



A fifth grader from St. Michael's Academy meets a puppet from the presentation of "the Hobbit."



Jeanne Mathes holds up one of the puppets from the presentation of "the Hobbit." The girls are fifth-graders from Bryan.

photos by Pam Rimoldi

Hobbits really made of foam

By CATHY SAATHOFF

Battalion Staff

The Hutsah Puppet Theater presented J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit" Tuesday night with a set of puppets made of foam rubber and scraps of material.

The story, presented on a wooden stage with interchangeable backgrounds, tells of Bilbo Baggins and his journey through Middle Earth in search of stolen treasure.

The fantasy dwarfs, hobbits and trolls of "The Hobbit" are well-suited for puppet-making.

Mark Norby, spokesman for the six-member Hutsah troupe, conducted a workshop Tuesday afternoon to give puppets' background. Those little puppets that guided the audience through Middle Earth are put together with foam rubber, rope, scraps and a lot of imagination.

Norby said the puppets are the hand and rod type, like the Muppets and Sesame Street characters. They are operated from behind a curtain, with puppeteers holding the puppets over their heads.

The soundtrack of the show is on tape. The puppeteers must coordinate the movements of the puppets with the sound on the tape.

The puppets look convincing from the audience, but up close

they look like they've had a rough life, traveling from college to college stuffed in large bags.

Besides an occasional head above the curtain, the only thing visible to the audience is the sticks which are attached to each character's hand to control movement.

"You don't realize the puppets have sticks on their arms after awhile," Norby said.

The puppets start out as sheets and cubes of foam rubber. The sheets are rolled to make puppet bodies, and the segmented heads and arms are attached with rope.

The head cubes are slit to create the mouth, which the puppeteer's hand goes in. The facial contours are carved with scissors and razor blades.

The nose, ears and other features are carved separately and attached with contact cement. The eyes, which sparkle under the lights, are really half ping-pong balls with buttons glued on.

The puppets are covered with a thin layer of art foam, which smooths out their "skin." They are then painted with various colors of acrylic paint.

The puppets have no legs, so the only clothing required is a shirt, which Norby said is made of scraps of cloth.

Jeanne Mathes, another puppeteer, said the puppets' necks and wrists wear out often and must be replaced.

Manipulation of the puppets is "very uncomfortable," Norby said. The puppeteers, who are behind a curtain, must hold the puppets over their heads and operate the mouths and arms. Sticks are attached to one arm of each puppet, and Mathes said the arms usually hang at the puppet's side except when the character is speaking.

Making the puppet appear lifelike isn't an easy task, Norby said. The puppeteer assumes a character walk to give the puppet the same walk.

Puppet speech involves moving the head and opening the mouth on certain syllables, as well as gesturing for emphasis and expression.

Most of the 30 puppets require only one hand, unless the arm is moved. Since there are only six puppeteers, one person often has to control two puppets.

The only exception in "The Hobbit" is Gollum, the schizophrenic green creature Bilbo Baggins encounters in a cave. Gollum is slightly hyperactive, and needs one hand to work his body and another for both arms.

The dragon, Smaug, was the audience's unanimous favorite when Norby asked after the show which puppet they would like to see.

Smaug is a huge green creation who stole a scene from tiny Bilbo. Smaug's eyes glow, and his wings take up the entire stage. And he belches smoke at the end of his speech to Bilbo.

Smaug is a head puppet — he is worn on a puppeteer's head, two others hold his wings and another carries the fire extinguisher that produces the smoke.

Other special effects, like flashes of lightning and a glowing staff for

wizard Gandalf, impressed the audience, but Smaug seemed to be the favorite.

One of director Rusty Steiger's purposes in producing "The Hobbit" is to promote puppet theater for adults. The show is not recommended for children under 7, but the audience was full of enchanted little faces, and when Norby brought out puppets for display after the performance a stampede of little feet headed to the stage.

The Hutsah Puppet Theater, which is based in Chicago, was sponsored by the MSC committees Cepheid Variable, Arts and Free University.



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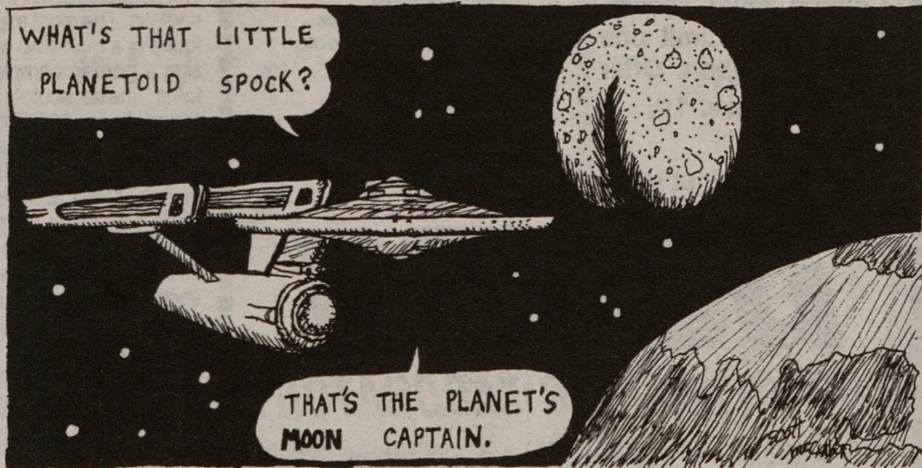
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