

Marionettes visit school

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(Above link goes to YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=29&v=NPoI2hIizLY)

Searching for the King by Angie Landsverk

Students at St. Peter Lutheran School in Weyauwega saw the Christmas story as told by marionettes. The Fox Folk Marionette Troupe of Fox Valley Lutheran High School (FVL) presented “The Search for the King” on Dec. 13.

For FVL senior Aidan Smithson, it was a Senior Showcase performance for him. He lives in rural Waupaca, graduated from St. Peter Lutheran School four years ago and has been part of the troupe the past few years.



Aidan Smithson is pictured with one of the marionettes following the Fox Folk Marionette Troupe's performance, in Weyauwega.

Angie Landsverk Photo

Smithson was a sophomore at FVL when one of his friends introduced him to the group. "I've kind of stuck with it ever since," he said. He developed friendships through his participation in it.

Smithson also said, "It's a good look at history, a different way to tell Bible stories." He plans to study history in college. Returning to St. Peter Lutheran School "brought back a lot of fun memories," Smithson said.

Dave Payne directs the troupe, which is an extracurricular club at FVL. At FVL close to 40 years, he is the school's Communications Director. Payne's daughter Cassie is the co-director of the troupe. "We are probably the only high school group that does marionettes in the whole world," Payne said.



Dave Payne is the director of Fox Valley Lutheran High School's Fox Folk Marionette Troupe. Angie Landsverk Photo

Most of the puppets they use were built in the 1960s. The troupe has about 75 puppets, and also does an Easter show and some fairy tales. “You don’t see string puppets much anymore,” he told the St. Peter Lutheran students before the show began.

He said about half of the group is “brand new this year.” The first time many of them picked up a puppet was six weeks ago, Payne said. Last Thursday’s performance in Weyauwega was the troupe’s fifth show in the last two weeks.



The 30-minute show it presented was about Artaban, a “wise man” with a truth to share. The story is based on “The Other Wise Man” by Henry Van Dyke.

“Marionettes have been telling this story for hundreds of years,” Payne said. “The puppets you will be watching have been telling the story for over 50 years.” Many of the hand-crafted marionettes used in it debuted in December of 1965, and the story of “The Other Wise Man” was one of the shows performed by the original troupe.

It was also the first show performed by the high school’s troupe after the marionettes were donated to FVL in 2004. Bruce and Barbara Purdy approached the school when they were looking for a home for marionettes they created. They first became involved in marionettes in the 1960s, and were instrumental in starting a group at All Saints Episcopal Church, in Appleton.



That group created four Christmas plays, made the puppets and their costumes, while also building a stage, sound and lighting system. When the Purdys moved to Nevada, they took their puppet building skills with them. They built a new set of marionettes and oversaw the creation of a new group at their new church.

That was the first collection FVL received, after the Purdys met with school officials. Payne recalled FVL's principal saying to him, "You have puppets. You should do this." Payne was an English teacher at FVL at the time and said the marionettes reminded him of the string puppets in "The Sound of Music." They were different than the hand puppets he used in the classroom and at his church.

After the school accepted the donation, the Purdys tracked down All Saints Episcopal Church's marionettes and equipment. FVL received that donation as well. Payne's daughter Cassie was double majoring in English and theater at the time. In both cases, she helped him inventory everything and assemble the stages. Faith Seeley, the former director of the church troupe, was among those who did a training session with them.



Payne's introduction to puppetry was decades earlier, when Neenah's Rec Department had a summer program that involved building marionettes. He was around fourth grade and said they took the show to parks in the community that summer. Years later, Payne was a parent when the pastor of his church was looking for something to do with the youth group. The group started doing hand puppet shows as a ministry.

Payne's daughter Cassie is a children's librarian and eventually took over what became Hands 2 Grow. "Between the two of us, we have more than 700 puppets, and people keep giving us more," Payne said.

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