ARTS

Canadian icon speaks to packed Grawood

BY ALAN LEBLANC

Say the name Ernie Coombs to the average Canadian and you're unlikely to get a response. Say "Mr. Dressup" and you're lucky if they don't start humming that hokey theme.

Mr. Dressup has been delighting children for over thirty years, and his long-running TV show, now in reruns, has just been renewed to run indefinitely.

Currently he is on the road doing both children's shows and adult lectures. One such lecture took place October 27th in the Grawood Lounge. Speaking to a packed house, Coombs demonstrated what an influence he has been for generations of children.

The talk began with Coombs' story of how he came to Canada alongside Fred Rogers (yes, Mr. Rogers). Coombs was offered a job doing a television show called Butternut Square, and he graciously accepted. This was the show that first introduced everyone to Finnegan, the cute little dog that never talked, but only whispered. Mr. Dressup, at that time, was merely a character on the

To present coverage of Expo '67,

the CBC cancelled Butternut Square. The public was outraged and the show was revamped and brought back as Mr. Dressup. A particular

One

episode

had him

fixing

plumbing problems

in his sink.

He looked

directly into

the camera

and said.

"Oh, hi! I just

had a leak

in the

sink."

puppet on the shov Mrs. Trampoline was disliked by th public and create and puppetee Judith Lawrence Mrs. Trampolin was subsequentl bounced, Casey made hi first appearanc during the secon year of the show.

Coombs went o to reminisce abou many of th mishaps of liv television including workin with animals. H told a story of chimpanzee name Heidi that wa

booked for the show. At the first sight of Casey, Heidi became ecstatic, grabbed the puppet, and threw it across the set.

Coombs discussed the trials and tribulations of live television. One problems in his sink. He looked directly into the camera and said, "Oh, hi! I just had a leak in the sink."

> He quickly realized what he had said, but it was a live broadcast and there was no second take. Naturally, members of his production staff found this hilarious.

Coombs also managed to entertain the audience with a handkerchief, pretending it was a young boy going through a daily The routine. incredible thing was that he had the active participation of the crowd. He also read some of the letters he has received from children (and many

adults) over the years.

A fifteen minute movie retrospective of Mr. Dressup was also presented, introducing us to the puppets Annie and Truffles. The voice of Annie is played by Luba Goy, famous as the sole female cast member of Royal Canadian Air Farce. The retrospective showed some of the more embarrassing scenes involving live taping. Rehearsal outtakes were also shown.

It was after the movie was presented that we were introduced to James Parker, who did the voice for the puppet Alex on the newer shows.

episode had him fixing plumbing Not a stranger to children's programming. Parker also had the prestigious role of Polkaroo on The



Polka-Dot Door.

The most incredible part of the entire presentation was the question period following Coombs's speech. The details that this entirely adult audience retained about the show were astounding. Questions about the Wise Old Owl and what he thought of Barney (not much, by my guess) were standard fare.

Coombs also explained why Casey and Finnegan were slowly phased out of the show - apparently Judith Lawrence, the creator of the two puppets, decided it was time to hang up the puppets for good so she could get started on retirement.

A surprise for the audience surfaced from the Tickle Trunk. After tickling the latches open, out popped Finnegan. I swear I have never seen such exuberance from anyone, let alone a crowd of college students in a bar, for a Canadian icon. When asked why Finnegan never talked, Coombs replied sensibly, "How many dogs have you ever heard talk?

Coombs is currently living in Pickering, Ontario and is working as a spokesman for Save the Children Canada. He is also preparing a Mr. Dressup Christmas special to be broadcast this year. Last year he also received the Order of Canada for his work on the hit show.

After a lengthy autograph/photo session, Coombs settled for lunch at the Grawood. A special "Mr. Dressup Menu" was also available for anyone who wished to eat a Finnegan burger (not composed of actual pieces of Finnegan).

With such an outpouring for a television star, it makes me wonder if there's some part of us all that longs for those days of daytime television, when Mr. Dressup would welcome us into his home and try to teach us how to have fun.

Ready to ask Coombs a bunch of questions unrelated to the show, the realization hit me: I was talking to Mr. Dressup! The best I could muster was a question about the Order of Canada. A five-year-old would have probably been able to be more probing and curious. Oh, to be a kid again.

Eastern Comfort Shuttle Service SPECIAL STUDENT

RATE

Halifax . Sydney . Louisbourg (902) 562-0438 1-888-528-1222



RESTAURANT

Authentic East Indian Dining in the most intimate surroundings.

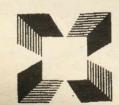
Open 7 days a week

5234 Blowers St., Halifax 422-6347

Pad your resume, write for the Gazette. We could always use a few more shallow, self-serving people.

IN STUDENT TRAVEL IN DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL IN SOUTH TRAVEL 3RD FL SUB

IN EUROPEAN TRAVEL 494-2054 AND SO MUCH MORE



Canadian Universities Travel Service Limited

