

# Prehistoric creatures com

*Scientific research and puppeteers create spectacle on Mendel Center stage*

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**  
Sight & Sound Editor

**BENTON HARBOR** — Third-generation puppeteer Miron Gusso describes Erth’s “Dinosaur Zoo Live” as a happy accident.

“Erth is a company based out of Sydney, Australia, who been making puppets and installations for the past 20 years,” he says.

“A paleontologist from Canada saw Erth’s stuff and asked, ‘Have you ever made a dinosaur?’ They said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘Do you want to?’ And they said, ‘Sure.’ So they built one, and built it specifically for atmospheric entertainment so kids could not only see it, but touch it. ...

Then they wanted to teach Australian kids about Australian dinosaurs. Once that formula started to work, there was an instantaneous draw to it, hence the global demand for this show.”

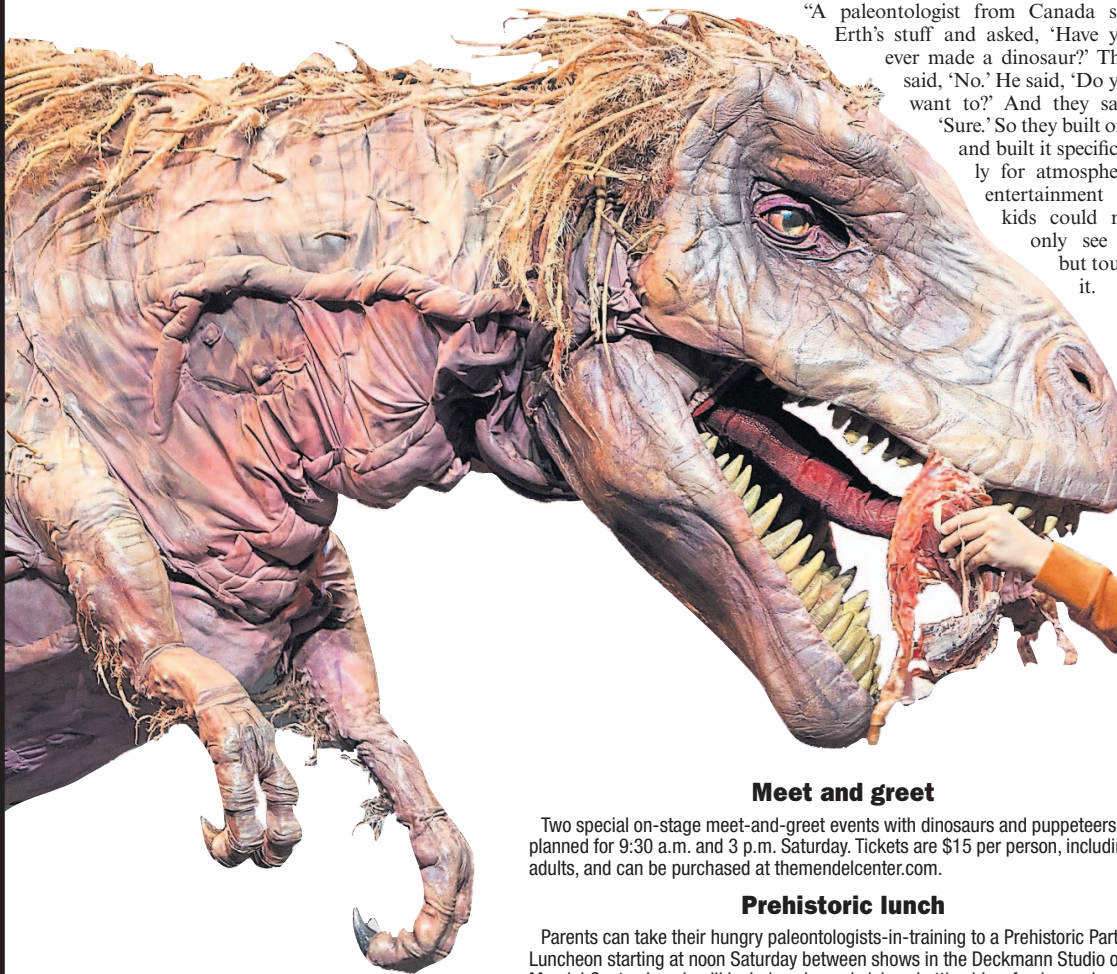
Written and directed by Scott Wright, the cofounder of Erth Visual and Physical Inc., the sixth North American tour of Erth’s “Dinosaur Zoo Live” brings a pair of shows Saturday to the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

The experiential theater production, which includes host Miles Portek with puppeteers Gusso, Jackson Eather, Brendan Malafronte and Eryn Malafronte, takes audiences on a prehistoric journey where they get to meet a menagerie of creatures that roamed the planet millions of years ago. In its current run, the show features 19 large-scale dinosaur puppets brought to life on stage, including a triceratops, which Erth created specifically for this tour.

“Everyone thinks that we’re really bad spellers but Erth actually is an acronym for environmentally recycled theater,” says Gusso, who has been with the troupe for the past six years. “Every single show that



**GUSSO**



**Meet and greet**

Two special on-stage meet-and-greet events with dinosaurs and puppeteers are planned for 9:30 a.m. and 3 p.m. Saturday. Tickets are \$15 per person, including adults, and can be purchased at [themendelcenter.com](http://themendelcenter.com).

**Prehistoric lunch**

Parents can take their hungry paleontologists-in-training to a Prehistoric Party Luncheon starting at noon Saturday between shows in the Deckmann Studio of The Mendel Center. Lunch will include sub sandwiches, kettle chips, fresh veggies and dessert. Luncheon tickets are \$10 for ages 3-12, and \$15 for ages 13 and older, and can be purchased at [themendelcenter.com](http://themendelcenter.com).

# Bring dinosaurs to life in 'Dinosaur Zoo'

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Erth's "Dinosaur Zoo Live"

**When:** 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

**How much:** \$20-\$32

**Contact:** 927-8700 or [themendelcenter.com](http://themendelcenter.com)

**Artist info:** [www.dinosaurzoolive.us](http://www.dinosaurzoolive.us)

Erth produces has recycled products – from sets to costumes to materials and internal mechanisms for the puppets. ... This show is definitely educational and interactive. It's like Jack Hanna on Letterman, saying "These are my dinosaurs." We bring out dinosaurs from the smallest to the very largest and kids have an opportunity to come up, to interact and even help us aid these dinosaurs if they need attention."

Gusso, who operates the Tyrannosaurus rex – said to be one of the largest carnivores to ever roam the planet – was born in Moscow, and comes from a Russian performance family.

"My mom worked for the biggest puppet theater in Moscow and did voice work and came to this country and didn't know what to do, so she started a puppet company with my brother and myself," Gusso says. "So at age 9, I was doing little puppet shows and starting to tour. So I've been doing puppetry and performance my entire life."

Gusso is an alumnus of the University of Connecticut's Puppetry Arts Graduate Program, where he also designed and built puppets for Connecticut Repertory Theatre. He performed at the Dallas Zoo in 2015, and previously has been seen as a dinosaur in Radiolab's live show "Apocalyptic," which toured in 2013, and at Field Station: Dinosaurs in New Jersey.

Like many puppeteers of his generation, Gusso says his career has been shaped by Jim Henson, who is best known as the creator of the Muppets.

"We are all Muppet kids," Gusso says.



Photos provided / C. Waits

**ABOVE:** Host Aimee Louisanne, also on the cover, introduces the new triceratops puppet during Erth's "Dinosaur Zoo Live." **AT LEFT:** The Tyrannosaurus rex puppet, operated by Miron Gusso, gets a meal from a young audience member during Erth's "Dinosaur Zoo Live." The production will have two shows Saturday at Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

"You ask anyone their favorite puppet, there's a 95 percent chance it's going to be a Jim Henson creature. It's going to be Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch, a character from 'Dark Crystal,' something, which means we are so used to this kind of puppetry where you don't see the puppeteer."

Erth's "Dinosaur Zoo Live," however, is different in that Gusso's T. rex, a backpack puppet in which the puppeteer is strapped into a harness built in an aluminum framework, exposes his legs. That hasn't hindered the illusion when he comes on stage.

"The coolest aspect about performing is, we bring these guys to life," Gusso says. "Kids are going to buy it. We say that all the dinosaurs in our show aren't real. In fact, they are very well-made puppets. ... Even when we bring them out I can hear the audience, 'Is that real? Is that real?' ... That's when the magic happens."

The reason, Gusso says, is all in the de-

tails. For example, scientists now believe the T. rex had a birdlike skeletal structure and stance, leading designers to incorporate that into the large-scale puppet.

"The design team truly takes a lot of time working with paleontologists," Gusso says. "They take the latest, modern scientific research and incorporate that into the design. For example, the latest research with T. rex was that it was more birdlike, that he stood more birdlike, as opposed to the angle we were taught when we were kids. They also had feathers. We try to adapt those elements into the puppet."

Puppeteers also go through training in animal behavior to mimic movements accurately.

"We talk about different perspectives about how animals walk from cold blooded to warm blooded," Gusso says. "Dinosaurs are very bird-like, so we'd go to the zoo and watch ostriches or emus for the head move-

ments and how the head rotates. We mimic that and take it into our performances."

The creatures created by Erth are also much more mechanically complex than most puppets. Instead of having multiple puppets that are limited to a few different actions, the company has created solo puppets that can perform myriad tasks.

"It's really humbling for a puppeteer to operate these puppets, these beautifully mastered engineered pieces of machinery," Gusso says. "It takes a good month to six weeks just to understand the mechanics. After that, you can sort of start being the animal."

Gusso manipulates the puppet by hand, although there are electronic controllers to move the dinosaur's eyes and mouth, and of course, to utter those bone-chilling roars.

"We have a camera that looks out of the nostrils of the animal that feeds into a monitor that helps us orchestrate what's going on," Gusso says. "But after doing this for six years I don't even use the camera. I know my spacing. I know in front of me I've got six feet of a dinosaur head and behind me is eight feet of tail."

The entire structure weighs about 100 pounds and performing in it is physically demanding.

"It's the best workout," Gusso says, laughing. "It's become our running joke in the cast. We all got rid of our gym memberships and took this gig instead."

While the show provides plenty of educational information on what is known about dinosaurs today, Gusso says the show's jaw-dropping spectacle is meant to leave a lasting impression that goes far beyond these prehistoric beasts.

"It took me three years to really realize this, but the show isn't really about dinosaurs," Gusso says. "It's about the empowerment of our kids. It's to prove to a kid that their thoughts, their views on the world are just as valid as any adult's today. We love kids and we love learning from them as much as teaching them. Dinosaurs, I think, are just a really cool tool to get their attention to get outside and explore their world."

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