

Puppet captures lead in SU play

By Glenne White

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WINCHESTER — Amid the organized clutter of bolts of material, foam, sewing notions, mannequins, and sewing machines, students are finishing costumes for “Rumpelstiltskin Is My Name.”

The Shenandoah University theater department’s fall children’s show will open this weekend.

One student has a particular talent needed for the production. Jonathan Carlucci, a 23-year-old junior in the musical theater department, is a professional puppeteer.



Puppeteer Jonathan Carlucci (right) and extra Corey Buckner show how the Rumpelstiltskin puppet will be worn during

When it came time to discuss casting for the show, director Wade Fransen told costume designer and fellow professor Cheryl Yancey that he would probably cast the tallest people appropriate for the roles in the upcoming show and look for the best short person to play the feature role.

This casting would help the audience, mainly children, to see that Rumpelstiltskin is a peewee sorcerer.

Yancey suggested that a Rumpelstiltskin puppet might be the answer, and casting would be easier. Fransen agreed to the idea.

Carlucci creates, designs, builds, and brings life to his creations. He has been making puppets since he was very small, messing up the family living room with bags and tennis balls and glue and markers and material.

Once his little-boy puppets were

the production of "Rumpelstiltskin Is My Name."
(Photos by Scott Mason)

finished, he would command his parents and older brother to "watch my show." As soon as he was old enough, his mother taught him to sew. At 15,

Carlucci turned professional.

Yancey described how his talent emerged in the SU theater department. For his final exam project at the end of last year's spring semester, Carlucci turned in Penelope, who is on hand — literally and figuratively — in the SU costume shop.

Muppet-style, she is hot pink with fluorescent pink, boa-feathered hair and is a bit of a tease. Think Miss Piggy in her younger days on a college campus.

Carlucci is also a ventriloquist. Penelope and Yancey bantered back and forth across the work table about Penelope's life at Shenandoah.

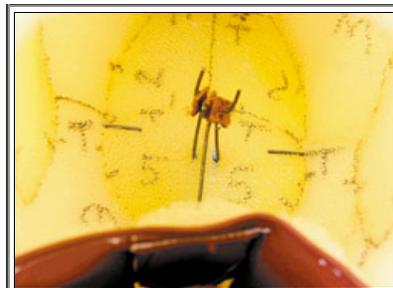
Penelope is only one of Carlucci's successes. Yancey said that when she built a large two-person camel puppet for a previous show, she sought his help.

"Jonathan has wonderful talent," Yancey said, such that she invited him to accompany her and to be a presenter during September's U.S. Institute of Theatre Technology conference. Attendees at the event responded positively to their puppetry presentation and students were inspired by a successful student puppeteer.

Now Carlucci is hard at work on the Rumpelstiltskin puppet. It is a combination-type of invention — in part an American adaptation of Japanese bunraku puppetry (part of the Asian culture since the 16th century) and part muppet-style puppet.

It takes two people to make Rumpelstiltskin come alive. Carlucci is joined by fellow actor Jonathan Richard for the task. Both dress in black, to be as invisible as possible, and manipulate the 4 1/2-foot-tall puppet onstage.

Lighting designer Bill Pierson will work with the staging so the focus is directed on the puppet and not the puppeteers.



Markings can be seen around the levers that move the eyes in the head of a puppet that will be in Shenandoah University's production of "Rumpelstiltskin Is My Name."

Carlucci provides the voice and works the mouth, eyes, left hand, and foot, while Richard maneuvers the body and right hand and foot.

Each will have one foot in a black slipper. With careful coordination by the Jonathans, Rumpelstiltskin will walk, jump, gesture, glower, hunch over, and do everything expected of an actor.

Extensive practice is needed to work together in this way, Carlucci said. "It's very physical."

Audiences should also expect some pyrotechnics and smoke to help maintain the illusions.

"Rumpelstiltskin Is My Name" is not as dark as many of the versions of the fairy tale. Comic moments abound, with two sisters vying for family attention, and the production has a happy ending.

Rather than the older themes of scary life lessons usually found in the work of the aptly surnamed Grimm brothers, the happy ending comes in the updated theme of "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."



Costume designer and SU professor Cheryl Yancey crafts an elbow joint for a puppet from plumbing parts. The show opens this weekend in the Glaize Studio Theatre.

Carlucci, besides working on completing his degree at SU, also makes custom puppets. He has created a Kate Smith (of "God Bless America" fame) and puppets for educational television series and teaching DVDs.

He is taking some time, too, to make contacts with studios and industry people who will need his talents after he graduates.

"When people ask me what I do, I say 'Make puppets,'" Carlucci said. "They laugh. Then I show them my puppets and their reaction is like 'Oh, wow!'"

His passion for the work shows as his face lights up. Carlucci's enthusiasm for his puppets and the hours he spends in the costume shop are confirmed by his colleagues and by Yancey.

He said he gets "in the zone" when he is working — it's "what I do."

Performances

"Rumpelstiltskin Is My Name" will be presented this Saturday and Oct. 31 at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. and this Sunday and Nov. 1 at 3 p.m. in the Glaize Studio Theatre at Shenandoah University in Winchester. Tickets cost \$8. For information, call the box office at 540-665-4569.

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www.carluccipuppets.com