

One crafty cat

Florida theater's puppet production brings "Puss in Boots" to life

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This cat in the hat is no Dr. Seuss creation. In fact, this is one bad kitten.

Puss in Boots is crafty, cunning and has the ability to kill ogres.

And, with a cool hat and boots, is an impeccable dresser, too.

The character that appeared in Charles Perrault's 17th-century fairy tale has gone through many evolutions in its 300-plus-year history, including the incarnation that will come to Springdale's Arts Center of the Ozarks on Saturday: a complement to gigantic puppets.

It is the award-winning troupe Bits 'N Pieces Puppet Theatre's production of the tale, which will arrive at 3 p.m. Saturday.

Holli Rubin, who builds the troupe's 9-foot-tall puppets for each of its shows and serves as the title character for "Puss and Boots," said the show follows Perrault's tale fairly closely, even in the rationale for telling such a tale.

"We want to give them [the audience] some sort of a life lesson, because at their best, that's what fairy tales do," Rubin said by phone before a performance in Miami.

The story follows Little Brother Nat, the son of a miller. In dividing up his property among his sons, the miller gives Nat little more than the cat. But the cat literally talks himself out of other fates and helps the lad anyway he can, rescuing a princess along the way.

Rubin's company's version of "Puss and Boots" has been touring the world for some time now, having appeared in a previous run of shows in the United States and also stopping throughout Asia and Europe.



Holli Rubin, center, created the puppets and plays the title character in Bits 'N Pieces Puppet Theatre's production "Puss in Boots." The show comes to the Arts Center of the Ozarks in Springdale for a public performance on Saturday.

"It's a classic fairy tale," Rubin said. "You understand it. Even without a lot of language, you get who is good and who is bad."

Prior to the recent revival of this show for the school year that began this fall, Bits 'N Pieces' version of "Puss in Boots" has not toured the United States in about four years, said Rubin, who has been involved with the company since 1976.

It's been updated since its last tour of America, Rubin said. The company changed references to things today's kids would understand, and it also incorporates bits of pop culture, too. One change came courtesy of the "Shrek" movie series, the second and third films of which featured the ogre-fighting cat clad in a hat. In Bits 'N Pieces' original version of the show, the cat did not wear a hat because it's difficult to maintain one on the stage, Rubin said. But those expectations changed after "Shrek," and a hat is used, at least for a while.

Rubin said she hears members of the audience murmur when the hat is first introduced.

Although the target audience is for those from preschool through the fifth grade, Rubin said "the way it's presented, you can't be too young and you can't be too old for the show."

Just watching the puppetry in action and the set is enough to keep someone entertained, she said.

And it also provides families an opportunity to share in the magic of theater, and a production with a fairy tale's offerings of morality.

"I think that going to live theater together, especially with a story that addresses ethics in a fun way, gives a family a very unique situation," Rubin said. "There is real communication going on in a live show ... that brings a whole group of conversations and memories that come from that experience."