LIFE

2026 Fall Puppet Slam features outstanding work and talent



Students perform on the stage on Friday, Oct. 30, 2026. The annual Fall Puppet Slam took place in the J. Louis von der Mehden Recital Hall, and various students showcased their puppetry projects.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL JEFFERS, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

by Jaylyn Davis
STAFF WRITER
SHE/HER/HERS
iue25001@uconn.edu

The Ballard Institute and the University of Connecticut Puppet Arts Program hosted the 2026 UConn Fall Puppet Slam at the J. Louis von der Mehden Recital Hall on Friday.

Dean Hernandez, a third-semester Master of Arts in Puppet Arts student, said every UConn puppet slam has been successful.

"Every puppet slam we've hosted had some level of success for the actors getting to experiment but also allowing ourselves to showcase the work we do," Hernandez said.

Rosie Grunzke, a fifth-semester puppet arts student who was in two of the show's performances, was proud of the huge audience.

"I can't remember the last time we were in this venue, but it seemed pretty filled up in terms of people coming," Grunzke said.

The puppet slam had seven puppet performances that had various themes, including horror and animals. Each was amazing; the stories, puppet designs and transitions were flawless, demonstrating the hard work the people on stage put into their craft.

The show opened with J Hann and Esme Roszel's "Bequeathed," which began with two people dressed in black waltzing to classical music. When the music ended, the performance shifted to a discussion about marriage and breaking free from the gender binary.

Hann is a puppeteer, fiber artist and dancer from New York City. Their work is inspired by the past and focuses on the queer, weird and whimsical. Roszel is a Brooklyn-based puppeteer and has a bachelor's degree in Puppet Arts from UConn.

Next up was Maddie Shubeck and Grunzke's "We're Talking to You," which was about birth and becoming a strong person while growing up.

Schubeck is a video and puppet artist from Detroit. Her work combines analog video, handcrafted puppetry and art installation to explore many themes, such as nostalgia, chaos, childhood, playfulness and transformation.

Next was John O'Donnell's "The Last Red Eye," which was about the significance of a red eyeball. In the performance, an actor dressed in black opened many full black bags, revealing green monster puppets with red eyes.

O'Donnell is an associate printmaking professor at UConn. He's made numerous puppetry exhibitions throughout his career. One is "Red Eye to Rome," which was featured at the Neon Heater Gallery in Ohio. His work has been showcased at other exhibitions and shows, including the Miami International Performance Festival.

After "The Last Red Eye" was Mia Carini, an undergraduate student in UConn's Puppet Arts Program, and Grunzke's "Stuck with a Fish." In the performance, the owner complains about the fish being too intelligent for its own good. The fish argues back with the owner, irritating them to the point where they choke it to death.

Next was Madlyn Harris' "Touch Your Toes," which depicted a school of puppetry and dance. In the performance, a student prepared for an upcoming puppet show by working on her puppet design. While working, somber piano music filled the background. Harris is a first-semester Master of Fine Arts student in Puppet Arts.

After "Touch Your Toes" was "Maiden Voyage," which was written by Maya Lozea but featured Harris and Hernandez.

While fairytale music played, two performers gracefully depicted a couple's journey through many places, including farmland and the ocean. The scene transitions were very smooth and cohesive, making "Maiden Voyage" a well-rehearsed and flawless work. The performance was a crowd favorite, as it received the most cheers and applause.

Lozea is a puppeteer who recently got a Bachelor of Arts in theatre from Wesleyan University.

The final puppet performance is Max Kountz's "Chair Tutorial," a very comical piece that got many laughs from the audience. In the performance, an actor with a huge smiley face mask uses paper to make a minuscule chair.

After making the chair, he sets it on the floor, and every time he tries to sit on it, he fails miserably. After countless failed attempts, he becomes upset and changes his mask's smile to a frown. Kountz is a third-semester graduate student from Georgia and a member of the Connecticut Repertory Theater.

Besides puppet performances, the show had three clips. The first was Schubeck's "You Should Know This," which was about glitches, distortion and the concept of knowing someone's work.

The second was Ali Etesamifar's "Freedom for Puppet Arts Students," where the camera is positioned near the ground to depict the main character's very short height. In the film, the main character searches for a way to escape a puppet arts production building.

Etesamifar is an Iranian puppeteer, fabricator and puppet designer who began his puppetry career on television in 2006. Currently pursuing his Master of Fine Arts in puppet arts at UConn, Etesamifar has produced many theater, film and television puppetry productions.

The final clip was "Holy Diver," a music video by Sam Kaszas, a puppeteer from Northwestern, Connecticut. "Holy Diver" features slow-motion scenes of rock music.

Maura Armstrong, a third-semester digital media and design student, enjoyed the show.

"It was really great," Armstrong said. "Each performance worked really well with the setting we were in, and everyone did their own forms of puppetry [in] ways that fit really well for the environment."

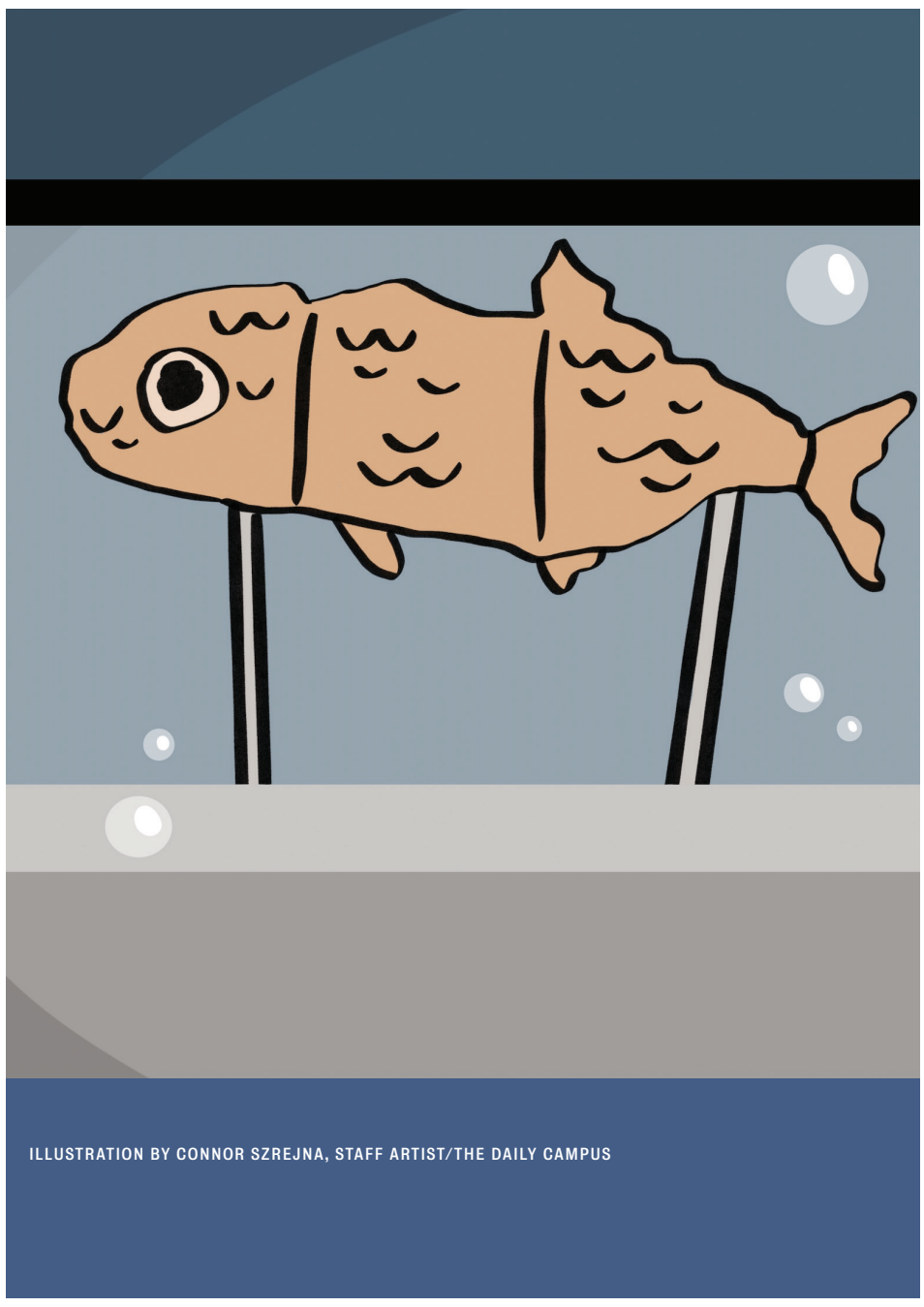


ILLUSTRATION BY CONNOR SZREJNA, STAFF ARTIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS