

# Toopy and Binoo bring silliness to stage

## The popular animated children's series transforms into a tot-illating musical show

By Jennifer Moss, Special To The Sun January 6, 2011

Brace yourselves. Toopy and Binoo, originally a series of best-selling children's books by Dominique Jolin and now the top-rated kids' animated TV series in Canada, has metamorphosed once more into Toopy and Binoo and The Marshmallow Moon, a 90-minute, staged musical production. Produced by Koba Entertainment, the live show is wending its way across the country, and opens this week at the Bell Centre in Surrey and the Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts.

While this bit of entertainment news probably doesn't mean much to most adults, to those under the age of five, it's a pretty serious scoop. Tots worldwide love following the exploits of Toopy, an upbeat, stuffed toy mouse who, having somehow come to life, hangs around with Binoo, a small toy cat who epitomizes the strong and silent type. The TV show is seen on Treehouse in Canada, and also broadcast in Italy, France and India.

According to Frank Meschkuleit, the experienced Canadian puppeteer and voice-over artist who does the voice of Toopy, DVD sales are also through the roof. "The last count I heard was around half a million. It's incredible. Even Anne Murray doesn't sell that many."

Whenever a new, live action version of a popular kids' animated series makes its way to the local stage, parents typically steel themselves to "take one for the kids." They shell out the bucks, and swallow an extra-strength analgesic so they can sit through a couple hours of canned music, canned dialogue and sugary tunes.

But Meschkuleit, who is also a parent, says the Toopy and Binoo stage show incorporates a number of live elements that will keep it fresh. "I pre-recorded Toopy's dialogue and songs, and there will be an actor in a full sized body suit moving along with that. And several characters will be singing and speaking live. Plus the music is great."

Meschkuleit is part of an impressive cast of Canadian talent involved with the show. Led by award-winning choreographer, Patti Caplette as writer and director, the creative team includes Juno award winner Norman Foote as co-writer and music director; Andrew Beck as scenic designer; Luc Lavergne as video designer; and costume designs from Maydwell Mascots, Sue Dicks Design, and Anne Armit of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet wardrobe department. "I'm really excited about it," says Meschkuleit over the phone from Toronto, where he is busy preparing for another voice-over project by the same people who brought the world Toopy and Binoo.

Meschkuleit's road to landing the plum voice-over role of Toopy was a long and winding one. The Ontario native considered auditioning for Ryerson Theatre School over 30 years ago but "chickened out at the thought of trying to do Shakespeare at the audition." Instead he went in for mime school where a young actor didn't have to actually say anything if he didn't feel like it.

One day, acting on a bit of a dare, he tried out for the Muppets. "I heard they were in town auditioning for The Muppet Movie. I crashed the audition without an appointment. I did something funny, or surprising, and they asked me for my headshot and resume." Meschkuleit gave them the only headshot he had - a tiny photo booth image. "I figured I'd blown it -- but I ended up getting the call. It led to work on Fraggle Rock, and from there one thing just led to another."

Then a few years ago, when going for the role of Toopy, he thought he'd botched the audition. "They asked for all these different voices, and just kept shaking their heads whenever I tried anything. Then just before I left, I asked to do one last voice that was nothing like what they'd talked about. That ended up being Toopy's voice."

And now that voice has reached epic proportions in what Meschkuleit refers to as the Toopy and Binoo "stadium show." It promises to be a well-produced Toopy and Binoo extravaganza that will dazzle young fans and won't disable parents.

Plus, with every purchase at the merchandise booth at all coming Toopy and Binoo shows, patrons can make a donation to Musi-Counts, the music education charity associated with the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. All proceeds will go directly into funding their various school music programs.

So what are you waiting for? Grab your four-year-old and go see it.

AT A GLANCE

Toopy and Binoo and The Marshmallow Moon

When: Tonight, 6:30 p.m.

and Friday, 3:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

Where: Bell Centre, Surrey

ALSO

When: Saturday, 1 p.m., 4 p.m.

Where: The Centre, 777 Homer St.

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