



Troupe members stand behind a hand painted backdrop of a Jerusalem street to work the long black strings that move their marionettes.

Preschoolers enjoyed meeting the marionettes after a performance at the new Apple Creek YMCA Dec. 5.



Fox Valley Lutheran High School students who are Fox Folk Marionette Troupe members are (left to right): FRONT – Senior Kirsten Funk with the sick man; Junior Nathan Grundmeier with Steve; Freshman Tony Kubek IV with Melchior; Sophomore Alyssa Lawrence with Bethlehem Mother; Junior Julie Favorite with old Artaban; Senior Liz Scheibe with Young Artaban. BACK – Dave Payne, director; and Cassie Payne, assistant director. Lori Schneider photos

MARIONETTE TROUPE KEEPS A DYING ART ALIVE

“The Fourth Wise Man” Christmas folk tale told by FVL students

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Fox Valley Lutheran (FVL) High School students operating vintage marionettes – a kind of puppet that move with strings attached to their bodies – have a special way of spreading the message of Christmas to children and adults throughout the area while keeping a dying art form alive.

“That I know of, there are only a handful of marionette troupes existing in the Midwest, and ours may be the only high school group in the nation, perhaps the world,” says Dave Payne, who has been directing the program since 2004, when the marionettes were given to the school.

While performing for a community audience which ranged from preschoolers to 80-year-olds at the newly opened Apple Creek YMCA Dec. 5, Payne, dressed in costume, welcomed the crowd and, as narrator, laid out the story line to the audience.

Six Fox Folk Marionette Troupe

members dressed in traditional black stand hidden behind the backdrop of a new portable stage that Payne engineered. “We needed a lighter-weight stage that we could all handle, so I came up with a new design,” he said. He has spent uncounted hours repairing and restringing the marionettes for the four Christmas scripts that were also given to the school.

The troupe retold the Henry Van Dyke story of “The Fourth Wise Man,” Artaban, who planned to meet the newborn King but was detained by performing acts of kindness. Artaban traveled for years trying to find the King. The story unfolds to the crowd, ending with “Go Tell it on the Mountain.”

Troupe member Julie Favorite of New London is enjoying her second season with the marionettes. Last year she performed “Baboushka” and this year she operates Artaban’s horse, Vasda, and another puppet, old Artaban.

The troupe meets two days a week after school. Freshman to seniors are welcome, and more experienced students show newcomers how to express their stories through moving the long, black strings that carry motion to the puppet’s body parts. The most challenging part of operating a marionette is working the strings and avoiding tangles.

“Marionettes don’t have mouths that

move and their facial expressions don’t change, so it is challenging to the students to show emotion and drama. They do a good job of grasping the concept,” says Cassie Payne, assistant director and Dave Payne’s daughter.

The performance at the Apple Creek YMCA was the opening of the troupe’s season. The troupe will also be performing for FVL High School’s Winterfest on Jan. 31. Two shows are planned – an encore of the Artaban story and a new fairy tale adaptation called “Princess Gloriana and the Jewel Tree.”

“Our new show script is an adaptation of a fairy tale script I found in an old puppet book,” says Payne. “It contained many of the characters we already have in our collection of marionettes. I have adapted it to create a more elaborate story. It is the tale of a beautiful princess, a brave knight, and an evil dragon who is plaguing the peaceful land of King Baldwin and Queen Helena. The dragon marionette is being built by one of our puppeteers.”

Winterfest is a musical and fine arts showcase for FVL students and is open to the public. The event runs from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Puppet performances are tentatively scheduled for 12:45 p.m. and 3:20 p.m. Check for times closer to Jan. 31 by calling the school at 920-739-4441.

HISTORY OF FOX FOLK MARIONETTES

The Fox Folk collection of marionettes is the puppetry legacy of the Purdy family and All Saints Episcopal Church in Appleton. More than 50 marionettes and more than a dozen hand puppets as well as props, scripts, backdrops, staging and lighting were hand-crafted by Bruce and Barbara Purdy and members of the All Saints Marionette Troupe.

This artistic endeavor began in the mid 1960s when religious stories were being eliminated in public schools. It was a collaborative effort of Jim and Marion Cowen and Bruce and Barbara Purdy. Marion Cowen had been a professional performer in Chicago. The first show, “Why the Chimes Rang,” opened in December 1965. These delightful Christmas shows became a community tradition for youngsters throughout the Fox River Valley.

The Purdys moved west in the 1980s and took their passion for puppetry with them. Under their leadership, a new set of marionettes was crafted for their new church and the show “Marko, the Shepherd Boy” opened at Incline Village, Nev., in 1985. Performances continued into the late 1990s. More than 20,000 students viewed the cycle of four plays put on by the troupe between 1965 and the late 1990s.

Fox Valley Lutheran High School became the new home of this marionette collection in spring of 2004, when they were returned to the Fox Valley by the Purdy family. Christened the Fox Folk Marionettes because of Fox Valley Lutheran high school’s fox mascot and the puppets repertoire of folk tales, the troupe debuted in January 2005, as part of the school’s annual Winterfest with “The Search,” an adaptation of one of the original scripts.

A new tradition started up for the troupe a few years ago. Each graduating senior takes the troupe to the elementary school they attended to put on a marionette show for the students.

