



Entrepreneurs try to cash in on family of pumpkinheads

By **SUSAN SHINN**
Staff Writer

Halloween is quite far off, but one family is ready for trick-or-treating.

The OH Lanterns are a family of eight pumpkins made of soft-polyurethane. Each bright orange pumpkin is life size, but has a very human, very ugly face.

The family visited Carroll Hall on Saturday as part of the second annual UNC Entrepreneur Club Conference. Bob Williams, president of Pumpkin Productions, Inc., and Jack Erker, his partner, spoke about the successes and pitfalls of creating their own company to market the pumpkins.

The third partner in the company, Hollywood special effects expert Todd Masters, also created the pumpkins to use as props in a Halloween film. The film, however, was never released.

Williams and Erker first saw the strange-looking pumpkins at a friend's office in 1986. "We knew we had something special," Williams said. "We gave it the 10-second test. I looked at it. He looked at it. We both looked at each other and said, 'Let's do it.'"

But it took a while longer for the partners to get their new-found product on the market. "Don't do what we did," Erker said, in describing their strategy. "We started like all books tell you not to."

Erker took the pumpkins to a gift show in New York and received 50,000 orders within three days. Through contacts at the show, he then set up a distribution network over the rest of the country.

Erker encountered an early problem in getting a manufacturer to

produce the pumpkins. The OH Lanterns are created from real pumpkins that have a sculpted clay face on one side, and a mold is made of the sculpture. The pumpkins are then mass-produced. A company in Archbold, Ohio, finally agreed to do the project.

"We spent \$80,000 in molds because we knew we had the product sold," Erker said. "It's safer that way."

Erker said that their company has found a niche in the seasonal business. Pumpkin Productions takes orders, manufactures, ships, collects and ends its season on Oct. 31 with no inventory.

After their first season, with sales of \$4.5 million, the partners decided to do a business plan and a market study. They didn't want their company to experience a "Pet Rock" nose dive. Because they couldn't afford advertising, they hired a publicist and got exposure from television stations in the Midwest, New York and Los Angeles. This gave the product both credibility and free advertising, Erker said. Williams and Erker also went on a one-month publicity tour.

This year's sales are projected at \$25 million. But Pumpkin Productions is not just out to make a profit.

A limited edition series of 10,000 giant pumpkins, personally signed by Masters, will be sold for \$100, with all proceeds going to charity. Additionally, Masters and his special effects friends will create a haunted house at Universal Studios, with those proceeds also being donated to charity.

Erker said that the charity work conveyed the positive tone of Pumpkin Productions' products and also

got the name in front of the public.

Erker and Williams said they want the OH Lantern Family to become the first family of Halloween. Williams said that unlike Christmas, which has the commercial symbol of Santa Claus, there is no identifying character for Halloween. "If we can accomplish that, we can stay in the business for a long time," Erker said.

Williams said, "Within three years, Halloween will be the second largest holiday, with Christmas being first. Adults are coming back to Halloween and bringing the fun back into it."

"It's the only day we can get out of our nice business suits and act like a kid again and do it right," he said.

And adults open up the marketplace. "One man sent out 40 pumpkins as invitations to his Halloween party," Williams said.

With expansion of the marketplace comes a need for product expansion. In addition to the original family of eight, Baby OH Lanterns and finger puppets for kids are also available.

"We're not just selling a foam pumpkin," Williams said. "We're selling a complete concept."

The popularity of Jack OH Lantern and his friends has paid off but not without a price. Williams said that his partner worked 18-hour days six days a week, while he was on the road for that same amount of time. "I wear one name badge that says 'Hi, my name is Bob' and one that says 'Hi, my name is Dad,'" he said. Still, both men were smiling when they left to catch their after-noon flights.

The OH Lantern Family visited campus Saturday as part of the UNC Entrepreneur Club Conference

Lab Theatre production's acting impresses, but plot depresses

Expecting a happy, good-feeling kind of play? If so, then pass up the Lab Theatre's production of "Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi."

About four modern women, this play seems starkly unrealistic. Dusa (Tessa Blake) has gotten a divorce that she did not want and her ex-husband has stolen the children. This is believable enough, but he's taken them to Morocco and Argentina?

Fish (Debi Teitelbaum), an independent woman who works and believes strongly in the feminist movement, has been left by her boyfriend for another woman who would be dependent on him, unlike Fish was. She believes she can still have him, but when she finds out the two are married, she watches them make love from his fire escape. Get real!

Stas (Susan Bowen) works in a hospital during the day and at night leaves to meet her many "appointments." With the extra income from turning tricks, she plans to study in Hawaii. Not only is she a call girl, but a kleptomaniac as well.

Stephanie Dean
Theater

Then there is Vi (Jane McNeill), perhaps the most enjoyable character, but definitely not without her own troubles. She is severely anorexic and depressed, losing control at any time for any reason. She is rushed to the hospital because of her illness and returns happy and concerned about everyone, flitting and running about. But being anorexic isn't enough; her sexual preference depends on her mood.

Each of the women's problems is more than enough for the typical household. But these four live together in one apartment — merging their troubles. Quite a handful! There are many things left unclear to the audience. What exactly does Fish do for a living? Is Vi's obsession with rape throughout the first half of the play because she was a victim and had an abortion? Though the play is

modern, it is choppy and its viewers have to interpret much of it in the best way they can.

However, each member of the cast does an excellent job with her character. Blake brings out all the emotion for her stolen children as well as for her friends. Teitelbaum is effective as the headstrong feminist who is distraught over her lost beau. Bowen shows the impersonality and unconcerned nature of a part-time prostitute. And McNeill successfully demonstrates the radical change anyone, especially an anorexic, can undergo.

Most aspects of the production are impressive. The musical interludes, lighting in soliloquies and staging are marvelous. The one drawback is the play itself. It takes too much work to understand, and then, after all that, it is completely depressing.

"Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi," a Lab Theatre production, will be performed today at 4 and 8 p.m. and tomorrow at 5 p.m. in 06 Graham Memorial. Admission is free.

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DTH/Christie Blom

The Lab Theatre presentation of "Dusa, Fish, Stas, & Vi" portrays the lives of four independent women

Parking

agencies on campus such as the North Carolina Memorial Hospital (NCMH), the Rams Club or other sources, but that would call for a 20-year monetary commitment from those agencies, he said.

The department could also consider other sites for the deck, like the Bell Tower area, or could not build the deck at all.

Stephen Weiss, professor and director of Graduate Studies in the Computer Science Department said, "My permit pays for use in a lot 25 percent of the time, and three-fourths of the time the lot is free to be used by people at night. Can we raise money by charging people (to park) at night?"

Swecker said that option is under consideration.

One member of the audience said the traffic office should monitor faculty and staff with permits who live on the bus line, and only one permit should be issued per family.

"That is done with students — they don't like it, but they accept it," Swecker said. "I don't know how employees will feel."

Staff and faculty members said Chapel Hill residents should not be refused parking permits simply because they live in Chapel Hill and are close to campus.

"I don't feel I should have to ride a bus, when it happens to come," said Virginia Petty from the University

Registrar's Office. "A person from Durham knows he has to get to Chapel Hill, and I don't feel I should be penalized for living in Chapel Hill."

UNC parking fees are excessively high, said a chemistry department employee. "It's like an unfair tax applied to be allowed to work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill," he said.

The transportation department has been advised that a request for money from the legislature would be denied because everyone else in the state uses user fees to build parking decks, Swecker said. He would not say who advised the department.

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