

Children's Castle Theater to present Baba Yaga this weekend

By Laura Adelman

Remember childhood daydreams of magical far away places, believing that you could be anything or be anywhere your imagination could create?

Childrens Castle Theatre celebrates that spirit, and brings Farmington children of any age the opportunity to be involved in acting.

The theatre group will be bringing to life a Russian fairytale, "Baba Yaga" for eager audiences March 29 and 30 at 7:30 p.m. and March 31 at 2 p.m. All performances will be held at the FHS Little Theater.

Tickets are \$5 for adults, \$3 for students, children and seniors. They can be purchased at the door the day of the show.

The show promises to be unique and entertaining. Jimmy Blare plays a talking dog, representing the negative side of life, while the talking cat stands for all that is good.

The lead character, Princess Elisabeta, is played by Jennifer Harris. Asked what she thinks of being in a lead role, she says, "I have to be here a lot of nights."

She is anticipating the performances, calling the idea of being on stage "kind of freaky."

Harris is most excited to have her parents and fourth grade Farmington Elementary School teacher, Miss Gigerich in the audience.

She previously played a small role as a lady at the ball in the play "Cinderella."

Wendy Turner, who founded the theater, noticed she stood out in that character, and thought she would be a good prospect for a larger role. "We, as staff, see these amazing metamorphosis of people," Turner said.

Childrens Castle Theater began with one woman's quest to expose children to acting.

Five years ago, Turner began her dream of sharing her avid passion for theater with Farmington kids.

Turner, a theater major, met friends in college who had strong theater backgrounds, having had



The creative staff for "Baba Yaga" has spent much of their time in the costume room getting ready for this weekend's three shows. The creative staff includes (L-R): Rob Knowles, Wendy Turner, Mona Miller Ostroot and Shane Martin. Photo by Laura Adelman.

done community theatre from the time they were small children. "I was jealous because we never did any theater in Farmington. Until you were in high school there was nothing," she recants.

She originally contacted Community Education to see if she could begin teaching a summer class enacting a children's production.

Community Education was very enthusiastic about the project, but Turner was told she would have to fund it herself.

Some of the theater expenses included renting the performance area, obtaining the play, the costumes, props and sets.

The first year she charged a participation fee from the 24 kids who enrolled, but it was not enough to cover all the expenses.

She crossed her fingers and hoped to get enough money in ticket sales to make up the difference.

Her first production, "The Wizard of Oz," was scripted and donated to them by Pete Martin, Lakeville's Community Education Director.

"I think he was glad to see something turning up and wanted to help us out, so he gave it to us for free; he even lent us some costumes. For everything else we just scraped and scrounged," Turner recalls.

The production was a success, financially as Turner broke even and each show entertained a large audience.

In 1992 she applied for, and received, a grant from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, and has successfully received funding through them ever since.

Mona Miller Ostroot joined Turner in 1994, and is constantly attending to details and making sure things are kept running as smoothly as possible. Turner

refers to her as "the glue that holds everything together."

Together they decided to make the theater a year-round group, setting a goal of producing three to four plays per year.

Parents, such as Janell and Gordy Schmidt and Alex and Paula Meyers, are active in the program. Currently they are donating spare jewelry needed for the "treasure".

Turner is actively seeking five individuals to become part of the board.

Responsibilities of the board are to decide which plays to perform, advertising and marketing and setting policy.

Turner has also recruited Shane Martin to be stage manager, Karl Wicklund as set designer and builder, Rob Knowles as writer/director and costume designer Anne Krike.

Childrens Castle Theater has

grown into a beehive of activity, newly located upstairs in the TownsEdge Mall.

An excited Turner shines when she embellishes, "Just last November, after our fourth production, we rented this space. This is the first time ever we've had our own space, our own budget and everything."

Creativity and individual styles are celebrated when choosing roles for the hopeful actors.

Casting decisions are sometimes difficult, but Turner and Miller Ostroot make an effort to allow all children to try different roles, as well as help behind the scenes.

Miller Ostroot recalls the first

production she was involved with, "Arabian Nights."

Casting the production was difficult because so many kids auditioned. Miller Ostroot laughs, "We had 86 kids in the cast...we had *talking rocks* because we didn't want to tell anybody who auditioned no!" "Baba Yaga" consists of about 50 kids.

Wicklund wrote the play after reading "probably a couple of hundred" Russian fairytales. He found one that looked like it would work and spent a few months writing the script, including a narrator part for Baba Yaga because he thought she was such a pervasive figure in Russian folklore.