

SPRING and SUMMER 2005 Issue #17

PUPPETRY

INTERNATIONAL

the puppet in contemporary theatre, film & media



GENRE BENDERS

- Erick Hawkins and Ralph Lee
- Sandglass Learns to Fly
- Bread & Puppet in Tehran

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issue no. 17

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PHOTO: Rod Kelly



PHOTO: Joe Born

In our shows for families, take a romp through the old South, April through June, in Jon Ludwig's adaptation of *Brer Rabbit & Friends* (pictured at left). This summer, enjoy *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* by State Puppet Theatre Stara Zagora of Bulgaria, *Hansel and Gretel* by Tanglewood Marionettes and *Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp* by National Marionette Theatre.

See the *Kings of Broadway* on display at the Center! Tony Award winner and Oscar nominee Julie Taymor donated the mask prototypes of Scar and Mufasa (pictured at right) to the Center's museum collection. Both masks, reveal Taymor's talents as an inventive designer and sculptor.

Find everything puppet you can imagine in the Museum Store — from jewelry to books and videos, from puzzles and pop-up toys to, of course, an amazing variety of puppets. For more info, go to www.puppetstore.org.

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PHOTO: Bradford Clark

EDITOR'S PAGE—

PUPPETRY: *Life at the Crossroads*

As we were working on this issue of *Puppetry International*, a brochure arrived advertising auditions for the new cycle of ESNAM, the three-year professional training program at the *Institut International de la Marionnette* in Charleville-Mézières, France. The school's philosophy seemed to capture the spirit of what we envisioned for this edition:

... Theatre, and the stage in general, are increasingly interested nowadays in the potential of puppet theatre. Familiar with the visual codes, responsive to a language that privileges poetical metaphors, directors and performers are taking an interest in the new forms of stagecraft that are developing at the permanent intersection of performance and image.



There are many such intersections in the Road Atlas of Puppetry—the crossroads of tradition and novelty, spoken word and sculptural form, flesh and metaphor, spirit and commerce. It's easy to lose one's way, but there are so many paths for the courageous and curious to explore. ESNAM has the advantage of generous government support to foster creativity in its charges [page 40], but many less well-heeled puppet theatres are likewise laboratories of this sort. They encourage their members to exit a crossroads by some other means than simply choosing to go right or left. One might, for example, turn on one's head and burrow straight down to China. One might turn one's gaze heavenward and ignite one's booster rockets. A nerf ball might be turned into a puppet head. A set of socket wrenches might dance a *pas de deux* on the hood of a 1958 Thunderbird Coupe de Grace, while shadows of wispy ballerinas seduce an artist's rendering of an aging Messiah (had he lived).

In this issue, we are looking for those points of intersection. Or perhaps "point" is an insufficient analogy. Suppose I stick my big old nose in a clear pool. Imagine how the ripples transport the imprint of my impressive schnozz outward in all directions. Now, from the other side of the pool, you come along and slam your fist into the calm water. As the waves from your hand meet the ripples from my nose, an interference pattern is formed that magnifies the amplitude of our intentions, combining to form something brand new, unforeseen. That interference—that is where it is goin' on, see? Good Boutros Boutros golly, Miss Molly—that is where the rubber meets the rodeo! This is the living breathing hologram wherein lie the answers to all our secret desires for occult knowledge: Why are we here? Is there a goddess? Why don't pistachios taste like pistachio ice cream? When Ralph Lee made masks for Erick Hawkins's ballets, they kicked up some serious ripples [page 4]. Sandglass Theater created a production collaboratively with a circus director/mime and several aerialist/acrobat. during which time these same puppeteers were *also* traveling to Cambodia



to make a new work with a theatre in Phnom Penh! [page 7]. Underground Railway Theatre has for decades mixed actors with puppets, shadows with orchestras, art with politics [page 22]. UMO, headquartered on Vashon Island, near Seattle, uses their collective training in puppetry, mime, dance, commedia, mask and clowning to create performances that refuse to be pigeonholed [page 18].

There's a lot more, but you'll see. Certainly there are a lot of wonderful puppet companies that stick to the conventions of their chosen style and genre. There can be great virtue (and virtuosity) there, and there will be other issues of PI to celebrate that sort of work. But, by Punchinello's tallywhacker, so many of us both here and abroad are finding ourselves in a *postmodern condition*! We struggle, like Beowulf, to stuff our aging bodies into suits of armor once more, as we prepare to battle the dragons before they set fire to everything. Our strength is no longer in our sword arm, perhaps, but in the new forms we can create together.

— Andrew Periale



■ RALPH LEE: *Good Enough?*



"Dear Ralph, I think your part in this can be a great work of art, not scenic, property art, I mean high art. I think it can come out absolutely brilliant." —Erick

Ralph Lee is a man of many accomplishments and some renown. He began making puppets when he was still a child, and went on to have a very full career in New York, where he has acted both on and off Broadway, and has built masks and puppets for many theatre and dance companies. In 1976, he became the artistic director of Mettawee River Theatre Co. He directed the outrageous Greenwich Village Halloween Parade for eleven years. He has created masks and puppets for a number of other prominent artists and has received many awards and honors. According to Mr. Lee, one of the most satisfying of the many collaborations he has been involved with was the work he did with another great collaborator—Erick Hawkins.

Hawkins was a towering figure in the dance world. His dance and choreography span a good deal of the 20th century, and Ralph Lee worked on seven of his ballets over a period of thirty years. "Erick had a very specific aesthetic, which tended to be minimal—for movement, as well as for the visual and musical elements." Back in the early 1960s, Erick was working on a ballet based on the apocryphal story of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. He was very particular about the materials that were used. Paper and balsa wood were primary on his palette, and that choice would serve as a constraint that would help unify the work of his designers.

Ralph was asked to create a mask for the character of George Washington. He crafted a piece out of Celastic, and it bore a definite resemblance to our nation's father. Erick put on the mask for the first time and— even though he couldn't see Hawkins's face— Ralph could read from the shade of disapproval reflected in the face of the mask that he had missed the mark. "Think 'folk art,'" Hawkins told him. "Try carving it out of balsa wood."

Ralph's initial mask, though it fit the requirements, did not possess the simplicity, nor the degree of artifice, that Hawkins was after. He had never carved a mask in wood before, and the material forced him to simplify lines and make a face that was flatter than the one had he first modeled in clay. Erick was delighted with the result.

At the outset of each project, Hawkins would talk about the need to make things clear. The mask was something to be placed on the head (sometimes above the head). It should be an object of art in its own right, and not a means to creating an illusion.

Was this a collaboration, or merely work-for-hire? Hawkins, in the early 1970s was an artist with an international reputation and at the height of his creative powers. Lee was an established but much younger artist and he admits that the relationship was to some extent that of master and disciple. Still, this was clearly a two way street. For one thing, Erick Hawkins did not begin to choreograph until after all the masks were complete. This almost unheard of rehearsal protocol not only shows his respect for Ralph's artistry, but for the power of the mask to influence the dancers' sense of their personae on stage, and even his own choreography.

One of the most stimulating experiences for Lee came during this period in a ballet called "Plains Daybreak." Hawkins spent his childhood in southern Colorado and was deeply affected by both the landscape and the native cultures that had made their homes there over the centuries. "Plains Daybreak" is a sort of creation myth. Though original with Hawkins, it was similar to stories from Native American folklore. Characters included stars, plants, animals and "first man."

It was a very ritualized dance, and Lee was charged with making all of the masks. "It was a very painful process," he recalls, "because I was not used to working in such an abstract way as Erick wanted. I tried to find the right emblems that would effectively express the various characters. Erick would come over to the studio while I was working and say: 'Not good enough. Not good enough.' I'd get furious, but I knew that he was right."

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

Lee finally began to get a handle on what he was doing, finding inspiration in the simple stylized language of Brancusi's sculpture. A buffalo was a pair of horns—a simple "U" shape pulled open. Later, a cascade of horsehair was added, shading the dancer's face in front. In this manner, the masks were finished, and thanks to Hawkins's visual acuity and uncompromising nature, Lee feels that they were "the best set of masks I ever made. What Erick wanted was to find the element that would tell a story in one stroke, rather than in many fussy gestures."

The last ballet on which Ralph Lee worked was another creation story, though this was specifically a Navaho story. "Killer of Enemies" featured a hero who went through the world vanquishing enemies in order to make this a habitable place for humans. Ralph based his mask designs on Kachina iconography, working on a series of flat planes which allowed for more abstraction than with 3-D modeled features.

Hawkins powers were waning then. (By the time the piece was in rehearsal, it was actually the dancers in his company who were creating much of the specific movement in the piece.) Toward the end of the mask making, Erick brought Lucia Dlugoszewski with him to Lee's studio. She was a radical and inventive composer, reconfiguring the innards of pi-

anos, playing both inside and out, inventing her own instruments. She composed many ballets for Hawkins, and was his wife. Toward the end of the mask making, the two of them came over to Lee's studio. All the masks were laid out on the floor. They were quite symmetrical (as kachina tend to be). Lucia had brought some things with her, and she went around the room, placing an item on most of the masks— a feather here, a bit of white horsehair there, or perhaps a seed pod on a stem. Ralph was amazed at her perceptiveness, and the finesse with which she would create a kind of visual surprise, release the masks from a predictable symmetry and bring the breath of life into them. "Dlugoszewski was another of Hawkins's collaborators, but she was something more— his muse. At that moment, I realized how significant a person Lucia was in Erick's life, she was the one who could say to him: 'Not good enough.'"

"I've made lots of masks for people who were dazzled by the first thing I'd come up with," confesses Lee. His best masks, though, were for the choreographer who made him dig deeper, who made him keep trying until he got it right. "It was an incredible gift."

"Theatre always needs going as far away as possible from naïve realism (no matter how beautiful)."



photos, this page: David Fullard, 1980

"Lying in bed thinking of dances, I finally realized Rabbit is wrong. I see no way to avoid Rabbit's ruination in cartoons and even BEATRIX POTTER's PETER RABBIT."



The Nature of Collaboration

The following statement was originally printed over a photo published in *Dancescope* [Feb. 1978]:

I am invariably surprised by the work I create for Erick Hawkins. It is very different from what I usually do. In most of my masks, figures and giant puppets for theatre events and outdoor festivals, the historical reference or departure point from nature is still visible in the finished product. But when I work with Erick we go right down to the bone, clean out the marrow and let it dry out in the sun. It's a matter of getting at the essence, stripping away all the inessentials and revealing the spirit behind the familiar associations. The sympathetic nature and purity of the materials helps in the process: carved balsa wood, paper, horse hair, leather and an occasional feather. At the same time the image must be capable of breath: the performer must be able to breathe through the image, bringing it to life. But that's what's most important to me in all my work—creating an image that can tell a story, can contribute to the clarification of a dramatic moment, making it vivid and alive.

"At this point I think we can steal all we want from dear old Indians. It will come out US, anyway."

"First let me say: Your bird and fish came remarkably close to first visualization I had of how the carving, headdresses, could be approached. Both of them were subtly and beautifully done. But now I see you can undoubtedly go a long way further into an exciting theatricality and vividness."

photos: Peter Papadopolus



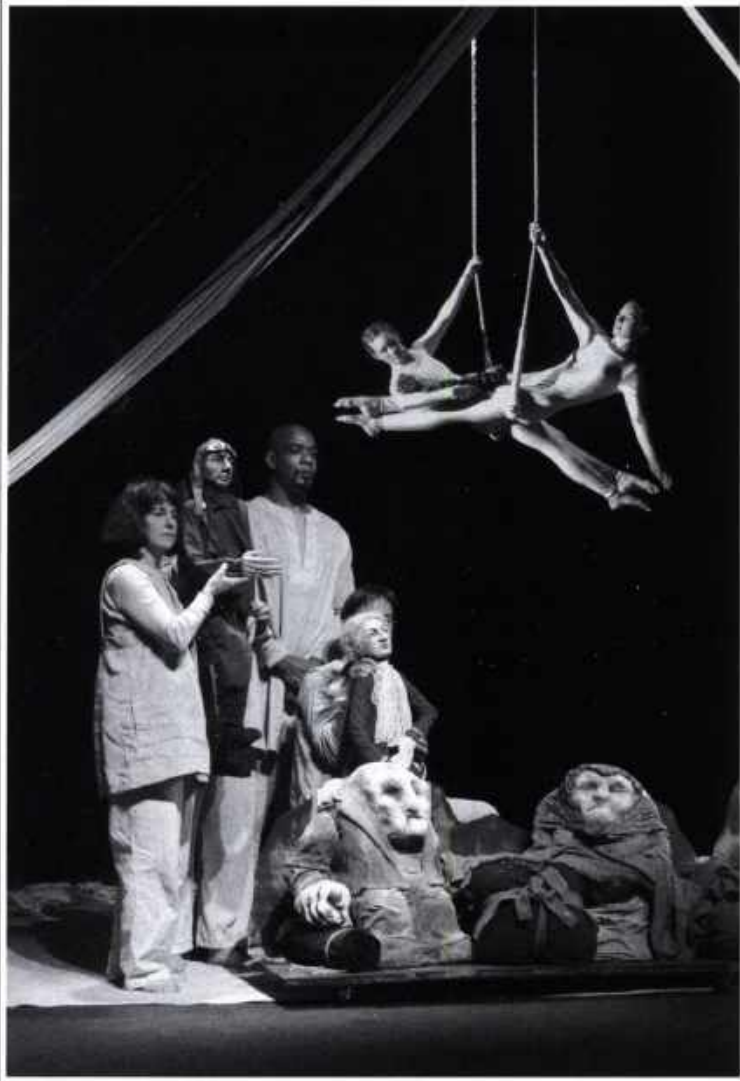
would be no real dialogue, no electricity between the diverse elements on stage."

What it doesn't talk about," Lee has recently said, "is the adjustment the contributing artist has to make to work successfully with the primary artist. That's a big commitment. One must absorb all the ruminations and specific notions put forward by the primary artist without becoming subservient. One is being asked to find a way to function within these requirements at the height of one's powers, to match the creativity of the primary artist. Otherwise, there

BY ANDREW PERIALE

Caption quotes are from handwritten letters from Erick Hawkins to Ralph Lee during the preparations for Plains Daybreak.

SANDGLASS LEARNS TO FLY



BY ANDREW PERIALE

Sandglass Theatre, of Putney, VT, has been engaged in several collaborative projects this year that really stretch the boundaries of puppet theatre. One of these productions involves only Vermont artists. Another takes them from Putney to Phnom Penh. In both cases, a number of disparate disciplines come together to form something unprecedented. Are the resulting performances, though, more than mere novelty? Is there a strength and depth that come with this sort of “genre bending,” which is truly profound? Are these sorts of cross-discipline encounters good for the art of puppetry?

Between Sand and Stars is a production that was developed and performed by seven equal partners. From Sandglass come Eric Bass, Ines Zeller-Bass and Merrill Garbus. From Gemini come sisters Elsie Smith, her sister Serenity Smith Forchion, and their close associate Bill Forchion. Rounding out the cast is Rob Mermin. Their collective professional cred-

its would be an article in itself, so I’ll just say that these artists work at the highest levels in their chosen fields: Sandglass has an international reputation in the puppet world (and should be well-known to readers of this publication); Elsie, Serenity and Bill worked for years for Cirque de Soleil (both here and abroad); Rob is the director of Circus Smirkus, which still tours annually under yards and yards of canvas.

It is not so unusual, perhaps, for artists who are virtually neighbors to say, “Hey, we should do a show together!” It is exceedingly rare, though, for this impulse to be sustained all the way through development, rehearsal and performance, *and* with such satisfying results. As moving as the final production might be, though, the fact of the collaboration itself and its lasting effects on the participants, may end up being the bigger story.

Of the five players I interviewed for this story, everyone had a slightly different recollection of how the project was born. Maybe it’s a manifestation of the BLAHS (Blue State Anxiety Hyperactivity Syndrome), but I blame the *Zeitgeist*. That is, there is something in the air that seems to favor collaborations—lately artists seem to need to connect, to interconnect, to, you know, “mix it up” a little. However the initial contacts were made, these seven artists ended up meeting in a studio space and sharing their artistry with each other. Thus inspired, they brought with them to the next meeting short lists of possible projects. Antoine de St. Exupéry’s *Homme de Terre* (*Wind, Sand and Stars*) showed up on several of those lists. This text, the story of an aviator who finds himself, post crash, on an African desert at night, became the basis of the production “Between Sand and Stars.”

The group soon found a way of working together, and it seems to me that this was made easier by the fact that there was such a high degree of mutual respect. Eric and Rob worked on the (largely unspoken) text. Eric acted as director, yet

in a very real way all seven of the participants were playwrights. According to Serenity, Eric was a great director—able to guide the group without ever saying “no” to people’s ideas. The project was full of challenges. How do you exploit the strengths of such a diverse group? Serenity, Elsie and Bill were aerialists, while Bill was also an acrobat trained in both musical theatre and clowning. Rob was trained as a mime but now directs *Circus*, which is different in almost every way from the sort of intimate, visual theatre in which Eric, Ines and Merrill were used to working. Ultimately, the aviator was cast as a puppet. Elsie and Serenity used their aerial skills to evoke a sense of flight, sandstorms, and wind. Rob performs, as does Bill, though Bill also provides the only spoken text in the show—a storyteller’s voice, yet he tells me he is more “the story” than a storyteller.

At some point, everyone is a puppet manipulator and for the aerialists this was a real challenge. Actually, getting the puppets to move expressively was relatively easy for them—“after all,” Elsie tells me, “our work is all about attention to small movements.” No, the real challenge was in understanding their role in relation to the puppet. “What are the protocols?” was something I heard from all three of them. “Can you lay a puppet on its back?” “Can you throw it in a bag?” “Where is our focus?” “What is the timing?” Eric is as good a guide as any into this world of wood and cloth beings—ciphers onto which we project so much. Eventually, the non-puppeteers found their way in this new world, too. Bill, for instance, has “learned to give the same sort of respect to a puppet as a character on stage, even when it is not being manipulated.”

The puppeteers’ notions of stage reality were also challenged during this process. What did it mean that there were now performers swinging above their heads as they tried to bring a puppet to “life” on the stage floor? “We posed ourselves a big challenge,” says Bass. “How do we get the audience to perceive the [rather limited] space between man and his flying aspirations—represented by the aerialists—as a great distance?” One of the techniques they came up with was to have the puppet of the aviator manipulated by strings from a distance. He spends the night on the desert reflecting on his life. He realizes that he is there because of the great risks he takes in order to follow his passion, namely, flying. Most people, he thinks, don’t risk much: “The clay of which we are made has dried and hardened.” He also ponders the importance of awakening the “sleeping Mozart” that dwells within us. This bit of text inspired the group to add Mozart as a character. The music that accompanies the play reflects this as well, half of it being by Mozart and the other half by local composer Ron Kelley.

One of the questions I posed at the outset was, “Are these sorts of cross-discipline encounters good for the art of



puppetry?” Implicit in that question was the impact of such an encounter on aerial work, clowning, and circus arts. While this is not a question that can be definitively answered in advance, I did ask the participants to consider it. Rob Mermin’s impression is that the circus performers were learning to work within the puppeteers’ milieu, and that the puppeteers did not actually change their way of working very much. And yet “the problems which the piece has posed, because of all the interacting elements,” says Eric Bass, “have caused Sandglass to think differently about stage space and design, as well as narrative and dramaturgy.” This summer, *Circus Smirkus* has chosen “*Pinocchio*” as its annual theme, and has commissioned Sandglass to build a puppet that they will integrate into the show, so we will see what happens when the shoe is on the other [wooden] foot. Serenity Smith Forchion allowed that puppet movement has influenced her thoughts on the power of single movements or gestures—the turn of a head at just the right moment. Elsie Smith thought that watching puppets had helped their work as aerial teachers, which is all about body ergonomics. Bill Forchion thought that the piece had a lot of “heart,” and is more story-based than the work they usually do; because they took that risk, they may be more likely to take risks in the future. The thought that an aerialist and acrobat of Bill’s caliber thinks that adding narrative elements is “risky,” makes me smile. I know, though, that by working in a new context, each of these artists was stepping into the unknown, and seeing their own work through new eyes. That has got to be a good thing.

“*Between Sand and Stars*” has now been presented as a work-in-progress performance in three stages of development. The fourth and final stage is scheduled for September of this year at Keene State College as part of the biennial Puppets in the Green Mountains festival produced by Sandglass Theater. The seven have risked much both individually and as a group to get their project to this point, and great risk reaps great rewards—as well as spectacular crash-and-burn flops. From the look of it, though, this one is going to fly.



SANDGLASS IN PHNOM PENH



Sandglass Theatre is involved in another collaborative project, but to rehearse this one they have to travel to Phnom Penh. Phnom Penh is, of course, the capitol city of Cambodia, a country still not fully recovered from the ravages of the Vietnam War era bombing campaign (thank you, Henry Kissinger) and the subsequent genocide orchestrated by the Pol Pot regime.

Their partner in this venture is Savanna Phum (pronounced "poom"), a company run by Mann Cosal, a self-taught shadow puppeteer. Savanna Phum uses several of the traditional Cambodian forms and combines them in new ways. This in itself is a radical concept for a country

in which the classical court dance, for instance, has existed virtually unchanged for the past eight centuries. Pol Pot's "killing fields," which targeted artists along with the rest of the educated class, was devastating—perhaps a third of the country's populace was murdered or starved to death. There were other unintended consequences of this era, though, including the international influences resulting from the subsequent Diaspora.

Sandglass members Eric Bass and Ines Zeller-Bass, Jana Zeller and Zak Grace worked with the company for two and a half weeks last June. In order to perform, they learned some of the techniques of Cambodian shadow puppetry, as well as dance (for the puppets are, in fact, danced rather than simply manipulated from a static posture).

Members of Savanna Phum in turn learned some of Sandglass's methods of puppetry.

Sandglass is one of the few companies in the United States which has a really clear sense of its own method and approach to puppetry. This method forms the basis of their teaching in the annual Summer Intensives in Puppet Theatre at Marlboro College. Yet it is a tribute to their artistry that they are still hungry to learn, to understand, to seek out new light from whatever the source.

What the outcome of this work with Savanna Phum will be is not yet clear, but Sandglass is in the process of raising money for a return visit in November. •

THE IMPROBABLE PARTNERSHIP

BY PENNY FRANCIS



Improbable's Hanging Man

It is hardly worth repeating, so often has it been said, that the divisions of art forms in general and the performing arts in particular are not so much disappearing as dissolving and merging. One result of this is that the actor has in some quarters been replaced by the “performer,” a term which in English means a practitioner of the performing arts, whether actor, mime, acrobat, circus artiste, dancer, singer, musician or puppet player. Nowadays, she or he is likely to be at least three of these, if young and wishing to enter a profession where the demands made on performers are far wider in scope than those made on the actors of previous generations.

The reasons for this increasing versatility in the theatre player are more than economic: there is a large number of groups attracting a new, young public which seems to respond to informal theatre spaces and to visual spectacle, however modestly staged. This is a genre now complementing in ever greater proportion the literary tradition which has dominated British theatre for four hundred years, making of theatre-going a middle-class, middle-brow, middle-aged pastime. It is no accident that we Brits call our public not “spectators” but “audience.” In France the trend to spectacle started earlier and is a reason for the emigration of artists from England, such as Peter Brook and the Cornish “Footsbarn” group. However, the last twenty years has seen the steady encroachment on the national theatre scene of practitioners, companies and festivals dedicated to a “visual, physical” style. Nobody can ignore this genre of theatre in which the stage images are at least as important as the words, with music the dominant auditory element. The groups are to be seen in the National Theatre (*Complicité* and *Improbable*) and the West End (*The Right Size*, *Cheek by Jowl*). Many, including opera companies, have harnessed the puppet and animated object to their work.

The shared vision of Julian Crouch, Phelim McDermott and Lee Simpson, all to some degree designers, performers, writers and directors, with Nick Sweeting, their inspired producer, has introduced an experience that is now an established part of the contemporary trajectory of theatre. Their company, “Improbable,” produces work based on improvisation, with a rich visual language as the primary means of expression, and a collaboration of all the artists working on the production. They make work grounded in their own pleasure, that is to say, in the belief that when the work stops being enjoyable, it is time to give up and move on. They have worked together and sometimes independently for several years.

For the spectators, the result is always unexpected, freshly-minted work, brimming with humour, inevitably a feast for the eye, even when the budget is tight. For them, puppetry—meaning all forms of animation of figures, objects and materials—is an expressive medium which is necessary to their style, their poetic. They are not puppeteers, they rarely employ puppeteers, but puppetry seems to be a built-in ingredient of the mixture.

Some years ago they leapt to our attention with a piece called *70 Hill Lane* in which McDermott, as protagonist, told the story of a brief period in his adolescence when he and a friend were haunted by a poltergeist. The story was illustrated



Animo- an interactive show

by the use of many metres of transparent sticky tape manipulated within the small playing area to mark out a haunted house, its architectural plans, even a miniature model of the whole building magically suspended in the middle of the stage. The tape also formed human characters; it lent itself to the play of light, the suggestion of ghostly figures. For many this was great puppetry, if not in any traditional sense. It testified to a sensibility to the essentially theatrical potential of animated materials, and the result was a delight. Crouch said: "When the sticky tape is stretched taut it catches the light like a violin string; cut it and it turns into liquid gold."

Improbable is still beating new paths through the performance jungle; so far they don't repeat themselves. The four founders (which includes Nick Sweeting— their producer and engine) are a partnership, only working on a show all together when they want and need to. It is important for each of the three creators to follow his own way, within a close association. They illustrate the idea with a sketch of three satellites revolving round the gravitational pull of Nick

Sweeting, the terrestrial force. It makes them feel less constrained, and new work is tumbling out. 2004 was a development year, 2005 a year of production, with many projects on the go, together and with other collaborators.

The Improbable landscape of the recent past, the present and the immediate future looks like this: *Lifegame* sold out in the National Theatre's Cottesloe space in May 2004 for ten performances. It has been presented in New York. The show involves taking a guest member of the audience onto the stage, coaxing him or her to tell their life story, and improvising scenes from that life with a group of players and some puppets and objects. It is a typically dangerous idea, and if there is one characteristic of Improbable's work that stands out more than another, it's making dangerous theatre. *Lifegame* can be electrifying or can misfire.

Their beautiful open-air installation and fireworks spectacular, "Sticky," is scheduled for showings in various countries and is bookable for occasions that demand celebrational spectacle on a vast scale by presenters with deep pockets. I saw it on the South Bank and will never forget it.

Shockheaded Peter has just ended its fifth London run, and is currently in New York for its second. It has toured the world for some years now, frightening and amusing young and old. Even though the producing company is Cultural Industry, the talents of Improbable shine through it. It is considered a watershed of modern theatre.

Based on the 19th century German classic *Der Struwwelpeter*, the show is a series of episodes warning children of the mortal dangers of misbehaviour, such as walking without looking where you are going and not eating your soup. The poems are sung and played onstage by a three-piece musical group called the "Tiger Lillies," and acted by human actors and grotesque puppets. The thumb-sucking child has his (fabric) thumbs cut off with great shears, and the spectators gasp in pleasurable disgust when red ribbons spill onto the stage. A baby with a shock of wiry hair and fingernails twelve centimetres long is buried under the floorboards by his parents (but later wreaks his revenge). The set itself is puppetesque, filled with animated doors, walls and furniture. The human performers are also grotesque, their performances, like those of the musicians, comically exaggerated in movement and voice.

"Our performers should have the quality of well-moved puppets," says Crouch (or McDermott) in a joint discussion of their work. "In our workshops we asked for the same kind of movement from the actors as from the puppets; at the auditions we questioned the puppets, not their manipulators," says McDermott (or Crouch: attribution is difficult since they harmonise so well).

"We have never done a show where the puppet sensibility was not there. Of course, the puppet can do things human actors can not, like having thumbs chopped off, transforming itself, changing size. More importantly, the puppet is a shortcut to the emotions of the audience.



Penny Francis edited the British magazine Animations for its first 14 years, and was Collaborating Editor for Henryk Jurkowski's book of essays, Aspects of Puppet Theatre, and his recent two-volume History of European Puppetry.

Spirit is endlessly surprising

"Even our settings can be part of the puppetry. We did a production of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* in which a great staircase was set in motion by performers within it, and it became an animated thing, a symbol of a descent into disaster. It was not an illusory machine, it had a life, and made a final exit bearing away the whole cast."

They talk about the "space" between the puppet and the spectator, a space to be invested emotionally. "Come and play with us" is the invitation, "believe in us, otherwise it is not worth being here." It may be a game, but the investment of belief is the essence of all enjoyment of theatre. The puppet is a sort of quick dividend in terms of theatrical riches. It may be made of any material, rapidly, unexpectedly.

They have an interactive show called *Animo*, where four or five performers, surrounded by materials like newspaper, cloth, sticks and balls improvise stories and situations initiated by the spectators or the players. Creatures arise and are destroyed; stories evolve, brief illustrated jokes are told. This was how they discovered the potential of sticky tape. *Animo* is ephemeral theatre in the ultimate sense. Sometimes the alchemy works, sometimes not: it is a shared experience that takes risks. All their theatre has this vital element of danger, which means that sometimes *Animo* is not theatre at all, simply a heightened interchange with a group of interested people. Sometimes it is the purest essence of theatre, almost on an

other plane of existence. Recently they presented it at the Little Angel Puppet Theatre where the new artistic director, Steve Tiplady, has been a regular performer with Improbable and expects more collaborations with them.

Spirit is still in the repertoire. It had a showing at the 2004 Fidena festival in Bochum, Germany towards the end of May. Like *70 Hill Lane* before it, *Spirit* is inspired, totally original, personal, funny, spooky, simple in terms of design and execution, endlessly surprising.

One of the next productions will involve Julian Crouch in a show based on Neil Gaiman's book, *Wolves in the Walls*. And Lee and Phelim have adapted *Theatre of Blood*, the 1970s horror story that starred Vincent Price in the movie. With Jim Broadbent in the lead, it is scheduled for the National Theatre in the late spring.

Julian is in constant demand as a scenographer. He designed *Jerry Springer*, *The Opera*, and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, both for the National Theatre. He says he is more and more interested in multi-media design; his animated colour graphics are beautiful. I'd like them on a wall instead of a picture.

As to their method of working, if "method" is not too formal a word, Improbable loves to create a show before the audience's eyes. The unexpectedness of improvised theatre charms them; it seems to be what they like to do most. They have struck a chord that is resonating throughout Britain, part

of the movement advancing purposefully through the boundaries of the Fringe into the centre, contributing to a rebirth of interest in theatre. This movement is employing the puppet frequently, to supplement and fortify its image-making, its symbols and metaphors, its illusions and surrealities.

Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch talk about a "space" to be invested by the audience, "room for play," and another kind of void, the "gap" which must exist in the most structured of their productions, the possibility of un-filled and undefined time lapses to be completed "in the moment" by the performers or the spectators. I quote:

There should be something between what is there and what we want the audience to see. We want to keep some room for play where the spectators are allowed in: audience participation in its truest sense. High professional gloss is not an ambition. Theatre practitioners usually worry too much. Playing should be pleasure; it is too important to take seriously. We always leave room for play, even up to the final performance.

Improbable has become a major force in contemporary British theatre, a result of the unique synergetic vision of its founders, Phelim, Lee and Julian, and Nick.

"We are alchemists," one of them once said. "We want the audience to witness a miracle, and renew it at every performance." Most of the time they succeed very well. •



The article is an adaptation and update of two essays on the work of Improbable:

PUCK, *La Marionnette et les autres Arts, No. 11, I.L.M., France, 1998*

Total Theatre, *London, May, 2004.*
www.totaltheatre.org.uk

Improbable's website is
www.improbable.co.uk

Improbable's *Sticky*



HUYGHE + LECORBUSIER: HARVARD PROJECT

THE AESTHETICS OF RELATING TO PUPPETS VIA ARCHITECTURE, MUSIC, FILM AND HISTORY

BY ROLANDE DUPREY

French artist Pierre Huyghe collaborated with Harvard University's Art Museums, Design School, and Department of Visual and Environmental Studies to produce a work that premiered November 18, 2004 at the Carpenter Center in Cambridge.

The work included a live performance of scenes from a film shot in October in New York. The 24-minute film was seen after, and sometimes before, the five performances of the fifteen-minute live show. Audience members could also watch the puppeteers perform their actions from the back of the stage. The film will continue to play at the Sert Gallery at the Carpenter Center through April, 2005. The live performances were performed as a one-time only event.

Much can be (and has been) said about Huyghe's work. He has produced several works in collaboration with other artists and organizations. In creating events in which an original film plays a small part, he layers the experiences of the audience and extends the visual language of the exhibition. Liam Gillick, in writing the prologue/epilogue to the film and performance, asserts that:

...when you are invited to a place to make something that may or may not make a place better, the question is not how well you can achieve the stated desires of those involved in that invitation but how to keep suppressing the self-consciousness of the act of thinking hard about what you might represent in terms of future content or past potentials.

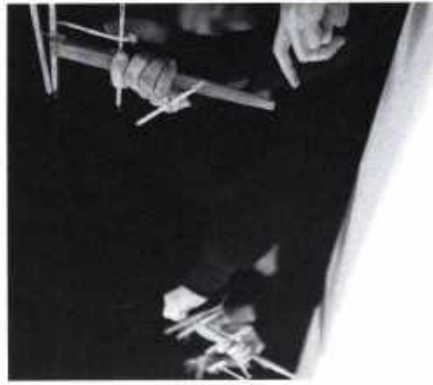
The "past potentials" relative to this project include the creation of the Carpenter Center, the only building designed by LeCorbusier in North America and his last. In creating a temporal landscape, Huyghe has used puppets to represent both the building, its process of design, Le Corbusier, and a



photos by Michael Vahrenwald

range of other human characters based on real people, both of today and of forty years ago. An abstract paper sculpture marionette designed by Matt Brooks of Puppet Heap (in the style of Albrecht Roser) represents "Mr. Harvard," dean of deans. This puppet appears in both the scenes of the past and the scenes of the present. His character—representing the eternal bureaucracy—is at the source of the conflict that drives the narrative of the film.

Huyghe has forced a comparison of his own work here at Harvard with that of LeCorbusier, seeing the conflicts inherent in this collaboration relative to the conflicts experienced by LeCorbusier forty years ago. In developing a puppet film, he has also introduced a unique scale to the real events he is exploiting. There is the obvious proportional scale of the small, manipulated figures to the larger real figures; but there is the temporal scale as well; a scale used by mapmakers to indicate distance: a gradation between the real event and one that has been manufactured. This is not to say that the performance event or the film is disingenuous; if anything it reverberates as a new "Epic Theatre."





THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE PUPPETEERS: A PERSONAL POINT OF VIEW

In utilizing portrait marionettes, Huyghe asked us as performers to create characters based on his short explanations of who they are/were. Using both the gestural vocabulary of the real people, and the movements dictated by the limitations of the puppets themselves, we set about a four-day rehearsal process. All of us had worked with marionettes. We were all experienced, thankfully, with building and stringing, coupled with a general knowledge of movement. Performer Kevin White who had helped to build and string the marionettes at Puppet Heap, became our unofficial “puppet wrangler,” though we all participated in re-stringing and augmenting the marionettes according to what we needed from them.

We faced many challenges. Operating portrait marionettes and performing objects, which included architectural elements, a 3-D “line drawing” of the building, and a manipulated model of the building, required lots of rehearsal time. Many of the pieces had to be re-strung according to the effects that Huyghe wanted to achieve. Some, like the grand 3-D rendering of a drawing, was carefully hoisted up on “dead hang” stands, as well as being manipulated for the various shots necessary. For the “building ballet,” we practiced hours with the objects in order to discover their movement potential. We choreographed ourselves in order to pass the objects in and around one another. It was probably one of the group’s finest moments, and one which, alas, was never seen live.

A scene that *was* seen live was the manipulation of the building. In this piece, four divergent parts of the Carpenter

Center moved in and out of place as the argument between Mr. Harvard and LeCorbusier ensues. Like a housewife deciding where to place a piano, Mr. Harvard does or does not want a tower, does or does not want a ramp, etc. Underneath the stage, four of us crowded into cramped quarters operating the various parts of the model like a complicated dance. Since all of us were women, we called ourselves the “girls club” and joked unceasingly about our “secret” group.

The impracticality of performing most of the film scenes live was obvious to all of us at the outset. Many of the camera angles required the puppeteers to step out of the proscenium, to hold a marionette downstage facing upstage (it was a single bridge). The lighting for the film could never be achieved in a live show. Some of the objects were just too difficult to set. Scene changes would have taken hours. And the tree prop was a fabulous string catcher. During the filming we would reference the live show, saying, “When we do it live we could...” We all had plenty of ideas how to achieve the various effects. In the end, Huyghe chose to perform only the scenes involving the large building model.

I was impressed by Huyghe’s visual acuity in creating the stage picture. His rudely sketched storyboard was in a state of constant flux as he watched us discover what we could do with the puppets. In one improvisation, Theresa Linnehan and I created the “Fay Wray Maneuver” which ended up being in the film. In the scene, the large mysterious Mr. Harvard picks up the diminutive Ms. Linda. It is one of the most psychologically telling scenes of the film, and one of which I am particularly proud.

The filming was scheduled for only one week, the days limited to eight or nine hours. The set up and execution of several scenes took many hours themselves. We had no stage or production manager, though there were several people who played the parts that a production manager would have played. The entire crew should be commended for their commitment to the project. It was due to the ease of our collaboration that it was able to proceed and be completed within the strict time limits.

Huyghe himself was using techniques (marionettes) of which he had very little knowledge. His learning curve was hastened and helped by builders and performers, but Huyghe

was working under a very tight time limit, and had much to accomplish. As in other films, several scenes that took hours to shoot ended up on the cutting room floor. In one scene, the marionette version of Huyghe stumbles into the scene headless—such a beautiful metaphor! It didn't make the final edit.

The "script"—actually a non-verbal scenario—continued to be tweaked even during the live performances, where Pierre Huyghe side-coached on headset while we performed our actions. During one early run-through in the afternoon, he stopped the performance while he corrected the choice of sound. The audience waited patiently. It was, after all, part of an artistic event, not necessarily a theatrical one.

RELATIONAL AESTHETICS AND THE JUXTAPOSITION OF WORLDS



Nicolas Bourriaud mentions Huyghe as one of the artists that work within an aesthetic of human relationships, in the book "Relational Aesthetics." In relational art, all the possibilities of human relationships (inter-human, humans to objects; humans to space, etc.) constitute the work of art. Specifically, the audience's perception of the Carpenter Center, of LeCorbusier, of LeCorbusier and Huyghe's nationality, of Harvard, of puppets and the puppet film, etc., is part of the work. The perceiver becomes a participant in that the very act of watching is *relating* to the event/exhibition. We in theatre are very familiar with this particular aspect. It is what drives and supports most street theatre.

In the world of contemporary art, however, theatre is only one small part of the entire exhibition. The work may be quantified and documented, and in its documentation, extended out like a fractal pattern. By definition, the artist himself is not at the center of the work. In placing himself as a character in the piece, Huyghe rejects this principle of relational art. Nevertheless, by meticulously documenting each

correspondence, each element, he widens the scope of the work, and invites new audiences to become a part of it. (Even this article may be seen to be an extension of the work.)

In placing puppetry at the service of his piece (as well as architecture, film and history), Huyghe capitalized on and tapped into a powerful world of interconnections. Puppets serve to revive the "inner child" of the perceiver/participant, returning him/her to a more primitive time in their psychological development.* Puppets also are natural tools of satire, of tragic-comedy, and of spectacle. As a composite artform it is the most collaborative: seamlessly folding the visual into the theatrical narrative. Puppets provide a ready-made visualization of scale.

Historically, Huyghe is not the only artist that has stepped into the realm of puppetry—I am reminded of the Bauhaus—but in pressing the aspect of specific human relationships onto this universe, he has produced worlds within worlds of reverberations. Like the old Quaker Oats boxes that had a picture of a person holding a Quaker Oats box in which there was a picture of a person holding a Quaker Oats box, the effect is dizzying.

Huyghe's project was served well by puppetry. Whether puppetry has been served well will be up to future audiences (perceiver/participants) to judge.

* We as puppeteers see this consistently in our own work. In the live shows performed outside at Harvard, the mostly-adult audiences were as joyful as children, clapping and laughing at the various effects.

Rolonde Duprey is a puppeteer and frequent contributor to PI.

UMO: SIX AS ONE



BY ANDREW PERIALE

This portrait of UMO Ensemble is condensed from a series of interviews with David Godsey, one of the company's founding members.

Their first performance as a group was, I suppose, Martha Enson's thesis production at the now defunct Institute of Professional Puppetry Arts*. The actual beginnings of the company are a bit more delightfully complex. During Martha's MFA program at IPPA, she took a semester to study physical theater with Jacques Lecoq in Paris. It

was there that the members met and began to think of doing a project together. The opportunity for such a production came up when Martha began work on her thesis production. This was a remarkable piece of work, which dealt with endangered species. The impression the piece gave was of a dance piece, yet each of the performers animated an abstract sculptural object. Formed from copper tubing, each of these objects took on a life of their own, as well as joining together to form more complex entities. The effect was quite spectacular. A year later, the piece was accepted for a choreographer's festival in Massachusetts, so the company members relocated from across the country to the Amherst area for three months of rehearsal and creation time. Working together again sparked discussions of whether or not they might form a company together. They had a ritual one night, where each of the performers held a cup and those in favor of forming a company voted by placing their cups in the center of the circle. When all was said and done, all of the cups were inside the circle. Since their arrival on Vashon Island, near Seattle, they have created over twenty-five original works using an astonishing variety of skills and techniques.

The original company included three couples—Martha Enson and Kevin Joyce, David Godsey and Janet McAlpin,

and Steffon Moody and Esther Edelman—in addition to Martha's sister Abby. One of the first items of business was to find a home base for their company. None of them wanted to stay in the Northeast, so a number of other places were considered—Atlanta, Chicago, LA, Minneapolis, San Francisco. In each case, something about the city warned them off. Either things seemed too centered around another art form, or the climate was not particularly welcoming. During this period, Esther and Steffon moved to Vashon Island—just off Seattle, WA. She recommended everyone come for a visit, but before everyone could get together and discuss things in a rational way, the company members just began moving in. It seems they found both their home and the supportive community for which they had been searching.

Before long the company stabilized—Abby moved off island to pursue her interest in dance and choreography, and Kevin, who at first had envisioned his role in the company as primarily managerial, became a performer. David believes that it was the strength of the three couples that really gave a backbone to the company's "body of work." Clearly there was a deep personal commitment to each other, which has always carried through to UMO's work. For instance, in every show, everyone gets to do something that they really love. Conversely, no one has to do something that they really hate, or that they think makes them look foolish or clumsy. It's hard to imagine what such a thing might be, as this is a group of performers that is known for the sorts of risks they take—if someone wants to do something in a show, they work hard together to find a way to make it happen. "I don't think we would have ended up flinging ourselves forty feet in the air with bungee cords [in *Millennium Circus*, 1999] if someone hadn't said that they wanted to do it," explains David. They have always given themselves permission to experiment. If someone wants to work tightrope walking into the show, for instance, they all learn tightrope.

This group dynamic has affected the way they work with puppets. Though Martha is the one with formal training in puppetry, it is part of the philosophy of the company that the members teach each other their various skills. Puppetry thus was assured a place in their work without ever becoming a defining element.

There are a number of guiding principals that influence the creation of new work. Some of these might be called "work aesthetic," while others are more artistic or philosophical in nature. The work that they did with Lecoq nearly twenty years ago still has



a large impact on the way they create, which is to say as an ensemble and in a non-linear fashion. "You cannot overstate the importance of that as the roots of the company," affirms David. "Our first full-length piece as UMO was *El Dorado*. Janet brought her buffoon training to us, including an ensemble-building exercise called 'six as one.'" In six as one, the goal is to achieve improvised unison moments that have no specific leader. Often there is a person who initiates a specific moment of the improvisation, and the other five players instantaneously follow in the action. The leadership is spontaneously passed from one player to another. "When the exercise is functioning well, no one on the outside of the group should be able to tell who is initiating the action. And when we really achieve six as one, no one inside the improv knows who is leading either!" In this way the work develops organically and— even in performance— the ability to work spontaneously as a group lends an immediacy and freshness to UMO which is a hallmark of their work.

UMO's pieces have often found resonance in world events. *El Dorado* went up around the time of the 500th celebration of Columbus's voyage to the New World. Though the timing of this was accidental, audiences felt that their message of European exploitation of Native America (and the core underlying issue of human greed) provided a needed voice amidst all the hype of the quincentennial. *Fatal Peril* was a piece in which they explored the human impulse to violence. Because of their busy calendar, they scheduled the start date for rehearsal at least a year ahead of time, namely, September 17, 2001. With the attacks on Washington and New York coming just six days before, they didn't think they could do the piece— at least, not without looking as if they were exploiting the tragedy. Eventually, though, they realized that they *had* to work on the piece— that it was the responsibility of the artist to respond, and to help society (or their audiences, at least) make sense of the darkest corners of the human psyche.

In addition to the work aesthetic, there are philosophical underpinnings that distinguish UMO. There is a certain "green" ethic— waste as sin— that permeates both their lives and work. There has often been a corresponding effect on both the sets and props. In this way the performer is the source, and they only bring on stage that which is absolutely necessary to complete the world that they are trying to create. For *El Dorado* it was a couple of rattan poles, a parachute, a cloth map. The "Sonic environment," as David calls it, follows the same aesthetic. In all the years they have worked together, they have rarely used recorded sound in their shows. They enjoy singing together, and they have found a place for that in every production. They also make noise**, or play music, or have someone else play music***, but it must always be freely played and ready to adapt to the constantly improvised flow of the "six as one" on stage.

Inevitably, there have been changes over the years. In 1994, Steffon left the company. More recently, Kevin left for full-time performing in Seattle. Bradley McDevitt was the first and only member added to the company until last year when Elizabeth Klob and Lyam White were invited to join. After fifteen years of almost constant work, they have decided to take a sabbatical. They need some time with their families, and perhaps a chance to dream about what the future of UMO might be. Let's hope their next fifteen years are as uniquely "UMO" as their first. •

*IPPA was housed at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Waterford, CT.

**Jonathon Hart, stepson of Roy Hart (a talented actor and vocal phenomenon), came out from New York to work with UMO on creating vocal sounds, and had a huge impact on the company. Also Kevin, previously a choral singer and choir director, used to create interesting vocal patterns for the group to sing.

***They have worked with a number of wonderful musicians, including Ela Lamblin, who creates his own very dramatic and sculptural instruments.

**FIND OUT MORE ABOUT UMO AT
WWW.UMO.ORG**



PLAYING IN AZDAK'S GARDEN WITH PUPPETSWEAT

BY ROLANDE DUPREY

In the late seventies in Hartford, CT, Robert Bresnick talked the Asylum Hill Artists Collective—a group of visual artists—into expanding their work into theatre. Bob had studied theatre briefly at the University of Hartford. All were new to the theatre, without any preconceptions of how to go about doing it, so they developed their own. But, because visual artists were the primary players, the pieces that developed were based more on the visual effects than on textual or acting techniques. It was here that Bob would start a life-long love affair with Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's plays fit Bob's sensibilities with regard to both social responsibility and theatre. "I am a director, not a builder or designer. The kind of theater that made it easy for me was Brecht."

Eventually, Bob applied for and received a CETA grant to form The Protean Theater, a storefront space on Pratt Street. A year later, mask maker and visual artist Leslie Weinberg joined Protean. Leslie, having grown up in New Orleans, had had much exposure to masks and pageantry, and began using her considerable art skills in their productions.

Bread and Puppet was very active at the time, coming to Hartford to give workshops and do performances. Leslie was especially moved by their piece *Wolfenstein*. Inspired by Bread and Puppet, Leslie began to create summer pageants using giant masks and puppets. Doing these summer pageants paid Protean's rent that was owed to the Redevelopment Agency in Hartford. Many performers and artists were attracted to Protean, both to use the space for their own work, and also to join in with in-house productions and spectacles.



I performed there in an original "Noh Rock 'n Roll" musical called *Johnny Komachi*, directed and written by Jeffrey Matson. "Tea Bags" the clown, a.k.a. circus artist Jennifer Miller (Circus Amok) also performed in the summer pageants.

Fast-forward twenty years. Both Bob and Leslie earned Masters of Fine Arts degrees. Leslie, having been the first woman accepted by Frank Ballard into the UConn puppet program, opted instead to get a degree in costuming. Bob earned his in directing from NYU expressly in order to study with Carl Weber, a Brechtian scholar. Bob's Fulbright study in Berlin extended his knowledge and appreciation of Brecht. Thus, when creating a name for a non-profit production company, the reference from Caucasian Chalk Circle (*Azduk's Garden*) was a natural outgrowth of his passion.

The name Puppetsweat was coined by Leslie previous to the debut of *Synoecism* and *Der Signal* at the Theatre for the New City in 1995. Each of these pieces had a long history of development. *Synoecism* (Coming Together) grew out of several pieces Bob had directed on the history of housing in Hartford (at Trinity College, New Haven (at Educational Center for the Arts), and in Bridgeport (using Fairfield University students). The giant masks and props were scavenged from several plays and pageants designed and built by Leslie during the years at Protean. Leslie's designs, though developing over the years, remain surprisingly unified with earlier efforts. Leslie designs all Puppetsweat productions, and Bob directs.

Der Signal is a pre-Bolshevik short story that was translated into Yiddish and told to Bob and his brother Martin by their grandmother. Martin Bresnick, a composer, decided to create an oratorio around a recording of his grandmother telling it. Years later, Bob and Leslie decided to create a puppet show to the piece. The piece used four overhead projectors, three screens, and three dancer/puppeteers operating flat shadow figures in front of the overhead lights. Leslie's use of overhead projectors can be traced directly to her study with Frank Ballard at UConn.

The process of using overhead projections, shadows and dancers for *Der Signal* informed the process of creating *Synoecism*, which used a variety of shadow theatre techniques, dance, mask and live narration and sound effects provided by composer/drummer Brian Johnson.



From that point, work began on *MS Found in a Bottle*, an Edgar Allen Poe story. The impetus came from seeing a film at the New Haven Festival of Arts and Ideas, and wishing to do an outdoor shadow play with a large screen. Having worked with dancer Melissa Sylvester and myself in previous projects, Bob and Leslie began a rehearsal process that would eventually span two years. During this time, we discovered a gestural vocabulary for the piece, as well as methods of performing in front of our own videotaped projected performances.

Leslie had created overhead projections in a style similar to *Der Signal*, and we had expected to perform as dancer/puppeteers with flat shadow figures. Then, after videotaping a rehearsal, Bob projected the tape on the shadow screen. Melissa, Carlos Diaz and I began playing with our own projected shadows, and the style of the production was born.

Puppetsweat performed the piece at the O'Neill Theater Center's Institute for Professional Puppetry Arts in June of 1998. Janie Geiser, who was curating Late Night at the Henson Festival that year, liked it, and asked us to perform. From that point, we developed two other Poe stories that were presented at the following Henson Festival in 2000. The style is that of a "live film": live narration, dancer/puppeteers in front of or behind projected video. The layering of live images over video projections of those same images became the defining element in the creation of all the Poe stories we adapted.

Having developed some expertise at video manipulation, Leslie taught herself an animation program in order to work on *For The Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*, adapted from William Blake. Martin Bresnick composed a piece for piano and voice to be performed in front of Leslie's video anima-

tion. It has since traveled around the world, with performances in Europe and Australia as well as here in the U.S.

Puppetsweat also produced toy theatre style pieces that were presented at the Toy Theatre Festival in New York (*Fisherman* and *Buttons & Bows*). This style of work also informed future projects. "Great Small Works has had a tremendous influence on my work," Leslie asserts. Azdak's Garden/Puppetsweat continues to produce pieces that use projections, live performers, masks and performing objects. Their newest work, *The Life of James Mars: A Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut* has been performed

since 2002. It utilizes a storyteller/actor, two dancer/puppeteers performing a variety of table top puppets and shadows, in front of video projections.

The development of Azdak's Garden/Puppetsweat has a lot to do with the collaboration between Bob, Leslie, and the people who perform the work. Performers are invited to share their thoughts and ideas. Melissa Sylvester, who has performed in all of the works, has done much to define the movement style. Leslie's design choices are very courageous; she has taught herself many new techniques in order to achieve the type of look the production may call for. Bob works on the storyboard, the sound design and the text. Sometimes it's only a matter of correcting the timing, sometimes work is tossed aside because it simply doesn't fit. Choices of content, approach and design are made after much deliberation, hence the name: Puppetsweat. •

Rolande Duprey has an MFA in puppetry from UConn.



UNDERGROUND RAILWAY THEATRE:

ART WITH A COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

We recently interviewed Debra Wise, the Artistic Director of Boston's Underground Railway Theater, and her co-founding partner, Wes Sanders, about the origins and aesthetic principles of the theater. Their work typically employs multiple levels of expression—actors with puppets, with shadows, with music. Their productions are enriched not only by this variety but by the way in which one style bumps up against the other, creating ripples and interference patterns which become new and unforeseen theatrical elements.



PI: What was the original impulse behind the creation of what became Underground Railway Theatre?

Debra Wise: We were very much inspired by both the socially and politically engaged theater work of Bertolt Brecht and the poetic, psycho-physical theater of Jerzy Grotowski. We envisioned a theater that would be engaged in the movement of our time for social and political change. We imagined a theater that authentically connected to community, which helped audiences imagine positive social change by, to quote Brecht, "making the familiar strange and the strange

familiar." We wanted to make theater that engaged the mind and the heart, that was simultaneously challenging and delightful. We also very much liked Grotowski's notion of the actor as a creator of the poetry of the theater. Along with several other American and European theater artists of the 1970s (for example, Caryl Churchill and the Joint Stock Co.), we extended his notions to the making of plays, and began to generate script through improvisation in collaboration with playwrights, designers, directors, and composers.

We also wanted to expand our theatrical palette beyond naturalistic acting. Of course, both Brecht and Grotowski were also interested in experimenting with acting styles. Their different approaches are both characterized by the notion that the contemporary actor had much to learn from traditional forms of performance—dance, puppetry, pantomime, commedia, mask work. It's easy to see how these impulses culminated with a desire to experiment with combinations of actors and puppetry. Puppetry seemed like a craft that we could add to our palette, and one that we could learn by doing. Wes and I, like many of the puppeteers I know, came to puppetry through actors' theater.

Wes Sanders: I was first drawn to puppetry through experiencing, as a director, the power of outdoor performance with masks to make Greek tragedy come to life. After that, I collaborated with the young Julie Taymor on *Peer Gynt* and some short Brecht plays, using puppets. Debra began to join me in these experiments with a masked version of *The Measures Taken* and a larger-than-life puppet version of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

PI: Did your shows always combine actors and puppetry?

DW: Although we enjoy combining puppetry and actors as often as we can, some of our productions have been actors' theater, and others pure puppetry.

WS: Our first three original plays, developed through improvisation, were mounted while we were still in Oberlin. There was a giant color shadow-puppet play based on the

paintings of Harley Frances (strictly puppets). There was an actor-only historical drama for adults on the Molly Maguires. We also created a puppet, mask and actor play for young people on consumerism and recycling. These three streams of work have continued to characterize URT's work to the present; the color-shadow-puppet work is still the medium for most of our orchestral collaborations.

PI: *Was this part of an aesthetic philosophy, or did it just evolve?*

DW: We aspire to match the theatrical style for each production with the particular demands of its subject matter. This is what determines the balance of puppets and actors for each project, as well as the style of puppetry we use. For instance, in *Sanctuary - The Spirit of Harriet Tubman*, we used large-scale puppetry to create the epic scale and scope required to make connections across geographies and histories, masks and hand-puppets to evoke folk culture, and shadow-puppetry-and-actor-pantomime to enter characters' dreams. The characters in *Home is Where* were set in a run-down urban neighborhood, surrounded by a proscenium suggesting the flora and fauna of the rainforest—the embrace of their larger “home.” This then came alive with puppet scenes that connected the characters with creatures in the natural world that had also become, in a sense, homeless.

WS: Most of our shows with orchestras are performed with shadow-and-mirror-puppets. To these we add a brief appearance by an actor or narrator to frame the story. Initially, we chose large color shadow-puppets because they projected well to the audiences of 3000-4000 that fill orchestra halls, but we stayed with the choice because the easy changes of scale in shadow-puppetry enabled us to create an entire world for the characters to romp about in.

PI: *Do you feel that the presence of puppets in a show influences the way the actors act? Or the way you direct them to act?*

DW: Yes, the actor has to adjust the style, dimensions, and timbre of his or her performance in order to create one world with the puppets. The possibilities are as numerous as are the styles of puppetry. As an actor, I most often feel this adjustment as line and shape—I almost imagine the outline of my gestures being bolder, like the difference between a line drawing and a feathery sketch. It's not that the performance is less nuanced, but that the stage pictures from moment to moment are more deliberately created than in naturalistic acting, which is certainly what I experience when I perform as a puppeteer, or as an actor wearing a mask. This is very true in *Alice's*

Adventures Underground, our version of Lewis Carroll's books—the actors needed to shape their performances to match the clarity and high-style of the many different puppets being constantly introduced onto the stage. On the other hand, sometimes a production benefits from an actor's style retaining a naturalistic subtlety while creating a world in puppet or object theater.

WS: Picking up on Debra's comment about line, shape and boldness, I remember in our production of Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*, breaking down the Devil's part— a character who appeared in a series of masked disguises— into tableaux. This production, in fact, was the boldest experiment we have yet attempted— along with *Alice's Adventures Underground*— in the mix of media— Debra played the Narrator as an actor, albeit with the equivalent of *mie* (from the Kabuki) and *toc* (mime); the Soldier and his girlfriend appeared primarily as wagon-puppets (with the puppeteers sitting on low stools with casters, Japanese style) with immovable mouths and eyes, but they also metamorphosed into color shadow- and hand-puppets as part of the extended dance sequence in Stravinsky's piece. The Devil, as I say, was in mask and costume. The secondary characters were large rod-puppets. Each puppet or mask or actor-style was chosen for its capacity for maximum expressiveness in a given sequence.

PI: *Conversely, how are puppets used differently in a play with actors, from how you might use them in a play performed entirely with puppets?*

DW: When puppets share the stage with actors, in our work, at least, we look to puppetry and visual theater to create metaphor. For instance, in our play about the impact of the media, *Twisted Figures*, an actor playing Hillary Clinton danced with her media interviewers. These were a vaguely Greek-style chorus of masked figures, each holding a microphone, with each microphone attached to a huge Medusa-inspired head, through the open mouth of which a small television flickered. In *The Christopher Columbus Follies: An Eco-Cabaret*, a young saxophone player performed a duet with a monumentally over-sized, realistically-rendered puppet figure of Hazel Johnson, referred to by many as the mother of the Environmental Justice movement. As she spoke of the environmental degradation of poor African-American communities, her arms opened to reveal a map of the United States, with toxic sites and cancer clusters marked with death masks. At one point in this solemn jazz threnody of sax and spoken word, a skeletal bird— a specter of industrial death— flew in to attack, and the maternal embrace of the older woman protected



WS: Especially since the early 1980s, when David Fichter became our very talented set-and-puppet designer, we have been a visually oriented theater company, so we tend to tell stories that include lots of opportunities for puppets and other visual design. This also means we are unlikely, for example, to develop any realistic drawing-room dramas like those written today by, say, Tom Stoppard. Music is as important an ingredient of a URT show as puppetry, and this is consonant with an overall style that elects theatricality over realism. We like to use all the colors on the palette, and we know that some of the best results come from “mixing the colors.”

PI: *Is there any other area in which you feel that URT breaks with a pure style (e.g. a classic handpuppet show, a traditional wayang kulit performance)?*

the young man. This metaphor provided the heart of the play, resonating throughout the cabaret and giving emotional color and added dimension to an otherwise mostly actor-driven political satire.

PI: *Are there other ways in which the use of puppetry in your shows influences the design, stylistic choices, text development, choice of subject, and so on?*

DW: Our mission to “create dynamic ways to connect high-quality professional theater with communities” includes the desire to “engage diverse audiences with theater that challenges and delights, informs and celebrates.” We decided early on that we were interested in beauty, and in creating beauty through means that revealed the presence of the human hand, at least in part to contradict our media-saturated culture, which effectively obscures so much.

DW: Our shadow-puppetry style is very different than that employed by the traditional wayang kulit. We almost always use intense color and large-scale imagery, and love to exploit the benefits of electricity and projection equipment – for instance, reflective light, moving scenic imagery, and prisms. Even so, our techniques remain relatively simple, out of both economic necessity and aesthetic conviction. One colleague told us that we were “cottage industry high-tech.”

WS: We have never worked on a project where a particular medium was the “given” – even with the orchestral work. We did not train in a specific style of puppetry; we came as actors to puppetry. We toured the puppet-studios and -theaters of Europe in 1976 to get a sense of the range of possibilities. Since then we have learned what we needed to know in each case through experimentation and consultation with other puppeteers (particularly Will Cabell in recent years).

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May you all be as lucky as we, to
have such a friend as Caleb.

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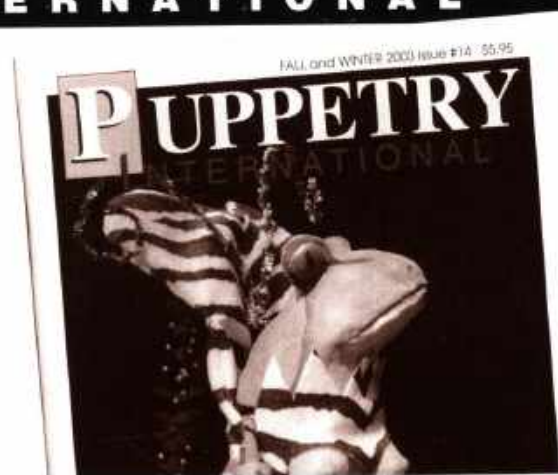
*There are notices of Caleb’s passing in the Boston
Globe and the newsletter of the Puppet
Showplace Theater in Brookline, MA, should you
want more in the way of facts.*

PI: Please feel free to add any other insights into your work, which you think distinguishes URT from other theatres.

DW: The amount and variety of meta-theatrical activities may set URT apart from other theaters to some degree. The five year "thinking through the arts" project, which we did with Harvard Ed's Project Zero and the DeCordova Museum, has led to not only a comprehensive curriculum, but also to docent-training and actor-led art tours at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.

URT has done a lot of direct political work, sometimes coordinating its touring with national movements— *The Anything Can Happen Roadshow* toured to anti-nuclear-weapons groups, to help them organize; *Sanctuary, the Spirit of Harriet Tubman* did the same for the Central American Solidarity Movement; and *Home Is Where* for groups working on homelessness in their communities. Even when it was not specifically coordinated with a movement, much of the adult work has had an activist edge—the two Eco-cabarets— *The Christopher Columbus Follies* and *Intoxicating*; and *Twisted Figures*, a satire on the media.

Underground Railway Theater will soon be moving into a new theatre in the heart of Central Square, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They are in the midst of a two million dollar capital campaign, to outfit the building, which will be constructed by their future landlord— MIT!



CALEB FULLAM, 1950– 2004

Caleb Fullam passed away last October— his life cut short by cancer.

His work was featured several times in this magazine. He made the puppets for— and performed in— the first-ever English production of Handel's puppet opera *The Burning House* (see Opera issue, #12). He costumed the frog puppet on the cover of our Sexuality issue (#14), and the fact that he left the puppet's breasts exposed caused us to be banned from the shelves of a certain national book chain! We worked with him on many projects, including a production of "The Masque" at the National Puppetry Conference, and our experience was always deeply enriched by his company.

When we consider Caleb's life, we find no shortage of fascinating and diverse accomplishments. They should be properly discussed over a good bottle of wine and smoked salmon— Fullam-style. He was witty, generous, talented, and stylish— always stylish. He was a font of knowledge and would have preferred, perhaps, to have been working in the 1890s instead of our Post-Modern age.

May you all be as lucky as we, to have such a friend as Caleb.

Andrew & Bonnie Periale

There are notices of Caleb's passing in the Boston Globe and the newsletter of the Puppet Showplace Theater in Brookline, MA, should you want more in the way of facts.

LOS TÍTERES de CACHIPORRA

THE BILLY-CLUB PUPPETS



ACTORS AS PUPPETS?

BY MANUEL ANTONIO MORAN

The Society of the Educational Arts, Inc., better known as SEA, is the only Latino children's theatre in New York City. Based in *TEATRO SEA at Los Kabayitos Puppet and Children's Theatre* in Manhattan's Lower East Side, SEA also maintains an office in Orlando, Florida, and its original site in Puerto Rico dating back to 1985. In our home base theatre over the past seven years, SEA has re-established the tradition of producing Latino children's theatre and puppetry, a tradition that had been forgotten for the previous eighteen years.

In our mission to offer productions that reflect and preserve Latino cultural traditions, SEA recently presented Federico García Lorca's *Los Títeres de Cachiporra (The Billy Club Puppets)*. This play, also known as *The Tragicomedy of Don Cristobal and Miss Rosita*, is not only a Spanish but also a specifically Andalusian Punch and Judy, whose principal character, Don Cristobal, is like the English *Punch* and the Italian *Pulcinella*.

Lorca was a great fan of puppet theatre, especially *guignol*, for which he wrote various plays. In those plays, which embody the roots of Andalusian culture, Lorca took advantage of a puppet's greater freedom to comment on social and political issues than that afforded actors of the same period.

To direct this production, SEA invited Luis Dorrego. Dorrego is a respected director from Madrid who has served as professor of theatre at the Madrid campus of NYU for the past eighteen years. Dorrego recruited Victor Navarro, designer-in-residence at the Teatro Clásico of Madrid, to be production and puppet designer. The combined vision of these accomplished artists resulted in a production in which the characters were played by both rod-puppets as well as actors acting as puppets. Together, the cast of acted and manipulated puppets came to life in the realm of a sewing kit whose buttons, thimbles, needles and thread embodied the characters of Lorca's story.

In addition to producing the show, I had the great privilege to be one of the actor/puppeteers in the production. It was a unique experience. Even though I have been acting for many years and working with all kinds of puppets, it was nevertheless the first time in which I both gave life to the puppet that I manipulated and later acted as a puppet that was supposedly being animated.

In the following conversation, Dorrego relates the thinking behind his choice to integrate these two genres and the motivation for this production:

I believe this is the first time that it has been performed in this style. I know of no other production that chose to do it this way, only one version where the actors were dolls, but who had legs and all.

In terms of aesthetic, I like theatre that is neither naturalistic nor realistic— theatre in which the audience sees a reflection of reality instead of (supposed) reality itself. The actors become an instrument and resource of the action of the scene, instead of serving at the center of the action around which revolves the universe of the story.

This is not a world in which man is the center, but rather a world that has many realities that might not be immediately apparent – the subconscious, chance, intuition, poetry.



I am less interested in the person on stage than in his or her mask, so that I might give more importance to the internal experience than to external realities. Thus, when the spectator views something other than a copy of reality, he can distance himself and think about the vicissitudes of the characters, about their condition, and not merely their external circumstance.

Dorrego says that distancing the audience with such a stage illusion, as Bertolt Brecht's theatre did, helps to provoke more analysis and depth between the characters, the action and the spectators. Dorrego continues:

Ivan Goll said, "The monotony and idiocy of men is so great, that in order to make any connection with the audience, one has to hit them over the head with exaggeration. Today's new theatre should be out of proportion and uncommon...actors must wear masks...an oversized ear, colorless eyes, wooden legs."

This is why Dorrego chose puppets to create a greater connection with his audience:

Unfortunately, there are many challenges associated with this type of production. First, in our

egocentric society, actors do not want to feel "manipulated" and even less that they should become a wooden doll or rag doll moved by a supposed invisible puppeteer. It's as if the actors had a subconscious psychological block against such direction. Second, in our production there were two types of puppets— not only the actors serving as hand-puppets, but also the use of traditional rod-manipulated puppets. Finally, we needed to fool the audience into believing actors could play puppets. Obviously, an audience with preconceived notions of puppets more quickly judges the expression of the actor's gestures and appearance.

Dorrego concludes that in order to create harmony and balance between the puppet and the actor-as-puppet, the actors need to be prepared physically with intensive study of the movement of a puppet. In this sense, a puppeteer gives life to an inanimate object while an actor must limit his movement to appear more puppet-like. How does a person restrict their range of motion, convert something live into something static pretending to be alive, versus giving movement and life to a life-like object?

In the end, I asked Dorrego, "How do you see the relationship between an actor as a puppet and an actor as a puppeteer?" He responded:

The puppeteer is a master of manipulation, a human being who gives life to an inanimate object— in other words, a "god" hidden behind the curtain. The actor, on the other hand, is a world full of expressive and thematic possibilities who upon crossing the limitations of a realist frontier, is able to explore new and unknown territory— something that

not even a puppet could do with or without its puppeteer.

With *Los Titeres de Cachiporra (The Billy-Club Puppets)*, the Hispanic Organization of Latin Actors honored SEA with the 2004 HOLA Award for Best Production. The show leveraged two styles to create a successful family-oriented performance that celebrated unique craftsmanship, and the finest traditions of culture, language and music.

Manuel Morán is a current Vice President of UNIMA-USA and the Founder and Artistic Director of SEA. He recently completed his doctorate in Educational Theatre from NYU. He is an actor, writer and puppeteer who lives in New York City and maintains a residence in Puerto Rico.



STORIES BIGGER AND SMALLER THAN OUR OWN BONES

AN INTERVIEW WITH BETH NIXON

BY JOHN BELL



Beth Nixon is part of a new generation of American puppeteers who grew up in the seventies and eighties, two decades after the radical innovations of Peter Schumann and Jim Henson. Nixon's approach to puppetry implicitly spans a wide range of forms—giant puppets, shadow theater, hand- and rod-puppets, masks, cantastorie, toy theater— all of which she approaches with an equal sense of ease and surety. Nixon spent her childhood in Rhode Island, studied at College of the Atlantic in Maine, and is currently a Teaching Artist with Spiral Q Puppet Theater in Philadelphia. She creates solo and ensemble shows, as well as huge community spectacles, and her work is marked by a stunning alacrity of image, a startlingly funny demeanor (the text of her collaboration with Morgan Fitzpatrick was written completely in palindromes), and an incisive political point of view which often emerges from deeply auto-

biographical sources. "Sloth Teeth," for example, began as a live radio show about the travails of a puppeteer running workshops in a shockingly rough inner-city elementary school, and then shifted surrealistically into a dreamy handpuppet bus trip to Brazil, where it morphed into a hilarious but scientifically accurate explanation of the ecology of the sloth (with an absurdly funny song rhyming such words as *Bradypus Tridactylus*), and then returned to where it started with an epiphany about larger issues of social ecology. Our interview was conducted over the telephone and by email.

John Bell: How did you get interested in puppet theater?

Beth Nixon: Puppet theater is the only art form I've encountered which is wide enough and loose enough to embrace all the different forms of expression I'm drawn to. Growing up (and still) I had a trunk of dress-up clothes, and I spent a lot of time parading around our neighborhood, riding bikes, and going grocery shopping in bizarre outfits, being different characters. When I was seven I joined a traveling children's theater. It was largely kid-run; we wrote some of the shows, built sets and costumes, toured around New England elementary schools. That opportunity to be part of a creative community of my peers was huge and kept me from going berserk in school. I stayed involved through high school, and participated in a lot of dorky school plays, too. Then at College of the Atlantic, I formed an improv group with some friends.

Meanwhile, I'd been writing short stories, poems, songs, and struggling with writing, knowing it is a vital form of communication for me, but also something that knots me up and makes me sweat. Sort of as a distraction from writing I'd started sculpting stuff in high school—large chicken wire and yarn beasts—playing with the veiny shadows they cast. Looking back, I guess those were puppets, but I didn't think of them that way then. But building things, getting my hands engaged, helps my brain work in different ways than when I'm still. Also, drawing has always been something I do to relax, a relief when I get bunched up with words. My brother was always drawing beasts and monsters, I guess maybe that's where I picked up my affections for non-human, no-particular-species-type creatures that puppet theater makes a home and family for.

On top of this mish-mosh of art forms that led me to puppets, I was clear that I wanted to be part of raising hell, effecting change. My folks are pretty politically engaged. I grew up with Coalition Against Racism meetings at our house, accompanied my mom to Pro-Choice rallies, Gulf War protests, lots of state-of-the-world discussions during dinner. Social and environmental justice work was woven into my understanding of what I was doing here.

So... I went to see The Bread and Puppet Domestic Resurrection Circus in high school, 1993 I think. It knocked my socks off. I went up every year after that and volunteered for the Pageant, always the highpoint of my summer. However, it didn't occur to me that I could DO things like that, for life, for more than a weekend, until in college I needed to do an internship, in my "career field." That field was marshy and unmowable as far as I was concerned— in fact I'd certainly still hesitate to call puppetry my "career"— there's something vitality-less and removed about that term. Anyway, in my searching for what I could do for ten weeks, I came upon an ad for Red Moon Theater in Chicago. I wrote to them; we set up an intensive internship for the first half of the summer. Then I wrote to Bread and Puppet, and volunteered there for the second half of the summer in the creation of the last giant Domestic Resurrection Circus. I returned to my senior year of college consumed with paper-maché, and irritated by course work that kept me from building. I wrote, built, and directed a giant puppet pageant for my senior thesis project, and have just kept going since then.

***JB:** You've worked a lot with Spiral Q Puppet Theater in Philadelphia. What has that experience been like, in terms of making theater with various community groups in an American city?*

BN: It's been amazing, and hard, and sloppy, and important. I've been working with Spiral Q for about four years as a teaching artist, puppet builder, show-maker, volunteer coordinator, pageant director, etc. I'm really grateful for the experience; Mattyboy Hart and Beth Pulse welcomed me into the organization, and from the get-go, encouraged me to experiment in both the classroom and the studio. I'm also grateful for the opportunities that I've had to work with all sorts of different community groups that I probably wouldn't have connected with otherwise. It's an exhausting, terrific, inspiring routine to load up the Q van with cardboard, fabric, maché, paint, tools, and head out to an addiction recovery program to work with a group of adults to build a pageant piece, or head to an elementary school to transform their cafeteria into a working studio. We do a lot of group discussion and brainstorming to define the story they want to tell, create a build list, then usually split into smaller work teams and over the course of several weeks design, build, and rehearse their cre-

ation. Then they perform it for their families, friends, neighbors in a park, or parking lot, or church basement. I'm working with a group of twenty third-graders right now who are making a rhyming puppet show about kids taking over the world; it's brilliant.

We also work with different activist groups that want puppets and banners for demonstrations. We go through a similar brainstorming process to clarify the message they want to convey and then work on metaphor, and the translation of words to visual language. Lots of times when I go to a fancy-pants museum or theater, someplace that isn't about community arts work, I feel antsy and irreverent. I'm delighted that my work at the Q is unpredictable, and unrefined; a group of kids or someone from the mental health center across the street will come into our puppet museum and start playing with stuff, and create theater we alone could never have come up with. I'll walk in to see toy theater flats of suffragettes beat-boxing and break-dancing, or a vampire-bat-mask-singing about loneliness.

Up to now what I've described is our work at its best— puppeteers listening to community groups, individuals in the groups listening to each other, folks who haven't usually built puppets learning to use tools and materials, recognizing that most of the supplies we use are cheap or recycled thus accessible, realizing that their stories are worth telling, building relationships with each other over pots of "maché," and then transforming a space with their art. And folks are proud of each other and themselves, their friends and families are impressed; it's incredible to be part of that, to help facilitate it and then watch it take on a life of its own. Each project, I learn more— about teaching, about puppetry, about other humans, about myself.

On the flip side, which seems only fair to mention, I often have major doubts about the work. I'm frequently frustrated on lots of different levels— nuts and bolts stuff like the fact that since I'm almost always working with groups who are building their first puppet, or training work-study students or volunteers, nothing is particularly well built. We have dozens of off-balance birds. Uncomfortable, heavy, jalopy, wonderful things are our specialty. The important point is that the participants really make everything, they don't just add pompoms and glitter, but that does result in the wonkiness of nearly everything. Connected to that frustration is the fact that we are always struggling for money, and so over-committing ourselves, never having quite enough time to finish anything really well, or go as deep as we'd like. Because we need the bucks we end up doing a lot of quickie workshops and other stuff which doesn't excite me.

It's then that I have questions about whether the work that we do at the Q is what the participants/Philly/the world, really needs or wants... if it's really the best angle to be work-

ing from, to be directing resources and energy that way... if it's not mostly a way to get paid for pushing what I'm interested in on other folks... if I'm not just a cog in the white and well-meaning non-profit industrial complex that claims to "serve" but is really just in the way of other people's self-determination? We are revisiting our mission; talking more about what it means to be accountable to the communities we work with. We have a new director now. The Q has been constantly evolving as an organization. I've just transitioned from working (way more than) full-time to thirty hours a week, to give myself more room to work on my own projects. Sometimes the line between my work at the Q and my own stuff gets blurry; because I care a lot about both, but it's important to me that there is separation, which requires me standing up for myself because the organization has its own momentum and buzz that is easy to get sucked into.

JB: *Could you talk about how your show **Sloth Teeth** came about? How did you come to combine object theater, radio drama, hand-puppets, masks, cantastorie, and two seemingly unrelated subjects: Philadelphia inner-city schools and the ecology of the Brazilian sloth?*

BN: I read *National Geographic Magazine* when I'm sitting on the toilet. I came upon a picture of the sloth moth; I was tickled by its rhyming name and the fact that it lives in the coarse hair of the sloth, nibbling the algae that grow in the grooves of each hair. I started doing research on the moths (*Bradipodocola Hahneli*) and the sloths (*Bradypus Tridactylus*) and learned about the symbiotic relationship they are a part of with the tree and the algae. It was inspiring and delightful.

During this research period I was also working with a group of seventeen "at risk" fourteen- to twenty-one-year-olds in North Philly to write, build, book, and perform a puppet show for kids in their neighborhood. I was having a hellish time navigating being a geeky, androgynous, white, middle-class teacher figure every day, all day long, in a boiling hot classroom with mostly poor, African-American, Latino, and Asian teenagers, who, by and large, didn't give a rat's rump about puppets. This was the summer job they had been assigned to

by their program. They didn't know each other. They were getting paid \$6.50 an hour, so I was their boss too, which amplified the already problematic power dynamics. It was tough; there were some incredible moments along the way, and they ended up creating an intense and amazing show, which they performed three times for enthusiastic crowds. I think it was a valuable experience for all. I encountered my own race and class privilege in some painful and important ways, and began to uncover my need for a new understanding of power in the classroom.

I would come home sweaty and exhausted after rushing around and struggling all day and soothe myself reading about the slowness of sloths, the inter-species symbiosis; I'd look at pictures of these magical beasts dangling from branches, and feel a sort of jealous longing. My puppet shows are always at least sort of autobiographical, and usually star some oft-overlooked, under-celebrated wonder of nature (baleen, lichen, liverworts, dung beetles, pelicans, palindromes). Here was this classroom of eighteen beings, all the same species having such a hard time co-existing, and there were these four different species making it work. Through art we get to put things with seemingly little or no connection next to one another to see what light they shed, what they reflect off each other. Also I'd been grinding my teeth at night, so I had the pleasure of incorporating my horrendous dentist in the show, which fulfilled some dental hang-up I seem to have.

In terms of the various forms I combined in that one show, it seems to me one big advantage puppetry has over other kinds of theater, is there's always the opportunity to play with scale. There is, of course, always the more practical matter—my determination to make a show that could be packed up to fit in a trunk to travel, so that certainly affected some of my building decisions. The radio drama

part grew out of a read-through of the script with Gina Favano (of *The Indicator Species*) and Morgan Fitzpatrick Andrews (*Shoddy Puppet Co.*). Morgan and I have worked on a lot of shows together; usually one of us brings a script or a plan to the other and then we chew on it together for a while. Morgan used to have a radio show when he lived in Boston and he's got a real knack for noise-making, sound-



scapes, voices, etc. Gina has sort of an olde-timey sensibility, she's a musician, has great timing (and had taught before in a similar classroom environment). I was struggling with how to build puppets of my students that were respectful, how to mix all those flesh tones correctly, how to create the feel of the chaos of the classroom and all the personalities with only three puppeteers. I was wary of being the giant white teacher lady operating these weird dolls of my students, so I kept procrastinating building that part of the show. When we read through the script I'd written and Morgan heard my concerns, he suggested we just write that section as a radio play. Besides being a brilliant solution, it also saved my butt since we were to perform the show in a few days at the Fringe Festival.

Before taking the show on the road, I made a cantastoria, and my colleague Lucy Schneider became algae—so then we had the sloth, moth, tree, and algae as costumed characters to accompany the illustrations and puppets. The cantastoria enabled me to get a song in the show; I'm always a sucker for that sort of thing.

JB: What is your sense of the possible connections between puppet theater and contemporary politics?

BN: City Hall, The State House, The White House, The U.N.—all of them, with a few adjustments, would make fantastic puppet theaters, they've got heat (unlike Spiral Q), good lighting, plenty of seats...heh, heh. It seems like part of the reason things are so bleak and dreadful, in terms of contemporary politics, is because of the manipulation and "moronicity" doled out by the mainstream media. I'm fired up about puppet theater's ability to be an alternative, more honest, more engaging, creative way of presenting other news, spreading other stories—not Comcast's, ones that matter in terms of understanding history, each other, other cultures, foreign policy, you name it...I've seen puppet shows about or involving the FTAA, genetic engineering, biodiesel, white privilege, police brutality, community gardening, war(s), the Patriot Act, the occupation of Palestine, and more; and other ones that shared stories of heroic grandmothers, the first bicyclists, labor strikes...all these shows have had an impact on me, either introducing information, or making me feel new ways about familiar issues. I imagine they've had similar impacts on other audience members. Lots of folks come to see a show because it's puppets, and then through that form, which is seen somehow as benign, we can pack far more in than perhaps many viewers anticipate, or even realize. Also, the presence of puppets, music, and street theater at demonstrations are vital parts of building political movements that are creatively expressive,

and help them be movements instead of just a book, a meeting, a lecture. Puppet theater makes stories that are bigger and smaller than our own bones, so we can communicate in ways regular humans aren't able to. Contemporary politics needs that.

JB: How do you want to proceed with your work in the future?

BN: Mostly, I want to keep going. There are lots of projects I'm excited to do, and people I'm eager to work with. I want to learn more about clowning; I want to build a giant puppet flotilla down the Schuylkill River, or some river; I want to travel to all sorts of places with a puppet show. Two years ago in Montana, I had a brilliant experience working as an artist-in-residence for two schools, in the towns of Yaak Valley and Troy. I spent six weeks working with about 400 kids, teenagers, adults, and seniors to design and build a giant puppet time-line of their community, which we kicked off with a parade through town and performed on their football field, accompanied by original music, composed and played by residents. The population of the region is approximately 900 people, and about 400 folks were in the audience, so only about 100 people were not involved in the project in some way. It was a chance for the folks in the town who had been struggling with some really divisive issues around logging and mining, and where poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, and religious fundamentalism were large players, to come together to remember, celebrate, and re-imagine the place that they shared. I had a fascinating and beautiful time there; I'd like to do something intense like that again.

Also, I'm a big fan of think tanks. My friend Mark Dixon introduced me to this form of working. We locked our selves in a kitchen for two weeks in Pittsburgh, with three other people, deconstructed the kitchen, made a show out of the pieces of the kitchen and the experience, and then took it on tour for a week. This past summer, Ray Young and I put together a 72-hour musical project at a horse stable in Maine, where eight of us spent 72 hours (almost straight) making an original rock opera (using masks, costumes, and instruments) which we then took on tour for a few days. In both of these projects, most of the people had not met the other participants before being locked in to this intensive creative process together. I plan to do more think tanks; they push me in important, horrible, satisfying ways, and make me let go. The group dynamics woven into the art making, and vice versa, are hilarious and often terrific.

There's lots of other stuff that I'm hot to work on; I'm going to stick with the Q for a little while longer, while I let the idea of "what else" percolate... •

THE HISTORY OF A GREAT IDEA BREAD & PUPPET IN IRAN

BY ELKA SCHUMANN

In late November, 2004, Peter and I had an extraordinary opportunity to visit a faraway country with a rich ancient (and a turbulent recent) history—a country vilified by our administration—where we received one of the warmest welcomes of our many travels: Iran.

We staggered, bleary-eyed, from the plane after thirty-two hours of travel from northeastern Vermont, through Tehran airport passport control, and though it was 1 AM, a group of students and administrators were there to meet us with gorgeous roses, a sheaf of wheat and warm smiles. There was Golnaz Agha Beighi, manager of the International Section, who, together with Bread and Puppet Theater's manager, Linda Elbow, had made this seemingly impossible trip happen. Graduate Theater student Poupak Azimpour was the spark behind the whole project; she had learned about Bread and Puppet years earlier in a class on contemporary theater, and inspired everyone else to bring us to Iran. Faranouk Aria, director of the Secretariat of Student Puppet Theater Festivals originally wanted us to come to the big December Festival, but changed the invitation to a November workshop because of our annual three-week run at New York City's Theater for the New City before the holidays. Other key figures involved in the project were Drs. Hadi Khanikiu, Behrouz Gharipur, Hashimi and assistant translator Leyla Tavakoli.

Next day, at Tehran University, a large banner by the main entrance greeted us:

DEAR PETER AND ELKA SCHUMANN, WELCOME TO OUR COUNTRY

In a small storage room, a helpful staff had prepared the materials we'd requested: plenty of large cardboard, a bolt of white fabric, cans of housepaint in bright primary colors, masking tape, wire, staplers, basic tools—everything brand new. Next, we met the twenty students chosen from the Puppetry, Theater and Art Departments, while a bunch of others, relegated to "observer" status, glowered from the sidelines.

In the course of this five-day workshop, Peter broke some new ground. First, he included all interested students, expanding the number participating to over seventy from many different faculties. Then he put them into teams (men and women together). He chose an outdoor space—the student ball-court—for rehearsals and performance. The flexibility of the University in meeting Peter's unusual requirements was admirable; some classes were simply suspended

to allow students to participate, and we were given free rein in and around the ball-court. It quickly filled up with work materials, jackets, books and take-out food, as students began constructing puppets, following Peter's instructions to use found objects and trash. Cinema students looped their figure with garlands of discarded film; others used crushed soda cans, spools of thread, bark and twigs. Their task was to build larger-than-life "demons of society," and invent names and ways to present them. The ingenuity and zeal of the students was impressive. Within a couple of days there were ten figures ready, with names like "Everydayness," "Lies," "Threadbare" and a 15-foot-tall "Racial Discriminality." I got together a twenty-voice-strong chorus, providing organized noise, narration and three diverse songs. Peter painted a series of generic politicians and a theater-of-the-absurd cantastoria about "Lubberland"—a mythic country that could be interpreted as either Iran or the US. The whole production was called "Funeral Service for a Rotten Idea." It ended with a chanting procession to the newly built brick bread oven where two dozen slightly-charred loaves, made with Glover sourdough, awaited consumption. The performance was as packed as an outdoor show in a limited space could be. What everyone got out of the rowdy patchwork of paintings, parading, dancing and singing, trash-sculpture and narration is hard to guess, but the process was exhilarating and liberating for the participants, and surely something totally new for the viewers. We, in turn, deeply appreciated the enthusiasm and energy of the students and the cooperation and support of the University faculty, staff and administration. At no point were any restrictions put on our work, and whether that was due to a loosening of Islamic Republican standards, or to the recognition of the inherent unimportance of puppetry, or to our hosts' generosity, we'll never know.

During the last days of our stay, after the performance, we were treated to some spectacular sightseeing and got a glimpse of some traditional puppetry. In a visit of Poupak's family home, Peter unpacked his fiddle and joined her husband, ethnomusicologist Hamid Ardan, and his ensemble of classical musicians in an unusual jam session. Instruments included the oud (precursor to the lute), the ney (reed pipe), the tar, setar and kemenche (plucked and bowed string instruments), and the zard and dohol drums. Everyone was improvising under Hamid's direction, in a kind of wild, twelve-tone jazz. Then a company of three kheyman-shab-bazi (tent-night-play) puppeteers arrived and in short order set up a light metal frame, covered it with fitted red curtains, carefully unrolled a dozen colorful marionettes, and put on a delightful show. A straight man in brocade tunic and cap sat by the stage, alternating announcements, drumming and rep-tee with the puppets. The main character is Mabarak, the impish black fellow, somewhat like a benign Punch, who swaggers and bounces around the stage, playing pranks and



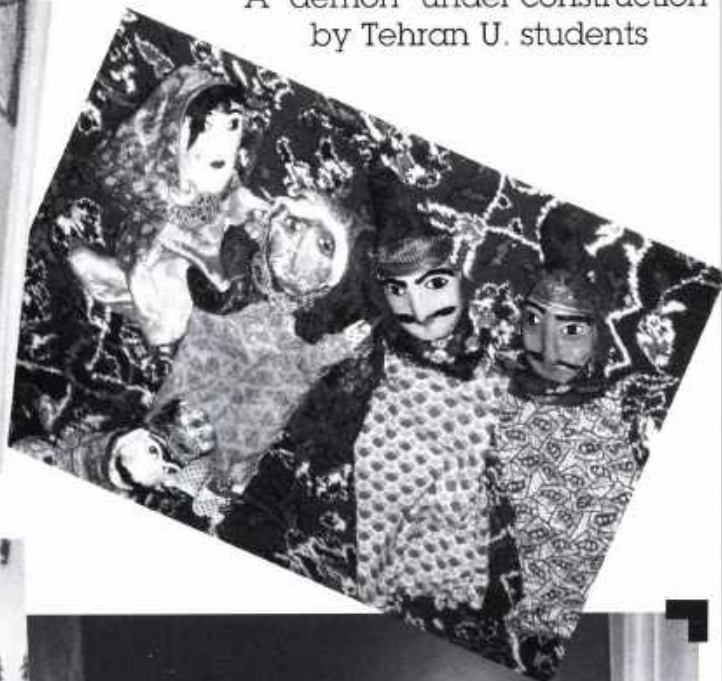
Peter and Elka in woodworking shop with students



A "demon" under construction by Tehran U. students



Mehdi with Jijiriji puppet



Kheymeh-shab-bazi troupe



Interview at Tehran U.

cracking jokes. In both the distant and recent past, his big mouth could get him into trouble with higher-ups and powers-that-be. But puppetry's roots are so strong in Iranian culture, we learned, that it was allowed to continue unfettered after the Islamic Revolution, when movies, theater and even music were severely curtailed. Restrictions in cultural spheres are being lifted now.

Mabarak's fellow-puppets are a gaggle of dancing girls with porcelain-doll faces and bright brocade dresses; they flounce and shimmy about, the one in white is Mabarak's wife, in green— his mother-in-law. The themes seem to be mainly domestic intrigues and squabbles, the squeaking and squawking rendered by swazzle for all the puppet voices. Then there are the special-effects walk-ons: a street-cleaner wielding a broom; two soldiers holding hands; a juggler; and even a puppeteer-puppet with his own tiny puppet. The mechanism is extremely simple— three strings in all— but the manipulation so skillful that each character has its own lively, idiosyncratic movement.

In Shiraz, we met another master puppeteer, Mehdi Faghi, who showed us his Jijiriji hand-puppets. A reserved, gray-bearded man, he also acts in movies and TV and paints exquisite calligraphy pictures. Jijiriji is based on ancient tales, and the main characters have the distinct grace of Persian miniatures. The hero, Gholi Khan, rescues beautiful Roshanghiz-bala from the wicked witch Ververeyeche with the help of Goolak, an acrobat with elongated, dangling arms. There seems to be some tension between puppet traditions, for, Mehdi assures us, the Jijiriji puppets of Shiraz never use vulgar language, in the way Tehran's Mabarak does.

It was also in Shiraz, 35 years ago, that Bread and Puppet Theater (but without Peter who'd boycotted the trip) came to perform at the Shah's International Festival. The seven puppeteers brought "Fire," an anti-Vietnam War play and "King Story," a rod-puppet street-show about the abuse of power. They performed it on the Shiraz University campus and around the city, but with difficulty because of the near-abduction of the Great Warrior puppet and because it was hard to find a translator who would publicly utter: "The Shah was afraid..." and "Death killed the Shah." We still perform "King Story," and it seems as relevant today as it did in Iran in 1970. Miraculously, the taxi driver who took us to the magnificent ruins of Persepolis nearby, had watched

"King Story" as an 18-year-old, near the main bazaar— and still remembered the giant silver and blue, sword-swinging Great Warrior!

We also visited Isfahan, a beautiful city spread along both banks of the Zaayandeh River. Where ever we went, we were housed in luxury hotels (full of business delegations from Europe, I might add), served delicious meals in homes and restaurants, taken to view dazzling mosques, fascinating museums, awesome ruins and sumptuous bazaars. Throughout the trip, strangers were openly curious and eager to try out their English phrases. When we said we were from America, there was astonishment, often delight, but never hostility. I photographed freely, and always asked permission to take a portrait of a person. Only once was I told, very politely: "Please don't. It's not our custom." I was warned to hold tight to my purse in the bazaar, but we were struck by how few police and military were on the streets and by how light security was in the airports. Yes, traffic in the cities, especially Tehran, is truly horrendous. And, yes, women are obliged to wear modest dress (men, too, must keep their shirts on and arms covered) and cover their hair, but there are many interpretations, ranging from black, tent-like chodors to flimsy scarves barely perched atop the head. The women we met were confident and assertive. Our media's distorted reports on the Middle East lead us to expect meek and submissive Islamic women. Often, it was quite the contrary! Though charming and feminine, many Iranian women are well educated, hold leadership positions, and are obviously comfortable running things.

I do wish we could have stayed longer and learned more, and not have arrived so woefully ignorant, but at least it was a start. We would love to have puppetry and theater students from Iran join our summer internships in Vermont, and to return with our shows and puppeteers to perform in their country. The obstacles seem formidable: red tape, expense, and, not least, the bristling hostility of our government to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hopefully, someday, that will be a thing of the past, and we will be able to say, *khokhesh-mi-kanam*— Welcome!— as sincerely as it was said to us. •

Elka Schumann [at right] is the Director of the Bread and Puppet Museum in Glover, Vermont, and is an occasional contributor to Puppetry International.



Poupak Azimpour
and author



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HISTORY COLUMN

BY JOHN BELL

Puppet theater's practice of bending genres—the interaction of different techniques of puppet theater both within puppetry itself and in connection with other forms of performance—is in some ways completely characteristic, and may even be the definition of modern puppet theater. The way Westerners now routinely presume genre-bending to be a normal aspect of performance is just as strong as the Western assumption a century ago that puppeteers basically stick to one genre of puppet performance, and one only.

By this I mean that, as John McCormick suggests in his new book *The Victorian Marionette Theater*, nineteenth-century European puppeteers who made their modest living as theater artists generally focused on the perfection of one particular technique of puppetry: marionettes in the case of McCormick's subjects; handpuppets in the case of Laurent Mourguet, the creator of Guignol, or John Piccini, the London Punch performer immortalized by George Cruikshank and John Payne Collier; rod marionettes in the case of

the many Southern Italian families pursuing the *opera dei pupi*; or shadow theater in the case of Henri Rivière and his fellow artists at the Chat Noir cabaret. The strength of these forms of puppetry, whether steadfastly traditional or consciously avant-garde, lay in the unrelenting focus its practitioners gave to one technique. In this way, the "art" of the particular form could be maintained or advanced. (And certainly asserting the artistic legitimacy of the generally low-class forms of puppetry was of some concern to those trying either to make a living from that work, or trying to re-invent the parameters of art as an "avant-garde" enterprise.)

At the turn of the century, however, the idea that artistic integrity is dependent upon fidelity to one specific technique (not only in the world of puppetry, but also in other fields such as dance, music, and the visual arts) changes, for two related reasons. First of all, avant-gardists of all sorts begin to prize the possibility of breaking out of old forms (which the Futurists, for example, called *passéist*) in order to give themselves the authority to re-invent dance, music, theater and puppet theater according to the modernist impulses they felt bursting within them. Secondly, these impulses were not self-invented, but inevitable responses to the technological and social changes going on around them. For example, the visual artists dedicated to shadow theater at the Chat Noir cabaret in Paris of the 1880s were not simply interested in re-creating the popular *ombres chinoises* shows which pervaded nineteenth-century France, but in applying innovations in lighting (arc lights for example), color (with transparent paint) and depth (through multiple layers of glass). These innovations not only marked a break with existing *ombres chinoises* traditions, but also paved the



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way for the complex stop-action cinematography of Lotte Reininger, and ultimately the animation innovations of Ub Iwerks and others working for Walt Disney.

A pivotal character at the cusp of modern genre-bending in puppet theater is the familiar anarchist, bicyclist, *enfant terrible* and playwright Alfred Jarry, who in the opinion of many theater historians more or less invented avant-garde theater. Jarry was a genre bender in many ways. Although he started making puppet shows during his elementary and high school years well within the confines of northern French marionette techniques (which Reginald Sibbald examined in 1936 with *Marionettes in the North of France*), when Jarry got to Paris and began working with Symbolist theater director Aurélien Lugné-Poe, he soon gloried in mixing up forms. The performers in his 1896 *Ubu Roi* wore masks, moved and talked like puppets, and rode hobby horses. Doors and windows, Jarry asserted, should only be brought onstage when needed, more like puppets than set pieces. After the initial scandalous success of *Ubu Roi*—the scandal in large part due to Jarry's genre-mixing—Jarry blithely continued to mix things up by creating later versions of the Ubu epic with handpuppets he and his friends performed, or by handing over performance duties to the popular *Guignol Anatole* theater, directed by Émile Labelle.



Alfred Jarry

Jarry's 1890s devotion to genre-bending in puppetry would become the norm in avant-garde performance to follow, especially as Futurists, Dadaists, Expressionists, Constructivists and others gave themselves permission to define themselves as dancers, poets, painters, playwrights, actors and puppeteers without any official approval. A similar sense of the value of heterogeneity persisted through the twentieth century, and pervades our own time. Now we assume and even expect that puppeteers (as well as other artists) will routinely re-invent, mix together and jump between genres. For example, while puppeteer Basil Twist's grandfather, Griff Williams, made a name for himself on the West Coast in the 1930s specifically with the string marionettes he performed with his swing band, Twist is known as "an artist destined never to repeat himself" (as the Creative Capital Foundation put it). Twist switches back and forth between marionettes, shadow figures, bunraku-style puppets, toy theater and, of course, his own underwater object theater—an array of genres whose common thread is innovation and sur-



Charlotte Charke



ideas about artistic excellence, although certain types of genre mixing were not unheard of in Western theater traditions. Pierre Louis Duchartre pointed out in his 1929 book *The Italian Comedy* that some *commedia dell'arte* performers presented their comic scenarios one night with masks, and the next night with marionettes. Charlotte Charke's career as a marionette performer in 18th-century England (as Fidelis Morgan shows in her book, *The Well-Known Trouble Maker*) was largely due to her failure to succeed as an actress on the legitimate stage, and John McCormick's study shows that performers switched back and forth between acting and puppetry through the nineteenth century as well.

Aesthetically, a certain amount of cross-genre influence has also marked the acting/puppeteering divide. The movement vocabulary of southern Italian popular

actors of the *wayang orang* imitated the movements of *wayang kulit* shadow figures. But what modern Western puppeteers often tend to note and marvel at is the single-minded focus demanded by many traditional puppet forms. Western puppeteers know that traditional bunraku performers spend years of hard apprentice work learning only how to move a puppet's feet before they can move up to the left hand, and then finally the right hand and head. Similarly, the breathtaking accomplishments of Chinese handpuppet virtuoso Yang Feng seemed dependent upon that artist's single-minded devotion to the possibilities of one form, not many, and his achievements were commensurate with that single focus. Such accomplishments, in fact, were probably not possible by means of our current love of heterodox accomplishment. Our "modern" love of innovation and multi-valenced possibility ensures variety and novelty, and does not rule out high artistic proficiency, but faces certain artistic limits compared with the achievements of Yang Feng, or dedicated bunraku masters. •



Yang Feng

prise rather than steadfast devotion to a classic technique.

This modern expectation of genre mixing is patently in conflict with older

acting was specifically influenced by the stiff-legged movements of the marionettes who performed *Orlando Furioso*, and likewise in Java the live

BASIL TWIST'S DOGUGAESHI

Nov 18-23, 2004, Japan Society, New York City

REVIEW BY STEVE ABRAMS

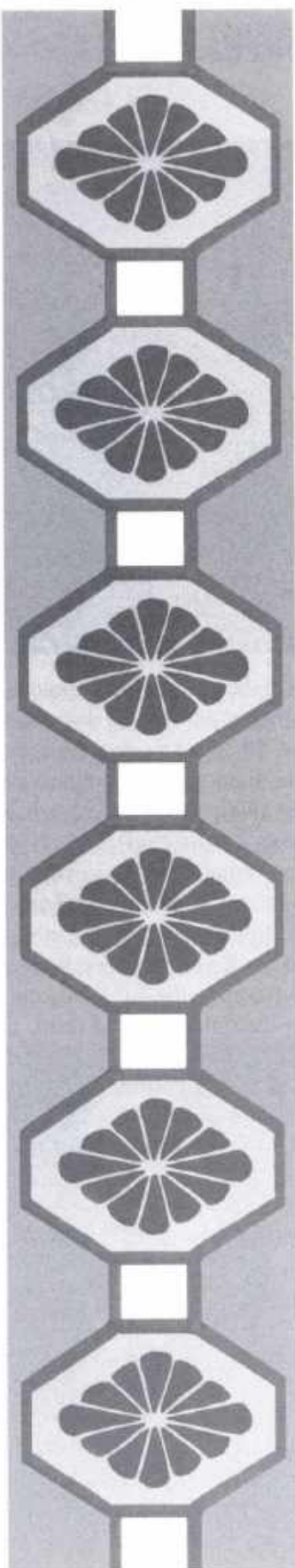
In 1997, Basil Twist was captivated by a brief black-and-white film clip showing mysterious sliding screens that provided the background for a nearly extinct form of Japanese puppetry. A commission from the Japan Society and two journeys to Japan gave Basil the opportunity to re-create this unusual genre and to blend it with his own personal vision. He uses 88 sliding screens, music and video projection to present a unique work of visual theatre.

My own past experience with Japanese theatre prompted my early arrival at the elegant Japan Society, to allow time to mentally slow down. It also gave me a chance to read the extensive program notes, which offered clues to understanding an unfamiliar form of theatre.

Dogugaeshi is a stage mechanism that serves as a backdrop to traditional Japanese folk puppet theatre. Comprised of a series of intricately painted screens that slide open to reveal image after image in rapid succession, *dogugaeshi* developed in Awaji Island and Tokushima Prefecture. Its history is inextricably linked to that of Japanese puppetry.

Rural puppet theatres developed intricate backdrops for their productions called *fusuma-e* (painted sliding screens). The screens are set up on several tracks along the top and bottom edges and layered, so that opening one set of screens reveals another set behind, and so on. As the show progresses, the screens are opened one by one from downstage to upstage, each revealing the gorgeous *fusuma-e* (screen) behind. There are variations on this system of transforming images as well. For a play set inside a palace, the screens are drawn in perspective, revealing room after room. In addition to sliding, the screens can also pivot to reveal new images on the back side. This elaborate technique is commonly called *dogugaeshi* (set change). This complex and advanced stage mechanism developed with such intricacy that it became an independent attraction in its own right.

The Awaji Puppet theatre is the only professional troupe that continues to give public performances using the *dogugaeshi* technique. In a thatch-roofed theatre in Inukai Village, Tokushima Prefecture, there are 132 *fusuma-e*. The screens portray forty-two different kinds of landscapes including sparrows on bamboo, tigers, elephants, eagles, carp, chrysanthemums, Japanese maples and cherry blossoms. The theatre houses the mechanisms to manipulate the screens. The theatre holds a large annual performance festival in which the final portion of the performance is dedicated to *dogugaeshi*.





After reading the notes, it seemed that the sold-out audience of seventy might be viewing a sixty minute "slide show," essentially watching a long sequence of set changes. Would this be a puppet show of animated wall paper? Changing sets provides a kind of movement, and movement can be choreographed to provide drama. Basil Twist has refined and deepened his skills at making abstract moving objects glide, pause, transform, reveal or disappear. The slow meditative pace at the start is punctuated with a few surprising changes, and the work seems to subtly build in intensity. The beautifully painted screens include geometric designs of the type that might appear on sumptuous kimono fabrics. Other screens offer characteristic Japanese scenes of buildings, landscapes, swimming carp, ocean waves and flowering cherry trees through the seasons. The final sequence of receding images takes us ever further back in time and space to a distant shining light.

The abstract, contemplative nature of the changing visuals has fascinating diversions. The only actual puppet figure is Kitsune, the traditional white fox of Japanese mythology. With a finely sculpted face and a flowing white fabric body and tail, the darting, undulating fox puppet makes a brief but memorable appearance to do an expressive Kabuki style dance.

Beautiful weathered faces of smiling elderly Japanese women appear in a lovely and surprising sequence of projected video documentary. The women are recalling their memories of seeing magical dogugaeshi performances in their youth.

The music for Dogugaeshi is far more than mere accompaniment. The composer/ instrumentalist, Ms. Yumiko Tanaka, seated at the side of the stage, is visually captivating with her long, straight black hair, her air of intense, yet serene, concentration, and the visual beauty and ethereal sounds of the

shamisen and koto. The soundscape designed by Greg Duffin blends traditional Japanese practice with contemporary music ranging from pop songs to trance.

Like a fine Japanese meal or massage, I found Dogugaeshi to be refreshing and stimulating

Puppeteers for Dogugaeshi were Basil Twist, Kate Artibee, Philippe Rodrigues-Jorda, Jessica Scott

[Note— press kit materials mention Twist's collaborator and translator Jane Marie Law. For a review of her excellent book on the puppet theatre of Awaji—Puppets of Nostalgia— see PI #11, page 28. Ed.]

Steve Abrams is a former president of Puppeteers of America, and is a puppeteer from "the city of brotherly love"—Philadelphia, PA.

ESNAM:

at the permanent intersection of performance and image



There is a place, where a puppeteer finds herself at a crossroads. Whom does she meet there? Which road will she choose? A wine bottle sleeps on a bed of newspaper (the business section) while a line of cigar boxes chases a lone ballet slipper down a dark alleyway. But where, she wonders, are the puppets?

ESNAM (*École Supérieure des Arts de la Marionnette*) is housed at the *Institute International de la Marionnette* in Charleville-Mézières, France, under the auspices of the French Ministry of Culture. Students who complete the three-year training program receive a *Diplôme d'État*—a Fine Arts degree. The real goal of the program, though, is to keep the students always at the crossroads—the intersection of performance and image, ancient forms and modern procedures, the



abstract and the concrete. Their brochure, announcing the call for applicants for the 2005-2008 class poses the question: What can one claim to pass on when the art of the stage is in a state of perpetual questioning? They respond to this dilemma by: "Placing the emphasis on doing rather than on knowing, and move constantly between exercises and stage, maintaining constant openness to the world of artists. Determined to be a place of debate and exchange, the school turns questioning into a productive dynamic."

The first year is a probationary period, and there is a great emphasis on training of the body, the voice and movement, as well as the basics of stagecraft and puppetry, art and theatre history, analysis of drama, and more. At the end of the year, the faculty decides which of the students will be invited to continue.

In the second year, there is a focus on composition. Students learn to assimilate their knowledge of techniques of manipulation, construction and dramaturgy in the increased opportunities for experimentation. Students are involved in group projects with guest directors, as well as creating a solo piece.

In the third year, students are quite focused on experimentation and creative output. They form teams that invent group productions. They also follow their own individual leanings, creating an original show as a graduation piece.

Many, though by no means all, of the students are French. To date, the only American to matriculate is Basil Twist (certainly one of the brightest stars in our heaven), and New York's Roman Paska was its Director for a while. The competition for entrance is stiff, but if you get in, tuition is free; the French government seems to possess a notion of "nurturing the artist" which has somehow eluded our own leaders.

This is but the merest taste of what is offered at the school. Of the numerous other programs, one of the most exciting to us is CIEM—the International Convention of Puppetry Schools. When these schools from all over the world come together for their periodic "*Rencontres*," I am always reassured that the future of puppet theatre will continue to be very, very exciting. •



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THE VICTORIAN MARIONETTE

by **John McCormick**
with **Clodagh McCormick and John Phillips**

Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004
ISBN 0-87745-912-6 (paper) ISBN 0-87745-905-3 (cloth)

REVIEW BY BRADFORD CLARK

It's an exciting time to be a puppetry enthusiast. New books of scholarship seem to be appearing on a regular basis, with high standards of research and quality design. One of the latest entries, *The Victorian Marionette* (part of the Studies in Theatre History and Culture series from the University of Iowa Press), maintains the standard of archival research that distinguished John McCormick's previous book (co-written with Bennie Pratasik), *Popular Puppet Theatre in Europe, 1800 – 1914*. A fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, McCormick has previously published extensively in areas of popular theatre and directs puppetry productions as well. As a result, he brings both scholarly and creative perspectives to his research. This book serves as an in-depth, more narrowly focused complement to the earlier work.

As the introduction observes, the greater public associates British puppetry almost exclusively with the Punch and Judy glove-puppet tradition. The parallel history of string puppetry remains nearly unknown. Thus, this book fills an important gap in our knowledge of the popular theatre of this era, focusing primarily upon the years between 1860 and 1914. McCormick's painstaking research, which draws upon countless records and documents (many provided by the late puppetry scholar John Phillips, whose research McCormick cites as inspiration, and to whom the book is dedicated), provides a comprehensive portrait of the tradition and its most significant practitioners.

Organized thematically, each chapter focuses upon a different aspect of the Victorian puppet theatre.

Sections profile individual proprietors and the business aspects of their companies, compare and contrast performance venues and their architectural design, examine the nature of puppet acting techniques and audience response, discuss the popularity and sources of scripts and routines, and document the design and technical aspects of figures and productions. McCormick provides us with extensive endnotes, a glossary, and a bibliography.

Working from the perspectives offered by his popular theatre orientation, McCormick admirably recreates the contexts in which Victorian marionette performances took place. He clearly indicates where these productions stood in relationship to other aspects of the late 19th – early 20th century stage, illustrating the differences between a show presented in a temporary fairground set-up and one performed in a more established theatrical venue. Stories and personal reminiscences provide insight into the lives and struggles of entire families of puppeteers. Given the many difficulties that confronted the professional puppet artist—financial, legal and weather-related—one finds oneself wondering why anyone bothered to enter the field. Much to our delight, we come to see these mysterious proprietors as individuals driven by various combinations of passion, familial obligations, and financial necessity to maintain traditions that otherwise would have disappeared generations before.

The plays presented by these companies, often adapted (with severe cutting) from acting editions used by more conventional theatre companies, included many plots based upon sensational events and personalities. Quite a few of the melodramas cited are familiar to toy theatre



enthusiasts. While I certainly hope that the full puppet theatre scripts will be available some day, the book does an admirable job of discussing the sources and popularity of such subjects as Dick Turpin and Sweeney Todd, as well as pantomimes ("Red Riding Hood," "Beauty and the Beast") and various Fantoccini ("trick") and variety acts. McCormick thoroughly examines the nature of puppet stock companies, showing how the standardized figures, which often could be cast in a variety of roles with simple changes of clothing, paralleled the legitimate theatre's use of stock characters. Observations by Victorian audience members clearly indicate their aesthetic expectations; to be mistaken for a living actor constituted the ultimate accolade that a puppet could receive.

In most histories, stage scenery, lighting and even costumes tend to receive relatively little attention, no doubt due to the ephemeral nature of such elements. While limited by available documentation, McCormick offers unusually rich observations regarding the contributions of scenic painters to the Victorian marionette theatre, as well as those of costumers (who, after all, often create virtually the entire body of the puppet).

While not primarily a pictorial history, black and white photographs of puppets, playbills, and performers illustrate the book throughout. It also includes a color section, whose coated stock presents the photographs at their best. Clodagh McCormick's sketches of puppet structures and stringing methods, based upon first-hand examination of numerous collections throughout Europe, clarify key technical points and provide an important resource for anyone intrigued by classic variety acts. This level of in-depth research, drawing upon not simply written and photographic documentation of companies but figures and related ephemera as well, makes this volume invaluable.

Despite the sheer density of the material contained within, McCormick's enjoyable book remains highly readable and avoids needless jargon; it remains accessible to both scholars and casual enthusiasts alike. In terms of depth and importance, this book stands with Paul McPharlin's *History of the American Puppet Theatre* as a seminal work of archival research in the areas of both puppetry and popular theatre.

Brad Clark is a Board member of UNIMA-USA



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POWER PLAYS: WAYANG GOLEK PUPPET THEATER OF WEST JAVA

BY ANDREW N. WEINTRAUB

Athens: Center for International Studies -
Ohio University Press, 2004
ISBN 0-89680-240-X (paper); 295 pp; \$30

While the Indonesian *wayang kulit* shadow theatre, especially that of Java, has enjoyed scholarly attention in the west for many years, the Sundanese *wayang golek* rod puppet theatre had received relatively little attention in the English language before Kathy Foley's seminal 1979 dissertation, *The Sundanese Wayang Golek: The Rod Puppet Theatre of West Java*. Since then, a couple books have focused on individual aspects of *wayang golek*. These include Peter Buurman's *Wayang Golek: The Entrancing World of Classical West Javanese Puppet Theatre* (Oxford University Press, 1988), which focuses primarily on puppet iconography, and Mimi Herbert's book, *Voices of the Puppet Masters* (Lontar Foundation / University of Hawaii Press, 2002), which contains exquisite photographs of many figures along with first person narratives from the best known and respected *dalangs* (puppet masters). In 2001, ethnomusicologist Andrew Weintraub produced a six CD recording, *Wayang Golek: The Sound and Celebration of Sundanese Puppet Theatre*, which documented and provided an English transcription of a performance by Asep Sunandar. Now comes Weintraub's book, *Power Plays: Wayang Golek Puppet Theater of West Java*. Together, these works provide us with tools necessary to appreciate this extraordinarily vibrant and culturally relevant performance genre, complementing each other rather than duplicating efforts.

Intended for an audience interested in examining the social and political functions of *wayang golek* in performance, the book examines the phenomenon of the *dalang* "superstar" and the extraordinary role such performer /commentators have played in Indonesian political discourse since the 1965 ascendancy of Suharto into the post-Suharto era. *Power Plays* is organized into an introduction and three major sections ("The State of Wayang Golek," "Poetics and Politics," and "Cultural Technologies and Representation"), each containing several essays. An appendix offers short biographies of four well-known *dalangs*; endnotes, a glossary, and an extensive bibliography follow. The introduction establishes Weintraub's procedural approach to his material and contextualizes the performances of *wayang golek* within contemporary Indonesian and, specifically, Sundanese life. The book is based upon years of field work in Java and personal

contact with *dalangs*; his tremendous personal knowledge and enthusiasm for his subject shows.

Themes established in the introduction and early chapters continue throughout the book. What are the responsibilities of the *dalang* in contemporary political discourse? How does a Sundanese audience view itself in relation to the political positions of non-Sundanese politicians? In fact, how do the Sundanese they see themselves in relationship to Indonesia as a whole?

Researchers often describe *wayang golek* (as well as other genres of traditional puppetry) as a form offering a kind of "common man" commentary on contemporary life, but the exact nature of such observations has not often been examined in depth. There is a huge difference between the kind of genial, non-threatening, topical humor of a late-night talk-show host and the more pointed, potentially revolutionary satire of a political humorist with an agenda. In Indonesia, especially during the thirty-some years of Suharto's rule, *dalangs* needed to tread a narrow path if they were to both maintain their relevance and popularity but not run afoul of government watchdogs. Weintraub discusses the ways in which a few selected *dalangs* benefited from government support (which in the Suharto era, allowed access to media outlets such as television and the cassette recording industry, where reputations were made), how they cooperated with government dictates (either out of feelings of patriotic obligation or through fear of reprisal), and how they negotiated ways to present their opinions and connect directly with their audiences despite such confines.

Power Plays argues that the entertainment values of *wayang golek* cannot be separated from its effectiveness as a conveyor of rhetorical discourse. While critics worldwide often make such distinctions, seeing the entertainment aspects of traditional performance as being inherently inferior to those of spiritual, philosophical and educational functions, Weintraub postulates that entertainment provides the necessary context for communication; an audience that is bored is not likely to linger long enough to receive illumination, nor engage the *dalang* in the kind of dialogue which defines *wayang*.

While some chapters are most valuable to the specialized reader (one focuses specifically on issues of tuning and innovation in the creation of multiple-mode gamelan instrument ensembles, for example), even the general reader benefits from such discussions due to the book's overall clarity of purpose. If the specific innovations of superstar *dalangs* (the most successful of whom may design and own their own

POWER PLAYS

Wayang Golek
Puppet Theater
of West Java

Includes interactive
multimedia CD-ROM

Andrew N. Weintraub

gamelan orchestras) seem esoteric, it's important to understand how such innovations have fueled the popularity of such dalangs as Asep Sunandar (the subject of much of Weintraub's discussion). Such mass acceptance has invigorated wayang golek and saved it from the sad fate of so many other tradi-

tional puppetry forms world-wide. Yet this is not a renaissance without controversy, and while Weintraub's sympathies are with the innovators, he balances his perspective with the concerns of conservative practitioners and critics who see such innovation as detrimental to the ancient art form.

This edition is accompanied by a CD-ROM, which expands the introductory chapter. While Weintraub's book does not attempt to offer an extensive introduction to all aspects of wayang, this CD-ROM admirably introduces wayang golek to new audiences. Short video clips, including interviews with dalangs, performance segments and a demonstration of puppet carving, join musical excerpts, charts, photographs (the book itself has only a few) and a glossary to provide a comprehensive overview. Especially helpful clips demonstrate movement patterns associated with the various character classifications. The materials selected for the CD-ROM are specific to the text, especially important since Weintraub's essays largely focus on the significant innovations of contemporary dalangs (including a wonderfully rude figure capable of vomiting in a spectacular manner). While the necessity of fitting so much material on a single CD does not allow for high-resolution clips, the multimedia content tremendously enhances the reader's understanding of wayang golek as a living performing art (and adds greatly to the value of this very reasonably priced book).

I also greatly appreciated the technical design of the CD-ROM. As one of that tiny percentage who works on a Mac, I have come to accept that most CD-ROMs are not compatible with my system; the most I can usually hope for is access to individual, unlabeled media files such as JPEG's and QuickTime movies. Imagine my delight when I saw that this CD works perfectly not only on PCs, but on both older and newer Mac operating systems.

A work such as this wisely chooses to focus on specific aspects of its subject, leaving others for later inquiry. I did find myself wishing to know more about the complex roles Islam and specifically Sundanese belief systems play in the roles of

Javanese dalangs as conveyors of Hindu stories. In addition, a play scenario and excerpts from various performances whetted my appetite for more extensive translations.

This kind of scholarship requires a willingness to go to the sources of knowledge and listen carefully. It's exciting to see a work of real scholarship, which both draws upon original, first person field exploration and an extensive body of previously published research, much of it in Indonesian. As with Jan Mrazek's recent critical anthology, *Puppet Theatre in Contemporary Indonesia* (University of Michigan, 2002), in which part of *Power Plays* previously appeared, Weintraub's book presents wayang as a living, relevant form of theatre, speaking to a wide audience and having tremendous political and cultural impact. *Power Plays: Wayang Golek Puppet Theater of West Java* makes an especially significant contribution to the growing area of interdisciplinary puppetry scholarship. •

REVIEW BY BRADFORD CLARK

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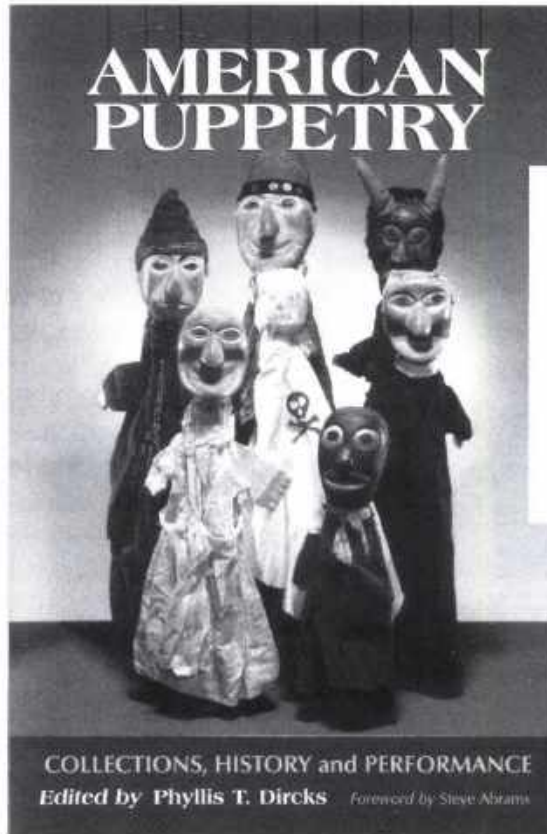
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Punch and Judy [by John Payne Collier] with Illustrations Drawn and Engraved by George Cruikshank. Kent: Pryor Publications, 2002.

Phyllis T. Dircks, editor, *American Puppetry: Collections, History and Performance*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Publishers, 2004.

David Solnit, editor, *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2004.

Andy Serkis, *The Lord of the Rings: Gollum. How We Made Movie Magic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.



**PUPPET
BOOKS
SHORT LIST**
BY JOHN BELL

These four relatively recent books show the wide range of ways that puppet theater has emerged in 21st-century society. John Payne Collier and George Cruikshank's *Punch and Judy* is a beautiful facsimile reprint of the original 1828 edition, which marked an important moment in European cultural history, when intellectuals and artists began to look at low-culture forms such as puppet theater as somehow worthy of interest. Cruikshank's illustrations have long been celebrated, but Collier's analysis of the history and meaning of Punch is enlightening. Pre-figuring Mikhail Bakhtin's modernist celebration of how popular culture turns things "upside down" through carnival, puppet theater and the grotesque, Collier connects Punch to Shakespeare's Falstaff by pointing out how "the ruling and strongest principle" in the minds of both is to "gratify the grosser and lower appetites." Collier's painstaking transcription of Punchman John Piccini's show (even in its bowdlerized state, which Joel Schechter pointed out in *Puppetry International* #7) is a priceless look at early nineteenth-century society dreams laid bare, as if you could see into the subconscious minds of a million Edwardian Londoners.

American Puppetry: Collections, History, and Performance is Phyllis T. Dircks's collection of essays about puppet collections across the United States, from the American Museum of Natural History to the Lou Harrison Collection at the University of California at Santa Cruz. The book is published by the Theatre Library Association, but the essays are not simply dry compendiums of collection holdings. Instead, each chapter is structured a bit differently, reflecting

the different basis of each collection. Annette Fern's piece on "The Marionette Theatre of Peter Arnott at Harvard University" is really a short biography of this remarkable scholar/puppeteer's life and work, as is the brief survey of Burr Tillstrom's work (collected at the Chicago Historical Society) by Bernard R. Reilly, and Richard Leet's history of Bill Baird's work, now housed at the Charles H. MacNider Museum in Mason City, Iowa. Elka Schumann's elegantly written essay on "The Bread and Puppet Theater Company Collection" is both a short history of that theater and an evocation of Bread and Puppet's barn museum in Glover, Vermont.

While these collections are based on the works of individual puppeteers, those at the American Museum of Natural History, the Center for Puppetry Arts, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Lou Harrison Collection, and the Ballard Institute at the University of Connecticut are more wide-ranging assemblages of different areas of puppet activity, generally with a global focus.

A separate section of Dircks's book looks at museum- and exhibition-related issues. Leslee Asch chronicles the various exhibits produced by the Jim Henson Company, while Mina Gregory, Maureen Russell and Cara Varnell contribute a concise and strictly informative essay on "The Fundamentals of Marionette Care." Mary Flanagan's essay on the development of computer-generated cyber "puppets" seems a bit out of place here, disconnected from the bulk of texts on collections; this is also the case with Alan Woods's history of

Julie Taymor's work. But Dircks closes with appendices on even more puppet collections, and a listing of puppet films in the New York Public Library's Donnell Collection. The net effect of this book is to make you wonder how you could best organize a road trip across the United States to look at all of these quirky and idiosyncratic collections.

David Solnit's *Globalize Liberation* is an anthology of essays about the downside of globalization, but with a firm belief in grassroots organizing as an antidote, and an equally firm belief in such cultural forms as puppet theater as a means to effectively counter the contemporary flood tide of global capitalism. Solnit himself is an international puppet proselytizer, based in San Francisco, who has traveled internationally, from Seattle to Israel, Argentina, and other countries, where he builds giant puppets from local materials to be used in spectacular street events. *Globalize Liberation* is an interesting marker of contemporary performance culture, because it shows how centrally important activist puppet theater has become in the anti-globalization movement.

Finally, Andy Serkis's autobiographical story of Gollum, the cyber anti-hero of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* epic is also not strictly a puppet book, even though the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy used an amazing array of puppet techniques. Serkis marks his unusual path from a career as an English actor to his culminating expertise as a motion-capture performer whose physical movements were transformed into the digital information which ultimately made Gollum "alive" on screen. Serkis has some initial qualms about losing an

actor's central tools: his face and body; but he comes to recognize certain advantages of being a full-body cyber puppeteer. When the technology of motion capture is first explained to him, Serkis is told "it was more like controlling or driving a puppet than acting the character, that I had to project life into the Gollum on screen." Serkis plunges into the work, puts on his computer vision goggles and: "What a buzz! Instantly it made sense." The interesting connections here are about how Serkis's work with cutting-edge spectacle technology bring him to pretty much the same kinds of challenges which traditional puppeteers have faced over the centuries. •

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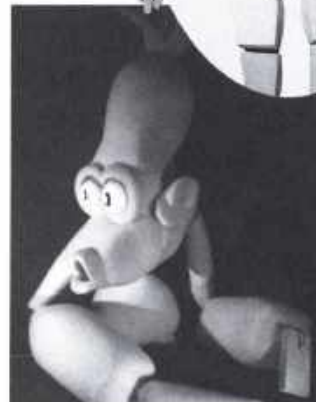
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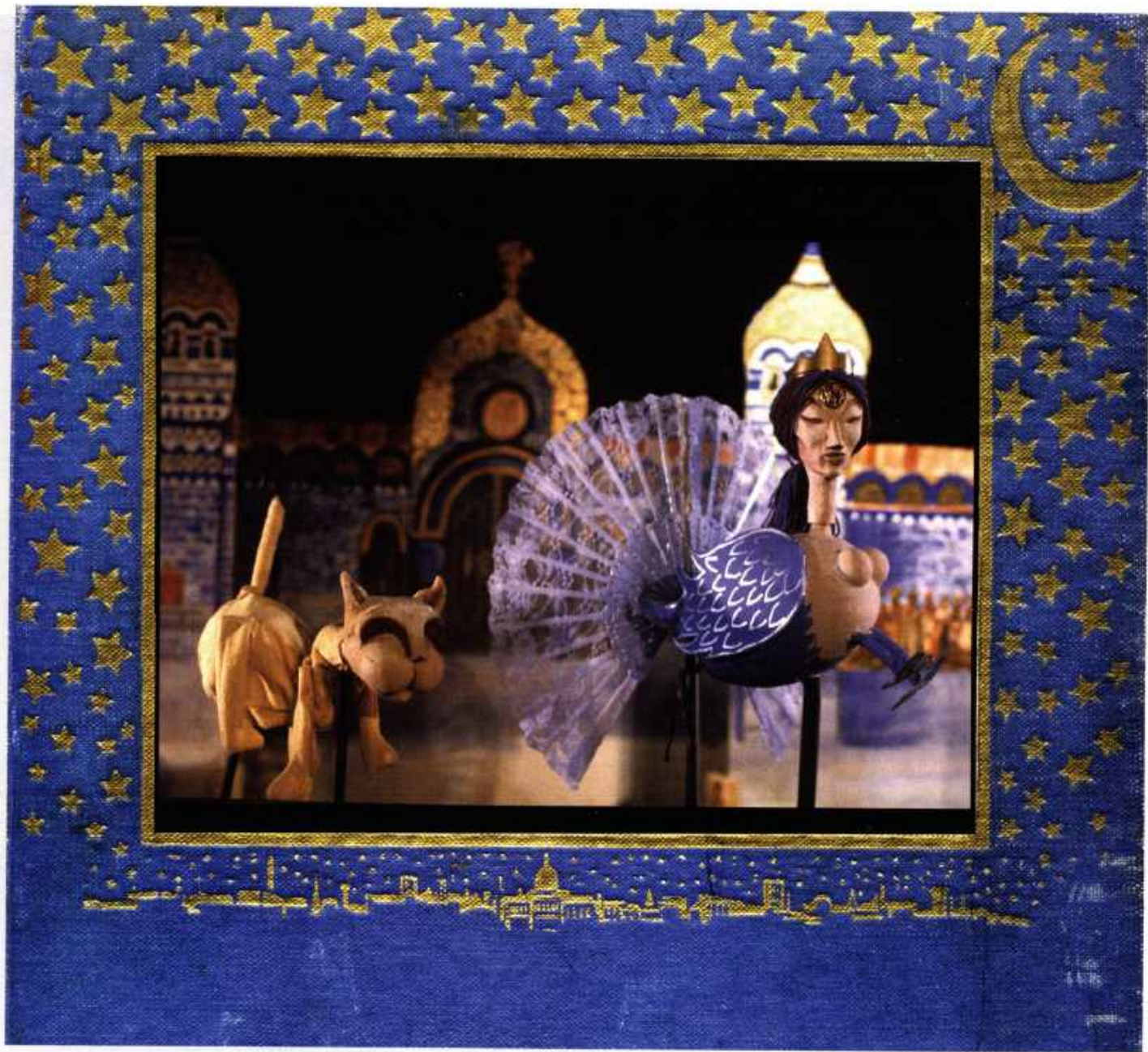


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Oliver Dalzell
Ice Cream for Diablo



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