

Bananas, tops!

review by Nan Lincoln

photos by Peter Travers

Evil-doers beware: There's a new kid in town, and he's loaded with attitude and fruit.

This new hero of the Wild West is none other than the Banana Kid, aka Chucky, and you just don't want to mess with him unless you enjoy getting beamed by one of his lethal, boomerang bananas.

The Kid, his trusted steed, Goatie, his mysterious mentor, The Man With No Name, Tootsie the saloon gal, Bad Bart and Snakeskin Sam and a host of other naughty and nice residents of the sleepy little town of Sueno are the newest creations of the Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers, who debuted their show, "The Legend of the Banana Kid: The Good, the Bad, and the Chucky," at the Criteriop Theatre this past weekend.

Once again, puppeteers Brian, Erik and Robin Torbek have come up with a winner. Combining old-fashioned melodrama with Wild West themes and a few pokes at commercial television, The Banana Kid's capers

kept a theater full of kids and their parents enthralled for a thoroughly entertaining hour.

This story is less complex than some of their past productions such as "The Grinch," "The Headless

Horseman," "Tales From the Nest" and "Pirates," and maybe that's why it worked so well for the young audience. There were very few, if any, "fidget factor" moments as we are invited along on little Chucky's dream of being a cowboy in the Old West.

We first encounter Chucky happily watching an old "Girl on the Railroad Tracks" melodrama on TV from the comfort of his couch when his little sister switches the channels on him at a crucial moment to watch a thoroughly annoying trio of "teletubby"-type characters bounce and sing a sappy little song. Now, here's the first evidence of the Torbecks' talents. These TV characters are played to scale; that is, they appear to be tiny finger puppets, and yet their action and dialogue is just as convincing as the larger puppets (some of them almost seem life-size) that



Goatie the, uh, goat is the Banana Kid's loyal steed.

PETER TRAVERS PHOTO

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show up later in the story.

Anyway, the irate Chucky goes out to play cowboy using a banana (aha!) for a gun, and promptly falls asleep, only to "wake up" in the outskirts of "Sueno," which is apparently being plagued by local bad guy Bad Bart and his henchman.

A mysterious rider, The Man With No Name, takes little Chucky under his wing, gives him the cutest little tail-wagging, fluffy goat (the aforementioned Goatie) to ride, and inducts him into his new identity as the dreaded Banana Kid.

During the "Kid's" adventures we encounter all sorts of colorful characters, but not too many to bog down the story. There's loquacious Tootsie, the saloon keeper; her perma-

nent customer, Cleatus; a man named Sue, who finds happiness when he changes his name; a beef jerky-loving bear; Bad Bart and his nefarious crew; and an excitable little kid who is always delivering ominous news, i.e., "The Train Is Coming!" "Snakeskin Sam's In Town!"

Of course, in the end our banana-wielding hero with the help of his trusty Goatie manages to thwart all the bad guys; we learn the secret identity of The Man With No Name; and Cleatus manages to get up from his barstool.

From start to finish "The Banana Kid" is just gol'darn fun. Actually, the finish is one of the "funnest" parts, with the puppets taking their bows while lip-synching to

Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots are Made for Walking" and the bad guys being hauled off while harmonizing "Happy Trails."

So let's hope the Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers keep this one in their permanent repertoire and the Banana Kid will ride again, and again and again. Catch the show when he does.

Before that, however, audiences will get a chance to see one of the Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers' classic productions, "The Grinch," based on the Dr. Seuss story but with a few interesting additions, including a star-struck singing mouse. "The Grinch" will be performed Dec. 11 and 12 at the Criterion at 4 p.m. ■