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Difficult to mambo when you're a moose

Dancers onstage get 'full workout' in heavy Backyardigans outfits

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We've heard of triple threats – performers who act, sing and dance – but to get a part in *The Backyardigans*, you have to be a quadruple threat.

The young performers who play the Humpty Dumpty-shaped characters in the stage show have to sing, dance, act like a penguin, a moose or a hippo, and do all this while encased in a huge costume with a head that has to be manipulated from inside.

"It is difficult and strenuous work," says the show's artistic director, Winnipeg-based Patti Caplette. "Some people get claustrophobic inside the full-body costume." The outfits are much heavier than anything dancers would normally wear. "It's a full workout," she says.

Caplette is the creative partner with her husband, who handles the management side of KOBA Family Entertainment. Along with *The Backyardigans*, their popular productions include *Caillou*, *Franklin*, *Little Bear* and *The Big Comfy Couch*. They work with a winning formula: find a kids' show that has a big audience; negotiate for the stage rights; shape a 60-minute storyline; compose songs and choreograph dance numbers; then sell tickets.

With *The Backyardigans*, it was a case of going back to live. The Nick Jr./Nelvana TV show, on air since 2004, features the five critters – Tasha the Hippo, Tyrone the Moose, Pablo the Penguin, Uniqua the Purple-Spotted Creature and Austin the Kangaroo – in song and dance mode. Evan Lurie of The Lounge Lizards and Douglas Wieselman write the music; Beth Bogush is the choreographer. Dancers perform the musical numbers on camera.

"It's an absolutely fabulous property to work with," says Caplette, a dancer who retired from the Royal Winnipeg Ballet many years ago. "There's a whole range of music. They do the rumba; they do the samba; they can waltz." The music is everything from polka to Mowtown to disco. (YouTubers have the cuddly little characters dancing to deep-voiced rap numbers).

Caplette learned her production skills on the job with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. Dancing led to choreography – for TV, live shows, sports events and even the circus. Her instinct for creating children's entertainment goes back to her early years. "My mother ran a dance school and I grew up with her magical creations for family audiences."

The Backyardigans are little showmen themselves, turning their common backyard into a different world in each episode. Before she makes a live show, Caplette says, "I watch hundreds and hundreds of episodes and study the program's bible, so I know all the relationships." After she scripts it, she records it using the TV performers' voices, "because the kids know all the characters' voices."

The Backyardigans runs today and tomorrow at the Sony Centre, 1 Front St. E. Call 416-872-

2262.