

Enter Sandman

Stageworks does puppetry

By: A. Richardson

The world of puppetry just isn't what it used to be. Blame it on technology. Once upon a time, watching somebody physically manipulate an inanimate object to produce life-like movement was something to be marveled. It still is, but we are easily bored creatures. Frank Oz's Yoda is quickly traded in for Andy Serkis' Gollum. Though the craft of puppetry is no longer as essential as it once was, the art of it is still intriguing.

Enter Stageworks Youth Theater. This production company has been providing theatrical education to young people of Wilmington for eleven years. Though they have utilized some puppetry in past productions, their current show, "The Sandman and Other Wonders," takes it to a whole new level.

"This is a visual show," says Gina Gambony, who, along with Chris Neely, created and directed the production. She explains that this isn't so much a plot-driven show, as a tableau of images with a connecting thread.

"The theme of the show is dream and sleep," says Neely. "Hence the title 'The Sandman.'" Fittingly, great inspiration was drawn from the children's book, *Where the Wild Things Are*, author Maurice Sendak's tale of a mischievous boy lost in a dreamlike world of monsters and dark forests. When asked how the concept was conceived, she says the specific art of shadow puppetry inspired her.

"Shadows are such a dream-like form," she shares.

Remember in school when the teacher brought out the projector, and kids put their hands in front of the light to make little bunny rabbit shadows on the wall? Think of that as a rudimentary form of shadow puppetry. It's done with a bit more sophistication in this show, with actors using themselves and props to make shadows that appear over fifteen feet high.

Being a youth-based show, Gambony says, "We wanted no one younger than eleven in this production, because the use of puppets required a bit more skill than someone below that could handle. "

Several styles of puppetry will be displayed, including rod puppets, masks and large ceremonial puppets. When asked how the kids were mastering the art, both directors expressed admiration for the actors' skills.

"I was definitely concerned at first, since we only had five weeks to rehearse," says

Gambony, “but one day, it just seemed the kids got it. They’ve really been enjoying it.”

Adds Chris Neely, “I think it’s a great form for kids who may be a little shy about going on stage. Because it’s not them, but the puppets who are on display, they can take the performance to a whole new level.”

Not all of the youth will be working with puppets. Live music will be used throughout the show, and, in turn, young piano, flute, guitar, and drum players will be utilized, as well as vocalists.

“They all perform in their pajamas, in keeping with the dream theme,” Neely informs.

As with any production, this one has its own unique challenges. In this case, it’s space.

“We can’t find a rehearsal space tall enough to [work on] our shadow puppet scenes,” Neely bemoans, over the fifteen foot high screen to be used. Gambony describes one puppet that’s “the size of my dining room table, and takes four people to manipulate. I can’t fit it in my car!”

When asked why they decided to do a puppet show, of all things, Gambony explains, “I didn’t see anyone doing puppet theater in Wilmington. We wanted something different.”

Both ladies have background in the puppeteering field. Gambony developed an interest in the art after learning about it through a friend. Thirsty for more knowledge, “I started doing a lot of research on my own,” she says.

Neely had a bit more experience. Performing children’s theater in a touring company, she gained experience in the art, falling in love with it instantaneously.

When the two women learned of their shared admiration of the craft, they jumped at the chance to do a production. Now that it’s on, the directors assure that the show is suitable for families all over our region.

“I think just about any age can watch this show and get something out of it,” Neely assures. At just over an hour running time, this means even the two year old in your lap can probably make it through.

If you’re in the mood for something different, perhaps some candy for the eye, this show may be your ticket. Pick a date: March 31-April 2, and April 7-9. Friday and Saturday shows are at 7pm and Sunday shows at 3pm; all performances will be held at Thalian Hall’s Studio Theater.