

Puppets will perform Sunday at Miller

"The Timepiece," a metaphysical musical for kids of all ages, is a story about a little man who lives on a park bench and dreams of adventure. Then one day he encounters a UFO.

The actors in this production happen to be less than 22 inches tall with heads carved out of wood. The marionettes and story, creations of Steve Kastner, along with an original musical score by Sigmund Snopek III, will come to life at the Miller Art Center, Sturgeon Bay, Sunday, Feb. 28 at 2 p.m., the third program in the series "Sunday Afternoon at the MAC."

Enacted with an unusual puppetry technique, the performance represents a fusion of styles. Kastner has combined the European tradition of string manipulation and live actor voicing with the Japanese puppet style wherein manipulators are fully visible to the audience but clothed in black. Snopek's contemporary computer-synthesized music brings the whole production into the 21st century.

The results mystify and entertain while creating a new theater art form that exposes the audience to the structure underlying the performance. Kastner explains that he becomes the "shadow" of the character who draws focus on stage. People who have seen the shows often remark that they forget the presence of the performer as is intended. "The marionette theater represents a fusion of several art forms including sculpture, mime, dance, drama, painting, and music," says Steve

about his production.

"The Timepiece" is one of several original shows being produced for next summer's season at The Red Rooster Playhouse in Fish Creek. A preview performance in Egg Harbor on Valentine's Day resulted in extensive revisions and refinements, all part of the process of developing new shows. Kastner says, "without being too confusing, I'm trying to write shows for kids that deal with some of the current mythological issues that jump out of the daily media headlines."

Door County artist and writer Kastner presented his first puppet show to children attending the Fish Creek Civic Association Christmas party in 1970 down in the basement of the old town hall. His interest in puppetry was sidetracked for several years while he developed a cross country ski business in Fish Creek but the dream of actually performing remained alive.

In 1985 he met David Syrotiak, founder and director of the National Marionette Theater of Hartford, CT. Syrotiak was performing in Green Bay as part of the arts series of the University of Wisconsin.

After the show Kastner went backstage with all the other interested audience members. He asked about how one can learn to manipulate stringed marionettes, a question Syrotiak is asked hundreds of times. In the conversation that followed Syrotiak mentioned that his company lacked one person to complete a touring group scheduled to do on the road in 10 days. If Kastner was serious and could be in Hartford in three days to start rehearsals, he would be trained as a member of the company.

Saying goodbye to the fall colors of Door County, Kastner bought an old International Travelall and packed it full, taking off for Connecticut. The first week with the company was a trial by fire. Sets and characters were still being built while rehearsals were squeezed in between long hours spent working in the shop. Over 90 hours were put in that week working continuously through the last night and day preceding the opening.

What followed was a hectic schedule of 55 appearances all over the East Coast. The company performed in theaters and school auditoriums, playing to audiences of as few as 20, select students at a tiny private school to as many as 1,500 people in an elegant restored classical theater.

When that first season ended Kastner went to France as an experienced performer. In Paris he became associated with several of the old marionette theater companies, notably Compagnie Blin whose tradition spans two generations and over 50 years of performing. He returned to the US with the intention of starting his own theater here in Door County.



Steve Kastner and daughter Greta with marionettes.

—Lorraine Mengert

The final piece fell into place in the winter of 1987 when he met Del Close and Charna Halpern who teach improvisational acting in Chicago's Second City Theater. Kastner was doing a large set painting for their latest show and became interested in the improv school. Close and Halpern are responsible for inspiring and training many of the actors of TV's Saturday Night Live including Bill Murray, Gilda Radner and the late John Belushi.

Kastner spent the spring and fall of that year studying improvisation, securing a confident stage presence, and commuting to Chicago once a week. Last summer he converted the old glassblowing building associated with his Fish Creek art gallery into a comfortable, all-weather theater and opened The Red Rooster Playhouse.

With the completion of a successful first season, Steve continues to

work with Charna Halpern and most recently with Milwaukee musician Sigmund Snopek III preparing new shows, music and characters for the 1988 playhouse.

His long term friendship with Snopek has often resulted in mutual exchanges of talent. Last winter Kastner completed a 9 by 27 ft. backdrop painting for Snopek's touring stage show. This year Snopek returned the effort by writing and recording the musical setting for Kastner's lyrics and play.

Plans call for the release of playhouse show recordings as well as performances featuring both artists together. Snopek's latest solo album "Wisconsininsane" on the Dali label is currently available in record stores on disc, cassette and CD and has been very well received. The merging of contemporary music with the marionette theater is unusual and challenging but both the artists are excited about the possibilities.