

'Pappa Mike' Manteo, 80, led theater for marionettes

Miguel (Pappa Mike) Manteo, 80, head of the Manteo Family Sicilian Marionette Theater, the last troupe of puppeteers using the traditional, life-sized, hand-made marionettes developed in Italy hundreds of years ago, died yesterday in the Clove Lake Nursing Home.

Mr. Manteo, a Westerleigh resident, was born in Mendoza, Argentina.

The family came to the United States in 1919, settling in Manhattan and opening their puppet theater in that borough.

But time and economic hardship forced the troupe, founded by Mr. Manteo's grandfather in Italy, to cease regular performances in the 1930s.

In 1939, Mr. Manteo and the troupe moved to Brooklyn. He took over running the theater from his father, who died in 1947.

An electrician who owned and operated Adlight in St. George until his retirement in 1976, Mr. Manteo told the Advance in 1983 that "sometimes the theater survived the electrical business and sometimes the electrical business survived the theater" during the lean years of the Depression.

Never, though, did he consider closing the theater.

In 1968, he moved his home to Westerleigh but the troupe remained headquartered in Brooklyn until 1985 when space was provided by the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences.

Patricia Gordon Michael, the institute's administrator, called Mr. Manteo a "very clever, unusual, special person — a great spirit."

"From long before I ever saw the marionettes in performance, I understood their vitality," she said.

Standing about five feet tall and weighing as much as 100 pounds, the marionettes, which used to perform scripts 1,000 years old portraying an era of knights and damsels in distress, are all handcrafted. The oldest in the collection of 200 are more than 100 years old and were made by Mr. Manteo's grandfather.



ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

Miguel (Pappa Mike) Manteo and one of his marionettes.

All the performances are in Italian.

The puppets have been shown in museums all over the world. One of the marionettes has been donated to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., where it is on display next to Charlie McCarthy, the late ventriloquist Edgar Bergen's puppet.

Over the years, Mr. Manteo has been given numerous arts awards, including grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1983, he received a national arts fellowship. This was followed by an arts award from Mayor Edward I. Koch and the

Governor's Arts Award in 1986.

The running of the troupe is now expected to pass on to other family members.

Mr. Manteo's wife, Marie, died last year.

Surviving are a son, Michael; a daughter, Catherine Gordon; his sister, Ida Grillo; six grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

The funeral will be Friday from the Matthew Funeral Home, Wilton, with a mass at 10:15 a.m. in Holy Family R.C. Church, Westerleigh. Burial will be in St. Charles Cemetery, Farmingdale, L.I.