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"This is my passion": How Dickens Christmas Towne in Nauticus can make it snow at any time

By Teresa Annas
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Stephen Kirkland, executor director of Nauticus, stopped in to the museum's Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center on Nov. 10, 2016, where Dickens' Christmas Towne was being installed. The attraction opens Sat., Nov. 19.



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E.C. Hanna created 17 puppets for his adaptation of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." His puppet show will be a

feature of a revamped Dickens' Christmas Towne, inside Nauticus' Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center. The attraction opens Sat., Nov. 19. In this photo, Hanna, 24, shown in his Norfolk apartment, holds his puppets for author Dickens and for Tiny Tim. Behind him are the other 15 puppets. He and his grandmother made all the puppets.



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Courtesy of Dickens' Christmas
The new puppets of Dickens' Christmas Towne.



Dickens' Christmas Towne

Dickens' Christmas Towne promises to offer a bigger, bolder Christmas celebration in its third season in Norfolk.



Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot

Tamari, left, and Takoda join in with carolers on the main stage at Dickens' Christmas Towne Monday, December 21, 2015. They are part of two dozen children with the ForKids organization who had a complimentary visit to the holiday event, which included lunch, a stroll through the old English village and a chance to talk with Father Christmas. ForKids is a Norfolk-based nonprofit organization that helps homeless children and their families. Dickens' Christmas Towne, featuring live music, stage performances, crafts and food, will be open at Nauticus in Norfolk through December 27.



The' N. Pham

A miniature Dickens' Christmas Towne with railroad train is part of the Nauticus' Dickens Christmas Towne village inside Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center in Norfolk, Va., on Monday, Nov. 17, 2014. The miniature town is set up by Bill Cofer. The Dickens Christmas Towne features a journey through a Magical World of Christmas characters, carolers, sweet treats, shops, games, activities & crafts. The' N. Pham | The Virginian-Pilot A miniature Dickens' Christmas Towne with railroad train is part of the Nauticus' Dickens Christmas Towne village inside Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center in Norfolk, Va., on Monday, Nov. 17, 2014. The miniature town is set up by Bill Cofer. The Dickens Christmas Towne features a journey through a Magical World of Christmas characters, carolers, sweet treats, shops, games, activities & crafts. The' N. Pham | The Virginian-Pilot



Nearly 25,000 visitors from 44 states experienced the inaugural season of Dickens' Christmas Towne last year at Nauticus in downtown Norfolk. So organizers are going to make this year's Victorian-era village even bigger and better. The live music, theatrical performances and family activities will begin Saturday Nov. 21, and there will even be a traditional pub offering an English menu. From Nov. 27 to Dec. 13, Christmas Towne will be open Fridays through Sunday. From Dec. 16 to 27, it will be open every day but Christmas. Tickets are \$5 for adults, \$4 for children ages 4 to 12, free for 3 and under. For more information, visit nauticus.org or call (757) 664-1000.



Bill Tiernan | The Virginian-Pilot

Helen and George Cox of Virginia Beach have been volunteers for Norfolk's Grand Illumination Parade for nearly 20 years. Photographed along the parade route on Granby St. Wednesday, Nov. 25, 2015.



Stephen M. Katz | The Virginian-Pilot

Balloon handlers guide a giant orca down Boush Street in downtown Norfolk during the 31st annual Grand Illumination Parade on Saturday, Nov. 21, 2015.



Stephen M. Katz | The Virginian-Pilot
Kate Scott, 2, of Norfolk sits on top of her dad's shoulders for the best view of the 31st annual Grand Illumination Parade in downtown Norfolk on Saturday, Nov. 21, 2015.



Stephen M. Katz | The Virginian-Pilot
Santa Claus arrives in downtown Norfolk during Saturday night's Grand Illumination Parade. It was a cold, crisp evening – appropriate for Santa's arrival in town.



Steve Earley | Virginian-Pilot File Photo

Floats head down Main Street during the 30th Annual Grand Illumination Parade on Saturday, Nov. 22, 2014 in downtown Norfolk.

Nauticus' executive director was on Nyquil, which made him more effusive than usual about his pet project, his museum's gift to the community.

Stephen Kirkland made it abundantly clear how much he loves Dickens' Christmas Towne, and that it emerged from his heartfelt desire to re-create for local families his fond childhood memories of a Portsmouth garden center's holiday display.

"This is my passion," he said eight days ago, as the project was being installed in Nauticus' Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center.

Opening its third season on Saturday, Dickens' Christmas Towne is huge (15,000 square feet) and re-creates London streets in Victorian England, the era of Charles Dickens, author of "A Christmas Carol."

This year it is, as Nauticus' promotional materials broadcast, "bigger, bolder, brighter." Christmas Towne now features nearly nonstop stage performances – a magic act, juggling, puppets, a Christmas play, acoustic music. In previous years, stage shows were intermittent, instead emphasizing performers roaming the "streets." The attraction extends this year to New Year's Eve, with additional daily programming in that final week that is less holiday-focused.

The museum has scrutinized every corner of Christmas Towne toward a more interactive and immersive experience. For example, the enormous train sets traveling over, under and around a snowy mountain have returned, but now visitors can send small hot-air balloons over that scene.

In response to a Facebook post by a patron last year who thought Christmas

Towne was like walking around in a snow globe, it will “snow” after each puppet and stage show. And new games were concocted: Youngsters may pitch fake snowballs into Scrooge’s window, or try to toss cornhole bags into chimneys to help Father Christmas deliver presents; he’s Santa’s Victorian counterpart who will reign over festivities each day. There’s also a petting zoo on Saturdays, and a “pub” with snacks, meals and even alcoholic beverages, provided by Omar’s Carriage House.

And all for \$5.

Kirkland has doggedly retained that low fee, which so far has not yielded a profit, even though the 2014 premiere version drew 23,000 ticket buyers, more than twice the predicted number, and last year drew 20,000.

Why not raise the fee? “This is why, and I gush about this,” he said, explaining that Dickens in 1843 wrote his classic holiday book in just six weeks. Before it was published, the author insisted on a fancy red cover and gold-edged pages – and a low price tag. He paid for it himself, Kirkland said. “So our goal is making it affordable for families, just like Dickens.”

Christmas Towne is one of numerous programs happening this weekend. The half-marathon, Grand Illumination Parade and other activities kick off Holidays in the City, a season-long series covering downtown Norfolk and Olde Towne Portsmouth.

The calendar of events is at www.holidaysinthecity.net.

Nauticus worked with Virginia Stage Company from the start, but this year opted to refresh the attraction with a new partner – Magical Solutions Inc. of Virginia Beach, which provides novelty acts for Beach Street USA.

Topher Jones, Magical Solutions’ project manager, has had a role in the past two Christmas Townes, as a caroler and a stage actor.

This year “the entertainment itself is more engaging. The puppet show is going to be in their faces, for the kids.” He wrote and directed a stage play, “Scrooge’s Goodwill,” to be performed throughout each day by live actors.

But the biggest hit is expected to be the 30-minute puppet show created by E.C. Hanna, a fourth-generation puppeteer from Allentown, Pa., now living in Norfolk.

A week ago he sat in his Ghent apartment, surrounded by 17 hand puppets representing characters in “A Christmas Carol,” from Ebenezer Scrooge to Tiny Tim.

He created the show in September with his 77-year-old grandmother at her home in Pennsylvania. “It’s the biggest one ever – for me and for Grandma.”

Hanna, 24, grew up creating and performing puppet shows with his father, grandmother and great-grandmother. His grandmother started it all when her kids were young, and gradually went professional.

He showed a picture on his iPhone of himself as a 6-year-old towhead, posed with his puppeteering clan at a festival.

Hanna also acted from grades five through 10 in a local production of “A Christmas Carol.”

“I always liked the story a lot,” said Hanna, who has a degree in media, culture and the arts from The King’s College in New York City. “I like the moral center of it.”

With so many characters to create in one month, he skipped sketches and went straight to making the puppets. He began by rummaging through “Grandma’s basement,” where he found bolts of Antron fleece, the puppet skin first used by Jim Henson on Kermit the Frog. “It hides the seams,” Hanna said.

From boxes of fabric scraps and wigs, he plucked all they needed to make faces, hair and clothing for his chest-sized puppets.

Meanwhile he had copied and pasted the entire book in his computer, and read it twice before cutting, cutting, cutting, to achieve a short version suitable for children. All the dialogue is from the book, he said. But he’s taken some liberties.

His conceit is to have the Pickwick Puppet Theatre set in the year Dickens released the book, and so the fictional troupe wasn’t yet clear on the story. They present a Ghost of Christmas Pheasant instead of Christmas Present, for example, until Dickens himself comes along to straighten them out.

“Because ‘Christmas Carol’ is pretty dark and heavy to do it straight, you’re going to lose some of the kids. So we bring in the silly,” Hanna said.

“I just really want it to go well. I’ve given it a lot of thought, a lot of energy. I just hope the story really connects with people.”

For his version, children are invited onstage, then discover that the puppet show takes place in nearby townhouses and shop windows.

To achieve that, Hanna and three other puppeteers will be hustling up and down scaffolding behind the walls, dropping one puppet to pick up another in a different window, and also dashing onstage for live roles.

“If we’re not out of breath, we’re doing something wrong.”