

Poetree and Friends promotes fun

□ YTV deal extends life of locally-produced show

By Calvin Daniels
Staff Writer

The specialty cable network YTV has breathed new life into *Poetree and Friends*, a children's production produced at Shamrock Television in Yorkton.

Premiering Oct. 27, 1990, the show was produced for only two seasons, although they were successful years, as attested to by CANPRO Gold awards for the best children's program series in 1990, '91 and '92.

Then YTV came calling.

The youth oriented cable channel wanted to add *Poetree and Friends* to its programming, but they needed a minimum of 39 shows. So production geared up to produce the additional shows.

Greg Popowich, the show's producer/director expects at least two more seasons for the show.

The success of the show has caught some of the participants by surprise.

"It's very exciting," said Debbie Hayward who animate Birdie the puppet. "It's a big thrill. I think that it got bigger than we ever expected."

Looking back, Popowich says the process has been a long one, but has been supported by a team approach to the show.

The station wanted "to look at some different local productions," said Popowich. "They are always looking for something different, and the company had always sort of wanted to do a kids' show."

Tree becomes show's focus

Through brainstorming at the station the idea of a talking tree (*Poetree*) and a number of his friends came into being.

Poetree itself is a wise old tree, animated by two controllers hidden inside. Judd Niven works the mouth, and provides the voice, while Joyce Bagley operates the eyes.

The eight foot, paper mache tree, itself took a couple of weeks to construct recalls Popowich, and has gone through an evolution since the show started in 1990.

"We built the tree once and we didn't like the face, so we did it again," he said. "Now we're trying to give it more expression."



File photo

Dan Calef, Birdie and Poetree rehearse during show's first season.

"We're always trying to make ourselves better."

With the tree as the central character, Dan Calef, the only human member of the regular cast came on stream.

Dan, who portrays Dan the Storyman on the show, was just a natural to incorporate into the show given his experience with the character, long a favorite with kids visiting the public library where Calef is employed.

Appearing on a Gerry Pepler program, Calef was asked if he knew someone who might be interested in working on the project.

"I said 'how about me'," recalled Calef, who moments later was in the office of Leanna Neufeld, station manager, discussing the possibilities of the project.

oped," said Popowich. "We didn't have to do anything with him."

"For me, it has been terrific," added Calef, who reads a story, always by a Canadian author, on each show, as well as providing dialogue with the other characters.

"It's sort of doing what I do here (the library) for storytime. Doing the show is a lot of fun, and it's been good for the library. Reading is talked about a lot."

A learning experience

The show was produced for two years, 28 half hour episodes, before going into a nearly two-year hiatus. Calef looks back on the initial run as a major learning experience.

"The first year we just sort of rushed each week to get one done," he said. They started the season with only three shows completed.

Birdie, brought to life by puppeteer Hayward has taken on a bigger role in the show.

"Birdie has sort of become the star of the show," said Calef.

"Poetree was supposed to be this old, knowledgeable tree and the star, but Birdie's sort of zany. He gets into all sorts of trouble and tells jokes..."

Hayward, along with Bagley, does much of the scripting for the show, but the process is much less formal, says Popowich.

"It's really hard to differentiate whose idea was whose," he said.

Often it's a case of sitting around and tossing suggestions back and forth.

Popowich admits sometimes they have to pull back on ideas, recognizing they may be too complex for the basically pre-school

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— Debbie Hayward,
Birdie's voice and show writer

reading age child, although that too has changed over time, said Calef.

"It was sort of aimed at pre-schoolers," he said. "I think that was the intent when it started."

"Although it seems it's now more for Grade 3s or 4s. A lot of the jokes, the little kids don't get them all."

"Now it's not even that unpleasant for adults to watch."

Writing for kids really isn't that difficult, said Hayward.

"When you have a kid inside you, you always see ideas around you," she suggested. "Sometimes all you need is a few words and you can see the whole show in front of your eyes."

It helps she is a character, which Hayward admits has a large part of her personality.

At least "the fun loving part that's in everybody," she said.

"After a while you know what he (Birdie) would say, or how he'd react."

Popowich adds they do have some basic precepts in place.

"We try not to take kids' intelligence for granted," he said. "I think they're a lot more intelligent than we give them credit for."

The show is also trying to provide entertainment — including an exercise portion highlighting local gymnasts and a crafts section — rather than pushing a particular message.

Popowich says a lot of shows work on the premise of teaching kids they shouldn't talk to strangers, what to do if the house is on fire, etc.. Although important the messages often indicate a rather somber world for kids.

"We think there is enough of that out there. We're trying to show them some of the good things out there," he said.

"We're not doing anything particularly new or exciting," added Calef. "but the quality is pretty good. When I actually shove the tape in and watch one ... I think it's pretty good."

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