

# Puppets pull strings to beat AIDS virus

GARY FRIEDMAN'S two-metre puppets talked openly about AIDS long before anyone else in Africa.

Towering above everyone else in the marketplace, health clinic or sports stadium, the puppets would argue in the local dialect about sex and the use of condoms, while a live band played in the background.

During the short piece of street theatre, spectators would learn about the male puppet named Jo who slept with several partners, became HIV positive and infected his wife, who in turn gave her baby the virus.

But when Jo was dying his family and friends showed compassion to the end.

The whole thing is done with a touch of dance and a strong flavour of humour, to overcome any uncomfortable feelings in the crowd.

Mr Friedman, a South African who is in Perth this week to lecture at the first national Aboriginal community disease con-

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trol conference, has played to crowds as big as 3000 in Africa and estimates that in the past six years a million people have been exposed to the puppets' HIV warnings.

He recently set up Puppets Against AIDS troupes in Canada and is keen to try his puppets out on Aborigines.

His work through the small non-government organisation, African Research and Educational Puppetry Program, targets indigenous people but the skin of his puppets is grey, to show the spread of the virus is not restricted by race.

He said the puppets had proved successful in southern Africa, where they were not part of traditional life.

The story line was always the same but the dialect and traditions changed to accommodate local culture. So far the performance had been done in 20 languages.



TALL STORY: Gary Friedman and his troupe with their puppets, Mary and Jo.