

Talent

(Silly) Scary Monsters

Ralph Lee is perhaps best known by New Yorkers for being the guiding spirit of the legendarily eccentric Halloween parade in Greenwich Village. But as a puppeteer-designer, he spends most of his time trying to be in tune with

the legends, folklore, and myths of others. His latest work, *Heart of the Earth: A Popol Vuh Story* (at Intar from January 11 to 29) is based on a Mayan creation myth. The story of two youths who travel to the underworld and play a deadly game of soccer with the Lords of Death, it was first tackled by Lee in 1980. The latest incarnation was one of the hits of the 1994 International Puppetry Festival at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, owing to both the fantastical, witty creatures (which he based on Mayan imagery) and his charming take on the old tale. "There's a lot of pottery put into Mayan graves," explains Lee, "and a lot of them depict scenes from the Popol Vuh. The Lords of Death are often depicted as decrepit, skeletal figures belching great farts, or they'll have some disgusting gases emanating from their mouths. That gave me a really good clue as to what kind of attitude to take: They're humorous and horrific at the same time." Growing up in Middlebury, Vermont, Lee used a hand-puppet theater to tell folk stories at birthday parties and for school groups. An early high point was a performance for his father's friend Robert Frost. "It wasn't very long, so he was able to endure it," Lee says with a laugh. Since then, he's dramatized myths and legends from Native American, Eskimo, and countless other cultures. "I try to be true to the original story, but at the same time acknowledge that I'm *not* a Winnebago Indian, for instance."

MICHAEL GILTZ

