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Lots of laughs

By AMY DE KANTER

**Aesop's Fables 2 is strictly for kids, so for this review, our writer consulted the experts.**

A GREEN and white caterpillar weaves through Bangsar Shopping Centre, Kuala Lumpur, as dozens of uniformed children, two-by-two make their way up to the third floor. Half of them are about waist-high, the other half miniature by comparison. They are here for the same reason I am, to watch Jim West Puppets performing *Aesop's Fables 2*.

Back from New York, it is apparent that West's fame has spread. It is a weekday morning in Bangsar and the theatre is full. Besides the school groups there are a few children with their parents, but adults are a clear minority.

What would seem to me a logistical nightmare – getting more than 200 little kids into their seats – is accomplished very quickly by teachers and the wonderful staff at The Actor's Studio. Little legs swing back and forth, miles from the floor. Some of the smallest children cannot keep their folding seats down and alternate between sliding off their chairs and sitting tucked into a v-shape. The kids chatter and giggle, obeying almost at once when their teachers remind them to quiet down and stay in their seats... before forgetting again just as quickly.



Jeremy Wingle and Jim West (in glasses) and the Aesop's Fables 2 puppets.

It is only when the lights go down that silence quickly settles.

Jim West comes on stage wearing a glittering jacket. He talks a little about the theatre and introduces his (human) companion on stage, Jeremy Wingle.

The slapstick begins. Big eyes, wide mouths and exaggerated gestures; if there were any doubts before it is now certain that this show is meant strictly for children and those who love them.

Unless the mere mention of SpongeBob or a toilet is enough to send you into fits of laughter, you won't enjoy the show as much as your kids, or at least not for the same reasons.

That's okay. The children are having more fun than I could possibly describe. They laugh, they shout, they wriggle in their chairs, they clap their hands high above their heads. It is obvious who really should be writing this review.

I would never be so cruel as to disrupt a teacher's system by interrupting to ask whether I can interview her kids, but fortunately I don't need to. The children are invited to write their comments down and post it on a large bulletin board when they leave.

"...great and fantatic," raves eight-year-old Allyshea, while Ryan, 9, says, "Be sure to make *Aesop's Fables 3* or *4*." Six-year-old Grace writes: "It was vear nise I hab grat fun thanx for the sao."

For most of the kids, Moral the dog is a favourite. Moral pops out to quote the ... yes, moral of each fable as it ends. He is also terribly cheeky and several times pops out uninvited, to the younger audience's great delight.

Several other kids, including three-year-old Isabelle, liked the giraffe. So did I. In fact, the coolest part of the show for this token adult was when Jim and Jeremy constructed some cast members right in front of our eyes. A shoebox became the lion with bad breath, a paper bag morphed into an almost life-sized giraffe, chasing a

shooting star.

My favourite feedback was on the neat and concise note by an eight-year-old called Mayumi: "I like the golden Egg. I like puppets."

Yes, the story of the goose and the golden egg was great. It was done gorgeously against a white screen with hand shadows. Jim introduced the fable by teaching his audience how to make shadow dogs, birds, spiders, crabs and elephants. From the back of the theatre, my view of the stage was obstructed by thousands of wiggling fingers.

At the end of the show, children can meet Jim, Jeremy and Moral. Jim and Jeremy seem delighted to meet the kids, but frankly, for the children, the real thrill is in meeting the dog.

"I feel good and happy that I came," writes seven-year-old Daniel. "I hope to see more shows, before it closes down." Now that one broke my heart, even though I assume he meant the play and not the theatre that has been around longer than he has.

Very, very sadly, The Actor's Studio at Bangsar Shopping Centre, KL, will soon be closing its doors. It was what made BSC different from any other KL shopping centre, a place that always made me feel "good and happy" too.

I don't know if I could name a single Christmas or birthday present I ever received as a child. But I have clear and fond memories of the times my parents took me to see puppet shows, pantomimes and other performances for children.

I urge audiences to go to this show and any other while we still have them. For myself, for our children and for all audiences in Malaysia, my new year's wish is that lovely neighbourhood theatre will soon find a new home.