

Puppets seem real to audience of school children

Story: KATHY PARRISH
Photos: DAVID FRANK

"Do me a favor," puppeteer John McAnistan asked his young audience. "Keep in mind that puppets aren't real. They have no life of their own."

But the kids at McGregor School didn't believe a word of it. Not then — and certainly not after an hour of watching the Bob Brown Marionettes bring puppets to life.

For the Avon Township youngsters, it was a rare chance to see the puppeteers who have entertained Andy Carter and have a standing invitation to the White House Easter Egg Roll.

Sitting cross-legged on their own gym floor, they watched intently as the troupe from Arlington, Va. turned rags and gloves into animals and clowns and Japanese warriors.

They laughed as shaggy dog Toby waved signs of "Puppet Power" and "Kermit Lives" behind the backs of the humans who supposedly control him.

And the children yelled wildly as a blue octopus attacked puppeteer Phyllis Nierendorf, who kept insisting it was "just a glove."

"Just as John told you, a puppet itself has no life of its own. You and I — the puppeteers — give it life," she told the rickrolling audience.

theater

"IT CAN'T move. It can't," she said firmly, while youngsters hollered "Look at your arm!"

"I have a pucky puppet, don't you?" she finally muttered while the audience collapsed with laughter.

But the youngsters composed themselves quickly, listening quietly as the nationally known puppeteers showed them hand puppets, rod puppets, marionettes and turned themselves into "humanettes."

A special treat was the Japanese Bunraku or "Black Theatre," with the black-dressed puppeteer performing in front of a black curtain.

Ending the show were larger than human dancing puppets, which brought gasps and wide-eyes.

"It's the puppet that's in control; not the other way around," acknowledged the puppeteer, wrapping up the presentation.

The youngsters' treat was sponsored by the school's Parent Teacher Association through the Detroit Institute of Art Youththeatre.

"It was so close," said Joy Willis, 7, whose first-grade class missed math to see the puppet show. "And it was real fun."

Jennifer Sherman, 8, thought the puppets were cute. The Avon Township second-grader has a "weird" puppet at home.

FOR THE PUPPETEERS, it was a pleasant end to a two-week metropolitan Detroit tour. They visited 19 schools as part of the Youththeatre Show on the Road series, as well as putting on "A String-a-Long" March 8 at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

This marked their 12th year touring for the Youththeatre in Michigan. "They



Octopus grabs puppeteer Phyllis Nierendorf of New York City.

come up with very original and high quality shows consistently," explained Youththeatre's Tim Doyle.

"They're always doing something new."

Started as a one-man show in New York City, puppeteer Bob Brown moved to the Washington, D.C. area to open the first puppet theater at the Smithsonian Institution. He then opened his own theater and six years ago developed a traveling company.

The troupe grows from four or five regular performers to 12 to 15 at Christmastime. Brown's wife, Judy, directs and writes scripts for the 10 different shows the Bob Brown Marionettes perform.

McAnistan, who performed in Detroit with Ms. Nierendorf and Lew Dic-

key, said puppeteers are more in demand than ever.

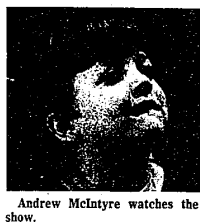
HE CREDITS their popularity to the increase in puppetry on television.

"Teachers, therapists and even dramatists are picking up on it," he explained. "A kid doesn't feel threatened by this inanimate thing."

A performer who loves the "one to one" contact of school shows, he says some audiences are better than others. But basically, he believes "kids are kids."

"They're hard to fool. They know what they like and let you know it."

"And geographically there's absolutely no change — from inner city to affluent suburbs to farmland. And we've done em all."



Andrew McIntyre watches the show.



Dawn Campbell (center) and Heidi Bleiler (far right) are among the large audience at McGregor School in Rochester attending Bob Brown puppeteers show.

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