

Seniors, youngsters enchanted by Chomko's troubadours

# Puppeteers bring brothers Grimm fairy tale to life

by Richard Chomko  
When was the last time you saw a real, live puppet show? Chances are the last time you were delighted by the antics of fairy tale characters was when you were a child, and your recollections of that event are now faded. But Midland's Doris

Chomko and her band of troubadours are making that puppet show experience a reality again for at least a few area residents.  
On Thursday, June 16 Mrs. Chomko and her puppeteers staged a performance of "Snow White and Rose Red" for

an intimate gathering of residents at the Villa Nursing Home in Midland.

Last week it was the youngsters' turn to revel in the antics of the puppets. On Monday the troubadours visited Monsignor Castex and on Tuesday Kindergarten and primary grade students at Sacred Heart School were treated to a performance of the famous Grimm fairy tale.

The story concerns two daughters who live happily with their mother, a big black bear who becomes a friend of the family. He is revealed as the golden prince when he catches the angry little gnome who enchanted him. This is one of many "olde" Germanic folk tales recorded by the brothers Grimm in the late eighteenth century.

A wonderful time was had by all, including the puppet players themselves. Joyce Bates (one of the puppeteers)

remarked, "I just enjoyed it so much. It made me so very happy, just to see people's faces light up like that."

"It was lovely to watch, lots of fun," said Ethel Coughney, age 78.

Maxie Altshuller and Christine Van Koughnett held the curtain for scene changes. "It was very good. I've never seen a puppet play like that before. I like the actual play instead of TV all the time" was Christine's comment.

Alec Jarlette, who also sat in on the performance noted that it was warmly received by the residents. "We have movies, we have TV, this is something different". What made it really special, according to Mr. Jarlette, was that Mrs. Chomko had been visiting these people for the past three years. "That really means something" he said.

Children sing along Mrs. Chomko ac-

companies the story telling with songs, especially composed as themes for the various characters in the play, and arranged in the pentatonic (five note) scale. She teaches these to the children during scene changes, but the little ones often seem to sing along spontaneously without having been taught.

The big black bear is universally acclaimed (by all the children I spoke to) as the real star of the show. Second in popularity is the obnoxious little gnome who seems to be forever getting himself into trouble.

Mrs. Curry, kindergarten teacher at Sacred Heart admits, "I was watching the children more than the puppets". She adds, "I could tell they really enjoyed it".

Mrs. Chomko and her husband Kaye (Deacon at St. Margaret's Parish)

will be leaving for Vancouver on July 18th, where Doris will teach a half day nursery class at the Waldorf School. Although she will not be available to do further puppet plays, Mrs. Chomko would be willing to lead a puppet workshop with people who want to learn the art of puppetry.

Mercy College, Detroit. It was there that she got the idea for the puppet play and the troubadours. Before Christmas, Rosemary Gebert (fairy tales teacher) suggested to the students that they prepare stories, songs, and plays to share with the larger community.

First Start in Detroit Mrs. Chomko's group decided to present a shepherds' nativity play with three string puppets. They took it to an inner city school, to a day care

centre, and to a block meeting of people who were working to revitalize the core of downtown Detroit. The troubadours enjoyed themselves so much that they continued after Christmas. Doris wanted a complete puppet show to bring home with her, so she began making the puppets for Snow White and Rose Red. When her husband Kaye came to visit her in Detroit, he helped make the cottage, the forest, and the eagle.

"There is a magic about puppetry" says Doris. "The storyteller, the puppet players, and the audience all get caught up in it. There is such joy in doing a puppet play, because you see the joy it brings to the children. Something happens."

Bruno Bettelheim (the prominent American psychologist) has made a strong case for the benefits of telling fairy tales to young children, in his recent book The Uses

of Enchantment. Teacher training at the Waldorf Institute in Detroit follows the "evolution of consciousness" picture of child development. This was first introduced to the western world by Rudolf Steiner in the 1920's, and has recently been confirmed by the noted French child psychologist Piaget. Puppet play presentations of fairy tales are only the tiny tip of the much larger realm of Waldorf Education.



'Puppet on a string'

Rose Red confronts the angry little gnome who has his beard caught in the fishing line. The audience, who are residents of the Villa Nursing Home in Midland, take no notice of puppeteers Mary Ellen Moreau and Joyce Bates.

Photo by Richard Chomko



Show time

Mrs. Chomko and the children of Monsignor Castex School sing the song of the Big black bear, while Mary Ellen

Moreau (Wyebridge), Joyce Bates and Joyce Cannon (from Midland) move the puppets. Photos by Richard Chomko

Gryphon Theatre proves it again — professional theatre just a stone's throw away

by Shirley Whittington  
There were a lot of Midlanders in the audience last Monday when Gryphon Theatre opened its summer season with The Fourposter, a play by Jan de Hartog.

The Fourposter telescopes thirty-five years of marriage into one delightful evening's entertainment, and the fourposter of the title is the symbol of the union. Designer Jack Timlock gave us an ample and imposing bed which wobbled occasionally when stress was applied at critical points. Although some may complain about faulty workmanship, in truth the bed was much like the marriage.

Bride and groom Michael and Agnes (played by Ted Follows and Dawn Greenhalgh) threatened to come apart at the seams several times during their marriage. She noted with horror that his ears were dirty on their first night together. Years later, affluence and success almost forced them apart. He found an accommodating lady friend who understood him. She reported that she'd taken a lover.

Later they disagreed on how their son should be disciplined and about whether their daughter should marry the pie-faced young man from next door. And Agnes in a fit of pre-menopausal depression announced that she was walking out of the marriage forever to find herself.

In spite of all the individual vanities and vulnerabilities the marriage holds. And every married person in the audience knew why. In the final scene when the pair take leave of their fourposter for the last time, the audience is left with a feeling of having gotten to know a couple of very interesting people, whose problems (though set between 1890 and 1912) closely parallel those of all those who go through life in double harness.  
Greenhalgh and

Follows were the complete cast and they sustained the long performance without once letting up the tensions (sometimes gentle, sometimes vicious) between them. The pair is married in real life and perhaps this is the secret.

Ted Follows is a masterful actor with a tremendous sense of emphasis and pace. A shrug, a frozen stance, a pause, an upraised and shaking finger - all are powerful tools in Follows' art of dramatic communication. The play is a comedy, and Follows pulled laughs masterfully. If sometimes the antics were too broad, this was in keeping with the melodramatic way of life that hung in the air around the turn of the century.

His stage (and life) wife, Dawn Greenhalgh, is a charmer - girlish at the start, and then passing into viperish middle age and final sweet maturity.

Timlock's sets revealed almost as much detail on the history of the marriage as the lines of the play. The bed and the bedroom became progressively more opulent, in key with the couple's changing fortunes.

The costuming also reflected the changing years and costume mistress Barbara Suarez clothed her characters well.

As always, there was great attention to peripheral detail. The recorded music of a barber shop chorus set mood for the play before the curtain went up, and between each act and scene, appropriate turn of the century ballads cued in the action.

The Fourposter has begun Barrie's Gryphon Theatre's summer season excellently, and under the leadership of artistic director Ted Follows, it promises to be a good season.

Once again it's been proven that one doesn't have to go to Toronto for polished professional theatre.

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