

# ARTS & CULTURE

## 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 show.

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 puppet on the show Mrs. Trampolin was disliked by the public and created and puppeteer Judith Lawrence Mrs. Trampolin was subsequently bounced, an Casey made his first appearance during the second year of the show.

Coombs went to reminisce about many of the mishaps of live television including working with animals. He told a story of chimpanzee Heidi that was 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

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."

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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 routine. The 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.

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' 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.

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