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Spotlight on *The Puppet Shoppe*

Colchester theater group Saints & Poets Production Company debuts its newest creation on Sept. 12. Like all of the group's past productions, "The Puppet Shoppe" will feature local actors performing alongside handcrafted puppets.

"Saints & Poets has a collection of 50-plus puppets from our previous productions and I have a number of puppets which I've created for other shows, as well others I've collected over the years," revealed producer and head puppet designer Kevin Christopher. "Though some will just be set decoration, many will be used by the actors in creating the story."

For its seventh production to date, Saints & Poets collaborated with Vermont Stage Company alum Chris Caswell.

"The idea has been percolating for a while," explained Caswell about her original script for "The Puppet Shoppe." The two-person cast, which includes Caswell and G. Richard Ames, follows a couple of puppet shop owners - Boris and Anya - in the near future. In a world where books are being collected by the authorities to fulfill a master plan, the lead actors find themselves in possession of the last book in existence. Unlike "Fahrenheit 451," the books are not being burned to a crisp. Instead, they're being condensed into an ultimate database - but for what purpose?

The wrench thrown in, explained Caswell, is how Anya and Boris feel about each other. She based the characters' personality traits on her observations during a recent trip overseas.

"I was visiting my brother in Russia and went into a tiny shop with puppets covering every inch of the store. There was one cash register on the right side and one on the left. One had an old man behind it, the other an old woman. They both looked angry at each other. I couldn't help wondering what their story was. I wanted it to unfold before my eyes like a foreign animated short without subtitles, but it didn't," said Caswell - and then added, "This play is me trying to breathe life into that moment."

Not only will Caswell and Ames breathe life into the script, but also into the many puppets that will populate the stage in next week's performance.

The Puppet Shoppe

Sept. 12-22 at 7:30 p.m.

Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2 p.m.

Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, 294

North Winooski Avenue, Burlington

Tickets: \$15 (802-86-FLYNN /

flyntix.org)



From left to right, Chris Caswell and G. Richard Ames hold Anya and Boris hand puppets. Courtesy of Saints & Poets Production Company

"The trick is in translating the acting into the movement of this object," said Caswell. "The tiniest movement from a puppet, just the tilt of a head for example, can convey enormous emotion."

And she's had practice with puppets. She starred as Charlotte in the 2011 Saints & Poets production of "Charlotte's Web," and also participated in the 2012 version of "The Moreau Horrors." Working with puppets, Caswell described, is "like true 3D animation."

While "The Puppet Shoppe" won't be Caswell's first try at puppeteering - it will commemorate a first for the rest of the production team at Saints &

Poets.

"After seven shows, we understand what it takes to put a show together, and I think that allows us more time to focus on the creative work rather than the nuts and bolts of producing theatre," expressed stage manager and producer Jess Wilson.

Just how creative will this performance be?

Kevin Christopher, who by day is the executive director of Lake Champlain Access Television, has been looking for new and different ways to utilize all the space that the studio has, since moving LCATV to the Colchester Creek Farm Plaza in March.

"One idea that I'm pursuing is to get local theatre groups into the studio to present works both for both a live audience and a three-camera recording of the show which we can air and distribute throughout the state," he said, explaining that a recording of "The Puppet Shoppe" will be the pilot episode.

"The Puppet Shoppe" will run from Sept. 12-22 and is recommended for audience members 14 and up. Shows will start at 7:30 p.m. at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts on North Winooski Avenue in Burlington. Weekend matinee times are also available. Tickets are \$15 each and can be purchased at the Flynn Center box office or by visiting flyntix.org.

Keep an eye out for the announcement of the Saints & Poets 2014 spring and fall productions on the company website:

<http://www.saintsandpoetsproductions.org>