

## Reclaiming a Community Legacy

About 40 summers ago, Dave Payne experienced the thrill of puppeteering for the first time. He was one of a handful of youngsters who signed up for the Neenah Rec Department summer program where elementary students sewed their own marionettes and performed pieces like “You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown” at playgrounds across Neenah. “I remember the dedication of our leaders — and the fun that it was performing with the characters we created — little did I know that those skills would ever come in handy again.”

Payne currently serves as the director of the Fox Folk Marionette Troupe, based at Fox Valley Lutheran High School in Appleton. “Three years ago our high school received an unexpected donation — two complete sets of marionettes, stages, and equipment. It was a wonderful gift, but I never dreamed then of all the time and effort that would go into reclaiming this unique legacy.”

The legacy he is referring to is the history behind the fifty-plus puppets that make up what now called the “Fox Folk” collection. We chose the name “Fox Folk” because of our location in the Fox River Valley and because the scripts we inherited are based on Christmas folk tales.

“I don’t know all the details behind the donation itself, but what I do know is that the school was approached by Bruce and Barbara Purdy who were looking for a home for their creations.” The Purdy’s had been involved in marionettes since the 1960’s. They had been instrumental in establishing a marionette group at Appleton’s All Saints Episcopal Church. The Purdy’s were among a group of parishioners who were upset that the stories of Christmas were being taken out of the public schools in those days. As a result, these dedicated volunteers ended up creating a repertoire of four Christmas plays. That included building and costuming puppets, building a stage, sound and lighting system, and much more. Over the years, the efforts of the All Saints group definitely paid off — over 20,000 viewed the puppet plays between the 1960’s and 1990’s.

During those years the Purdy’s relocated to Nevada and brought their puppet building skills and enthusiasm with them. They oversaw the creation of new group in their new church. Together the Purdy’s created a new set of marionettes. Bruce did the woodworking, while Barb sculpted and costumed the new cast of characters. The Christmas shows helped fund mission projects for the church.

It was this collection that first made its way to the Appleton high school. The Purdy’s met with Dave Payne and school administrator Paul Hartwig to see if the school would be willing and able to make use of their cherished puppets. After being assured the puppets would find a good home at FVL, the Purdy’s went back to Nevada and lovingly packed up the marionettes, staging, sound and light equipment, backdrops, props — everything needed to continue the legacy.



“I remember how concerned they were that everything got to us in one piece. They called the puppets ‘their children.’ They definitely wanted to make sure they went to someone who would care for and make use of them. They didn’t trust them to be shipped — they rented a truck and had their son drive the whole shipment from Nevada to Appleton.”

That’s when the work began for Payne. “Their son and I unloaded the truck. Everything survived the trip. I couldn’t believe how much stuff there was — the wood for the stage filled up the loading dock. I don’t think our maintenance staff was too keen on the donation. You could see it in their eyes — where are we going to find room to store all this?”

That was late in 2003. “I remember that Christmas vacation very well. My daughter — who was working on her theatre degree at the time — helped me inventory the whole shipment. We took digital photos of everything.”

Next came the big job of putting the stage together from scratch. The task was like a giant jigsaw puzzle. The parts were color-coded, but how they fit together wasn’t always obvious. “Cassie and I spent several days putting the stage together. We really appreciated the photos they sent.” Fully assembled the stage was huge — it filled up the whole back stage workroom. “The size of it reminded me of the puppet stage you see in *The Sound of Music* — not that fancy, but about that big.”

“Cassie and I were pretty proud we were able to get it all together. “ Unfortunately after putting it up, it needed to be disassembled and stored away because work needed to be started on creating scenery for the upcoming FVL Theatre stage performance.

Purdy’s had another surprise for the school. They had talked to Father Patrick Twomey, the rector of All Saints Episcopal Church, and inquired about the whereabouts of All Saints’ collection of marionettes and equipment. That started the ball rolling on a second donation of puppets and equipment which took place later that spring.

With the help of Father Patrick, Len & Lou Beard, and Annette LaBrake, the marionettes and props were packed for their trip north to FVL. Moving the All Saints stage was another matter. The All Saints stage had been custom built for All Saints’ spacious and high-ceilinged basement. It came in large, heavy panels that barely fit out the doors and up the stairs. Payne and Matt — his son — carted the stage away by trailer making several trips back and forth.

Payne again called on his daughter to help him assemble the new stage. “This one was really a challenge compared to the first stage. No one had put it together in years. We had no pictures to go from . . . and it was beastly heavy.” In a couple days, the stage was assembled. It was even bigger — and less portable — than the first stage. The bridge (platform for the puppeteers stand on) was 3 feet off the ground! “The stage spanned the whole theatre workroom behind the stage.

With the stage up, it was time to call on our friends from All Saints to do a training session with the marionettes. An afternoon in August was chosen and Faith Seeley — former director of the All Saints troupe along with the Beards and Annette LaBrake — came to FVL to give Payne and his daughter a basic lesson. After looking over the stage,



attention focused on the puppets. A variety of marionettes removed from their storage bags, unwound, and untangled. Faith was especially helpful in teaching the puppet movements to Cassie while Dave looked on and take notes. Original plans to videotape the session were scrapped because of lack of time. Dave and Cassie later recorded their own video to introduce FVL's first group of puppeteers to the puppets and equipment donated to FVL. Once this was done, it was once again time to disassemble the stage and put it and the puppets into storage until preparations were ready to introduce the Fox Folks Marionette Troupe.

The next several months were a time of intense study and preparation. The set of scripts received with the donations was reviewed. "My thoughts," according to Payne, "as I read the scripts and watched videos of the performances were that these were definitely products of the 1960's. To do the same plays successfully forty years later was going to take some rewriting and shortening. It was really apparent how times had changed."

There were four different shows with scripts and puppets that had been donated to the school. "Why the Chimes Rang," "Zia, the Hunchback," "Marko, the Shepherd Boy," and "The Other Wiseman" were the show titles. Payne chose the "The Other Wiseman" a retelling of Van Dyke's classic Christmas tale about Artaban, a wiseman from the East who was a companion of the Magi. "I liked that fact that for our beginning venture into marionettes we could be telling a basic Bible story from a different point of view. In light of our audiences, it seemed the best choice."

With that in mind, he began to compose a script in his head. It was down on paper by October. The original plan called for a variety of puppetry styles — marionette, hand, and even shadow puppets on a full stage. "It was a grand idea — unfortunately not too well grounded in reality or experience. In my brain, it was a beautiful piece of art. In my schedule, it was something that could never have worked. I went to Julie Miller — my secretary and one of the most wonderful and creative people I know — and confessed that there was no way I could put together the whole show I had in my mind. She snapped me back to reality. She said we didn't need to do Broadway — we needed to put together a solid show that our students could perform and that would reach our audience for Winterfest."

With her advice in mind, I pared back the show to a simple format with a narrator serving as a bridge between the marionette segments. It would be four or five acts and as director, I could serve as the narrator dressed up in the minstrel costume that had been part of the donation. I entitled my adaptation of the tale: "The Search."

The students were more than ready to get practicing with the marionettes. We had originally recruited them the spring before hoping to get some work in during the summer, but that didn't happen with all the other work of receiving the second donation and moving/ assembling the All Saints' stage. It was November just before Thanksgiving break when we actually met as a group for the first time. Several of the original volunteers had gone on to other pursuits by that time. The names of those who attended our first meeting were Mr. Dave Payne, Mrs. Julie Miller, Miss Michaela Lemke, Tasha Lemke,



Amanda Houser, Jessica Evenson, Jaimie Waack, Jolene Wierschke, Jenny Hammond, and Allison Loewenhagen.

“Our first meeting was pretty much ‘show and tell.’ We met in the Honors English room. We watched the intro video that Cassie and I had filmed. Then everybody grabbed a marionette and we tried a number of basic moves like walking, sitting, bowing, gesturing. It was all we could do — we didn’t have a stage or sound track yet. But it was a start. We also set up our weekly practice dates — it was about 7 practices to our debut performance.”

Thanksgiving break was spent doing basic marionette repair. It had been a long time since the marionettes in this show had been used and they needed lots of work just to get them untangled and functional. I tried to get enough working that we could practice the first act or two. It was always an adventure going from one week to the next — what new thing would I be adding this week?”

We still didn’t have a stage at this point. For our next practice, we met in the administrative storage room across the hall from the school office. There was a big old table someone had fashioned out of a heavy old wood door. They had pounded 2x6’s to it for legs. It was about the perfect width and height for a makeshift stage. We clamped the opening backdrop to the table and began practicing scene 1. Everything was “up-for-grabs” at the first practices. No one had assigned parts — we needed to see which puppeteers had the ability to bring their characters to life. I would read the lines of all the characters and the puppeteers would try to time their actions to my reading.

There were a number of challenges that became apparent early on. “The puppets had been strung in the classical American technique, but it really wasn’t working for performance style. Walking the puppets was a real chore for the puppeteers and it was hard for them to make convincing gestures with their hands and heads the way they were strung.

“I hated the thought of changing the marionettes - I was hoping we could use them as they were. I was debating just what was the answer when a package was delivered one morning to my desk. It was just addressed to me as the ‘Puppet Man’ — it must have been from someone who read the article in the Post-Crescent when All Saints donated their group of puppets. A note inside said that it was mine if I could use it. I looked at the marionette inside — a very simple puppet compared to the ones we were using in the Fox Folk Marionette Troupe. But even though it was so simple — it worked remarkably well. I studied it a while and noticed the different stringing pattern it utilized. It gave me an idea . . . I went home and dug out the marionettes I had used as a gradeschooler in Neenah and the stringing pattern was similar. It put the emphasis on the arm movements instead of the leg movements. After experimenting with the first few Fox Folk marionettes, I decided it was time to restrung the whole lot. It was a decision that would take until after Christmas.

Another challenge was the different style of puppetry that marionettes presented. “I had worked with “muppet-style” puppetry since the mid-1990’s. I was very comfortable with that genre and assumed that would translate perfectly into marionettes. I was wrong. From the first



practice, it was clear to see that “muppets-style” depends not on puppet action so much as word play. That did not translate at all into marionettes. I thought I had the whole play written. What I found out when they started performing is that I had a story without action — it was totally unworkable as a marionette script. I needed to rewrite each scene so that actions would help portray the emotion and meaning of the scene. It was a good thing we hadn't cut a sound-track yet.

With practices coming weekly and a script at least roughly together, it was apparent that we needed to begin in practicing on the stage we would actually be incorporating into our performances. We needed a portable stage of some type. To make use of the backdrops that had been donated by the Purdy's and All Saints, it needed to be approximately the same size as the performance area of those original stages. I spent hours poring over the marionette books provided by the Purdy's and on countless plans found on the internet. None perfectly met our needs, but I began to picture what might work for us.

I wanted to use the silky red fringed curtains the Purdy's donated. We needed a stage that could be wheeled around from place to place in school since we could be performing in any number of places. It also had to be pretty much self-contained since we might not have lots of time to set up our show. In the end, I took a rolling theatre flat and attached a hinged “bridge” that could be folded up so that it could slide through any regular school door. Door height also governed the height of the stage since it needed to roll from venue to venue. The final stage features attached lighting, a leaning bar, script bar, and beautiful gold brocade curtains supplied by creative consultant Julie Miller. (Julie is also the artist who painted a number of the beautiful backdrops used in our performances.) The finishing touch was closeout gold and red fringe supplied by Walmart to cover up the wheels. Side curtains are attached with PVC pipe so that they are sturdy, yet removable. Julie Miller again sewed the black side curtains.

Getting used to performing inside the boxy stage was a learning experience for the troupe. How easy it had been getting puppets on and off stage with just a table tipped on its side and the limitless expanse of stage in front of the marionette. After some initial challenges the learned the new “ins and outs.”

Christmas break was fast approaching and we were still only about three acts into the five act play. We were making progress, but it was clear that we needed to be working with a sound track to be ready to perform. My assignment over Christmas vacation was to get a sound track recorded and lots of puppets restrung.

Christmas break was coming to a close. Lots of puppets had been restrung, but no sound track was in the offing. Should I call faculty members? Who can I get to fill the required number of voices? The answer came at our family New Years' celebration. I set up the recording studio in Granny's apartment while the festivities went on downstairs in the fellowship hall. The wisemen ended up being my brother-in-laws Rev. John Unnasch, Rev. Jim Behringer, and son Tim. My voice is the voice of Artaban, the sick man, and one of the Roman captain. Other voices included my daughter Cassie as the slave girl, my son Matt as the old man from Jerusalem, nephews Patrick and David Behringer as the shepherd and the Roman soldier respectively. The original recording also featured Vicki Behringer and Josey



Unnasch as the Bethlehem mother and daughter, but they were replaced in a rewritten scene with the voices of Julie Miller and Michaela Lemke.

Introducing the sound track to the troupe was exciting, but a little disheartening to the puppeteers. It had been so much easier to keep up with my voice reading the script and giving directions rather than live speech. Live speech was way too fast at first for the puppeteers to anticipate and keep up with. But it came in time. The hardest was introducing the new scenes with just sound track. That did not work at all.

Only a few practices left to our final performances. It was time to add props and backdrops to the mix. Props were odds and ends I purchased at Goodwill or St. Vincent De Paul Thrift Stores to give a more three-dimensional feel to the staging. We used the campfire for Act 1; a well for Act 2; and a different well with plant for Act 4. We also added the sound equipment controlled from back stage and lighting at the last practice. Lots of new items with little time to practice.

Dress rehearsal was held in the atrium (the glassed in library area) where we would perform for the Winterfest audience. It was a straight run-through - no time for redoing mixed up scenes. Everything was going so well until the final Act. The soldier was leading out the slave girl when his arm fell off! It fell off his body but was still attached to the strings. It crawled along the floor of the stage. It was hilarious and everybody cracked up - we have the video to prove it. Thankfully, the arm fell off in practice and not on performance day!

The Sunday of the Fox Folk Marionette Troupe debut arrived. Signs were posted all around to direct people to our performance. Invitations had gone out to our friends at All Saints and to the Purdy's. The Post-Crescent reporter was on campus. The crowd ended up being standing room only. Clad in my minstrel outfit, I announced the beginning of our performance, "Hear ye, hear ye . . . the show is about to commence." The show itself went by in a flash. We had trouble with some floating sheep — a perennial problem, but the show was well received. Before I knew it, I was introducing our cast of puppeteers and our debut was history. I especially treasured the compliments of the All Saints visitors and Mr. Steve Purdy who stayed after the program to share their encouraging words.