

# PeoriaTimes-Observer

# Living

Wednesday, November 27, 2002

Section B

## Whittaker's expressive arts

By Channy Lyons

Times Newspapers

Juliette Whittaker figured out how to make marionettes when she was in charge of the dramatic arts program at Carver Center.

She has a master's degree in theater and produced and directed plays at the center for a number of years until funding decreased and budgets tightened. She needed to find another way to work with the kids. She had to think small.

"With my background in theater. I am able to miniaturize sets, costume design and presentation," says Whittaker.

Theater scaled down became puppetry. At first, she created hand puppets, but found them simplistic. She began to make marionettes, the 2-foot-tall variety, grandly costumed, and controlled by complicated systems of strings.

Each became a unique, expressive character.

"It was more of a challenge to make a marionette. That interested me," Whittaker said.

She experimented and found that making them with modeling clay worked best.

"You mold the head on a light bulb, and the heat bakes the clay. Then you break the bulb inside, and you have an empty head shape to work with," Whittaker said.

One thing led to another and, soon, Whittaker had a full cast of characters. Plays were put on, and not just at Carver Center.

She trained a group of 15 young people, mostly boys, to work the marionettes. They put on productions in Peoria, Chillicothe and in Pekin.

She remembers particularly the time her troupe had three



children, and each has its own story.

For example, "Rachmaninoff in C-Sharp Minor" is a pastel drawing of a good-looking young teenage boy. A sheet of music is on the wall behind him.

"This boy wanted my complete attention. I was teaching a group of boys to play chess. So, he would put Rachmaninoff's "Prelude" on the player, and the other boys would leave. He'd have a private lesson."

Another portrait -- "Fantasia for Robin!" -- shows her 4-year-old niece, Robin, standing in a flower garden with her animal friends sitting on leaves and flowers or floating in the blue sky.

"These are Robin's stuffed animals. She won't go to bed without them. So, we had to round them up each night and put them to bed with her," Whittaker said.

The largest painting has the longest title: "One of These Days, I'm Going to Ram My Fist Through That Damn White Wall!" It shows a man doing just that.

The man she depicts was very active in the black power movement. In the active part of the painting, he is wearing a superhero-type leotard and putting his arm through a white brick wall. In the lower left corner, he is shown again wearing a suit (he has been attending a university class, Whittaker explains), and he is fantasizing about the action.

Inspired by Baha'i, Whittaker finds in the Baha'i faith a unique understanding of the importance of the arts in

Photos by Ben Lambert

The experienced and you learn that making them with modeling clay worked best.

"You mold the head on a light bulb, and the heat bakes the clay. Then you break the bulb inside, and you have an empty head shape to work with," Whittaker said.

One thing led to another and, soon, Whittaker had a full cast of characters. Plays were put on, and not just at Carver Center.

She trained a group of 15 young people, mostly boys, to work the marionettes. They put on productions in Peoria, Chillicothe and in Pekin.

She remembers particularly the time her troupe had three stages stretched across the entire auditorium at Lakeview Museum, and presented plays on each one.

Today, visitors can see many of her favorite marionettes in Gallery II at the Contemporary Art Center.

The displayed figures include a series of African-American marionettes, which she created, as well as her collection of Persian-Arabic mid-19th-century characters from the early days of the Baha'i Faith.

That is not all there is to see at the exhibit of Whittaker's creative works. She also paints,



Photos by Ben Lamb

**Look into my eyes:** "I am captivated by eyes. It is the first thing I notice when I meet someone," Juliette Whittaker said. Whittaker, who works in many artistic media sculpted the Miles Davis marionette, above, which is used in her shows. Lower left is "A Time to Wonder," left, one of Whittaker's paintings on display at the Contemporary Art Center of Peoria on Water Street. "The Chinese Beauty," right, is another of Whittaker's marionettes.

sculpts, assembles collages, creates pencil and pastel drawings, and makes rugs to hang on the wall.

When you ask her how it is that she can create in such a variety of media, she says simply that things evolve.

"You know, I never thought about that before. One thing leads to another. I see ideas around me, and I think, 'I can

try that.' Nobody's saying 'don't try that!' So, I do it."

Whittaker always has done what interests her, and as an educator and activist in Peoria, she has encouraged and supported community members, especially children, to do the same.

Whittaker grew up in a family that fostered creativity. Her parents valued education high-

ly. Her father was an attorney, and her mother was an English teacher. They lived in Houston, Texas.

"When my father was working on a difficult case, he would read Cicero in the original Latin at night for relaxation. I remember I could hardly wait to learn Latin in school because my parents spoke Latin at the dinner table when they wanted to talk about something I shouldn't hear.

"I wanted to find out what they were saying. So, I had to learn Latin, too," Whittaker said.

She took music lessons, ballet, tap, the visual arts, yet she learned primarily through observation and reading.

Today, she continues to explore the arts.

"The artist part of me has chosen a storytelling style," Whittaker writes in her artist's statement.

"It may be a drawing or a 3-dimensional marionette, but they all share my vision of the heroic in both ordinary people and the historically extraordinary people."

Looking at Whittaker's portraits, you can see that she is drawn to a person's eyes. "The mirror to the soul," as the sage says.

"I am captivated by eyes. It is the first thing I notice when I meet someone. Sometimes, eyes tell me things that I'd rather not know."

Many of the paintings and drawings in her exhibit are of

doing just that.

The man she depicts was very active in the black power movement. In the active part of the painting, he is wearing a superhero-type leotard and putting his arm through a white brick wall. In the lower left corner, he is shown again wearing a suit (he has been attending a university class, Whittaker explains), and he is fantasizing about the action.

Inspired by Baha'i, Whittaker finds in the Baha'i faith a unique understanding of the importance of the arts in our lives. Baha'i teaches that art "helps us express our spirituality in constructive ways."

She discovered Baha'i in 1955. She had entered a piece of sculpture in a members' art competition conducted by the national Theater Guild, and when her work was accepted for display, she went to New York City to see the exhibition.

She longed to stay in Manhattan to work in the theater. One night, she went to see singer/actress Eartha Kitt perform, and afterwards, went backstage to talk with her.

"Ms. Kitt said to me, 'You don't want to act or sing or dance. You want to direct. Well, they aren't going to let you do that yet,'" Whittaker said.

Whittaker decided to return home. She boarded the Twentieth Century Limited train at Grand Central Station for Chicago. She sat next to a young Persian girl who was going to her parents' home in Minneapolis to ask their permission to marry. But, why must she ask them, Whittaker wanted to know.

The young woman explained that family unity was a basic tenant in her religion. She was Baha'i. Whittaker learned more about the religion from her, and the next Easter Sunday she decided to test out the Baha'i Center in Peoria.

She studied the religion and became involved in the center's work. For several years, she has been the volunteer librarian at the center, and before long, she was making art there, too.

Whittaker's unique exhibit at the Contemporary Art Center is on display through Dec. 22.



**Educator, artist and activist:** Juliette Whittaker, raised in Houston, Texas, by an English teacher mother and a lawyer father, was always encouraged in her creative undertakings. "The artist in me has chosen a story-telling style," said Whittaker, who uses handmade marionettes to put on puppet shows throughout the Peoria area.