

Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, culture, books and more, edited by Karla Kane

'Dorky' delights

Dorktales puts a silly twist on traditional storytelling

by Karla Kane

You've probably heard the one about the three little pigs. You know, big bad wolf, huffing and puffing, house made of straw, etc.? But how about the three little hedgehogs, co-narrated by an indignant puppet with a posh British accent, given a slapstick spin and delivered at a brisk pace? Welcome to the wacky world of Dorktales Story Time, led by local voice-over artist and actor Jonathan Murphy (and his sidekick, Mr. Redge, the aforementioned hedgehog puppet).

"People say it's very hard to be entertaining for children but I've never thought so," Murphy said. "As long as you're engaging, you bring them with you."

The concept is simple: lively, humorous storytelling. Murphy and his collaborators, using scripts written by Peninsula Youth Theatre's Executive Director Karen Simpson Gardiner, put a new, proudly "dorky" twist on classic tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Jack and the Beanstalk." The Dorktales crew members rely on pure storytelling ability (including a variety of silly voices) to enthrall young audiences, with minimal props and no costumes or scenery.

Dorktales is also part of a larger mission. The program is a spinoff of Geek Club Books, a nonprofit organization created by Jonathan Murphy's mother, Jodi Murphy, which aims to empower the autistic community as well as to support public awareness and acceptance about autism.

Jonathan, who's on the autism spectrum, said the goal is "to spread information about autism through storytelling, through popular culture and in fun ways that are engaging to audiences." Geek Club Books started life as an app, with an animated story based on Jonathan's experiences, and now offers interactive comics, school assemblies and more.

Dorktales, which boasts Jonathan's trademark goofy spin on traditional tales, was started as a way to help fund and promote the Geek Club Books organization.

Geek Club's mission of inclu-

siveness is important to me. Kids are kids are kids. We're all different. We all have different skills and strengths. Different isn't better or worse it's just different, and kindness and inclusiveness should always be rewarded," Simpson Gardiner said.

For Murphy, storytelling onstage is a natural extension of a lifelong passion. As a child, "I was always into playing other characters," the Redwood City resident said. "I would imitate what I saw on my favorite cartoons" (the name Dorktales was inspired by the Disney Channel animated series "DuckTales"). As Jonathan grew up, he began to further develop his interest in acting and storytelling.

"When I was about 14, I took my first voice-over class. A few years later, I started doing theater. I never got a lead role but I got substantial character roles, and people responded to that very well," he said, recalling his time performing in the musical "Les Miserables," at PYT, where he landed a stand-out role as Thénardier, the villainous innkeeper.

Actor Jonathan Murphy performs with his sidekick, British hedgehog Mr. Redge.

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Exploring different characters and becoming part of the theater community actually helped him to feel more comfortable in his own skin, he said, and embracing everyone's unique personalities and talents is what Geek Club Books is all about. Now a member of the Screen Actor's Guild, he works as a professional voice-over artist, as well as with elementary students in an after-school program.

His mother, who's served on PYT's board, said that Simpson Gardiner "knows (Jonathan's) style of comedy, this fun, geeky way of storytelling." "When I'm writing the script I have to keep in mind that at least initially there is one person performing all the parts. The shows are written specifically for Jonathan and speak to his strengths. He's a brilliant voice actor. He is great at physical comedy," Simpson Gardiner said.

Part of Dorktales' trademark humor is the comically antagonistic chemistry between Jonathan as the "narrator" and the other characters he voices, including Mr. Redge, who is prickly in more ways than one, and who frequently interrupts Jonathan with snide comments and suggestions. "It's like an Abbott-and-Costello kind of relationship," Jonathan said. "I try to aim for everybody. Obviously (the act) caters toward young

children but with the humor, there's kind of a sarcastic edge that's very me." Drawing on his love of accents, Mr. Redge's high-society voice was partially inspired by a role Jonathan played in "The Importance of Being Earnest."

Mr. Redge also serves another important role: "asking the questions kids in the audience may have so they don't feel dumb for not knowing something or not understanding a reference," Simpson Gardiner said. "My guiding principle when writing these shows is to try to make them fun for all ages."

Jonathan, Dragon Theatre Associate Production Manager Max Koknar and Dragon Company Manager Arika Spencer-Koknar got acquainted via Theater of All Possibilities, a touring company that brings interactive theater to schools. The Dragon, which has a tradition of opening its space up to emerging artists in the community, seemed the perfect place to stage a series of Dorktales Storytimes, where Murphy, Koknar and Spencer-Koknar take turns as Dorktales narrators.

Next up is "Little Red" (as in "riding hood") on Nov. 18 (watch for a sassy, ninja-like Granny wielding a tranquilizer dart). For the December shows, Dorktales is presenting two performances of "A Very Merry Dorktale": a comedic take on the

Dickens classic "A Christmas Carol," which, for the first time in Dorktales history, will incorporate not one but two actors on stage. After the Dec. 17 performance, there will also be a special "Fezziwig Fest," featuring some bonus activities for kids (all proceeds benefit Geek Club Books and the Dragon Theatre).

"Storytelling is important. Some of these stories have common themes and ideas that you will see referenced over and over again in your life: the idea that someone is a 'Scrooge,' for example," Simpson Gardiner said. "The more ways that kids have an opportunity to learn these stories the better. I also think kids learn better when the story can be funny and accessible. Learning can be fun!" ■

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What: Dorktales Story Time.
Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City.
When: Saturday, Nov. 18, at 2 p.m. ("Little Red"); Friday, Dec. 15, at 4:30 p.m. ("A Very Merry Dorktale") and Sunday, Dec. 17, at 5:30 p.m. ("Fezziwig Festival Fundraiser").
Cost: \$10-\$20.
Info: Go to dragonproductions.net/ and geekclubbooks.com.