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'Avenue Q' spices up summer

Tony-winning musical gives puppet show adult spin

By Ann Hicks
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One thing is certain: These are not Sesame Street cuties.

Although they look a lot like Cookie Monster, Bert and Ernie, what they do and say would have children's show censors wagging their fingers.

It was no accident that Rick Lyon, who studied and worked with Muppet-master Jim Henson, designed these grown-up puppets, because the Broadway musical hit "Avenue Q" is an affectionate adult take on Big Bird's 'hood.

The touring show, recommended for mature audiences, opens at the Peace Center Tuesday for eight performances of songs and hilarity. "Avenue Q" won three Tonys, for score, book and music, in 2004.

The puppets are paired with actor / puppeteers who not only manipulate them, but also interact with them on stage to reveal what each character is thinking and feeling, says Fran Curry, the show's puppet wrangler.

She cares for some 60 puppets, among them Lucy the Slut, Trekkie Monster -- he likes porn -- and Princeton, the recent college grad protagonist who is looking for friends and a home on New York's Lower East Side. It all comes together for him on Avenue Q.

Curry says she makes sure the stuffed and wigged-out characters are groomed properly, handed to the right puppeteers at every show and "appear at the right time and right place."

The actor who is paired with the puppet -- there are also actors who have no puppet partners -- uses his left hand to manipulate one of the arms of the puppet and his right hand to manipulate its face and mouth. Another actor helps manipulate the right arm of the puppet to work them in tandem, as often they either hold objects or need both hands to make a point.

Curry lists among her challenges making sure the many wigs in the show "always look as good as the day they were made," and passing the right puppet to the right handler.

"Mostly," she says, "I run around like a nut."

She graduated from college in 1991, (SUNY at Fredonia), where she studied theater; as the youngest of six kids, she had a tendency toward the dramatic, she says.

She first worked with puppets in "Lion King" on Broadway and built a career that counts 15 shows to date. She has toured with "The Producers," "Hairspray" and "Spamalot" and has been to every state except Alaska and Hawaii.

As to how to succeed in the theater, Curry's message is simple: "Work hard, keep your nose clean, always say yes when a job comes along, and be a terrific team player."
