

# Puppet queen of the Bronx

This grandma brings a classic art form to a new generation

BY TIZIANA RINALDI

**D**on't call them dolls! For Nilda Garcés, the grandma puppeteer of The Bronx, they are little people. In fact, they are extensions of herself. The fantastic alter egos that populate the playground of her vivacious, childlike imagination inspired by folk tales from around the world.

For more than 30 years, they have been leaping out of her vision into her skillful hands as hundreds of meticulously studied and gorgeously crafted marionettes, rod puppets and some hand puppets have come to life to narrate the wondrous fables that continue to intrigue and enchant Bronx children.

"As I make them, I can already see how they look like, the color of their hair, the music and the narrative that I'll be adding," said 71-year old Garcés, who has produced 14 original plays and staged countless children's classics, in her long career, including musical pieces such as "The Carnival of the Animals," by French composer Camille Saint-Saëns.

An accomplished teaching artist who thinks of herself as the Grandma Moses of puppets, she earned a Creative Arts Therapies Certificate from The NewSchool University in 1999. Garcés regularly collaborates with PS 304, The Early Childhood Lab School on Lafayette Avenue, where she develops puppetry courses tied

to the students' social studies and English language arts curricula, and the Kips Bay Boys and Girls Club, where she's currently preparing kids for a performance of "Laughing River," by Elizabeth Haze Vega.

"Many [of the children] have never been exposed to marionettes before," said the artist, who uses wood, *gesso* (a powdered form of calcium carbonate) and cloth to craft her creations for more sophisticated productions, but selects simpler household items such as detergent bottles, old clothes and masking tape when working with children. Many couldn't imagine that they can create at all!"

Her job is to introduce them to the fact that learning can be fun. She easily accomplishes that not only by teaching her students how to make marionettes, but also how to produce full-fledged puppet shows on selected academic subjects, which the kids research, adapt for the stage and entirely script, while Garcés adds music, props and the scenery. At the end of the year the students present their work to the school wide audience, and take their creations home to keep.

This year's theme at PS 304 is "Coming to America," which focuses on the period from 1890 to 1924, with characters as varied as Danish photographer Jacob Riis, American nurse Lillian Wald, and everyday folks of that time.

"I love to walk in the school, hear the piped classical music and see all the wonderful teachers and kids I've done projects with over the years," said Garcés of her work at PS 304. "My goal is to keep the 'learning switch on' until my last breath."

A lover of folk tales since childhood, when she began writing her own plays, Garcés took on puppet and mask making with her three young sons in the early '70s when, with her husband Mario, she accepted a job as building superintendent near the Bronx Zoo.

The opportunity came with the added benefit of an oversized basement where Garcés unleashed her creative passion and engaged the whole family.

Her kids quickly took to it and converted one of the sections of the huge room into an Italian "trattoria," down to the checkered red and white tablecloth and the hanging salami.

"It kept my children busy and it showed them that they could create," said the puppeteer whose sons' Mauricio, Gustavo and Alex early exposure to the arts helped them realize their own inventive potential growing up.

The first attempts at captivating young audiences came with the puppet shows that Garcés staged for her children's teachers and schoolmates in the very basement that doubled as the family's lab. The success encouraged her to push her boundaries and gave her the confidence to pursue more entrepreneurial efforts.

With help from the Westchester Council for the Arts, but especially the support and funding provided by the Bronx Council on the Arts she launched the "Garcés Marionette Troupe" and began touring New York City and surrounding communities taking her puppets to The Bronx Zoo, hospitals and libraries narrating folks tales from around the world. Among her favorites are works from Russia, Italy, Poland, the Caribbean and Mexico.

Since then, Garcés has performed at such venues as The New York Botanical Garden, Museo Del Barrio, The Neuberger Museum and Casita Maria. She has changed the company's name to "Garcés Puppeteria," to reflect her sons growing up and moving on, done more than 30 residencies, and received many awards including BRIO grants from the Bronx Council on the Arts and, in 2002, both a Puppeteers of America grant and a Volunteer of the Year from the Montefiore Medical Center Child Life Program, which she called "the most meaningful work of my life."

Of her decades of exposure to children and their development she said that not only "the arts need to be part of schools' curricula," but also added that "when families do a project together, the rewards are truly binding and lasting."

For more on Garcés Puppeteria, contact [nildasart@yahoo.com](mailto:nildasart@yahoo.com).

