

# The story of Moral

## Aesop's Fables puppeteers focus on learning, fun

By Kathy Lee

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He was born a Phrygian slave in the sixth century B.C. (or, in puppeteer Jim West's language, "about 2,500 years Before Barney"). He spent much of his life telling stories on the Greek island Samos. His master, Iadmon, liked these tales so much that he freed his slave, who then went to Delphi and was put to death.

No one sitting in the Vilar Center auditorium Sunday had much in common with this ancient man or his strange life, but we could all relate to Aesop's stories, which are just as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. The fables have been passed on from civilization to civilization, from generation to generation ... and West's performance was the latest, perhaps most colorful, link in the storytelling chain.

### Invisible Man

A stage decor of neon against black catches the children's attention as they congregate impatiently, not knowing what to expect. Out comes West, wearing a shiny silver jacket. He tells what little is known of Aesop and encourages the audience to read more of his fables when they get home. Then, he casts off what he calls the "Elvis jacket" and transforms into ... tadah! Invisible Man.

West doesn't try to fool the kids, who have already proved their intelligence by answering his first few questions. Obviously his "Ninja Puppeteer Hood" and all-black apparel don't really make him invisible. During three of the six fable enactments he doesn't even hide behind the table draped with black cloth, but rather becomes one with the puppet — right out in the open.

The children hardly notice this man in black swirling a long, flowing scarf on a stick to represent the wind in "The Wind and the Sun." And West is by no means the center of attention as he gallops across the stage with the paper towel-roll legs of a brightly painted cardboard-box stag dangling at his knees in "The Stag at the Pool." His arms literally become the silly head and evasive tail of a monster in "The



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Cat's Tail." What's that? You don't remember any monster in that fable? Well, as puppet Aesop says, "Everyone tells my stories their own way."

### Anything goes

Aesop's dog, Moral, was undoubtedly the star of the show. Moral didn't just come at the end; he made appearances throughout, trying to eat the newspaper leaves of a prop tree made during the show by West's award-winning puppeteer partner, Marshall Izen, or showing off his karate skills with a death-defying flip (no strings attached).

But, apart from all this goofing off, Moral had an important job to do: after each tale was told — often to the tune of classical music by Beethoven, Chopin and others — he came out in all his canine puppet glory to remind us of the underlying message.

"I call him Moral because he's been with me forever, and he knows all the morals to the stories," West tells the audience.

Most kids knew the moral to the first fable, which starred a turtle and a brown bag-turned-bunny. Moral the dog took shadow-puppet form to tell us that "only a fool hates things because he can't have them" after the puppeteering pair's masterful hand-finger-arm silhouette presentation of "The Fox and the Grapes." Perhaps the most important moral of all was

one West made up himself: Never send your dog to karate school.

### Try this at home

You may still be wondering why West's performance of "The Cat's Tail" involved a monster? Well, it wasn't exactly part of the original plan. You see, West "forgot" about the fable, which was the last on the program. He was busy showing the children how to make a monster puppet out of a folded circle of cardboard and some bunched-up newspapers when Aesop popped up from behind the curtain-covered table to remind him. West didn't have a cat puppet, so he came up with another moral: Use what you have.

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Morals weren't the only thing taught during the show. In keeping with the "Teach a man to fish ..." lesson, West and Izen showed the audience how to make many of the puppets and props used in their acts. The Sunday papers quite possibly made their way into dozens of home puppet shows around the valley. We can only hope the amateur puppeteers' pets weren't as hungry as Aesop's dog, Moral.

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