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INSIDE 'The Jungle Book'

In Huntington Theatre Company's production of the classic, everyone is bursting with personality. Read the review. **C3**

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2013

Season of wonder

When I was a kid, I had one comic book. Just one. It was a Wonder Woman comic, and so help me, it was pink. It came with a little '45 record, too.

Wonder Woman was amazing, brave and strong. She also had style, wearing fierce boots and magic bracelets. I wasn't in love with the bathing suit style getup, but she had a tiara, the lure of which was patently obvious to me even then.

If all that weren't enough, she had an invisible airplane, too.

I wanted to be Wonder Woman. One Halloween, I wore a Wonder Woman costume, the kind with the plastic

mask held against your face by a rubber band. It was awful. The mask would be slick with condensation from your breath in about five minutes and the plastic suit itself was a travesty.

Because we lived on Cape Cod, where October days are often warm and evenings are not, half the time coats were worn over costumes while we trick-or-treated.

I was pretty sure Wonder Woman wouldn't put up with that.

I still kind of want to be Wonder Woman, only if I tried to get away with that kind of costume now, I think people would wonder a lot of things, none of them good. Never mind. There is a chance I could actually scare people though, which would make a change since it's well-known that I'm not exactly intimidating. I'm pretty much a marshmallow. Ever drop a brick on a marshmallow? It becomes a pale mess. (Sound familiar?) This is unfortunate because life warrants a rather more rocklike constitution; tough, and unflappable. I'm not tough at all, however, and get in a flap more than I should.

It's nearly fall now, well-known to be my favorite season. I can put away the shame-inducing summer wardrobe and wrap myself in more forgiving clothes. And let us not forget the accessories. The sweaters, jeans and scarves! The bags! The boots! I don't know what it is about the boots, but they make me feel strong when I am at my most marshmallowy. I don't know if it fools anyone else, but it sure feels right.

So okay. Maybe I don't have an invisible plane or bullet deflecting bracelets, but I have my boots. I pull them on and instantly feel them impart a sense of strength as they wrap around me. And last week, at a Renaissance Faire, I finally got a tiara. This pleases me more than is fashionable to admit, but it's not like I can really wear it publicly; not without garnering the wrong kind of attention, anyway.

The accessories, sold separately, don't seem to be turning me into Wonder Woman though. Wonder Why Woman, maybe, or Wonder When Woman. Wonder What The Heck Is Going On Woman, even.

So I pull on my boots, revel in the glory of autumn and do the best I can. And until my invisible airplane shows up, that will have to see me through another season.

Freelance writer Karyn McGovern may be reached at karyn.mcgovern.cct@gmail.com.



Despite decades of honors for making others talk, Falmouth ventriloquist Harold Crocker was stunned when the standing ovation came from colleagues

AT A LOSS FOR WORDS

By EMILY HERRINGTON
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At 75 years old, Falmouth-native Harold Crocker still plays with dolls.

And this past summer, in front of more than 600 friends and colleagues, he received a distinguished service award for his outstanding contributions to the art of ventriloquism.

He was standing in the back of the room attending to his duties on the hospitality committee at the international ventriloquism convention, Vent Haven ConVENTion in Kentucky, that he's been attending for 30 years, when he heard the news.

"When (the convention executive director) came up and said my name, I was shocked. I had no idea this was going to happen; I had no indication at all. So I had to put my glasses on – the tears coming down," he says, making a crying gesture with his hands, "so I went down the front, in front of all my ventriloquist friends, and they gave me a standing ovation."

Then, he says, they all joined together to sing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," one of the theme songs of Crocker's performances.

"It's more like a fraternity of ventriloquists. The people that know you and enjoy you, and this award, they were all happy for me. And you could feel it, you know. ... Oh yeah, my head was like this," he says, miming an inflating ego.

"It means a lot to me that people acknowledged the fact that he's doing something good," says Louise Crocker, Harold Crocker's wife, as her husband showed off some of the sweet congratulatory letters and notes he received.

Anne Roberts, the convention's media coordinator, says the Vent Haven convention is the only one like it in the world and that "it's more like a family reunion."

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CHRISTINE HOCHKEPPEL PHOTOS/CAPE COD TIMES

Ventriloquist Harold Crocker in his backyard with his figure, Butch, which he thinks of as an alter ego. Above, Crocker performs live on "Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour" television show.

French Senate says 'non' to mini-Miss pageants

By ANGELA CHARLTON
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PARIS – Child beauty pageants may soon be banned in France, after a surprise vote in the French Senate that rattled the pageant industry and raised questions about how the French relate to girls' sexuality.

Such contests, and the made-up, dolled-up beauty queens they produce, have the power to both fascinate and repulse, and have drawn

criticism in several countries. France, with its controlling traditions, appears to be out front in pushing an outright ban.

French legislators stopped short of approving a measure banning anyone under 16 from modeling products meant for grown-ups – a sensitive subject in a country renowned for its fashion and cosmetics industries, and about to host Paris Fashion Week.

The proposed children's pageant amendment sprouted from a debate on a women's rights law. The legislation, approved by a vote of 197-146, must go to the lower house of Parliament for further debate and another vote.

Its language is brief but sweeping: "Organizing beauty competitions for children under 16 is banned." Violators – who could include parents, or contest organizers, or anyone who

"encourages or tolerates children's access to these competitions" – would face up to two years in prison and 30,000 euros (\$40,000) in fines.

It doesn't specify whether it would extend to things like online photo competitions or pretty baby contests.

While child beauty pageants are not as common in France as in the U.S., girls get the message early on

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Ventriloquist: A hobby that's lasted decades

from C1

"He's a longtime attendee of the convention and he's become a beloved figure. Everyone knows Harold Crocker at the convention. ... He's always super positive and super cheerful and just a delight to be around," Roberts says.

The convention is attended by big-name ventriloquists like Jeff Dunham, Terry Fator, Jay Johnson, Jimmy Nelson and others. The age range is from 2 to 92, Roberts says.

Crocker's ventriloquism career has spanned more than six decades. Some of his career highlights include performing for President John F. Kennedy's family in Hyannisport and on live television in New York on "Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour," which was similar to today's "America's Got Talent."

"Out of 25, I was chosen to go on the show, and I come from Falmouth," he says, laughing. "I tied for first place on the 'Ted Mack Amateur Hour.'"

He brought with him on the show his puppet friends Butch and Eddy, who helped Crocker show off his special talent.

"I'm the only ventriloquist who can make 'em whistle," Crocker says. "It's just natural."

Crocker has never worked as a ventriloquist full-time; he's a freelance artist. He's worked as a special police officer, custodian and for a natural gas company. Today he performs at least two shows a month at venues such as senior centers, local organizations and parties, and he works part-time on a maintenance staff.

Most of Crocker's performances are for charitable organizations.

"One of the greatest things of all for me is to make people smile. Money isn't – it's not important when you have something to give," he says.

Because Crocker has been a part of the ventriloquist community for more than 60 years, he's noticed some changes over time.

He says years ago, when he used to perform at children's parties, a magician would



CHRISTINE HOCHKEPPEL/CAPE COD TIMES

Ventriloquist Harold Crocker, with his many figures, has the unique talent of being able to make some of his 'friends' whistle.

perform for about an hour-and-a-half to two hours and then the ventriloquist performed after. It doesn't work like that anymore.

Now he books half-hour shows because the children have shorter attention spans. He's learned to start with his best material to capture their attention early, because if not, it's a loss.

His shows feature clean jokes, singing, impersonations and a lot of audience interaction. In addition to whistling with his lips sealed, he can hiccup, sneeze and sing. He brings along a few of his six figures – the "politically correct" term – but the sassy wooden Butch is his right-hand man.

Crocker and Butch have been together since the beginning. Butch is a pale, red-headed hard figure whose eyes do not move.

His jaw moves up and down and you can see the lines around his mouth. Crocker says Butch has the personality of a younger person, around 14 years old. Kids love him and he doesn't give the impression that he'll jump out

and scare them, he says, a fear catalyzed by films like the 1978 "Magic."

"He made me where I am today," Crocker says. "Other figures can work with me, but Butch is my alter ego."

Though Butch isn't intended to be a dummy-version of Crocker, he's coincidentally the same age as the ventriloquist when he got his start.

His grandmother bought him a doll with a string in the back, and he just started playing with voices and practicing in front of a mirror. No lessons, just inspiration from famous ventriloquists of the time like Paul Winchell with his figure Jerry Mahoney (who Butch is a replica of) and Jimmy Nelson and his figure Farfel the dog.

Crocker says working the multiple hand controls while doing voices and conversing with the figures isn't too much to think about; he's got it down pat by now – it's like playing guitar or driving a car. What does make Crocker nervous though, is wait-

ing in the wings before going on stage.

Crocker's advice for aspiring ventriloquists is practice, practice, practice in front of a mirror. He also says it's important to have a strong, not squeaky, voice and to drink warm tea before performing. Anything cold can hurt the throat, he says.

He also recommends starting small – don't buy a professional-grade figure if you're just testing the waters. Those can cost around \$3,000.

But if you're serious, it's worth it. "This is my family," Crocker says of his figures.

"I've been very fortunate to have this talent and to give to my peers and to give to the people for charity. I feel that I have something I've offered all of my lifetime, and I'm 75 years old, too, so it hasn't been a waste. And my daughters and my children and grandchildren – I'll always feel proud that when they do leave the earth that they know I accomplished something."

'Jungle' bursts with color and personality

By ALICIA BLAISDELL-BANNON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

BOSTON – The Huntington Theatre kicks off its new season by taking us to an old place.

It's a place where human babies are raised by wild animals, where playful bears converse with wise panthers, where monkeys want oh-so-badly to climb up the evolutionary ladder (to be like

you-oo-oo). Whether you know this fantastical place from the

stories of Rudyard Kipling or the movies of Walt Disney, you won't be disappointed revisiting it via "The Jungle Book," Mary Zimmerman's imaginative adaptation of the tale of Mowgli, the "man cub" raised by wolves who must decide whether to stay in the jungle or go live with his own kind.

After living in scenic designer Daniel Ostling's lush jungle for a couple hours, if only from afar, you might begin to believe that young Mowgli makes the wrong choice in the end when he bids a "temporary" farewell to his furry and feathered friends to follow a young girl back to the village.

Everything in the jungle is bursting with color. Everything – the flowers, the butterflies, the birds – is gigantic. And so are the personalities of the characters who live there, from the noble panther, Bagheera, who takes Mowgli under his paw (in a good way), to Shere Khan, the much-feared tiger who wants to put an end to the boy and all he represents.

Whether "The Jungle Book," which comes to the Huntington fresh from a successful summer at its birthplace, the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, makes enough of what Mowgli represents – human domination and destruction of the wild – is debatable. Theme is only lightly threaded through the play, and you might just as easily (and properly) assume that this a story about how we are, in the end, all creatures of Earth, with the same needs and fears and desires.

No, this is not a "Circle of Life" kind of production. "Jungle Book" is not a "Lion King" wannabe. It is more subtle, both in plot and presentation. No breathtaking puppet animals march down the aisles here. In fact, for those of us a little weary of puppetry, "Jungle Book" is refreshingly actor-centric. Birds are conveyed through little tics of the human head; an actress representing a doe chews her food sideways; the actors portraying elephants in the magnificent pachyderm parade (led by an amusing Ed Kross as Colonel Hathi and Geoff Packard as his put-upon lieutenant) wear bright red uniforms and big gray ears. Trust me, it says elephants on the march.

The costumes, of course, are stunning, and designer Mara Blumenfeld has pulled out all the color stops. A peacock's long dress train, a butterfly's shimmering skirt and wings, the fur collars and tails on the wolf pack: There is not a moment

ON STAGE

What: "The Jungle Book"

Book by: Mary Zimmerman

Based on: the Disney animated film and the stories by Rudyard Kipling

Original music by: Richard and Robert Sherman; additional music and lyrics by Lorraine Feather, Paul Grabowsky, Terry Hillyson and Richard Sherman

Presented by: Huntington Theatre Company

When: through Oct. 13

Where: B.U. Theatre, 264 Huntington Ave., Boston

Tickets: \$25-\$135

Reservations: 617-266-0800 or www.huntingtontheatre.org

on stage when your eyes don't have something on which to feast. Even the fabulous orchestra – the members of which are often on stage – is dressed in scarlet and gold.

Beyond color, though, there is a charming less-is-more theory at work here. Balloo, the goofy bear who befriends Mowgli, wears a series of hoops that suggest his size. A quartet of vultures convey menace only with their talons – the same talons that have a hard time holding onto a branch that the actors, huddled together, keep moving back and forth, right to left. It's a delightful little illusion.

And it's an illusion created by four actors holding a stick. The sets, the costumes, the wonderful original songs by Richard and Robert Sherman (with a few new numbers, some of which are more winning than others) all make "Jungle Book" fun and, at times, even fascinating. But it's the actors who make it believable – who bring us along, back to that exciting, exotic place of our childhoods.

Usman Ally's Bagheera is warm but also a bit neurotic in his need to protect Mowgli. I don't know about you, but I like that in a panther. Kevin Carolan makes Baloo cuddly but also a little narcissistic, even as he belts out "The Bare Necessities." Larry Yando's Shere Khan is appropriately sly and snarly, but it turns out he has a little conflicted Tony Soprano thing going on.

As King Louie, the monkey who wants Mowgli to teach him about fire, Andre De Shields channels Little Richard and Louis Armstrong. His crazy, over-the-top rendering of "I Wanna Be Like You" brings the house down at the close of the first act.

But it's the littlest actor who gets the biggest kudos. Two boys rotate performances as Mowgli, and on Wednesday night, I saw Akash Chopra. Energetic, engaged, adorable: If this kid doesn't grow up to be a big player in the acting world, there is no theater god.

Pageants: Critics say contests focus only on looks

from C1

here that they are sexual beings, from advertising and marketing campaigns – and even from department stores that sell lingerie for girls as young as 6.

The U.S. has also seen controversy around child beauty pageants and reality shows like "Toddlers & Tiaras." Such contests gripped the public imagination after the 1996 death of 6-year-old beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey, as images of her splashed over national television and opened the eyes of many to the scope of the industry.

"We are talking about children who are only being judged on their appearance, and that is totally contrary to the development of a child," the French amendment's author, Chantal Jouanno, told The Associated Press.

"The question of the hypersexualization is deeper in the United States than in France, but the levees are starting to fall. Before we are hit by the wave, the point is to say very clearly: 'Not here.'"

She insisted she isn't attacking parents, saying that most moms don't realize the deeper societal problems the contests represent.

"When I asked an organizer why there were no mini-boy contests, I heard him respond that boys would not lower themselves like that," she said in the Senate debate.

Michel Le Parmentier, who says he has been organizing "mini-Miss" pageants in France since 1989, passionately defended his business Wednesday.

He said that he has been in discussions with legislators about regulating such pageants, but wasn't expecting an overall ban. He says his contests forbid make-up and high heels and corporate sponsors, and focus on princess dresses and "natural beauty" – and that he shouldn't be lumped in with pedophiles or contest organizers who capitalize on children for profit.

"It's just little girls playing princess," he told the AP. Still, he acknowledged that appearances are important, and said there's no point in pretending they're not, at any age.

"One day or another they will find themselves before this problem of physical appearance. ... A woman who has a nice appearance will find a job more easily, a job interview. These things are done based on physical appearance" even if we like to think they aren't, he said.

He says that if the law is approved, he will focus his energies on children's talent contests called "Mini-Stars" that he has already been conducting. Annabelle Betemps, a guest house operator from the Alps, has entered her daughter in multiple pageants and lamented the harshness of the new law.

"We are hyper-disappointed," she said, describing the joys and friendships she and her daughter Barbara, now 13, have experienced thanks to pageants. She said preparing children to present themselves on stage is a gift that helps them throughout life.

"You can't tell me that the Senate will solve the country's problems by banning the mini-Miss pageants," she said, pleading with legislators to address



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Oceane Scharre, 10, elected Mini Miss France 2011, left, and Miss France 2011 Mathilde Florin.

other ills blighting children such as drug and alcohol addiction.

The senators debated whether to come up with a softer measure limiting such pageants, but in the end decided on an overall ban.

The Socialist government's equal rights minister, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, suggested

Wednesday that the Socialists may push for a compromise measure when the bill goes to the lower house of Parliament in the coming weeks. The amendment's author said the proposed punishments might be lightened in later readings but expressed confidence that the ban would survive.

Concerns about child beauty pageants have popped up in several countries in recent years, but regulations are rare. In 2006, Sweden, Denmark and Norway pulled out of a pan-European children's song contest and started their own to protest treatment of the contestants, as some were dressed like sexed-up dolls.

Controversy has also clouded adult beauty pageants. The 63rd edition of the Miss World pageant this month was moved to Bali after days of protests by ultraconservative Muslim groups confined the event to the only Hindu-dominated province in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country.

Sylvie Corbet in Paris, Jan Olsen in Copenhagen and Margie Mason in Jakarta contributed to this report.

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