

Oliver pulls out the laughs for smiling Shuler crowd

By Tim Keller — For the Comet | Posted: Friday, February 13, 2015 12:00 am

RATON – Entertainer Todd Oliver returned to the Shuler Theater last week — he was here 20 years ago — and demonstrated his mastery at providing a rollicking good time to everyone in a large all-ages audience.

He doesn't do it alone. He pulls his friends Joey, Pops, and Miss Lilly from travel cases, while three live musicians walk themselves onto the stage. Oliver also incorporated three audience members into the show onstage Wednesday night (Feb. 4). The center of the show, though, is a pug-nosed terrier named Irving.

The show opened with a short black-and-white film produced to look like it was made in the 1950s, complete with laugh track. A young boy takes an interest in ventriloquism but one look at the \$300 price tag on a mail-order ventriloquist's dummy leads his mom to suggest the boy try something else. As she walks away, the boy turns his eyes across the room to the family dog, apparently acted by Irving.

Thus the audience learned how Oliver came to use a live dog as his ventriloquist's "dummy." But Irving is no dummy: he's a great comic foil for Oliver, and sometimes smarter than Oliver — although, let's admit, Oliver writes Irving's lines.

Their opening dialog stacked joke after joke at breakneck speed, barely allowing one laugh to end before the next began. The family show came no closer to topical material than a reference to President Obama's birth certificate—rescue dog Irving can never run for president because he doesn't have one — and another to Kanye West and wife Kim Kardashian — Irving says, "He's black, she's white, I'm black and white, I could be their kid."

The pair did extended segments on Irving's job as a Wal-Mart greeter —it'll be hard for audience members to ever again hear "Welcome to Wal-Mart" without laughing—and on how Irving spends his days. "I went outside. Then I came back inside. I went outside. Then I came back inside," Irving droned on and on. The next day, audience members were overheard laughing as they recited the dog's comic



"Pops" and "Miss Lilly" banter with funny man Todd Oliver during a performance at the historic Shuler Theater in Raton Wednesday (Feb. 4).

The pair are two of three ventriloquist's dummies that travel with Oliver for his shows. They've all gotten to know each other well over the years. Oliver last performed at the Shuler Theater 20 years ago.

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Oliver writes songs, sings, and performs on electric guitar, electric piano with his band The Smiling Eyes —lead guitarist Mike Donoho, bassist Marcus Willett, and drummer Jeff Hauschildt. A half-dozen songs were interspersed throughout the 90-minute set to accomplish what Oliver termed “a modern variety show.”

The heart of the show, though, is comedy, and it’s produced through ventriloquism. Oliver eventually got successful enough to buy himself three ventriloquist’s dummies to augment his dog act. His first dummy, young Joey, emerged onstage from his travel case actively complaining about having to travel inside the case. “It’s hot, it’s dark, there’s no HBO — I might as well be in Maxwell.”

Oliver incorporated local humor along with distinctly different voices for Irving and each of Oliver’s dummies. Pops has the voice of an old black man. In a high woman’s voice, Miss Lilly defends her big buck teeth. “My teeth are straight, it’s my face that’s crooked.”

Oliver had audience members write questions for Irving on slips of paper in the lobby before the show. (The most Zen-like was “Where am I?”) Oliver and Irving used the audience questions for an extended session of comic improvisation.

Then Oliver walked through the audience to choose one woman and one man — Pat and Ray —to come on stage where they learned that they were about to become ventriloquist’s dummies. They opened their mouths whenever Oliver squeezed their necks, and he gave them words and sounds they never would have made themselves. The audience roared.

Simple and effective, Oliver’s family variety show delivered a steady stream of laughter. Many in the audience are likely hoping that he won’t wait another 20 years to bring his show back to the Shuler.