

ENTERTAINMENT

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CARLIN STIEHL For The Times

CO-CREATORS Eric Notarnicola, center, and Jason Woliner sit with animatronic Henry James Entrikin at "The Man in the Tuskhut" at the Velaslavasay Panorama.

RAUL MALO,
1965 - 2025

Mavericks frontman with rich baritone

His group expanded the sound of country with big-band, pop and Cuban influence.

MIKAEL WOOD
POP MUSIC CRITIC

Raul Malo, who as frontman of the Mavericks brought a Latin rhythmic flair and a sweeping sense of romance to country music, died Monday. He was 60.

His death was announced by the band in an Instagram post. Last year, the singer told fans that he had been diagnosed with cancer; in September, Malo wrote on Facebook that he had developed leptomeningeal disease — a condition in which cancer metastasizes to the membranes around the brain and

[See Malo, E2]

Justice prevails, at least on TV

Whether escapism or a sign of the times, it's been a great year for political thrillers, says Mary McNamara. E4

Comics E6-7
Puzzles E7

OPEN UP TO L.A.'S ARCTIC ANIMATRONIC

The brainchild of Jason Woliner and Eric Notarnicola, 'Man in the Tuskhut' brings visitors face-to-face with a robotic hermit

By MADDIE CONNORS

Two years ago, at Jason Woliner's birthday party, there was a strange guest in attendance. Mysterious, wise, uncanny — it was an animatronic robot cowboy named Dale. In the years prior, Woliner had become transfixed by immersive theater and animatronics, prompting him to purchase Dale. Woliner's obsession with him became akin to Frankenstein and his monster.

Dale's presence was a triumph. Using a complex software system, Woliner made the animatronic conversational. "I set him up in my garage. People came in and asked him questions, and he gave advice on relationships," Woliner says.

A disquieting collection of animatronics became fixtures in the director's life. More encounters ensued. Dale hosted an event at the Dynasty Type-writer theater in place of Woliner. Later, another one of his animatronics had campfire-side chats with audiences at the Overlook Film Festival in New Orleans. Woliner's creative partner of 15 years, Eric Notarnicola, joined the endeavor as well.

Notarnicola and Woliner, known for comedy projects like "Nathan for You," "The Rehearsal," "Paul T. Goldman" and "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm," found that animatronics aligned with their body of work — absurd, amusing and occasionally devastating explorations of truth and vulnerability.

Dale — now better known as "the man" — will host guests starting Thursday at the Velaslavasay Panorama in a show called "The Man in the Tuskhut." The six December events have sold out, but more are expected next year. The Nova Tuskhut is a space within the venue designed like an Arctic trading post. For the show, attendees have a one-on-one encounter with the man in the Tuskhut. That's after watching a documentary about frontiersman Henry James Entrikin, enjoying a drink at a saloon and grilling hot dogs.

"We started experimenting with this weird, interactive, intimate conversation with an animatronic and building it into a story that is surprising and maybe funny and maybe unsettling — something that leaves you with an unusual experience," Woliner says.

The animatronic improvises in conversation based on a story outline written by Woliner and Notarnicola. Inside the Tuskhut, the animatronic spurs surprising encounters with guests, Notarnicola says. "Some people come in and play a character. If they're interested in role-playing, then they get to do that. Other people play it a lot more straight," he says.

The buzzy show, not advertised on social media, has been gaining popularity through word of mouth. "We haven't spent a penny on marketing," says Woliner. The collaborators have sold out 200 encounters with the animatronic. [See "Tuskhut," E5]



Sundance Institute

NATALIE Portman and Jenna Ortega in Cathy Yan's "The Gallerist."

Sundance shares its lineup, and plans farewells

The 2026 festival will be the last in Utah, and the first without Robert Redford.

By MARK OLSEN

When Sundance kicks off in a little under two months, it will face a unique challenge. Unspooling for the last time in its longtime home of Park City, Utah, the festival must somehow pay tribute to the legacy and history of an event that has become very tied to the bundled-up, snow-capped romanticism of that specific place.

At the same time, there needs to be an air of excitement and expectation about moving on to the festival's [See Sundance, E5]

Arctic trading post fosters unsettling interactions

["Tuskhut," from E1] hosting 20 encounters per day.

In the Ken Burns-style sepia-stained historical documentary, visitors learn that the man was killed by "Arctic cold that was both his companion and his adversary." His travels include encounters with Inuit people, snow blindness and a stinging need for solitude that leads him to abandon his family for a life in the Arctic trading post. The documentary echoes the protagonists of Jack London novels — men up against the wild, grappling for survival — a trope Woliner enjoys.

"We've done a few things with those kinds of lonesome, filthy men," Woliner says with a laugh.

Once inside the Tuskhut, visitors sit across from the man in a dimly lighted room. Hooks line the walls. Medicine cabinets collect dust on bookshelves — ones with "remedies for ailments, some imagined, some real." Later, the man muses: "Real medicine is having something to believe in." A radio buzzes in the background with static and news of "that Hitler fella," as the man says.

The bizarre encounter is different for each visitor who sits in his haunting gaze.

"Some people have had experiences that seem similar to going to a confessional or to a therapy session because some of the prompts and questions are open," says Sara Velas, founder of the Velaslavasya Panorama and collaborator on the project. "People say: 'I hadn't heard someone talk to me in that tone of voice since my grandfather was alive.' It's a framework with many different outcomes, and it has been really special to observe."

Notarnicola says the scope of animatronic entertainment technology is far-



CARLIN STIEHL For The Times

RUBY CARLSON BEDIRIAN, left, Eric Notarnicola and Jason Woliner, "The Man in the Tuskhut" collaborators, stand in the saloon.

reaching across language and culture. "We're able to run the experience in over 30 different languages. We've run the experience in Spanish, Slovak, Polish and Chinese," he says. "It removes this boundary of communication where anyone, anywhere, can experience it and communicate."

Ruby Carlson Bedirian, head of engineering and enrichment at the theater and collaborator, says many visitors try to stump the animatronic or break it. "Many of

the people coming are, proportionally, insiders — they're interested in this form," Carlson Bedirian says. "There have been so many artists and technicians and specialized artisans who have had really amazing interactions."

The animatronic had a storied history before joining Woliner and Notarnicola's world. As they discovered, the robot was manufactured as part of a U.S. military operation. It was used in an immersive training fa-

cility at Camp Pendleton to prepare soldiers for the war in Afghanistan. By a bizarre twist of fate, it ended up in the filmmakers' possession through eBay, after a man named Juju kept the animatronic in his living room in Florida.

"We found them through Reddit — there's an animatronics-for-sale Reddit — and a guy had posted that he was trying to unload them," Woliner says. Woliner spends time on the animatronic Reddit alongside Dis-

neyland and Chuck E. Cheese enthusiasts.

One of the animatronics even appeared in the most recent season of "The Rehearsal." "We're trying to use them for good," Woliner says.

For Woliner and Notarnicola, "The Man in the Tuskhut" is only the beginning of their venture with animatronics. "We have other shows in development, and other things we want to do that are bigger — multiple characters. This is just

the beginning of where this form of interaction and entertainment is headed," Notarnicola says. The creative duo recently launched Incident, a new experimental entertainment company dedicated to these otherworldly projects.

Woliner is enthusiastic about being part of a growing community of interactive experiences in Los Angeles. "I'm most excited about being part of the off-beat L.A. community," he says.