

BY BARB HESTERMAN
STAFF WRITER

It was a life-altering experience for many as children from around the globe communicated in a language they all understood.

The company of child actors from Adventures in Children's Theatre in Woodstock returned from Germany last week after representing North America in the seventh World Festival of Children's Theatre.

The local company joined 22 other theatrical groups from New Zealand to Uganda to express themselves and their cultures through interpretive dance, music and drama.

"It must have been the most extraordinary 10 days these children will ever experience," said Greta Fairhead, director of the company. "The whole global aspect of this festival, if anyone had any prejudices they would have been abolished. We became one people... we developed such respect for all the different languages and cultures and religions, for all the different people.

"My children became best friends with children from Uganda, Bangladesh, New Zealand and, of course, Germany."

The Woodstock children arrived in Lingen, Germany on June 13. The festival ran from June 14-22. On stage and off stage, the experience was emotional, inspiring and overall very rewarding.

"It was very pressuring. It was scary, but once we knew what we were doing it was fine," said Eric Hall, 14, of

Woodstock, a member of the ACT cast. "It was overwhelming at times but the people were very friendly."

Danica Mott, 12, of Woodstock, was excited about being in another country. She said the shows were definitely the best part of the trip.

"The highlight was our performance, definitely," she said. "It was our moment to shine. I think (other theatre groups) loved it. We had fun, we did our best and I think it went well.

"It was really exciting to perform our own play and it was exciting to be there."

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- GRETA FAIRHEAD

The children wrote a play called *The Quest* about an aboriginal girl, Carly, who runs away from school after being teased by the other children. She finds herself in a magical forest where she is taken back to the past and shown her purpose. She learns to find peace in the world. The children coordinated the entire production from the music to the costumes.

"They had the chance to produce their own play and see it played out," Fairhead said. "They have the freedom to do that. Some children don't."

She said that all the countries, no matter what their social or political background, all attended the festival to serve the same purpose.

"We were all speaking the same language," she said. "We were empowering children through theatre... Their way of life was secondary to what they were doing."

Fairhead said some of the Third World countries such as Bangladesh and Burkina Faso (in Africa) freely expressed their countries' sorrows through drama. Through fluid movements and emotional expressions, the children spoke of wars and children left homeless to live on the streets.

"There were so many countries from what used to be the U.S.S.R.," Fairhead said. "These children were given opportunities they never would have dreamed of years before."

Although many other countries relied on traditional scripts and plays, the Canadians were nonetheless inspired by the foreign and exotic costumes and movement.

But when ACT took the stage, complete with black lights and flash, Fairhead said the response was overwhelming from the other countries.

"People were awestruck," Fairhead said. "They didn't know how we did it."

The theatre groups set up pavilions, sold memorabilia from their countries and showed off their culture. The Woodstock actors donned themselves in hats, bandanas and Canada T-shirts. The Canadian pavilion was wildly popular.

"After a couple of days you couldn't tell who our kids were and who the rest were," Fairhead said. "It was a sea of red and white."

Hall now has pen pals around the world.

"People were so receptive to Canadians. They asked if they could have pictures taken with us and exchange e-mail."

Fairhead said everyone around her spoke near perfect English which helped the kids communicate with others who in turn taught them their native languages. Many of the cast members picked up quite a bit of German. The only time language was a problem was during the actual performance.

"We had a little difficulty with language putting on the show because the technicians working the lights didn't speak English," Fairhead said, adding it was a little stressful since they had very little rehearsal time.

"The children weren't about the entertainment, they wanted to send a real moral message and they followed it through to the end," Fairhead said. "I'm proud that they stayed consistent with their production." *Ok. Rev. 7/11*

At the end of festival, no one was ready to come home. The children had gained a new respect for different cultures and people and a deep respect for their own country.

"I witnessed the transformation and fuelling of these children," Fairhead said. "They were given the opportunity to be movers and shakers, moulders and successful leaders."

Fairhead said her love for the arts and the people who belong to them rekindled in herself as well, just being witness to the experience.

"Artists live a different life. We perceive the world in a different spectacle and it can be lonely," she said. "When I came back I felt alone. There aren't many people who perceive things like I do. The networking of people from all pockets of the world was an uplifting but emotional experience. It gave me a new focus for why I do what I do."

Fairhead hopes to attend future World Festivals, particularly the one to be held in Cuba two years from now. Ultimately she would love for the festival to be held in Canada.

"The connection these children could make with other children by doing the arts would be life-changing," she said.