

# Puppetry Captures Collective Spirit



Brian Keith gives life to the tears of Joy Theatre production of Hare's House.

PHOTO BY NANCY ALDRICH



Inspired by a 1996 juvenile-justice theatrical project, Tears of Joy Theatre created the Higher Stages after school program to work with at-risk youth.

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grade schools in north and northeast Portland.

Even when students aren't themselves making puppets, TOJ performances integrate study guides and seek scripts with intellectual value that also make kids shout with excitement. Edutainment became the word used by puppeteers to describe how students enjoyed and learned from the presentations.

"It's not didactic education—it's about trying to give them experiences," says Kris Bluett-Woolen, TOJ community-outreach director. "Kids who are involved in the arts become creative thinkers."

The theatre has struggled with cash flow over the years, but the staff sees the trouble as worth the respect and enraptured

looks on students' faces. Even with one of the few living-wage jobs in the Portland theatre scene, TOJ performers must really love the work that they do.

After spending a month in rehearsals, TOJ's traveling staff often spends six months on the road performing the same show more than 200 times. By necessity, puppeteers strive to think of ways to keep the performances fresh, as touring performers play for 225,000 people annually in theatres, community centers, festivals and schools throughout the U.S. and abroad.

"One of the great things about working with kids is you always know if you're doing well," says Puppeteer Jonathan Owicki. "If a joke is falling flat, they start to fidget, and it's time to come up with a way to do it better."

The adaptation of legends like Anansi

the Spider from West Africa and Stellaluna the Bat from American children's author Jannell Cannon makes work less grueling for TOJ. These tales speak to the most basic aspects of identity and trickery to capitalize on humanity's common understandings.

"The best stories appeal to all people because we all struggle with the same problems," says Nancy Aldrich, TOJ artistic director.

Aldrich sees TOJ as particularly suited for building tolerance and cultural bridges with puppets that have a sense of character to cross over any biases. She gets help from bilingual storytellers with expertise in whichever cultural foray the rehearsal team is tackling.

"We want to respect the culture and bring to it everything we can," she says.

## Exciting lineup Coming



Tears of Joy Theatre's nationally recognized commitment to excellence and innovation in puppetry will open next year's season with "Jungle Book" by Reg Bradley.

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The story is based on the book by Rudyard Kipling and contemplates the meaning of family. Explore the Indian jungle with Mowgli as he tries to discover to which family he belongs. Monkey? Wolf? Man? The audience participates as members of the wolf pack as the powerful play unfolds.

Next up in the theatre's new works is "The Reluctant Dragon" by Nancy Aldrich, based on the book by Kenneth Graham. TOJ's magnificent dragon may look large and scary, but he, like the boy who befriends him, is much more interested in songs and poetry. The villagers call for Sir George to protect them, and everyone gets a great show.

"When Animals Were People" by

Aldrich and Omar Vargus follows. Mexican and South American tales will be brought to life in this dynamic new production.

"Fabulous Bear!" by Jan Wilkowski features a small bear named Timothy who brings home a lost puppy. Will his daddy let him keep it? The suspense is thrilling as the story unfolds revealing a burglar in the house! This play from Poland became a favorite with children throughout Eastern Europe.

Season ticket subscriptions, including "Jungle Book" Nov. 14-30, "Puppetz Vs. People" Nov. 28-9, "Reluctant Dragon" Dec. 19-28, "When Animals Were People" Feb. 6-22 and "Fabulous Bear!" April 3-19, are on sale for \$60 this month.

The shows at the Winningstad Theatre, 1111 S.W. Broadway, normally run \$14 children, \$17 adults. For more information or for group rates, call 503-248-0557 or 360-695-3050, or visit Tojt.org.

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