

Mongolian performers add life to exhibit

DENVER — It sounds like a real horse whinnying. But that's just one of the haunting notes Ariunbold "Ari" Mijiddorj can coax from the morin khuur or Mongolian horse-head fiddle.

Mijiddorj of Boulder is one of several local Mongolian musicians, folk dancers and contortionists who perform daily at the special Genghis Khan exhibition now at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. These artists are all members of the Denver-based Mongolian Cultural Center for the Arts, which is dedicated to promoting and preserving the arts and culture of Mongolia.

After playing an evocative melody about a galloping horse (and somehow making his instrument produce the sound of galloping hooves), Mijiddorj invites audience members of all ages to play models of the horse-head fiddle.

During Genghis Khan's time, says Mijiddorj, every man was expected to know

how to play the morin khuur. According to legend, the instrument was created by a boy who lost his beloved horse in a race. The boy turned the animal's bones into a fiddle bearing a carved horse's head in remembrance of his equine friend.

Also performing this day is artist and Tsam dancer Tsogtsaikhan Mijid, president of the Mongolian Cultural Center for the Arts. Dressed in a long, off-white silk robe, bearing a staff tied with red, blue, yellow and green silks, and wearing an oversized papier-mache mask — that he made himself — of a balding old man with a long white beard, Mijid performs the Dance of the White Elder, an ancient Tsam mask dance. Tsam is a Buddhist dance-drama designed to frighten away evil spirits and please the gods.

The old man stares at me as he dances, approaching and extending his hand for me to shake. Afterward, Mijid



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Ariunbold Mijiddorj, a member of the Denver-based Mongolian Cultural Center for the Arts, displays a morin khuur or horse-head fiddle, Mongolia's national instrument.

explains that the White Elder represents long life, happiness and luck; anyone whose hand he shakes

receives an entire year of good fortune.

What a bonus!

— Lynda La Rocca