



24 Hour Arty People Local Strategy takes it to the Stone Arch Bridge for an all-day performance Share

By Rod Smith
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Some call it a sleep-deprivation experiment; we call it art: 'Landmark' organizers Local Strategy

If only James J. Hill were here. Sure, there's a good chance the 19th-century tycoon walked the Stone Arch Bridge many times. After all, it was his idea. But, in early August, 6:30 p.m. is way too early for haunting, especially as the bridge is packed with runners, skaters, bikers, people ostensibly in some sort of romantic partnership, walkers of dogs. Plus, the old coot might just be shocked enough by what's happening at the structure's east end to keel all over again. A bicycle-drawn locomotive fashioned mostly from sticks and plastic? Three young women with buckets and brushes carefully painting colorless circles on pavement? Four scruffy musicians seated on folding chairs, generating an almost imperceptible drone on stringed instruments?

But it's the stuff down below, in the river itself, that would really leave Hill scratching his spectral pate--the co-ed quartet passing logs from shore to shore across a shallow patch between the mainland and Nicollet Island, the couple standing just offshore, lobbing small rocks and calling out seemingly random numbers. And what about the shorthaired woman dressed in river-colored shirt and pants, hip-deep in the water and flying a large, transparent helium balloon equipped with a silver bucket carriage?

Luckily, we 21st-century Minneapolisians know from performance art. Especially when an impish, dark-haired woman is strolling around, introducing herself as "knowledge transfer," and explaining that the event, part of the Visible Fringe, is a preview of Landmark, a 24-hour interactive event running from sunrise to sunrise on August 27 and 28. "I have, for you, a viewfinder," she says, handing each of us a small clay object.

The imp is director and actor Katie Pearl, one-sixth of Local Strategy--the instigators of the mysterious festivities around us. Along with a platoon of volunteers, all of the group's members, save one, are hard at play. (Choreographer and dancer Emily Johnson is off in

Alaska getting married.) Visual artist Krista Walsh is one of the log-passers, composer Joel Pickard is leading the quartet, playwright Lisa D'Amour is lobbing rocks, while filmmaker and designer Eleanor Savage commands the balloon.

"The bucket was full of water," she explains by phone a few days later. "I practice in advance, just to get some idea of what the balloon would do. I really wanted it to be over the bridge. I was trying to figure out where to position myself. But the wind was blowing pretty hard; it was hard to get any control. The wind ended up emptying the bucket when the balloon was really high. The water looked like silver flesh in the sunlight. Unfortunately, only a few people saw it."

There'll be other chances. Today's presentation is but a sliver compared to the main event, which encompasses the entire bridge, the land it connects, and the waters below. The group first came together only a year ago, but its members are connected by a collaborative web stretching back more than a decade. All agree that the piece is a very long drink of water--for any number of reasons.

"The day before my Parks and Recreation walk-through," D'Amour recalls, as she gathers a few days before the preview with Pickard and Pearl in the Local Strategy Process Room, a once-derelict office in the Soap Factory that now looks like a cross between a WWII general's headquarters and a whimsically reconfigured DNR lab, "all these police cars were there, and a helicopter, and I see this backpack floating in the water. I meet with them the next day and I'm like, 'What happened? I think someone may have jumped off the bridge.' The Parks guy is like, 'Oh yeah. We get one of those a month. They like to jump off the Third Avenue Bridge 'cause then they get to go over the falls.' It's a dangerous place."

Savage, who is also the curator for a historically minded baking competition, the "Great Cake Contest" (go to www.localstrategy.org for details), concurs: "Any time you have a place that powerful, there's going to be an element of danger. That's one reason the area was sacred to the Dakota. They used it regularly. There was an island called Spirit Island--since destroyed--very close to where the Stone Arch Bridge is now, where Dakota women went to give birth. But it's very beautiful, too. We have no interest in creating a spectacle, in trying to compete with the site."

To that end, Pickard is keeping a tight rein on the 24-hour drone's volume control. The one central rule is that "at no time can the music be louder than the sound around us." As with Landmark's other continuous events, musicians will work in shifts.

"The idea of labor is central to the piece," Walsh says by phone from her home in St. Paul. "The bridge was completed in just over a year--an astonishing feat because people worked on it around the clock. Our first unanimous decision was that all of us would be on-site for the duration of the event to emulate a single bridge workday."

As the preview draw to a close, Savage's balloon dips to a dramatic salute just over the bridge, while dozens of participants line the railing. What's most interesting is how

completely the piece blends with the area's gently celebratory nature. Just ask the little girl who's been toting a sky-painted cube, a prop in one of the event's many "follies." She's delighted with her role, and the tiny black terrier getting a good view of the quartet. Realistically, come midnight on the 27th, Hill just might have the time of his afterlife.