

# Rise and shine

Phoenix leads a Halloween parade of hope for a troubled city

KRISTINA FELICIANO

The past month and a half has brought a flood of frightening images. Next week, New Yorkers will finally get a welcome change of scene.

At 7 p.m. Wednesday, the annual Village Halloween Parade will roll a cast of characters out to delight and, in at least one case, inspire.

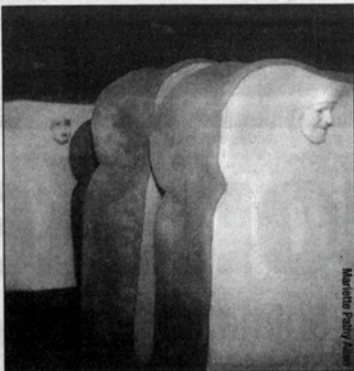
Wrangling up Sixth Avenue from Spring to 14th streets will be roughly 500 puppets, including oversized penguins made of satin, and old umbrellas, a bile crop of bright inflowers, a giant T. rex and a flutter of flap-jacks.

Leading them all will be the enormous flying phoenix — the mythological symbol of rebirth, resplendent in pinks, purples, reds and oranges and surrounded by a sea of lanterns, Chinese ribbon dancers and people singing "New York, New York."

The idea is to remind everyone that "there are better things to life than being afraid," says Sophia Chahelles, one of the parade's master puppet designers. "The parade will put fear images in your head — images of wonder and hope."

In a break with tradition, parade organizers have even elected a grand marshal to the mix. Mayor Giuliani was asked if he would do the honors — which would make him the first-ever grand marshal of the 28-year-old event. Longtime parade director Ume Fleming says he's yet to decide.

Prior to Sept. 11, Fleming says, the parade's theme was "the wisdom of the ancients." The lead puppet was Baba Yaga, a witch from a Russian folk tale who trav-



The Village Halloween Parade has always been an interesting slice of city life (above). Director Jeanne Fleming (below) predicts this year will be "heartfelt."



els in a mortar and pestle, followed by a hut that stands on chicken legs (all of which will be represented at the parade).

Baba was due to be accompanied by a vast enchanted forest, but she'll be a few trunks short to accommodate the phoenix, which embodies the parade's new theme.

"The theme came to one of the puppet designers in a dream the weekend after the disaster," Fleming says.

"And when we heard [the idea], we all knew — that's what we can do as artists. That's what we can do to make a contribution to the life of the city."

"The parade seems to emanate from the World Trade Center," says the 55-year-old celebration artist. "We looked down the street [the parade route, Sixth Avenue] and it was almost as if the parade came out of the building. It almost feels as if the phoenix is born out of those ashes."

The puppet, which has moveable wings and a long neck capable of craning, will be about 20 feet long and be carried by eight people who will manipulate it using poles.

"It's a very sinuous bird," says Michahelles, a 26-year-old puppeteer who has been building and designing puppets for the parade since 1998. "It will hover gracefully over Sixth Avenue, leaning to one side and the other."

Three silk birds will fly around the puppet, and it will be surrounded by white, luminous lanterns — "reminiscent of the cityscape," says Michahelles.

The Village Halloween Parade has taken a puppet's-eye view of serious issues in the past, from protecting the oceans (hence the penguins) to Y2K-bug worries (yes, there were bug puppets).

But this year the parade's creators — like the rest of America — were faced with an issue that they weren't quite sure how to cope with. Before they could even consider how to present the parade in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center, they had to decide if they would present it at all.

And decide they did. "Basically, our approach is we are a New York City cultural institution, and it's our responsibility, in a sense," Fleming says.

The Village Halloween Parade is a not-for-profit arts group funded in part by the Rudin Foundation (a sponsor for the past 15 years) and a grant from the

New York Post, Sunday, October 28, 2001

Department of Cultural Affairs and the National Endowment for the Arts, among other sponsors and contributors.

The materials for the puppets — including rattan, sequins, Styrofoam, fabric and papier mache — are donated.

And the budget is modest, even by indie standards. This year it's \$52,000 for an event that will last three hours, has taken months to prepare for (parade producers get started in the summer) and will be seen by millions of people (NY1 will be televising it live till 9 p.m.). It also requires the labor of more than a thousand volunteers, who'll carry the puppets.

Some of the puppets — about 50 — are made at a farm on the Hudson River in Barrytown, N.Y., near Rhinebeck. A barn there serves as the workspace of the parade's official puppeteers, including Michahelles and Basil Twist (the man behind the umbrella bats), who call themselves the Superior Concept Monsters.

Volunteers are also instrumental to the puppets' construction. People sign up to volunteer through the parade's Web site, [www.halloween-nyc.com](http://www.halloween-nyc.com), and are called based on need and their qualifications.

Fleming said this year there have been "more volunteers than ever."

"A lot of people have come up this year because they needed to get out of the city. We're definitely running a bit of a Fresh Air Fund," she says.

The balance of the parade's 500 handmade creatures come from all over the city and country, from groups like the Bread & Puppet Theatre and the Puppeteers' Cooperative and local artists who have been commissioned by the parade.

And then there are the home-grown parade participants who show up on the big night, including bands, artists and anyone game enough to slip into a costume and march.

Master puppet designer Sophia Michahelles gets hands-on at the upstairs workspace where the parade's primary puppets are made. The witch Baba Yaga (below, with Michahelles) was the event's pre-Sept. 11 main attraction.



lips; smiling slices of bread; dung beetles carrying a brown burden true to their name — and a group of New Jersey teachers who came as Imelda Marcos' shoes.

This year, says Fleming, there will be a lot of people dressed as "Star Wars" storm troopers.

"It's their version of 'The Empire Strikes Back' coming to reclaim the city," she says, noting that "everybody's coming up with their own idea of how to embody the rebirth of the city."

Each year some 30,000 to 40,000 people line up at 6 p.m. on Sixth Avenue between Spring and Broome streets to march their festive selves along the mile-and-a-half route.

Traditionally, they've had quite a crowd to play to. Last year, says Fleming, close to 2 million peo-

lowen Parade.

(Fleming said that although there have never been any crime-related problems at the parade, security efforts this year would be increased but that she was "not privy" to what the city had planned.)

Fleming won't predict what the turnout for the parade will be this year. She says some people tell her it's too soon for a celebration, while others say a celebration is just what's needed.

The one thing she's sure of is it's going to be "a very heartfelt event."

"It's also going to be a lot of fun."

The Village Halloween Parade still needs sponsors as well as volunteers to carry puppets. For details, visit the parade's Web site.



Going out