



Photo: Cynthia Del Conte

## Come to the Parade!

by Cynthia Owen Philip

**E**ver had the itch to create a fantasy world you could enter and depart from at will, all the while metamorphosing from one creature into another, like some clever and powerful ancient Greek god? Mirabile dictu, I've done just that. Now so can you!

Here's the where, what, why and how. Four Saturdays this fall puppet masters Alex Kahn and Sophia Michahelles, of Superior Concept Monsters, will be holding open workdays at the Rokeby Farm barn during which volunteers will fabricate the huge processional puppets they've designed for New York's 27th Annual Greenwich Village Halloween parade. The theme this year, inspired by the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, is the evolution of man from an earth rooted tool inventor, to a gravity-defiant space ex-

plorer and, finally, to an unfettered spirit.

Sound like science fiction? It is. But the workdays are in the here and now. Their objective is to muster the help needed to produce giant apes, spacemen, a time machine, and "mother pods" with their "star children." Kahn likens the communal experience of a workday to an old-fashioned barn raising. Paralleling the square dancing and feasting in which barn raisings culminated will be the grand parade in New York City up Sixth Avenue on the evening of October 31. The difference is that the parade enlarges participation by hundreds of thousands more people. They join as witches, ghosts and Draculas, as prince and princesses charming, as birds of paradise and mooning donkeys. Many form groups to dramatize

*continued on page 2*

*continued from page 1.*

a social issue. (This year, I bet there'll be computers gobbling up time and butterflies wilting before spray machines.)

Perhaps the most thrilling part of the parade are the spectators. Lining the sidewalks ten deep, they quickly become as much a part of the parade as the paraders themselves. Their sheer joy quickens to the explosion of creativity. This year the virtual audience will be national. The parade will be televised live over the Sci Fi Channel and USA Networks.

But to get back to the workdays. They are held in a hay barn, reconfigured and enlarged after a fire burned everything except a few foundation walls and the facade. Unadorned plywood trusses arch from the ground in an upward bowed sweep. (Imagine a very deep-bottomed, overturned row boat.) It's thirty feet high, but the space is as embracing as it is lofty. The barn's entire north end opens to the sky and the encroaching woods. The pervasive luminosity invites imaginations to soar.

Kahn and Michahelles, official puppeteers for the parade, are geniuses at finding the right job for each volunteer. No experience is necessary. All that's required is the ability to focus on a task. I can vouch for it. Two years ago, being moderately handy with a needle, I helped sew the ribs of a giant lunar moth. What happened was curious and wonderful. I became absorbed in the enveloping conviviality—on the opposite side of my creature was a stylish man who turned out to be a sail maker with tales to tell and a vast array of helpful hints. At the same time, concentrating on making many spaced repetitive stitches became a deep meditation.

This year, volunteers will be put to work on the ten-foot tall apes, a fifteen foot space machine, puffy floating space men or the astonishing mother pods, each of which will release a luminous star child. Sounds unreal? Not when you

help create the puppets. Somewhere in the process of fabrication, they take on lives of their own. No two are exactly alike, for they embody the many hands that made them and are vibrant with the individual beings of their makers.

In fact, the interplay between the puppets and volunteers grows as one phase of the parade leads into another. On Saturday, October 21, a rehearsal will be held at Rokeby for those who have signed up to carry the puppets in the Halloween parade. The rehearsal is crucial, for handling the puppets takes as much art as heft and endurance. Kahn and Michahelles envision their puppet ensemble in its final incarnation as a choreographed performance in which the puppets reveal their multiple meanings, lending the great procession a ritual depth and richness.

It has always seemed to me that our important festivals spring from ancient observances of the interplay of earth and spirit. This is why we love them—and why we need them. Halloween reaches back to the Celts of Ireland. The night of October 31 was the eve of their New Year. For them, it was a time when space and time dissolved and the spirit world energized the living world to set forth on new beginnings.

Jeanne Fleming, the creative director of the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade, has staged the event from Rokeby Farm for the past nineteen years. "Every phase of the communal process—design, production, and procession—calls forth the spirit," says Fleming. "The experience is transforming. The parade itself may be ephemeral, but the spectacle stays with each participant as a profound and wondrous, transforming experience." See for yourself on the parade's workday Saturdays at Rokeby Farm barn.