

Children's Opera comes to Somerset

(A Review submitted by Elizabeth McQueary Loiacono)

Recently my children watched an episode of Curious George in which the little monkey goes to his first opera.

When I told my 6-year-old that I was taking him to see the children's opera, Pinocchio, his reply was, "I have to take binoculars like Curious George so I can see the opera!"

After assuring him that he wouldn't need opera glasses in Somerset High School's W.B. Jones Auditorium, I nevertheless stuffed a pair of binoculars in my purse. I didn't want to deprive him of any tiny bit of this novel experience!

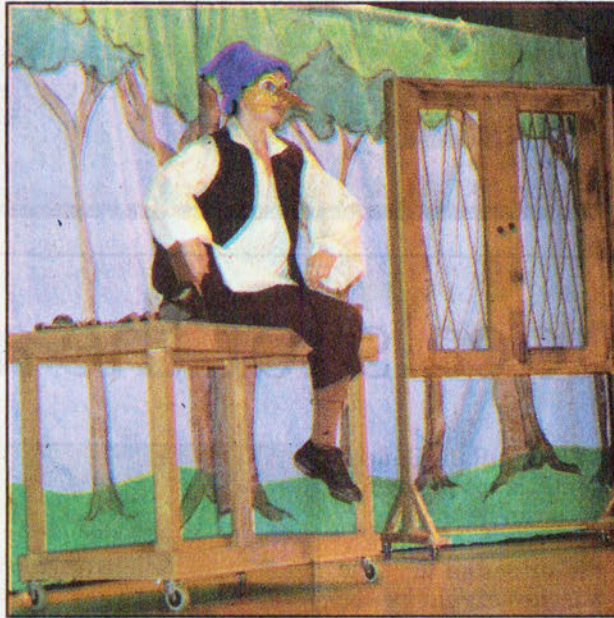
Children's Opera in Somerset?!

When I heard about the joint effort by Watershed Arts Alliance and Hopkins Elementary to bring Pinocchio to Somerset, I was thrilled for many reasons. Firstly, many children would get their first taste of musical theater and, secondly, this event might open the door to more similar performances in Somerset.

On Thursday, Nov. 29, Pinocchio was presented by The Schmidt Opera Outreach Program or SOOP. The troupe, from the University of Kentucky Opera Theater, gives performances at elementary schools across the Commonwealth. Thursday, they held captive an audience of Hopkins Elementary school children, teachers and parents.

Only 35 minutes long, SOOP's rendition emphasized the values of honesty, friendship and family through the classic tale of Pinocchio.

Set to music by Mozart, Donizetti and Offenbach, "the orchestra" consisted of one very skilled pianist, Martha Green. The roles of Puppet Master and The Wolf were played by Caleb C. Ashby, B.M. Gepetto and Mr. Cat were played by Manuel Castillo, D.M.A. Olympia the Wind-Up Doll and the Blue



Lady were played by Dannica Burson, D.M.A., and Pinocchio was Ashley Jackson, B.M.

They were supported by a host of knowledgeable directors, set designers and a talented costumer, all part of UK's Opera Theater Department.

After the engaging performance, a question-and-answer session allowed the children to express their curiosity about the opera, from the props to sound effects to the music.

If you've ever wondered, "Why opera?" then think about the benefits of a really good story combined with really good music. Children, especially, benefit from the experience of having their senses delighted by the auditory and visual extravaganza on stage.

From opera, children can learn lessons relevant to their own lives.

It is this belief in the importance of opera for children that led Pauline House, retired director for Watershed Arts Alliance, to pursue this endeavor. House feels strongly about bringing free access to the fine arts to the children of Somerset. For many years she has worked with the Watershed board to bring talented artists, musicians, storytellers, poets and writers to the forefront of Somerset's cultural life.

Judging from the success of last week's children's opera, I predict we will be seeing more opera performances in the future.

Don't forget your binoculars!

Watershed Arts Alliance's current director is musician and songwriter Joe LaMay.

Watershed is funded by the City of Somerset, Pulaski County Fiscal Court, friends and members. The Kentucky Arts Council, the state arts agency, provides operating support to Watershed Arts Alliance with state tax dollars and federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. Also, a special thanks to Larry Sword and Elizabeth Broyles.



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