

## MTYP takes tiny trolls to Great White Way



By Kevin Prokosh

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'START spreading the news,' gleefully sang Leslee Silverman before announcing that the Manitoba Theatre for Young People had been invited to present its signature piece, *Comet in Moominland*, in New York, New York, next fall.

MTYP's smallest theatre stars -- 13-centimetre-high troll-like creatures called Sniff, Snufkin and Moomintroll -- and the two actors who control them are headed for the Big Apple, where *Comet* will open the New Victory Theatre's 2007-08 season Sept. 24-Oct. 14.

"The invitation to play on Broadway is a bit special," Silverman said during an interview. "It's the pinnacle."

Silverman made the announcement yesterday under the canopied dome where MTYP will stage another run of its most travelled production for Manitoba children on spring break next week. She couldn't remember another professional Winnipeg theatre ever taking its own creation to New York City.

The New Victory calls itself New York's ultimate theatre for kids and families, and works out of the city's oldest active theatre. It typically has its pick of the top international children's theatre companies.

"We wanted to present *Comet* for a long time," says Carrie DuBois, New Victory's programming associate. "We really felt that *Comet* is so charming and intricate and unusual."

It is only after recently adding a reconfigurable studio theatre called The Duke on 42nd Street that the New Victory could accommodate the 28-performance run of *Comet*, Tove Jansson's epic tale about three Moomintrolls who set off on an eventful adventure after learning their home is threatened by a fiery comet.

The New York opening is the most newsworthy since *Comet* was first sighted in the humble gymnasium of Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface on Earth Day, April 20, 1990. The development of MTYP's first major touring production had begun with an exchange of letters with Jansson, who lived in a lighthouse on a Finnish island.

The original idea was to have the audience follow the three-metre high characters through Moominland, but the creative team of William Chesney, Graham Whitehead, Kim Selody and Silverman decided to shrink the Moomins and have four table stages ring the spectators seated on the floor. Two actors -- the original duo was Selody and Maggie Nagle -- narrate the 55-minute show and manipulate the pint-sized puppets.

It was hoped by the creators that tabletop theatre would replicate that childhood experience of playing under a blanket-covered table.

The novel presentation and the environmentally friendly message has combined to make *Comet* MTYP's top draw for the last 17 years. It has played across the country in both official languages and made its American debut in Pittsburgh in 1992. In 2003 it was scheduled to travel to Hong Kong but that tour had to be cancelled due to the SARS outbreak. Earlier this month *Comet* enjoyed a sold-out run in Toronto with Jennifer Lyon and David Warburton.

Getting to go to New York is an unforeseen bonus for the two veteran actors.

"Who would have thought after all these years we'd be going to New York with a puppet show?" said Warburton yesterday after performing a scene for the media. "It's good for our creative team to see it go international and have their work acknowledged.

Lyon, who has graced many Canadian stages in classic roles, is also enjoying the irony of having a children's show featuring foam trolls to thank for her United States stage debut.

"I don't care how I get to Broadway," says the daughter of former Manitoba premier Sterling Lyon. "The fact we're playing New York is a thrill."

The tour will pay off with more prestige than financial windfall.

"You can't make money on any tour," says Silverman. "We won't lose money, (but) I don't know if we've ever gone on a tour to make money. We're just pleased and excited to be going."

Public performances of *Comet* begin Tuesday and run until April 6.

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