

More to explore than Dora

A host of children's theater productions usher in a great season **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

Parents who want to get their kids excited about the theater have lots of blockbusters to choose from on Broadway already ("The Lion King," "Mary Poppins"). And in November, "The Little Mermaid" begins previews as "Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas! The Musical" returns for what looks like an annual engagement. Even "Young Frankenstein" might get 12-year-olds to put down their Game Boys and start Puttin' on the Ritz.

But families focusing only on mega-events may miss out on a remarkable range of entertaining, challenging and fun theater being created by a host of original companies across the city. With styles ranging from puppetry to comedy to socially aware dramas and sophisticated musicals that encourage creativity and imagination, children's theater is stronger than ever. Here's a quick hopscotch around town for some of the fall offerings

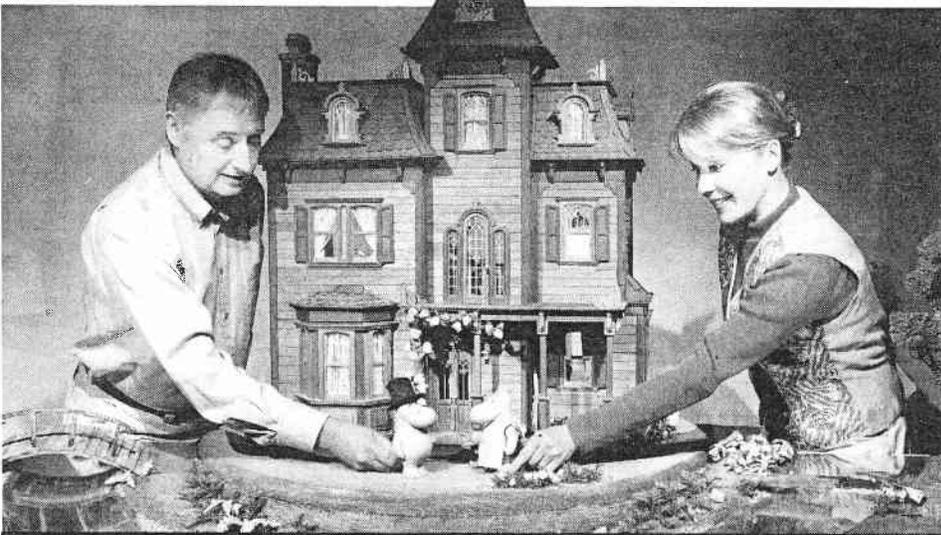
MANHATTAN CHILDREN'S THEATRE
(212) 226-4085; www.manhattanchildrenstheatre.org

MCT is entering its sixth season with an adaptation of Margaret Wise Brown's classic "Goodnight Moon" on the heels of its recent, immensely popular production of "Go, Dog Go!"

The hour-long "Dog," with a cast of half a dozen tail-and-eared performers (plus a bemused accordion player) "wasn't your typical fairy tale," says Laura Stevens, who co-founded MCT with Bruce Merrill, who helmed that show. "It took all the elements of theater and really made imagination be a central part of it. The music was fantastic and the costumes were great. We're going to bring it back. We've had other shows that would sell out the whole run. But that one was packed."

Still amazed that a theater company dedicated to children's programming can make a go of it — MCT has a generous, not-a-bad-seat-in-the-house location at 52 White St., nestled between Tribeca and Chinatown — Stevens is excited about pushing the boundaries of what people can expect from kid's theater

with "Goodnight Moon," which is currently running through Dec. 9. Following that will be "Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse," from Dec. 15 to Feb. 3, 2008; "Hansel & Gretel," Feb. 9 to March 30; and the return of "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie" from April 5 to May 18, the show from Laura Numeroff's book that MCT audiences ate up last year.



David Warburton with Moominpappa and Jennifer Lyon with Moominmamma, the center of a family of round and furry Scandinavian trolls in "Comet in Moominland," coming to the New Victory Theater beginning Sept. 28.

"Our music director is just going crazy on the harmonies for 'Moon,'" Stevens says. "It's beautiful, but it's definitely taking it to another level. Children deserve the best, just like adults do."

THE CHILDREN'S THEATRE COMPANY
(212) 633-6629; www.childrenstheatrecompany.org

Many children's theater companies offer acting classes and workshops, or perform "pocket" shows in schools to reach new audiences. But Children's Theatre Company is especially active, with after-school programs that benefit from careful planning, parental involvement and high-quality productions.

The CTC approach is working at a handful of schools in the city and expanding throughout the country, says Mehr Mansouri, who co-founded the group with Roya Movafegh. And what happens off the stage is just as important as what happens on it.

"Our whole goal is to have a theatrical 'think tank,' where the kids are not only participating in what kind of world they want, but they also become the voices of positive change," says Mansouri.



Play is the thing in the Czechoslovak-American Marionette Theatre's "Hamlet." Left, "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie" at Manhattan Children's Theatre.

"When they do these musicals, an adult audience listens to the themes with a different view."

Mansouri talks passionately about the impact theater can have on kids and says auditions for the next season will take place this month and next month, with performances in January and February at its main space in the Village. But CTC is active in the schools and community year-round.

"We want the kids to use the theater to transform themselves and their community," Mansouri says.

CZECHOSLOVAK-AMERICAN MARIONETTE THEATRE
(212) 777-3891; www.czechmarionettes.org

With shows typically suitable for ages 5 to 105, the Czechoslovak-American Marionette Theatre isn't just stringing along the art of puppetry — it's hoisting it to new levels. Anyone who thinks Howdy Doody is what puppetry still amounts to will be amazed at what a captivating, classic and unique experience genuine marionette theater can be.

Founder Vit Horejs, a veteran puppeteer, founded CAMT after discovering a dusty box filled with antique marionettes in a church sitting in the heart of the fading Czech community on the upper East Side. He says he enjoys the frisson of combining live actors with marionettes.

"Has somebody joined us from the audience?" Horejs says. "Yes, some of the puppeteers saw our shows over the years and then wanted to join us."

A recent revival of "Faust" just concluded. Up next from the smart, literary-minded company is "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark" in November at Jane's Carousel, 56 Water St.

NEW VICTORY THEATER
(646) 223-3020; www.newvictory.org

A jewel of a space on 42nd St., the restored New Victory is the highest-profile space dedicated to children's theater. Virtually any time of the year, you can go to the New Victory and be assured of an engaging production cherry-picked from around the world. Upcoming productions include "Comet in Moominland," a combination of puppetry and live actors based on the quirky best-selling kid's books, Sept. 28 through Oct. 14; "The Wolves in the Wall," based on the creepy Neil Gaiman book, Oct. 5-21, and the Golden Dragon Acrobats from China, Nov. 30 through Jan. 6, among many other shows. ♦