

Volunteer keeps Nibley children's theater going

By Lance Frazier
staff writer

NIBLEY — The little stage at the back of Nibley's city park gets pretty crowded each year around the end of June, and much of the credit goes to Jessie Datwyler.

Datwyler has produced and directed children's plays for Nibley Heritage Days for more than a decade, involving as many youngsters as she can.

From her first production in 1983 of *The Selfish Giant*, to *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* this year, Datwyler has taught children the basics of acting. And the productions have been so successful in getting people involved that they've just about outgrown the stage.

"We're hoping to build a bigger, better stage," says Datwyler, who estimates she spends about 50 hours on each production. Her dream is to replace the plywood setup with a larger cement platform capable of displaying more



scenery — and more kids.

"Everyone who comes to sign up is in the play," she says with a smile. "Every kid should be in a play. You learn teamwork, how to work together and build something. Not everybody can hit a ball, but everybody can get up on the stage and sing."

Datwyler tries to find plays with a lot of speaking parts to get more kids involved. This year she adapted *Ali Baba* for the stage and came up with 80 parts for villagers, dancers and saber-wielding thieves.

While she has involved more and more actors, the time she has to work with them has shortened over the years. A decade ago, she says, the cast would

rehearse three months before a play. Now, she usually has about two weeks to pull everything together.

To cope with the time pressures she enlisted help from others in Nibley, mostly mothers of the actors.

"It's really turned into a community theater," Datwyler says. "I get it going, but that's about it."

Actually, she chooses the plays, organizes the script, assigns parts, handles finances and helps direct. She usually works with several other directors and a choreographer, but ultimate responsibility for the success of each production lies with Datwyler.

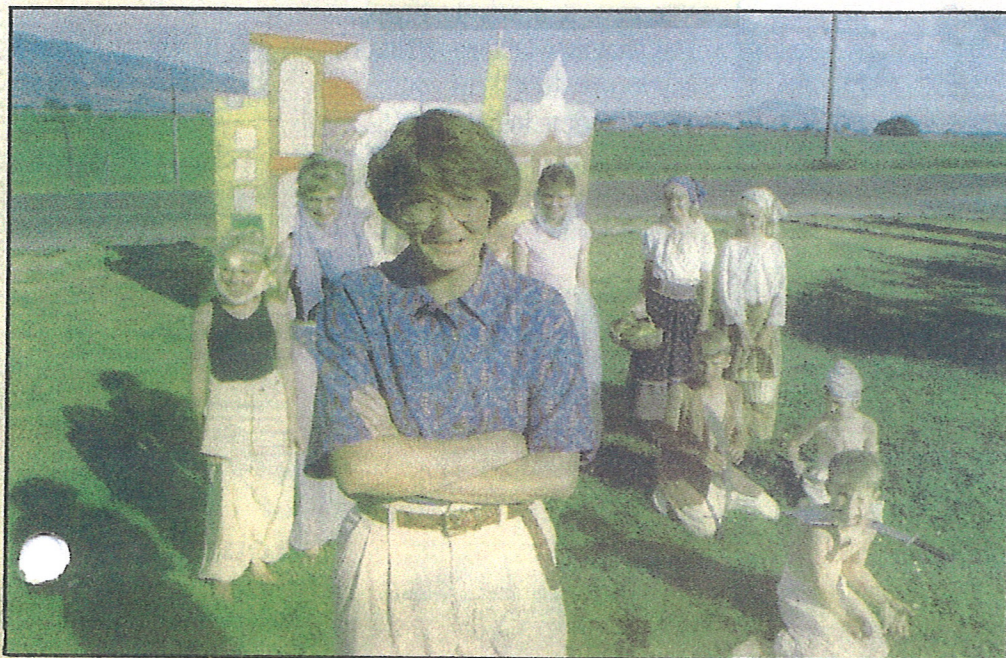
Jeena Nilson, who was the choreographer for *Ali Baba*, says that if it weren't for Datwyler, Nibley children's theater wouldn't exist.

"She has the kids in mind," Nilson says. "She just wants them to have a great experience."

Several youngsters performed in all of the first 10 plays, and Datwyler says most of the actors are hooked after one play.

"When they're grown up and go to a play, they'll be able to say 'I know that song,'" she says, but that's not her first priority.

"It's important to be a good influence in the kids' lives," she adds. "I stress to the volunteers to try to make each kid feel important."



Dan Miller/ Herald Journal

Jessie Datwyler and some cast members from 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.'

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