

arts & entertainment



GREAT GRYPHONS

**Children's theater troupe
celebrates its 30th birthday
with swing through the state**



At left, Leslie Elias, founder and artistic director of the Grumbling Gryphons, a traveling children's theater, narrates during a recent performance of 'Anton Antonovich: A Galician Folktale,' at Cornwall Town Hall on Friday. The theater is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

Below, Grumbling Gryphons, including from left, Lucy Fetterman, Jacob Johnson and Sarah Brice, take a bow during the performance.

PHOTOS BY IRENA PASTORELLO
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN



Leslie Elias likes to say she is probably the only actress to portray an oil spill for 20 years.

Well, maybe not *likes* to say. She doesn't *like* that there is such a thing as an oil spill in the first place, never mind the discomfort of self-promotion.

Like the spill that figures prominently in her most recent play, an adaptation of a Haitian folktale, Elias is a force of nature. With mile-a-minute intensity, she flits in stream of

consciousness from her aunt's inspiring flamingo dancing to her own efforts at working a marine biologist's whale recordings into a play. For three decades, Elias' children's theater troupe, the Grumbling Gryphons, has blended cultural and environmental messages in presentations around Connecticut and beyond.

At libraries and schools — and at New York's Museum of Natural



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Daniel Saed, right, of the Grumbling Gryphons dances during an encore called 'The Worst Band in the Universe' in Cornwall.

GRYPHONS: Promoting participatory theater

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History and as far away as Ukraine — Elias has encouraged youngsters to stoke their creative powers through theatrical expression.

EMPOWERING CHILDREN

Her plays encompass various cultures and myths and frequently involve nature. She incorporates whimsical costumes like the 12-person black "oil spill" sheath. She enlists mask makers, a trio of regular actors and sometimes musicians. And for each show, she has accompanying lesson plans drawn.

"You can have the greatest masks, music, storyline, but I think my true talent involves empowering children," said Elias, as her twin 8-year-old sons and 12 children in a summer program she runs tramped around her Cornwall home one August day. "It's giving them a voice, helping them to value their own thoughts."

Last month Elias' troupe celebrated its 30th anniversary in trademark fantastical form. The crowd at Cornwall Town Hall was at standing room only. The eyeballs of the dozen or so anxious amateur young actors appraising their audience appeared in the gap between the bottom of a curtain and the stage.

A tribal, bongo-infused song by the group Sirius Coyote bounced off the walls. The audience clapped in unison. In strode a juggler, followed by a woman draped in white and walking on stilts. The stilted woman shimmied as much as

she could on the stilts. Later, an even taller costumed creature — a green monster with three sets of feet poking out at its bottom — would lead the audience outside to close the evening with a circle of song and dance.

"What is imparted here is just magical," said Louise Coogan, a mother whose children attended the nonprofit troupe's programs.

STARTED IN CENTRAL PARK

A Long Island native who spent her childhood attending avant garde plays and honing her performance skills around New York, Elias studied movement at Sarah Lawrence College in the mid-1970s. She became a drama instructor and directed her first children's play at Saint John the Divine in Manhattan, joining a feminist theater group along the way. She landed in Connecticut after receiving a grant and helped launch the Magic Box Players in Danbury.

After a year-and-a-half in Danbury, Elias, her former partner, Nicholas Jacobs, and acquaintances founded the Grumbling Gryphons. Their first performance, "The Myth of Persephone," about the seasons, was staged in Central Park. The troupe emerged as an ardent proponent of participatory theater, from the start encouraging children to do things like chant and sing to "help" gods and goddesses rescue Persephone. The Gryphons increasingly landed gigs across the region and, eventually, the world.

As Elias researched each

piece, her passion for environmental themes heightened. She worked with a marine biologist to create a show inspired by a ship that conducted humpback whale research. "The Ghost Net," about an errant so-called drift net, was one of four primary plays in the Gryphons' repertoire. Used by fishermen in sizes that can be miles long, sections of drift net have been known to break free. In Elias' play, one such net haunts the ocean. The net ensnares fish, is weighed down by their bodies and sinks. Bottom-feeders nibble on the sea life trapped in the net, allowing it to rise again and repeat the cycle.

"I once was a fish, swimming free, now I have nothing but bones circling me. Stop the war on the sea, live in harmony, we're all one family," Elias chants in a guttural tone, mimicking the words children chant.

A female protagonist ultimately slays the ghost net. Elias writes life lessons between the lines.

"Ultimately, (the heroine) realizes that the ghost was only a net, and fear and ignorance couldn't let her see it," said Elias, whose productions have incorporated Jewish traditions, Hopi Native American lore and Greek mythology.

A GLOBAL INFLUENCE

Elias wants to translate the work and perform it worldwide to inspire children to take care of the oceans. It's not her only lofty goal. She dreams of making her children's theater a national model.

"I would love to train all these out-of-work actors how to work in schools in this participatory way," she said, reflecting on the rewards of influencing children instead of becoming another actor "spinning my wheels and going on auditions."

Her play may not yet be in multiple languages, but her influence has already encircled the globe. In the mid-1990s, the Grumbling Gryphons worked with Ukrainian children impacted by Chernobyl.

"On behalf of all the children ... I thank you for bringing them a sense of imagination, goodwill and peace," Inya Bonacorsa, field director of the Children of Chernobyl Relief Fund wrote Elias. "They will never forget the 'fire dance' or the 'keynote song.'"

Never forgetting sounds cliched, but in Elias' case, her distinctive plays really have left impressions.

Sabrina Leifert attended a Gryphons presentation at Goshen Center School 15 years ago. This summer, she shuttled her own children, Sean, 4, and Haley, 8, to the Gryphons' summer program.

Now 27, Leifert received a flier about the summer programs and remembered watching "The Trickster Spider."

"I knew exactly who she was, I remembered the songs very clearly," said Leifert, now of Sharon. She said she's grateful her children experienced something so ingrained in her own memories, praising Elias: "She just had the kids feel so good about themselves. All the kids were just enthralled."