



- Our picks for gadgets, back-to-school supplies
- Secrets from the Gift Guru
- Plus, Clark Howard's money-saving tips



The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

SATURDAY, AUG. 7, 2004

ajc.com



Leonardo cracks the da Vinci code

Out of the way, Spider-Man! Leonardo da Vinci, superhero, has taken the puppet stage by storm.
Living, D1

An inventive romp, with da Vinci leading the way



JOE BORIS / Center for Puppetry Arts

Renaissance avenger Leonardo da Vinci soars over Florence in response to Mona Lisa's signal for help.

By WENDELL BROCK / wbrock@ajc.com

Will moonstruck Leonardo da Vinci save his muse Mona Lisa from the clutches of the corrupt Borgia family? Will the tyrannical pope blow up the Vatican rather than succumb to the crime-fighting Renaissance man's fanciful flying machines and weaponry?

If only we had one of Leonardo's nifty inventions — say a hand-cranked, spring-powered time-travel machine — we'd know the answer to this comic-book cliffhanger. Instead, we'll have to tune in to "Avanti, da Vinci! The Secret Adventures of Leonardo da Vinci" — the wildly inspired, fastidiously crafted puppet operetta that the brainiac duo of Jon Ludwig and Jason Hines have installed at the Center for Puppetry Arts.

Lest you haven't figured it out, the conceit of the show is that the hallowed old master led an adventurous double life as an evil-bashing superhero. The resulting

THEATER REVIEW

"Avanti, da Vinci! The Secret Adventures of Leonardo da Vinci"
8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 5 p.m. Sundays. \$16-\$20. For ages 18 and up only. Through Aug. 22. Center for Puppetry Arts, 1404 Spring St. N.W., Atlanta. 404-873-3089, 404-873-3391, www.puppet.org.

The verdict: A comic masterpiece.

➤ Please see 'DA VINCI,' D8

'Da Vinci': Renaissance man fights evildoers

➤ Continued from D1

homage, which had its world premiere Thursday night, is a veritable pop-up book of sublimely inventive stagecraft in which a gaggle of foulmouthed puppets makes delightful mockery of some of the icons of Renaissance lore (Pope Alexander VI, his daughter Lucrezia Borgia, and the hapless and perpetually distracted Leonardo).

Where lesser artists might render a straightforward portrait of the man as Superman, the genius of Ludwig and Hines is that they create an episodic multimedia spectacle that operates on numerous levels at once.

First, there are the puppets, designed with Renaissance splendor by Hines and brought to life by a dexterous ensemble of five. Then there's composer John Ceretta's hooky score, punched up with a grab bag of Italian and English lyrics that the cast sings with faux virtuosity.

Mixed in with the marionettes, rod and shadow puppets and other marvels of this ancient art are high-tech video and animation sequences that pixilate and dissolve with digital precision. As supertitles guide the narrative from Rome to Florence and back again, the action unfolds on no less than five stages (designed by Bradford Clark in the style of an art-laden chapel and illuminated with a chiaroscuro's

eye by Liz Lee).

In frame after frame, magical surprises lie in wait.

Leonardo (Hines) the curious draftsman performs an autopsy on a 101-year-old cadaver.

Mona Lisa (Reay Kaplan) giggles at the tickling brush of her creator, who sees the visage of his ladylove reflected in the moon.

Leonardo paints a portrait that calls for an ermine. A real-life critter is called in to model, and after some frenzied acting out, the furry one grabs a brush and does his own self-portrait.

Leonardo, who was also a theater artist, stages the tale of Icarus, in which the ocean is evoked by a series of revolving blue-and-white poles, cheeky cherub-clouds puff up a storm, and Botticelli's Venus floats by on the foam. To top it all, in front of the proscenium, a mock-Elizabethan puppet-audience guzzles cheap wine and comments on the proceedings.

And time after time, Leonardo goes to Mona's

rescue in his wacky machines — a creaky bicycle, a flying thingamabob that spins like an eggbeater, even a subaqueous tank with wings.

But the *pièce de résistance* is the satirical and sometimes self-referential writing.

As depicted here with some historical authority, the Borgias were a kinky and incestuous clan, and their sexcapades are treated with comic brio. Lucrezia (Lorna Howley) flicks her whip at her brother, Cesare (Ludwig), who wants to marry Mona Lisa. And when the lecherous pope (Michael Haverly) tells his daughter to "genufflect before Peter," he's not talking about a holy saint.

In Ludwig and Hines' hands, no lily goes ungilded. In terms of its originality, depth of imagination and technical complexity, this is one of the best works I've seen in my three years of reviewing Atlanta theater. No kidding.

Florence may crumble. The Vatican may tumble. But "Avanti, da Vinci!" is here to stay.