

Bourkes' Puppets



When you bring your kids or grandkids to Jubilee this year, take time to watch an unusual puppet show that had its roots a little over 30 years ago.

While Toni was skipping rope in Chicago, Rod was in Dublin, producing, directing and starring in backyard plays. It was a natural progression for Rod when he and Toni married to pick up where he left off. Toni purchased two marionettes at a yard sale and in the early 70's, their three sons helped launch "The Bourke Troupe". The troupe adopted the rock 'n roll music of the 50's and got the audience to dance along with the puppets.

Soon "The Bourke Troupe" was performing at nursing homes and block parties. It was fun and entertaining. They added a few puppets at a time. Rod liked to have the audience participate in the shows, so he let kids pick out a puppet and dance to the music. Since there was no talking involved, even the shy kids blossomed. Sometimes adults joined in the fun, too.

When the boys started feeling self-conscious, Rod and Toni continued on their own but kept the same format. They used "rock and roll" and audience participation. They also worked on educational/entertaining programs. In the duo, Toni performs in the background so Rod can be the "star". She picks out the music, writes special scripts when commissioned, helps load and set up, does the PR and bookkeeping.

In the 70's, Toni wrote a puppet show about drug abuse and the Alabama Department of Mental Health hired Rod to present it to junior high schools throughout the state. It was designed for jr. high school students to present to the younger grades. Toni has also written a skit on kidnapping, but so far has not been successful in finding a sponsor.

Bourkes' Puppets has been a sideline for the Bourkes. Rod has been employed as a custodian in a private school and Toni pursued a teaching degree and career. They've kept the show going for over 30 years now. They both wish they had kept track of how many shows they've done but they do know over the years they've touched thousands of lives. At public shows, they've had parents coming in with their children telling them that they remember the show they did for their birthday parties when they were 3, 4, or 5. Time flies!

You might call Rod a "maverick puppeteer". He doesn't just hold a puppet on his hand and make it talk. He sings, dances, shares and teaches while performing.

Rod had open heart surgery with a valve replacement and quadruple bypass in March of 2002. Honoring the old adage, "The Show Must Go On", Rod performed four shows at Jubilee that May. Only a handful of people in the audience knew of his operation and therapy. He is truly a real trooper.

In 1976 Margaret Carpenter had a vision of an annual city-wide festival. She hired the Bourkes for her granddaughter's birthday party and asked them to perform at the festival. They did and they've come back ever since.

If not performing, Rod is on the field coaching or refereeing soccer games. Twenty-four years ago, he helped form the AYSO soccer program in Montgomery. He coached one of the first all-girls soccer teams and still continues with the U-12 and U-14 girls teams. He is on the AYSO board as a safety director.

So Rod and Toni Bourke are thankful for being part of so many lives even in a little way. They both love entertaining and watching people have fun. They're good at "sneaky teaching" where you learn something without knowing it. Puppetry keeps them young at heart.

You can contact Bourke's Puppets at toniandrod@aol.com