

A merry band of marionettes

By [Victor Wishna](#) Tue, Jan 31, 2012 [KCMetropolis.org](#)



Dating back some 30,000 years, puppetry is one of the world's oldest art forms—as theatrical players, puppets even pre-date human actors, according to some historians. The current production of *Strega Nona* at the Paul Mesner Puppet Studio is a pleasing reminder of why the genre has endured, and why Paul Mesner Puppets is an asset to Kansas City's children—and the adults lucky enough to join them.

Appropriately, this Italian-themed folk tale is brought to life—or, at least, to three dimensions—through imaginative marionettes designed and constructed (by Mesner and Steve Shipman) in the traditional Sicilian style, with the puppets controlled via wire rods as well as strings. Directed by Mike Horner, this production is a revival of the version first staged here in the early '90s, and features the entire original cast of puppets, as well as a quartet of talented, young puppeteers: Gabby Baculi, Cody Ross, Ryan Emmons, and Loren Wendelburg. Each ably imbued his multiple characters with distinct voices, movements, and personalities, to earn what should be high praise for any puppeteer: you wouldn't know they were there.

The plot, made popular in a 1970s children's book, is relatively simple: *Strega Nona*, a benevolent old enchantress who lives on the outskirts of Calabria and cures townspeople's common ills with simple household remedies, leaves the affable oaf Big Anthony alone with her magic, bubbling, never-ending pasta pot. She warns him not to touch it, but, alas, he cannot resist, and—spoiler alert!—calamity and hilarity ensue.

At this particular performance—10 a.m. on a Wednesday—I happened to be the only person over the age of 9 who wasn't a teacher or part of the

cast and crew. Anyone who may have become inured to the magic of live theatre should attend a show with 100 third-graders. The simple dimming of the house lights brought cheers, followed by *oohs* and *aahs* as the first puppets appeared on stage. And when anything particularly funny transpired—for example, whenever Strega Nona’s insubordinate goat head-butted another unwitting puppet off his little wooden feet—the wave of high-pitched laughter was, well, unadulterated.

The script, by Mesner and Mark Weinstein, also includes some choice if cheesy chuckles for those grown-ups who may be accompanying the target audience: “I’m having a big hair day? But I’m not from Branson!” exclaims one character. Later, Strega Nona, who references “a visit to my local Olive Garden,” advises “if you’re going to San Francisco, be sure to wear a flower in your hair.” And then there’s this classic: “Crime and punishment? What a novel idea!”

Baculi and Horner collaborated on the set, a convincing enough impression of Renaissance Italy, while Lidia Kaminska’s music design sets a couple of scenes to traditional Italian operetta, and Art Kent’s lighting—a few projected stars—let’s everyone know when it’s nighttime. There are even some special effects, such as when Strega Nona wishes away her supplicant’s “chicken spots” and—*pop pop pop*—they magically disappear. “*How did they do that?*” whispered a little boy in the fifth row.

Afterwards, at a Q&A lead by Ross, the boy got his answer (the spots, attached to the puppet’s face by Velcro, are whisked off and away by a nearly invisible wire), as did many of the children who wondered how it all worked. But their enthusiasm did not dim at seeing the puppets up close, strings and all; simply realizing that puppetry—or theatre—is not magic was not enough to break its spell.

REVIEW: Paul Mesner Puppets ***Strega Nona*** Runs January 25–February 19, 2012 (Reviewed Wednesday, January 25) Paul Mesner Puppet Studio 1006 E. Linwood Boulevard, Kansas City, MO For tickets call 816-235-6222 or online at www.paulmesnerpuppets.org

Top Photo: Cody Ross and Gabby Baculi and Strega Nona and Big Anthony of Paul Mesner Puppet's *Strega Nona* (Photo by gettheumbrella.com)