

# Meet Babar's agent

When the President of the United States wants an audience with the king of Celesteville, the White House has to check with his handler in Toronto. ANTHONY REINHART reports



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As elephants go, they don't come much friendlier than Babar, the 74-year-old children's character of book and television fame.

No surprise, then, that the king of Celesteville has made two trips to the White House during a reign of Republicans, whose party emblem is an elephant.

Never mind that the woman who owns the North American live-performance rights for the pleasant pachyderm, Patricia Silver, is a disenchanted Democrat who railed against the Vietnam War before fleeing to Canada with a draft dodger in 1971. Or that Babar lives in Toronto, a city where freedom is exercised in such forms as same-sex marriage and plenty of vocal disdain for U.S. foreign policy.

None of that seemed to matter when Babar, a favourite on first lady Laura Bush's reading list, was summoned to the annual Easter egg roll on the White House lawn last year, and invited back for the same event last month.

Business is business after all, and "pulling Babar wouldn't have made a difference," Ms. Silver, 56, says in her office on Danforth Avenue. "But I am a member of Democrats Abroad," she adds, before pointing out a framed picture of herself with John Kerry's sister Diane.

Aside from politics, there are more practical concerns to contend with whenever Ms. Silver, president and founder of Sphere Entertainment, sends Babar or one of her other live acts out on the road.

It starts with finding the right performer to fill the costume. And Tom King, a Toronto dancer who also plays TVOntario's Polkaroo for Ms. Silver, must do far more than simply wear the big Babar suit.

"You have to be able to communicate everything through movement," she says. For example, "you have to express surprise, but you don't have your face," because it's hidden behind Babar's huge costume head, which also limits Mr. King's vision.

Babar has no hands for expressive gestures, only stumpy hooves, and the thick costume makes movement a challenge.

"And, given all that, you still have to portray a story," Ms. Silver says, "so we audition a lot of people."

Gigging at the White House in the post-9/11 era only adds to the experience, with full searches of Babar's bags, not to mention background checks on the actor and Ms. Silver. Needless to say, both passed, despite her Democratic loyalties and colourful Vietnam-era history.

After growing up in a St. Louis suburb, Ms. Silver earned a fine arts degree in music at Stephens College in Columbia, Mo., then her master's in broadcasting at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

In 1971, after spending a month camped outside the campus Reserve Officers' Training Corps building to protest against the Vietnam War -- and staring down the National Guard, which had opened fire and killed four students a year earlier at Ohio's Kent State University -- she and a male friend decided to bail and head to Canada.

"We were going to sing folk songs," she says, though they knew nothing about their new country.

The man eventually headed home, but Ms. Silver stayed despite her "horrified" family in Missouri. They were equally unimpressed to learn she had joined a rock band as she worked her way through various jobs in TV and radio.

She took her first step as a children's performer in the late 1970s, when a fellow musician, who filled empty daytime hours working as a clown, invited her along.

"It was a little frightening because I had never been a clown," she says, recalling her first gig at the Canadian National Exhibition, "and eight hours is a very long time to play the piano."

She nonetheless became hooked by the response of her young audiences, and before long, was rebuilding her working life around children's entertainment.

In 1977, she founded the Sphere Clown Band, and remains a member after nearly three decades that have included extensive touring.

She has written a bestselling how-to book, *Face Painting*, helped to establish the Beaches Alternative School and sits on industry boards, including that of the New York-based Children's Entertainment Association.

In addition to Babar's appearances, she owns the live rights to *Bananas in Pyjamas*, *Polkaroo*, *The Toy Castle*, *Fairly OddParents*, *Max & Ruby* and *Snoopy*, and produces, writes and manages all their live shows.

With help from three employees, Sphere also books about 2,000 acts, from children's performers to luncheon speakers, at about 1,000 events a year at malls, fairs, festivals, offices and private parties.

It seems a departure from anti-war protests, but not to Ms. Silver, who says "the hippie draft-dodger in me" drives her desire to please children.

"When we put Babar at the White House, everybody wins."