

Mütter Museum and UK artistic group hosts parade in South Philly honoring thousands who died from Spanish flu

The performance art spectacle is a component of the Mütter Museum's upcoming "Spit Spreads Death" exhibition, which opens Oct. 17.

By **Grace Maiorano** - September 25, 2019



On the evening of Sept. 28, a parade will convene at Marconi Plaza to commemorate individuals who died from the 1918-1919 flu pandemic. The performance art spectacle is a component of the Mütter Museum's upcoming "Spit Spreads Death" exhibition, which opens Oct. 17, exploring the "Spanish flu," which is estimated to have killed 50 to 100 million people worldwide. (Photos special to SPR)

More than a century ago, thousands amassed on South Broad Street for the Liberty Loan Parade, a march organized to increase public funding for World War I efforts.

The patriotic festivities, though, took a grim turn.

As crowds convened, the event exacerbated the influenza pandemic in the city – an outbreak that would kill more than 17,000 Philadelphians over five months.

On the evening of Sept. 28, another parade will convene at Marconi Plaza, following a similar route up Broad Street, to commemorate those who succumbed to the deadly disease.

The performance art spectacle is a component of the Mütter Museum's upcoming "Spit Spreads Death" exhibition, which opens Oct. 17, exploring the "Spanish flu" pandemic of 1918-19, which is estimated to have killed 50 million to 100 million people worldwide.

Giving the exhibition an immersive dimension, the museum collaborated with Blast Theory, a United Kingdom-based artistic group “creating interactive art to explore social and political questions.”

Blast Theory, which has produced work in countries across the globe, aims to place audiences members at the focal point of their spectacles.

“The exhibition and the artistic exhibition that would run along side it is fully integrated,” said Blast Theory artist and founder Matt Adams. “So, it’s this fantastic dialogue between all of us as collaborators right from the get-go, in terms of how much making something that is an artistic invention that really fits very coherently with the themes of the exhibit at the Mütter itself.”

Up until recently, the museum hosted a special exhibition for several years surrounding injuries, death and healing during the Civil War. Brainstorming a succeeding showcase, the Mütter wanted to highlight medicine related to World War I.

“Part of the larger focus is not just to talk about the history of medicine but generalize a little bit and talk about medicine humanities,” said South Philly resident Nancy Hill, the museum’s special projects manager.

This notion led to the museum’s massive research into the Spanish flu, as World War I played a crucial role in the disease’s spread throughout Philadelphia, particularly because the city was an industrial hub for military manufacture. Such job opportunities led to an influx of \$250,000 folks spilling into the city, according to the Mütter’s research.

“It was global, but it hit Philadelphia particularly hard,” Hill said. “Philadelphia, in particular, has this very unique story to tell about the flu epidemic. There’s this very local relationship to the flu epidemic, and there’s no monuments or memorials to those who died.”

Though Hill says the Liberty Loan parade can’t be entirely attributed to the outbreak, the collection of thousands of people undoubtedly worsened the pandemic’s presence in Philadelphia.

Though the city’s public health commissioner was aware of the disease, Hill says there was immense stress to keep the parade going in light of the war.

“Something as communicable the way flu is – it’s generally a bad idea to gather people at all,” she said. “There was a massive social pressure to support the war effort and to be patriotic. So to cancel the parade would have been a pretty big deal. People thought that the war was a much bigger threat and that supporting the war was much more important.”

Utilizing its innovation with light and sound, Blast Theory has crafted a curious project to honor those Philadelphians who passed away 100 years ago.

In the upcoming parade, which kicks off at 5 p.m. at Marconi and gradually heads north to Dilworth Park, participants are encouraged to choose a person to commemorate during the event. Honorees are listed on the Spit Spreads Death website where participants can register beforehand or during the parade.

Through the Mütter’s research, more than 750 death certificates were unearthed, as each of them relates to Philadelphia’s influenza pandemic.

"Unlike most parades, this isn't really one to watch," Adams said. "It's one to take part in, so we're hoping everyone will come and walk with us."

As participants representing the deceased march up Broad Street, they will also play a world-premiere of choral music on their phones through the website.

The debut work was created by Oscar-nominated composer David Lang and sung by Philadelphia's Grammy award-winning choir The Crossing. This haunting original score will include the names of everyone who died on the pandemic's deadliest day, Oct. 12, 1918.

Though the parade creates a living history, it concurrently hopes to recognize individuals working in public health.

"From my point of view, it's not so much teaching history as sort of connecting something historical to the present day and for us as artists, it has to be meaningful right here, right now," Adams said. "...It has to really be a powerful experience for them here and now. So what we're trying to do is to really create something that has a powerful artistic experience with very strong images, beautiful sounds and a strong sort of emotional connection between the people who are walking and the people who died 100 years ago in the city."