

River dance: Canoes, kayaks and sailboats stage 'boat ballet' in Minneapolis

Nearly 40 watercraft will join to perform a choreographed “boat ballet.”

By [Kristin Tillotson](#) Star Tribune
July 31, 2015 — 9:24am

It was no “Swan Lake,” but there was grace amid the chaos.

Lit by the descending evening sun, 17 kayakers faced off in two rows and paddled straight at one another at ramming speed — then slipped through in a synchronized display that came as close to elegance as possible amid powerful wind gusts and mercurial water currents.

You almost could have called it a dance — which was exactly the intent. The kayaks, along with eight canoes, a few rowing shells, small sailboats, paddleboards and even a couple of pedal-powered mini-pontoons, were rehearsing for Friday night’s Mississippi River Boat Ballet, a free hourlong performance on the river in north Minneapolis.

“There are a thousand unpredictable things that could happen,” said organizer and eternal optimist Patrick Scully, “just like in life.”

The event is part of the third annual Riverfront Fest, designed to help revitalize an underused portion of the Mississippi corridor.



Scully, a fixture of the Twin Cities arts scene who founded Patrick’s Cabaret, is well-known for pushing artistic and social-issue boundaries. But this is only the second time he’s attempted to cajole Mother Nature into being his co-pilot. Five years ago in Potsdam, Germany, he staged a boat ballet on a calmer body of water than the Mighty Miss.

“I was flying by the seat of my pants on how to coordinate all the different groups and work out my time map,” the dancer and choreographer said. “Now I can apply what worked last

time. It's mostly formations of lines, curves and shapes found in nature, using the specific movements typical of the different boats."

The participants, recruited through social media, local watercraft associations and Scully's vast arts-community network, include more than 40 volunteers from all over the Twin Cities. Their aquatic skills range from beginner to seasoned. Paddleboarder Kris Diller of Maple Plain said the most challenging part is "Standing up! And avoiding logs just under the surface."



All "dancers" will wear life vests and have been drilled on safety protocol. Rescue boats will stand by in case of mishaps. An



improvisational orchestra will accompany the event from a floating dock.

Kayaker Jana Freiband of Minneapolis, a photographer and musician, said the give-and-take with Scully — whom other participants described as "brave" and "full of hope" — has been enlightening on both sides.

“He’s a performance artist, not a kayaker, and some of the ideas he dreamed up weren’t practical,” she said. “He wanted us to spin around in the water like cottonseeds in the wind, but you can’t really do that in a kayak, so it became a big circle instead. I’m a visual artist, so I suggested lining up in color formation to make a rainbow. It really has been like learning dance steps and putting them all together.”

From the shore, Scully



communicated with team captains by walkie talkie during Wednesday’s rehearsal, the first of just two involving all the various watercraft.

“Ten seconds, canoes — OK, start across shoulder to shoulder,” he directed. “Come on, mama goose and kids. Ah, the gorgeous shells return, looking fabulous! Don’t just move forward all together, make a little snake.”

The event can be viewed from Ole Olson Park, located north of the Broadway Avenue bridge on the Mississippi’s west bank, about 2 miles upriver from St. Anthony Falls.

Friday’s Riverfront Fest, being held at the park from 5:30 p.m. to sunset, includes food trucks, craft beers and live music. It is presented by the Minneapolis Riverfront Partnership, a nonprofit tasked with revitalizing the entire riverfront, but particularly this area.



The fest was started in 2013 “to bring more people to the upper river,” said Liz Wielinski, president of the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board.

Olson Park offers a biking and walking trail as well as a majestic view of the city skyline, but it doesn’t get as much traffic as other urban sections of the Mississippi. Wielinski suggested to Scully that he

time the boat ballet with the festival so his audience could make use of its infrastructure, “like porta-potties,” she said.

Scully received a \$10,000 Legacy Fund grant through the Minnesota State Arts Board to put on the event.

From the prime viewing spot — a hillside sloping down to the center of all the water action — musical director Adam Conrad made notes on his phone during Wednesday’s warm-up. As conductor of the Improvestra, he will lead his “tonal, very groove-oriented” band in reacting musically to what the boats do on the water from a nearby floating dock.

“I’ve got about 40 hand signals,” Conrad said.

The rehearsal ended with few casualties: just one brief capsize and a scraped mast from a bridge underpass.

“It started out so disjointed, but it’s gotten smoother and smoother,” said canoeist Jean Brandes of Fridley. “The most fun part is just being out on the water with so many different people. It’s a



melting pot.”

Scully said he’s happy that Legacy funds are being used to give an artistic experience to a group of people primarily made up of non-artists.

“They’re out there having a great time, focusing on time and space and technique,” he said. “Like dancers on a stage.”

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