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# PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

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issue no. 2

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Personal Vision, Leadership and the Future

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Tea at the Palace by the Puppetmongers Powell, winner of a 1995 UNIMA Citation (see article, page 20)

#### Back cover:

From FAUST, directed by Vit Horejs.

Part of the "Faustmania" which hit New York last year (see page 29).

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## Editorial

# Personal Mythologies: *leadership and vision in a consumerist culture*

Where do we find leadership in the arts, today? Who has the personal vision to turn our world-weary psyches around, heal us, set us off in a new direction?

Our Public Television station is re-running the Bill Moyers series: *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, and it strikes me that there's been a lot of talk about myth lately. Maybe this is related to the imminent millennial, historically a time of increased interest in spiritual causes, doomsday prophets, and other attempts to find a place for *Homo sapiens* in the cosmic order.

Perhaps the current crisis of meaning is related to the end of the cold war. As a child, my understanding of mythology was restricted to the Greek and Roman Gods—divine hanky panky and clashes of Titans. That was during the post Korean War era. The anticipated nuclear conflict between the superpowers made for terrifying bedtime stories: huge themes of good versus evil; a level of destruction entirely off the scale of human experience; a pantheon of spies, presidents and generals. It was also enormously motivating. It put a man on the moon. It gave our lives meaning: It gave us a myth.

The fairytale of Mutually Assured Destruction was not a real myth, perhaps—high marks for characters and conflict, but the climax was unthinkable. And the denouement? Unsatisfying. We used to have a Missile Gap. Now that that threat is gone, we seem to have a Meaning Gap. We have always looked to our storytellers for tales which would somehow provide answers to the big questions: why are we here? where are we going? what does it all mean? Now we must seek out new

storytellers. Our natural inclination is to look to popular culture. Superman, though, is allowed center stage only because he is a super salesman for his bosses: the twin gorgons of Production and Consumption—two snakes forever eating each other's tails. We require a storyteller not beholden to any worldly master, who understands the nature of invisible things, the intricacies of the actor's art, and the use of metaphor as a way of bridging the two.

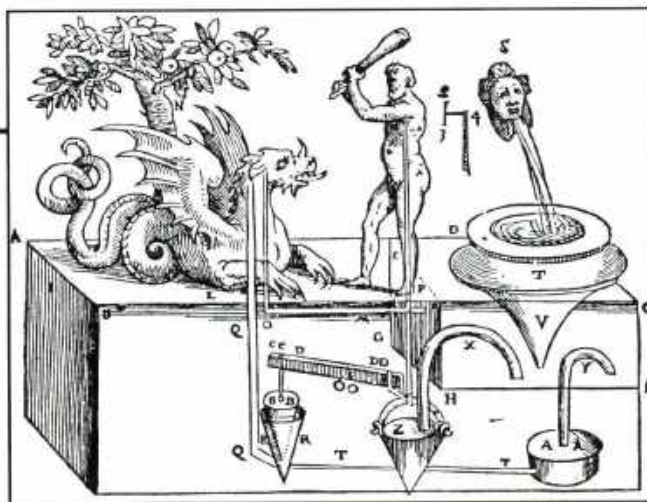
Puppetry is well-suited to mythmaking, and puppeteers with a strong personal vision—a "personal mythology"—will be the high priests of meaning in the new millenium. You doubt it? "Read on, Macduff!"

This issue is full of the work of such people, such as Eric Bass (page 32) and Joan Baixas (page 8). Leslee Asch looks at the work of three lesser-known American artists who have created their own mythologies in micro-scale (page 5). Institutions may, in the main, provide an effective antidote to personal vision, but some (especially smaller ones) are doing a commendable job in fostering this needed brand of leadership and heart both here (pages 13 and 16) and abroad (pages 11 and 19).

We also bring you news of two fascinating international collaborations in Mexico (page 22) and Nicaragua (page 26). There are puppets and Faust (page 29), puppets on film (page 36), and, finally, World Wide Web guru Jed Weissberg writes about what computer companies can learn from puppeteers (page 39).

Enjoy and take heart,

—Andrew Periale



*Hercules triumphs over the dragon, which spits water in his face. (1589)*



# Solitary Style

## *the development of a personal vision*

by Leslee Asch

The ability to conjure a complete and perfect world of one's own invention has always been at the heart of the appeal puppetry holds for artists. I can imagine no other field where this ability to "play God" is quite as alluring. The ability to control is the most obvious, but equally important to most artists is the ability to define—to define an aesthetic and a personal view of the world.

In the prologue to his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Carl Jung states, "What we are to our inward vision, and what man appears to be ... can only be expressed by way of myth. ... Thus it is that I have now undertaken, in my eighty-third year, to tell my personal myth."

David Feinstein and Stanley Krippner suggest in their book "Personal Mythology" that in the process of development we must know our own mythology before we can participate in the culture's mythology. As Feinstein puts it, "A primary role of myth always has been to carry the past into the present. Through this binding of time, a culture's accumulated knowledge and wisdom are brought to each new generation." However, in our current society this is no longer an easy thing. The village is now global, the family ties are scattered and we each must piece together and define our own beliefs and universe. In Feinstein's words,

"the half-life of a valid guiding myth has never been briefer." Obviously this is an issue for all individuals and for all artists, whatever their field and endeavor. However, I believe it has been grappled with and addressed in unique ways by puppeteers, given the special attributes of the medium. How does the puppeteer reinvent the world for his/her culture?

In the "recent past" there have been extraordinary individual artists who have perfected their own intimate means of expression, most notably the work of Robert Anton, Winston Tong and Bruce Schwartz. Although distinctly different, the work of these three artists were linked in the level of perfection and soul-searching depth put into each performance. There are also a number of contemporary artists whose work particularly exemplifies this ability. Several of these artists, such as Roman Paska, Theodora Skiptares and Neville Tranter (Netherlands) have already had a great deal written about their work.

I will focus here on the work of three very different and distinct artists. What unifies their work is the miniature scale in which they formulate complete worlds of their own imagining:

**Janie Geiser**—Janie Geiser has developed her own distinct vocabulary, a style all her own, a universe in miniature. In her most recent piece, *Evidence of Floods*, her woodcut-like imagery inspires it all.

The puppets and even the stage itself are beautifully hand crafted. They evoked a deceptively simple world, a dream world where fantasies and dream images dominate the mundane work-a-day world; where internal lives supercede the material. Many artists with such a complete vision choose to control all the parts, working primarily on solos.

Interestingly enough, this superpersonal world is not realized as a solo work. For "Evidence of Floods," her most ambitious work to date, there are 12 performers. Geiser has very intentionally chosen an aesthetic simplicity in order to focus on more complex issues. In this work, a woman is both running from domestic violence and pursued for a crime she did not commit. The scenes depict her journey through anger, fear, and loss to personal understanding and redemption. The musical score by Chip Epstein is extremely interesting. The action of the play is a series of eight toy theater vignettes. The audience moves, in small groups, from one vignette to the next. At each juncture, the music seemed to exactly hit the specific action. As someone who is always trying to analyze the technical, I found myself trying to figure out how the musical sections could be so perfectly timed to each vignette. In reality, the entire piece is one complete score and it's a chance occurrence that musical moments and



Janie Geiser and Company  
Evidence of Floods (1994)

photo: Janie Geiser



The chanteuse, from  
The Araneidae Show  
by Basil Twist



Warner Blake's  
Soup Talk Number One  
(1990)



physical actions coincide so perfectly.

Geiser was drawn to puppetry through her work as a visual artist. She wanted to expand her drawn image to, as she puts it, "incorporate the dimension of time and to explore an alternative approach to the narrative elements that had always been part of my work."

**Basil Twist**— I've thought a lot about how to describe the recent *The Araneidae Show*, and all I keep coming back to is young, campy, outrageous and thoroughly entertaining. Twist's young career is worth examining in light of two current discussions in the field: professional training and the quirky strengths of puppet theatre. Basil Twist was the first US artist to complete the full three year program of study at the International Puppetry Institute at Charleville-Mézières, France. In fact, this show was originated as his graduate thesis project.

Based in large measure on dream images, the piece successfully juxtaposes surreal dream imagery with a campy cabaret style. The manipulation is exquisite and the imagery and staging is so lush that it seems almost impossible at times to remember that this is a completely solo performance. Unlike Geiser, Twist, who is a third generation puppeteer, has been interested in and

has experimented with puppetry since childhood. I asked his thoughts on the development of this work and his personal style and he commented, "my time studying in France was very important to me. I would never have developed this style without having studied the full range of theatrical expression. As an American, it was important for me to show that I could be serious, while consciously playing with the classical American style."

**Warner Blake**— Weighty, wonderful and worldly, Warner's work tackles seemingly impersonal, historical mega-events, weaving them into a new, personal vision and societal mythology. He begins his newest work, which will be the conclusion of *The Soup Talk Trilogy*, with a quote from James Joyce: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." This very aptly sets the stage for the intertwining or overlaying effect of history, time, dreams and the individual interpretation of events.

Conceived as a soiree to be performed *at* and *on* the dinner table, *The Soup Talks Trilogy* is an exhilarating romp through the ages of civilization. Following the great tradition of performers like Robert Anton, Blake performs in his studio for an intimate audience, seated around a specially rigged conference table. The table is flanked at one end by a miniature proscenium stage, and a screen for rear projections at the other end. In between, whole armies

are portrayed by miniature soldiers, with little white baby booties standing guard.

When I asked him to discuss the evolution of his style and how he has developed his personal mythology within these enormous themes, he commented: "Coming out of a traditional theater background, I was looking for a process which would require fewer meetings. And this turned into a search for the connection between personal expression and the dramatic idea."

I think that Gordon Craig, the great theater artist, would have been delighted by Warner's trilogy and his conclusions. Craig imagined a time when the *Über-marionette* ("until he has won for himself a better name") would replace actors and reunite the theater with its religious and symbolic roots. And so he ends his famous 1907 essay "The Actor and the *Über-marionette*": "I pray earnestly for the return of the image—the *Über-marionette* to the Theatre; and when he comes again and is but seen, he will be loved so well that once more will it be possible for the people to return to their ancient joy in ceremonies— once more will Creation be celebrated— homage rendered to existence— and divine and happy intercession made to Death."

Should we strive for anything less? The myths continue to grow and so the torch is passed! •



# A Peculiar Itinerary

by Joan Baixas

*Reprinted with permission from Malic No. 3\**

In myth, water and blood, fire and sperm, earth and the womb, air and the brain, all live in a continuous present. We receive news of who we think we are, where we think we come from and what we assume awaits us. It places our exiguous existence between the coordinates of universe and instant. It inquires into the certainty of our intentions and the vast limitations of our perceptions.

Myth persists in symbolic thought, of hidden and diversified roots. The scientific discourse would have us glimpse a mirage of progress and transcendence; by contrast, practical intelligence suspects the ridiculousness of our pretensions. The mythological narrative establishes a poetic bridge between the optimism of the one form of thought and the pessimism of the other. A bridge above nature that situates the landscape. Be it from the study of objects of cult or the cult of objects, from research into the taming of animals or the taming of people, from examination of the history of sex or the sex of history, all thought passes through myth. Until philosophy is reached which, in order to open the door to science, knocks myth out and transforms it into a bundle of tales. Although there is philosophical myth and scientific myth, but that's another story. Actually, myth has become a symbolic language thanks to philosophy, which lets myth sit at table to take part in the feast of wisdom but does not allow it to the place of the one who dishes out the soup. Fortunately, of course.

Myth, in the first place, is not literary work. It comes to us above all the words of politicians and factotums, in sales and finance strategies, in films and stories, in trademarks and sentences, in jokes and bedtime stories. It lives in dream and dreams of us awake. A vital magma that nourishes us unawares, in its subtle

existence we never come to know it completely; it lives us, acts as a parasite on us and reveals itself little by little.

Mythological thought says that nothing happens gratuitously, that everything is symbol, a message to be decoded. Whether or not its reasoning can be verified, symbolic thought helps us live. It works in favour of poetry and poetry is the good life. It is Dionysian and, as such, a sign of fertility. Poetry is abundance, whatever the material conditions in which it develops. Mythological thought, like all the good things in life, enjoys a conflictive predisposition towards excess. Alas! "Everything I love is either illegal, immoral or fattening."

It is said that myth is the sacrificial alibi that prevents the extermination of the species, the foundational plot of the tribe. It defines with transparency the troop to which the adventurous subject who uses our name belongs. I'm different from you because in my ancestral dream Prometheus appears, and not Garuda or Quetzatcoatl, or Odin. But the name does not make the thing, and under different names the same subjects move through different landscapes—mutable names and faces for characters without body or face.

When mythological thought was the only form of human reasoning and all knowledge resided in myths, the basic energies that made up human life were materialised in the form of animated figures. Related to death, fertility, the natural forces, rules of conduct or soothsaying, we find them in all cultures. Puppets, fetishes and masks were the bodily forms of knowledge, the incarnation of chimeric beings who with their games encouraged the vivification of the common spirit. Puppets, objects of power, live in myth "like water in water." Rather than theatre characters, katxins,

wayangs, puppis and all their relatives are teratological monsters who delight in revealing themselves to humans enveloped in mystery. And theatrical tricks are not mechanisms of deceit, as the obstinate would have it, but rather the aura of enchantment necessary for the eclosion of the poetic life of the tribe.

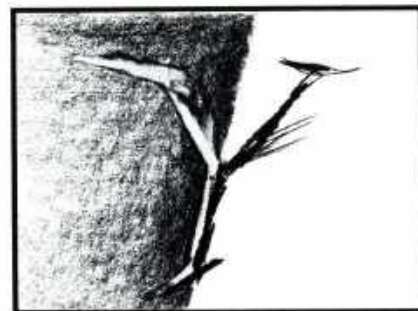
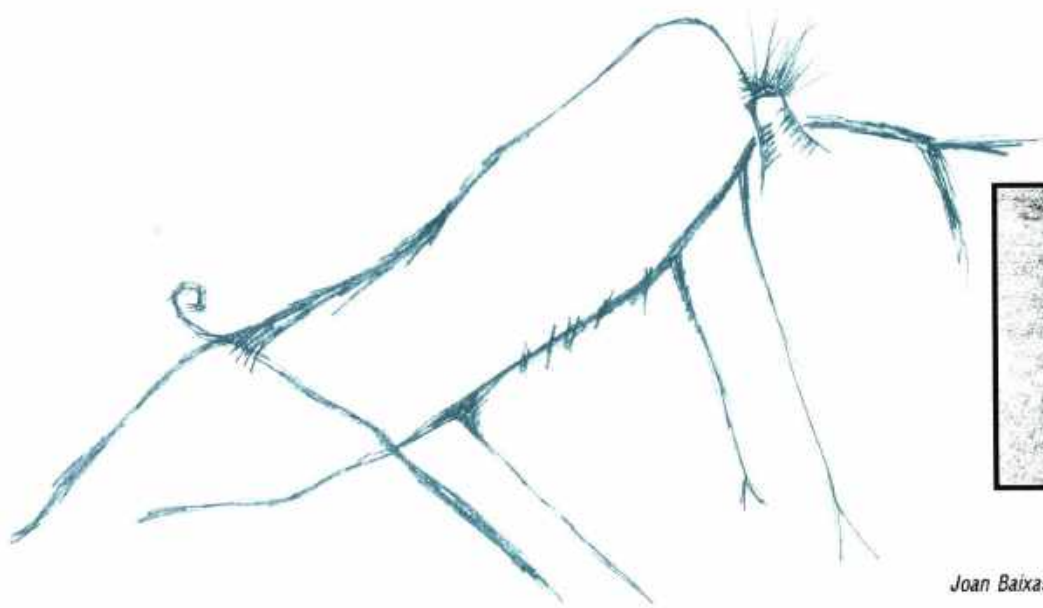
After centuries had passed and puppets in Europe had for better or for worse allowed themselves to be tamed by theatre conventions, they lost their sacred nature and became psychological archetypes. They were relegated to the second deivision. Their watchword was now the emotion of "as if I were." The protagonists of myth became imitators of actors, which doesn't lack its own poetics, of course.

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*Whoever wants poetry  
has to build up his  
personal myth...*

It was not until the twentieth century, with their discovery by the avant-garde movements, that puppets shook off this caricaturesque consideration. A re-emergence, rather than invention, for which we have to thank Jarry and Artaud, Klee, Picasso, Léger, Depero and all those artists who ceased to stare at the European navel to contemplate the wide horizons of other continents and their arts. And by way of other paths, puppets came to represent unknown reaches of reality: the machine and the monster, matter and form, dream and idea. There are no longer collective myths, or those that still exist are no longer poetic. Whoever wants poetry has to build up his own personal myth. Puppeteers abandoned the petty psychology of theatre of imitation to explore new territories. Or some





Joan Baixas,

Pencil on paper

attempted this, at least. The art of the past thirty years is full of these proposals: Joly, Genty, Boerwinkel, Paska, Schumann... personal plots on common ground: the sensation that everything is a message that has to be properly savoured to be deciphered; the conviction that everything has unknown and multiple reasons; the thrill of gaining access to innumerable poetic aquariums.

Ruminations of this kind saturate me at sundown while I stroll around the motorway *relais*, stretching my legs, tired from the long European tour, an empty sandwich bag in one hand and a can of beer in the other. Suddenly I'm struck by a startlingly simple idea. The idea that my puppeteering work of the last twenty-odd years is a kind of initiatory path along which mythology and its symbolic forms has been clearly and subconsciously manifesting itself following, apparently at least, an impeccable order. Even though each work featured a variety of characters and situations, if I arrange the central themes the whole appears as a musical score that seems to be full of meaning. These are the main ones:

- In 1967, in my first work I discovered the hero, the child Miguel Abatxvili [sic] from *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by B. Brecht, a defenseless hero still without speech.

- In *Calaix de Sastre* (1969) I found

man and woman, Zeus and his lovers. The man who undresses the woman in a sensual game of striptease. The man and the woman who quarrel stupidly until they destroy each other's painted faces, in the number *Pintura*.

- In *El Conte de les Aigües* (1971), inspired by a myth of the Pueblo Indians, I met Apollo and Dionysus, the endless flight that gives birth to life. The beauty of the winter night storm and the attractiveness of the smooth lake in the midday sun.

- In *Les Aventures d'en Martinet i la Pepeta* the hermaphrodite, man on the right and woman on the left, the actor who plays two characters simultaneously.

- In *Nyaps* (1975) Prometheus is presented carrying the fire in a cauldron. Death, the descent to Hell, pain and the Phoenix.

- In *Mori el Merma*, with Joan Miró, I discovered forms of energy and their games: the number three, the triangle and its harmonious manifestation, the spiral. Woman and her lovers. The emperor, the warrior and the slave. The dog, woman and the moon.

- *Peixos Abismals*, with Antonio Saura, adapted from a Chinese short story by Lou-Sin, was the experience of the four extremes of the horizon. Three men and a woman, three powers and an impotence. The artisan, the magician, the

emperor and the lover of all three.

- In *El Laberint*, with R.S. Matta, I went round and round in circles for so long that if it had not been for Ariadne disguised as the Minotaur, my whitened bones would have remained as the only record of my attempts to escape.

I am amazed. The discovery of this itinerary strikes me as a glaring message. If only I had Dr. Jung at my side to help me interpret it... Who would assure me that this bizarre programme is nothing more than a string of coincidences, or who would see it as an ordered compendium of private instructions? Whatever it is, it feeds my beliefs in the subconscious persistence of a language, that of myth, which is awakened in us, in this case through animated objects, enveloped in mystery and charm and without the scare of irrefutable certainty.

*Baixas, a painter and puppeteer, works at the Institut del Títore, in Barcelona. His work progressed in relative obscurity until recently, as a wider community of European puppeteers has come to know him as an important and visionary artist.*

\*Malic magazine is co-produced by *Teatre Malic* and Institut del Títore. *Teatre Malic* c/ Fussina 3, 08003 Barcelona, Spain. Fax 319-56-47

## *Institutions:*

*Do they nurture personal vision or encourage conformity? Following are four establishments with quite different approaches.*



*In Russia there is a school where puppeteers are trained from the inside out, where master and student are partners, and where individual style is valued above mere technical skills. This is certainly a model for nurturing self-confidence and personal vision.*



# The Three Padlocks

by Michael Khoussid

It is impossible to call on ready recipes in the matter of a school. The beginning of everything is to find those with whom one shares a concept of the world: A theatrical world, not a religious or philosophical one. It so happens that students, even though very talented, are unable to work with the sort of professor who instructs them in a theatre which they can neither understand nor feel. In that case, only a change of mentor will allow them to blossom.

## *An Approach Based on the Individual*

Moreover, it is necessary to research an individual approach. I am opposed to any mechanical selection process for students. Each student has their own unique value. It is necessary to find the path for each one, which allows them to achieve their maximum potential. For instance, no one ignores the fact that there exist introverts and extroverts. One has to take that quality into account. If the student is extroverted, they will go toward the audience, in an attempt to captivate them, to spill all their emotions out into the auditorium. If they are introverted, they will work on the nuances as a way of attempting to draw the audience into the scene. Of course, each actor may use in their work the entire gamut of possibilities. But to not take into account their general psychic tendencies is not very reasonable. If, in working with an introvert, used to details, to nuances, to imperceptible movements of the soul, you demand a high degree of excitation, a rebellious voice, large gestures, a flood of energy into the hall, you break their character and derail them.

One can also see differences in the approach to their role as a student. One student will use the material as a sort of fulcrum. The more the material is

profound and original, the more intense is the energy which floods the room.

For another student, the natural path is to fuse with the material, to temporarily renounce their identity. Of course, quite independent of the specific details, the work of the student presumes an active source of creation. No amount of effort on the part of the teacher will be repaid if their dictates push a student toward passivity.

The process of apprenticeship is more fecund when the professor and the student behave as equals, one more experienced and the other less, marching together down a path of exploration. Only under these conditions is it possible to form, not an actor/technician, docile to the director's commands, who does nothing without someone whispering in their ear, but rather a creative independent personality. In my opinion, the tragedy of contemporary directing has to do with the way we hem in an actor in an attempt to be helpful with music, with stage directions, with costumes. The actor thus comes to resemble an invalid, incapable of discarding his crutches.

## *A Spartan Education*

I never promise an easy life to a student. What it is about is creating a situation in which one is obliged to *do*. One could call that a "spartan education". One must find oneself in the position of a person thrown into the water, whose choice is to either sink or swim. One must from the very outset cultivate in the student a concept of being a creator: active. The actor's instrument is nothing more or less than their own body, their own soul. One must regularly agree with them. That is why one of our essential principles is the existence, beside our school of theatre, of our actual theatre. The students must get used to performing with a professional

troupe. At the end of their time here, with set designer Youri Sobolev, we seek to place the actor within a very strong context— set, costumes, lighting and of course puppets. They must transcend all that or be crushed.

Our school practices evenhandedly the "politics of open doors": open to students and to the world. The more an actor is aware of what is going on in the world, the greater are his or her possibilities. That is why every interesting professor from any country can teach in our school. And our students must be ready to go to any school and work with any professor. It is thus, for example, that our students have met students and professors from France who were exposed to methodologies different from those to which they were accustomed. In our turn, we received representatives from schools inspired by pedagogical principles different from our own.

## *The Three Codes*

Our department is not located in St. Petersburg, but in Tsarskoe Selo, far from the "hustle and bustle" of the city, where one cannot so easily collect one's thoughts. And areas requiring reflection are not lacking. The actor in the field of Synthesis and Animation must not be in opposition to the world; in each object (mask, marionette, etc.) they must find a partner. Now and then we relate to a pantheistic conception of the world. We use the notion of the "three codes." The first code is ascribed to the object by nature itself— its destiny, its structure, its color, its temperament, its material. The second code is that given to an object by an artist, who transforms it into a product. That can be a sculptor, creating a mask, an armorer fashioning a sword, a modeler giving form to a puppet, or a master luthier who's making a violin. At the





All photos: Don Juan (1993)  
*Interstudio, International  
 School of Synthesis and  
 Animation*  
 Director: Michael Khoussid  
 Designer: Youri Sobolev

moment of creation, the artist inscribes in the object its feeling, its "self." And a third code is produced at the moment of the play's action. It is brought about either by the director or by the troupe. That is when the sort of opening of the three locks occurs.

The moment of animation is, to be sure, an act of creation upon the stage, *hic et nunc*; but the understanding, the preparation of an environment ideal for its realization is produced beforehand. In certain cases, the moment of synthesis and animation is enclosed within the performances. But that is nothing more than the transplantation of foreign elements into a dramatic structure, the occupation of a neighboring land. For example, in the plays of Szaina, Kantor, Eugenio Barba.

### *Quanta*

We must speak of another aspect of the actor's playing, important in the puppet theatre and even more so in the theatre of animation—the ability to exist on the stage as a discreet element. Take for example Quantum Theory. The actor must focus all his or her energy into a tiny moment to project like a quantum. Then the image is interrupted so that they may reappear on stage a bit later as the same—or perhaps a different—form, to accumulate anew the energy needed to project themselves into a new "quantum." From the director's point of view, it manifests the vague complexes which unify the episodes in a play, but the actor must know how to create an energetic inner system which would be sufficiently viable and clever to be able, like a gas, to fill no matter what form, even the extraordinary and

extravagant, to render them lively and authentic.

Thus our school addresses at once the traditional and the avant garde. The attempt to find within the traditional theatre structures the "roots" which correspond to our explorations does not bespeak piety. Rather, it is the visual forms of antique Greek theatre, with mask, chorus, cothurni, and so on, which are so close to the theatre of animation. At the wellsprings of both the ancient theatre and the theatre of synthesis may be found the same pantheist conception of the world.

*Michael Khoussid is the director of Interstudio, International School of Synthesis and Animation near St. Petersburg, Russia*

*Translated by A. Periale*



# The National Puppetry Conference

by Richard Termine

*Every generation of puppeteers has a few obvious leaders—artists with a vision so unique and clear that they set the standard for everyone else. Whether such leadership can be created is doubtful, but it can certainly be given a helping hand along the way—by a mentor, a collaborator, an institution. One such institution is the National Puppetry Conference. Through its programs involving master teachers, guided individual projects and dramaturgical development, this annual Conference certainly contributes to the development of the personal vision of future leaders in the field.*

In 1990 Jane Henson established the Rose Endowment for Puppetry at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut, one of the cradles of contemporary American Theater. Its purpose was to provide seed monies for ongoing puppetry programs in the tradition of earlier offerings at the O'Neill directed by Rufus and Margo Rose and, more recently, by the Institute of Professional Puppetry Arts, directed by Bart Roccoberon. With the establishment of this endowment we faced the question of how to best serve the continuing development of our art form and the community of professional puppeteers.

At the O'Neill, practitioners of various theatrical forms (plays, musicals, cabaret, etc.) have found a safe haven in which to experiment and workshop their material. In this environment, far from the critics of New York, artists and audience can share in the process of listening to each other and honing the performance material. The O'Neill Theater Center's landmark program, The National Playwrights Conference, was established 30 years ago and dedicated solely to assisting the playwright develop new scripts for the human theatre. The workshop process

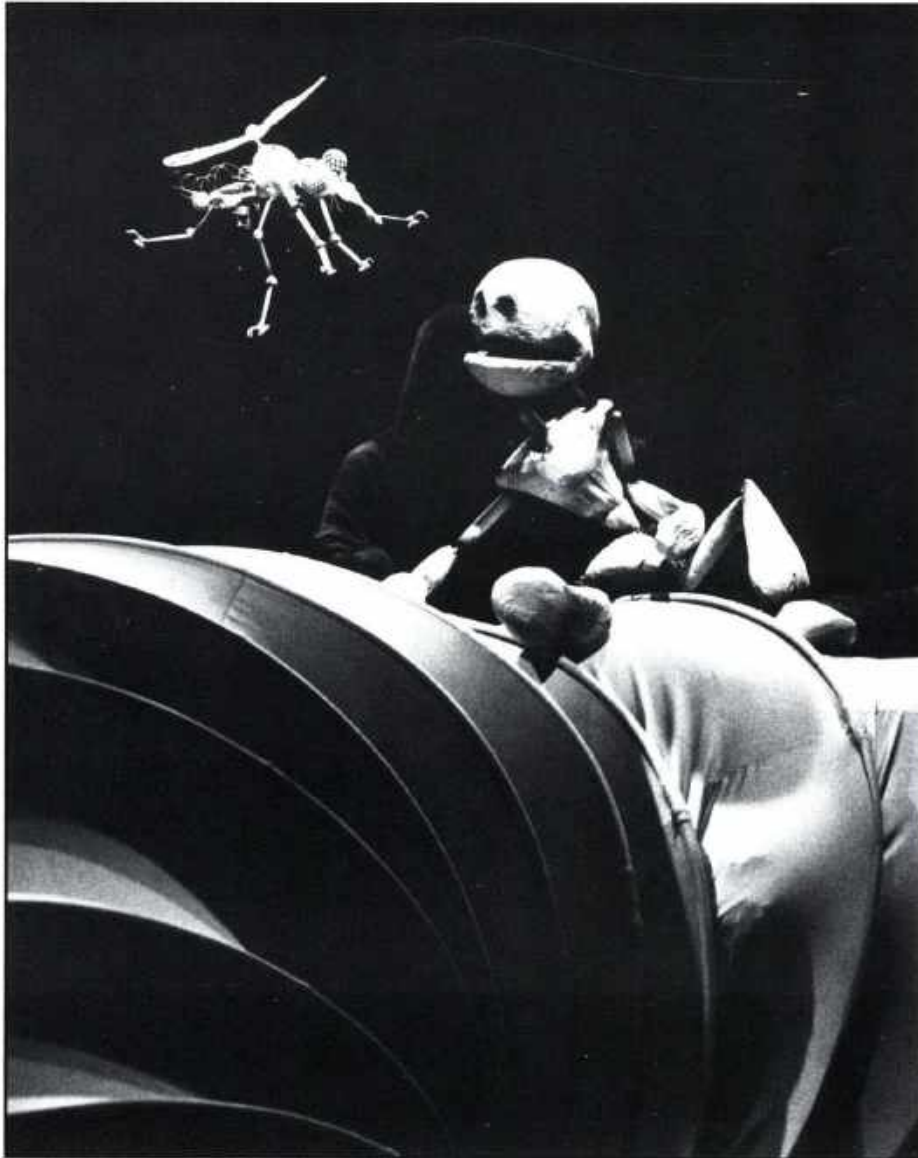
keeps the focus on the script and play-making, where a dynamic and viable structure of dramatic events (or good storytelling, if you will) are of primary concern. The physical and visual production elements are minimal so as not to overshadow or obstruct the performance material being presented. Another important element is feedback from the audience; discussions following staged readings invite audience participation in the process. Certainly there was something we could learn from this program.

As Artistic Director I wanted to take full advantage of this wonderful opportunity to create a program that would enrich and expand our art form. The prime issues for me became, "What can we learn from the O'Neill and its workshop production approach; what are the strengths and weaknesses of our art form; what structures and processes can we create to become a more viable art form?"

We began from the belief that, as an art form, puppetry is sorely in need of new literature and new performance material that can spawn additional productions, interpretation and reinvention as the human theatre does. Unlike the theatre of the human actor, the puppet theatre is a visual form that requires a more interactive development process beyond the written page, and while the human theatre relies on a playwright, director, designers and actors, the puppet theatre artist may assume any and all of these functions. Thus, adapting the O'Neill approach, we have come to support the puppet artist and his or her vision by providing collaborative performers, materials, technical assistance and a production support system. It is our hope that this will give the guest artists a certain objectivity by allowing them to

step out of the production to work as director, designer and visionary. A dramaturg is also available as a literary resource for the playwright/scenographer to assess the dramatic structure and theatrical viability of the material, while maintaining a dialogue with the director (often the same person). This provides reference and feedback as he or she charts the production course. This process is utilized in all workshop productions conducted by the Conference.

The core of each Conference is a featured guest artist workshoping an ensemble production. These have included such world-renowned artists as Albrecht Roser (a mask exploration of Stravinski's *A Soldier's Tale*) and Roman Paska (his original *Moby Dick in Venice*). In 1993, Muppet and puppet performer Martin Robinson created an original production, *Jackstraws*, which was presented to the playwrights and staff of the National Playwrights Conference. This was our first opportunity to "show our stuff" to the O'Neill theatre community, and Mr. Robinson took full advantage of the opportunity. As he stated in his program notes, "Those who have seen quality theatrical puppet pieces may be familiar with the kind of power we puppet folk wield; most theatregoers are not... Hopefully, [this production will be] an inspiration for puppeteers to go beyond the more traditional forms, and audiences to expand their definition of theatre." That evening also included the presentation of an original one-act play for actors and puppets, "Body and Soul" by Murphy Guyer, an alumnus of the National Playwrights Conference. Another National Playwright alumna, Annie Evans, joined us as a participant for that Conference in order to learn more about



*Jackstraws, June 1993*

*by Martin P. Robinson*

photos: Richard Termine



*Gogol's Diary of a Madman*  
*Adapted by Lenny Pinna and*  
*Richard Termine*  
*L to R: Daniel Tamulonis and*  
*Greg Ruhe*



*The Bonsai Boy*  
*by George Latshaw*  
*June, 1992*

*L to R: Mark Levenson,*  
*John Creson, Mary Harrison*





*Albrecht Roser with Cast of Stravinsky's  
The Soldier's Tale—*

*L to R: Deb Glassburg, Jo McLaughlin,  
Steve Widerman, Mary Harrison,  
Albrecht Roser and Bernd Ogradnik*

photo: Richard Termine

puppet artist Larry Reed and his shadow production based on Joseph March's *The Wild Party*. As I review the development of the Conference, it is wonderful to see how it has grown and evolved in a few short years into such a diverse and rich gathering of puppetry activity. I am not only excited by the caliber of the talented guest artists, staff and participants who come together to collaborate but also by the very nature of the work that is being created. At the O'Neill we are doing what we set out to do: provide a safe place to collaborate and learn from each other, and create a process by which to develop new works. This approach allows the puppet artist to find his or her voice, and to let the imagination take flight while staying connected with the essential theatrical origins of the playmaking process, creating new work that will have a life beyond our Conference and will broaden the horizons of our seemingly limitless art form. •

puppetry and to include it in her writing. She is now writing scripts for "Sesame Street" and is on our staff as our playwright-in-residence.

The Conference is staffed by outstanding professionals including Jane Henson, Margo Rose, George Latshaw, Bart Roccoberton, Bobbi Nidzgorski, Annie Evans and Lenny Pinna. Under their direction and guidance, Conference participants create their own individual or ensemble performance pieces using a workshop approach. While all Conference participants collaborate with a guest artist on his or her production (and gain a unique insight into the artist's vision, style and creative process), they are able to incorporate that experience into their own creative process and translate it into concrete dramatic form. With luck, they will discover their own "voice" in the process.

These works have included Neva Small and Greg Ruhe's fantasy character "Mrs. Snowy Flurry (which went on to perform at Macy's this past Christmas); two newspaper puppets who meet and disturbingly deconstruct one another while reading their newspaper headlines in an effort to communicate (created by Eric Ting and Andrea Soros); and the

comic animation of a church icon which comes to life and confronts a surprised religious cleric (conceived by Alex Posen). The range and scope of these performances is innovative and dynamic, demonstrating the effectiveness of a "shoestring" workshop production approach which distills puppetry to its essential and, often, most theatrical form.

A new component of the Conference in 1994 was the Dramaturgical Development Workshop, expressly created for puppet theatre writers. The workshop is led by resident dramaturg Lenny Pinna and focuses on the writing and shaping of new scripts or scenarios for the puppet theatre. Selected scenes and play readings are presented during the Conference to assist in the playwrights' realization of their ideas. Mr. Pinna sums up his approach by saying, "Puppet artists have ideas, images and techniques which could be cross-fertilized with dramaturgical and theatrical knowledge of literary or performance structure, which could lead to distinctive new work. I am convinced this work could eventually attract a wider segment of the American theatre audience."

Our fifth annual National Puppetry Conference will feature the extraordinary

# Xperimental Puppetry Theatre



*Erik Blanc and Marymay Impastato*

*Oakley's Dream*

*XPT- 1995*

photo: Benita Carr



*Bobby Box, Resident Head*

*puppeteer. XPT rehearsal for his  
work in progress Cattywhampus*

photo: Don Smith



Can an institution such as the Center for Puppetry Arts foster individual creativity and vision? The word "institution" seems to be at odds with the words "individual," "creativity" and "vision". In many cases, this is true; often, the vision is tempered by community standards (those of the community at large and of the institution itself). At the Center for Puppetry Arts, we have developed over the years a large audience that has come to expect a certain product in our Family Series (usually a well-known title done in a large-scale production with original music) and in our New Directions Series for adults (usually a top name in the puppetry field). There is, however, a venue at the Center from which our audience does not know what to expect—nor should they. This venue is XPT.

XPT stands for Xperimental Puppetry Theatre. We chose the spelling "Xperimental" because, had we spelled it correctly, the initials would have been "EPT," which also stands for "Early Pregnancy Test"—not what we had in mind. What we had, and still have, in mind is a workshop situation where anything goes, as long as it relates to puppetry in some way. After all, what's the point of experimenting in puppetry if you aren't going to test the boundaries of the definition of puppetry?

This experimentation started in 1980 by members of the resident company and some of the staff. Luis Q. Barroso organized our efforts into an evening somewhat jokingly called "Artists on Parade." Essentially, we wanted to show our personal visions of what we thought would make good puppet shows. It wasn't open to the public, and I don't recall there being more than ten people (including ourselves) in the audience. Small as it was, though, it was still an auspicious start. At the first performance Janie Geiser, now a New York artist with a growing reputation, showed us the beginnings of her "Little Eddie," a seminal work still on display at the Center Museum. When "Artists on Parade" was opened to the public, and the public was invited to join in the creation of new works, the name was changed to the

somewhat more formal "XPT." Many great things have come out of our experiment since; the greatest of all has been the process itself.

#### HOW IT WORKS

There are only two things expected of XPT artists—that their project is a "puppet" show (using the broadest definition) and that they complete the project. When an individual or group hasn't much experience, they may be encouraged to team up with someone who has more and can guide them. Members of XPT range widely in disciplines and skill levels. This allows for experimentation by artists who may never before have considered working in puppetry. As a result, XPT has created a fertile pool of new talent (one frequently tapped by the aforementioned *Family Series* and *New Directions*).

Anyone can submit a project proposal. The projects for production are selected by a committee (which includes the Center's producer, executive director and other artistic directors) and, most importantly, the XPT director. The XPT director is always someone who's been involved with XPT for some time (usually someone with a great deal of patience).

For the most part, projects are selected based on whether they seem likely to be completed as described in the application (though other factors, such as the degree to which puppets are integral to the project, can influence the selection). Over the years, an application has been developed to assure that the project has been thought through and that at least a possible course has been chosen. XPT *expects* changes during the process of production which is, after all, experimental. Other materials may be submitted in support of the application—storyboards, set models, compositions, scripts, puppet designs—whatever can help describe the intended project. Space and time considerations may also eliminate some proposals, but applications can always be re-submitted for a future XPT.

Individual project directors can work totally solo or with as many people as they can pull together. The Center provides access to the scene shop, puppet-making room, rehearsal space, the downstairs theater (100 seats), a budget (up to \$400.) and also provides publicity, house managing staff, and a technician to run lights and sound. Once projects have been selected, the artists are pretty much left on their own. The XPT director is available for help with finding material resources and/or people who might want to work on the projects, as a source of moral support, or as a sounding board.

The XPT audience is asked to fill out questionnaires detailing their comments on each piece presented (sometimes up to eight shows, but, more recently, a more manageable four). After the evening's performances, the audience is invited to participate in a question and answer session with the project directors. It is an open forum much like a play-reading feedback session. The audience does not necessarily ask all the questions; the project directors often have specific questions for the audience. The audience feedback can be most helpful in understanding what worked and what didn't, in the vision.

Essentially, the Center for Puppetry Arts XPT provides a no-risk way to try out new ideas and new artists—the only real risks are those the artists take in their experimentation. The pressure for the artists is to complete the projects as works-in-process. A titanic disaster is just as good as a brilliant success. A failure can teach a person more about why things work (or don't) than can a success, since a successful performance is less likely to be examined critically.

The individual vision and the artist is the focus of XPT. What do the artists get out of this? Most of the XPT participants grow with each project, and, as I mentioned earlier, some go on to the *New Directions Series*. Career advancement, though, is not the purpose of XPT. It is not a showcase. Instead, XPT promotes individual experimentation in a fail-safe environment under the guidance and nurturing of an established institution. •

XPT  
by John Ludwig



*Tears of Joy Theatre and Mark Levenson Present*

# *Between Two Worlds*

*Based on S. Ansky's classic drama, "The Dybbuk"*

*"One of the  
greatest love  
stories of all time.  
Combines a  
passionate,  
supernatural tale  
with compelling  
courtroom  
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*Now available on national  
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(206) 695-3050.*

*Come to a place where love cannot die.*



# L'ESNAM

"I belong to the generation for whom the theatre can play a role in transforming society and improving the individual. That idea, surely utopian, reflects nonetheless a moral idea to which I have remained faithful."\*

So begins a recent essay by Margareta Niculescu (whose professional life in puppetry stretches back to the 1950's) about l'ESNAM (The National College of the Arts of the Puppet), one of the world's most significant puppetry schools. Once every three years, about a dozen students graduate from the program. Its small size allows for great flexibility; masters come from all over the world to teach their specialties—languages, singing and music, voice and theatre movement, theatre technology, and all manner of manipulation. Group productions are built and individual

projects are undertaken. Niculescu has been director of l'ESNAM since its doors opened eight years ago. As such, it is she who is ultimately responsible for the educational philosophy of l'ESNAM. It is she who must establish both the environment and the mood in which learning will take place. It is perhaps reasonable to wonder if an artist, whose training took place some 40 years ago in a conservatory of then communist Romania, can provide what is really needed to an international body of students whose great works will be some of the first art of the 21st century.

Certainly her own experience as a theatre student in Bucharest, where she learned work and discipline, where "the word 'fatigue,' so often heard today, was banned...," shaped her character. Her character, in turn, shapes l'ESNAM.

But she brings to her students not only the discipline of her own training, but the openness of a lifelong student, one who has never stopped growing and who passionately loves her work and her students. "A school," says Niculescu, "is first and foremost, year after year of graduates, a human adventure—never the same."

\* All quotes are from "School of Theatre, School of Life" by Margareta Niculescu, in *PUCK* #7, an issue devoted entirely to the subject of professional training. *PUCK* is published by the Institut International de la Marionnette, 7 Place Winston Churchill, 0800 Charleville-Mézières, France. It is available in French, Spanish, or German editions.

—BY A. PERIALE



*Final project by Colette Garrigan of the second graduating class at l'ESNAM*



# UNIMA Citations:

## Recognizing Excellence

Since 1975 UNIMA-USA has awarded Citations of Excellence that recognize and reward the best of the puppetry arts in this country. In addition to encouraging worthy puppeteers, the goal of the Citations program is to provide credible recognition that will aid puppeteers as they seek audiences in this country and abroad. The Citations are awarded to shows that touch the audiences deeply; that totally engage, enchant and enthrall. In meeting the criteria for excellence in puppetry, Citation-worthy shows must also stand as prime examples of excellent theatre.

### 1994/1995 Recipients in the "Live Theatre" category:

**Befriended by the Enemy**— Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre (MN)  
Reviewers said:

*This is one of the most compelling evenings of theatre I have ever witnessed...*

*The performances are perfect.*

*Entertaining with a message... This is what adult puppet theatre should be.*

**From the Ashes**—  
Mum Puppet Theatre (PA)  
Reviewers said:

*An excellent piece of work by an artist who breaks new ground, with works that have not been done before.*

**The Ghost Sonata**— Roman Paska (for his collaborative work) (NY)  
Reviewers said:

*Brilliant rendition. He sets the standard for this play. He has achieved perfection. One of the finest actor/puppet combinations I have ever seen. A magnificent example of the potential of puppetry to command the stage and move an audience.*

**Joe Cashore in Concert**—  
Joe Cashore Marionettes (PA)  
Reviewers said:

*He eschews the glitz and trickery of the "concert" marionettist, preferring to tell simple compelling stories with his elegant and sensitively carved figures.*

**Nights Alone with Dewey D**—  
Mirage Theatre, Patti Smith (CO)  
Reviewers said:

*Enticing, mysterious, moving, bizarre, funny*

*Highly recommended as one of the finest shows I've seen.*

*A sensitive and talented actress/clown who proves the ongoing need in our business for the study of theatrical/acting techniques.*

**The Puppet Master of Lodz**—  
University of Connecticut (CT)  
Reviewers said:

*A totally enthralling production which left me feeling weak in the knees and emotionally drained. Masterful acting, clever staging, food for contemplative thought.*

**Safe as Milk**— Jon Ludwig (GA)  
The Atlanta Journal said:

*The kind of show only a genius could give birth to.*

**Tea at the Palace**—  
Puppetmongers Powell (Canada)  
Reviewers said:

*Each moment was a vital and wonderful theatrical surprise; This show is pure delight in storytelling and puppetry; Perfection in execution and charming, with concept.*

### 1994/1995 Recipients in the "Recorded Media" category

**"Lamb Chop's Play Along"**—  
Shari Lewis, PBS  
Reviewers said:

*Shari Lewis is golden. She makes the difficult seem simple. Her characters are first rate, well developed and thought out, and magnificently portrayed.*

*An excellent example of what a children's show can be. Inviting, warm, and not threatening.*

*Shari's puppetry art is not only highly skillful and entertaining. It is enlightening and inspirational as well. Simple puppetry at its finest.*

**"Alef...Bet...Blast-off!"**— Blast-off Productions (Len Levitt, Phil and Michelle Baron), Jewish Television Network  
Reviewers said:

*The production values are all first rate. The manipulation and voices are fully professional and fully create the illusion of life and character.*

*This technically superior, well-acted soulful production utilizes puppetry as a powerful and delightful tool to impact history, culture, and universal values. (The show) not only presents lessons for youngsters, but creative ways to apply them in real life situations. Quite wonderful!*

### UNIMA-USA Encourages Film/Video Puppeteers to apply for Third Annual Video Awards

In 1993, UNIMA-USA, the American center of the world's oldest theatre organization (the UNION INTERNATIONALE DE LA MARIONNETTE— affiliated with UNESCO), created the new awards category "Citations of Excellence for Puppetry in Recorded Media"— the nation's only honors program specifically for puppetry in film, video and other recorded media. Applications are now being accepted for the third annual awards for the new program. The original awards for "live theatre" puppetry, which were founded by Jim Henson more than 20 years ago, are also still awarded annually! The first Citations under the new program were awarded at a Lincoln Center reception in 1994.

Under the expanded program, puppeteers in film and video may submit their work directly to the Citations committee for consideration. The commit-



tee consists of a national panel of experts in film and video puppetry. When a production receives three or more nominations, it earns a Citation.

To submit work, applicants should transfer their work to 1/2-inch VHS cassette and send it, together with their names, addresses, phone numbers and main production credits, to the Citations committee chairman. Each application must also be accompanied by a \$50 fee (payable to "UNIMA-USA) to cover handling, tape duplication and distribution to the reviewing committee. In the case of an episodic or series production, a Citation will be considered for the series rather than for a single episode. Up to two episodes of a single series may be submitted for consideration as a series entry. Cassettes must not be copy-protected and become the property of UNIMA-USA.

Entries or inquiries should be addressed to: Danny Burge, Citations Committee chairman, UNIMA-USA, Box 102, Natural Bridge, NY 13665. Inquiries can also be faxed to 315-644-4387. Only work originally produced for recorded media such as film or video is eligible; live theatre productions recorded for archival or marketing purposes are not eligible. All entries must be received by April 15, 1996. Earlier applications are strongly encouraged, to ensure reviewers have ample time to review each tape for consideration.



*Puppetmongers Powell*  
Tea at the Palace



*Jon Ludwig in*  
Safe as Milk

photo: Rita Byers



"EN LOS TIEMPOS ANTIGUOS, SOL Y LUNA ERAN GENTE Y CAMINABAN SOBRE LA TIERRA"

# SOL Y LUNA:

## THE REEMERGENCE OF A ZAPOTEC MYTH

by Susan Bettmann

The scene: In Oaxaca, Mexico on the ceremonial mountain site of Monte Alban, the jaguars lie in waiting—black, yellow and silent. From the pyramid top shrieks the skeletal Night Terror—fierce, thunder-voiced. Red Eagles cry out as they flail down the promenade on their stilts. The seven-headed Serpent slithers through the audience spitting fiery venom as it descends the south pyramid steps. At the center pyramid, the observatory, overlooking it all, the musicians' instruments drum and wail, pounding out the heartbeat of this display for a thousand watchers. Sun and Moon, now naked and backlit by bowls of fire, prepare to ascend to the sky, as above them, fireworks explode in glorious showers of silver and gold.

This is the story of the Sun and Moon being enacted with giant puppets. This is the story of how the Sun and Moon were brought to Earth as children, and how they were chased into the Sky to assume their rightful place in the cosmos.

In Oaxaca, the homeland of the *Sol y Luna* myth, 16 Americans with Dragon Dance Theatre and 45 Mexicans under the umbrella of TECOM (Teatro Comunitario) Comparsa, gathered during November 1994 to produce an inter-cultural puppet theatre project of noteworthy scope and significance. Dragon Dance Theatre, of Worcester, Vermont, directed by Sam Kerson, and

Comparsa, of Oaxaca, directed by Roberto Villasenor and Luis Cervantes, undertook the staging of *Sol y Luna* at one of the oldest known ceremonial platforms in North America.

The series of pyramids which defines Monte Alban defined the performance as well. The main plaza covers an area as long as four football fields, with at least a dozen mammoth stone pyramids, walled courtyards, labyrinthine tombs and sculpted observatories. Each of the ten scenes took place at a different area. Each group of giant puppets descended steps reconstructed from plans originating thousands of years ago. The winds carried a feeling of ancient power. Above the site circled falcons, vultures, songbirds and, once, a stunt pilot.

To understand puppetry as a sacred art may well be to use its highest potential. We began rehearsals at the site with a prayer circle. We honored the place, the cardinal directions, the opportunity to be there. We acknowledged the Zapotec tradition which brought forth our story. We proffered flowers, thanks, some prayers, and some of the traditional black clay whistles made in the Oaxaca Valley. We Americans and Mexicans attempted to attune ourselves to the spiritual, historical, geographical, and artistic openings presented by Monte Alban. The place

struck a vein of deep personal involvement for each of us. Although the story of the *Childhood of the Sun and the Moon* comes from the traditions of the indigenous Zapotec cultures of the Oaxaca Valley—the Chinanteco, the Mixe, the Triqui and others—this was the first time in centuries that anyone had been allowed to perform at the site at night. We shared a sense of privilege and purpose in creating these two performances at Monte Alban.

The Dragon Dance company drew its members from international sources. Co-workers from Washington state, New Mexico, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Quebec joined a core group of Vermonters. Included among the Mexican group were performers of national achievement, as well as many students. The artistry of each group of builders and performers contributed to the unlocking of the site. Like a puzzle, the rare combination of skills fit together to allow us this unusual opportunity.

We used a beautiful 19th century opera house, the Teatro Macedonia Alcala, as a rehearsal space. Meeting every evening with the two directors, the actors, dancers and musicians prepared scenes for the weekly rehearsals at Monte Alban. Musicians also rehearsed separately in the studio of the Mexican music director, Nacho Carrillo.

It was helpful to establish group





*Puppets for The Childhood  
of the Sun and the Moon  
Oaxaca, Mexico  
November, 1994*



*Puppet design by Sam Kerson*

*The "Serpent" heads  
Labastida workshop*

*photos: Sam Kerson*



'IN THE ANCIENT TIMES, THE SUN AND THE MOON WERE PEOPLE AND THEY WALKED UPON THE EARTH'

leaders with counterparts in both the American and Mexican groups. This seemed to assist in communication and also in team-building, though some jobs were nationally specific. The choreography was almost purely Mexican, designed by Lorena Vera and Nancy Torres, with American Alexis Smith. American artist Janice Walrafen managed the puppet-building workshop.

Our construction workshop was set up in the center of the city at an outdoor plaza, Labastida, frequented by students, craft vendors, tourists, and the general public. Often passersby, fascinated by the clay, the giant forms being papier-maché and painted, or by the music, stopped to join in for a while, sometimes staying for the long term, sometimes just to chat.

We built more than fifty puppets during that month, among them, giant tigers (jaguars), eagles, skeletons, the 8' x 8' Old Woman head, dragons and iguanas. Dragon Dancers Ellis Jacobson, Nathan Scott, and Sam Kerson designed them. Comparsa painters— notably Edgar Flores, Benjamin Sanchez and Jorge Maclaury— did the painting of them, and costume ideas came mainly from Comparsa. Fireworks are a big part of every Mexican fiesta. Ours were brought in from the small village of Tule, where a family of *coheteros*, fireworks manufacturers, custom-made many displays. Among these were the magnificent silver and gold showers representing the Sun and the Moon.

Oaxaca is arid, the sun hot, sometimes fierce. Two participants suffered heat stroke. Language was not just a challenge, it was, at times, a barrier. Sometimes the two groups of artists were hurt by misunderstanding or ignorance of certain cultural expectations. The political situation seemed edgy, with California governor Pete Wilson's new Proposition 187 creating real antagonism between Mexico and the U.S. We needed to find artistic solutions to political problems.

In the heat of the fire were our musicians. When the Mexican percussionists arrived at rehearsals, using pre-hispanic instruments, such as turtle shell drums played with deer antlers, they assumed their music was the only valid sound for the scenes. The American musicians, playing wind instruments and synthesizers, had to work hard to invent and incorporate melodies to go with the rhythms. We finally combined sounds to create a more symphonic imagery that resonated to the benefit of both groups.

Overcoming difficulties through art, music, and puppet theater gave the *Sol y Luna* puppeteers the greatest sense of satisfaction and meaning. Both Dragon Dance Theatre and Comparsa hope and intend to find the means to continue this find work together in the future.

*A half-hour videotape of the Monte Alban performance is available from Green Valley Media, 300 Maple Street, Burlington, VT 05401.*

## The Story— *SOL Y LUNA, THE CHILDHOOD OF THE SUN AND MOON*

The beginning of this story makes the Sun and the Moon sound almost stately. In fact, a more unruly pair of *brats* would be hard to imagine. They were not born, but rather emerged from the rotting carcass of a dog. The twins were looked after by the old Wise Woman of the earth, but they were disobedient, destructive and rude. They used trickery to kill the old woman's husband, the Stag King. They then ate him and tricked the old woman into eating his heart and liver.

Furious, she sent Uncle Tiger to punish them. They killed him. She sent Uncle Eagle to punish them. They sent him packing. Finally, she sent Night Terror after them. Fearful, they hid in a great serpent's mouth. He protected them from Night Terror, and, by way of thanks, the twins jumped out through his eye sockets and ran away with his eyes.

One eye was brighter than the other, and Moon had it. So, of course, Sun wanted it. He tricked her into setting it down, whereupon he grabbed the brighter eye and ran off with it. Moon grabbed the duller eye and chased after him. The chase progressed to the heavens, where it continues to this very day. •





*from The Childhood  
of the Sun and the Moon*

*Left— "La Vieja"  
the Old Woman  
Face sculpted by Ellis  
Jacobson*



# Puppetry, Politics, Circus and Farming in Nicaragua

by Michael Romanyshyn

It is amazing how rich the culture of a small country can be. When I first went to Nicaragua in 1984 there were seventeen existing family circuses. Imagine! Seventeen family circuses in a country the size of the state of North Carolina. I was lucky then to meet Ben Linder. He was the U.S. engineer who was later murdered by the Contras while working on a hydro-electric project he helped design. He loved the circus (himself a clown, juggler and unicyclist) and knew many of the families who were performing in Managua at the time in their old patched up tents. On the night we went to see a performance of one such family, a leopard escaped into the audience sending screaming people scampering up the tent poles. The band didn't miss a beat and the leopard was coaxed back into the ring without anyone getting mauled.

That same week, I saw dozens of shows performed by groups from all

over the country. I got to see, for the first time, a campesino theater called Los Alpes perform a beautiful show with animal masks. I also saw giant puppets and big heads (or "fat heads" as we call them) originally from Spain but with a Nicaraguan twist. In Spain, the giant puppets represent royalty, and the big heads—which are comical because they come to the performers' knees—represent common people. In Nicaragua, the opposite developed: the giant puppets became the citizens and the big heads came to represent the rulers like the former dictator Somoza.

Los Alpes impressed me the most with their beautiful way of transforming humans into animals with masks made from burlap and plastic feed bags, and their simple and direct style of storytelling. As it turned out, they belonged to a farmworkers' organization called MECATE which, since that time, has been involved in several projects with the Bread and

Puppet Theater of Vermont. Growing out of the work between Bread and Puppet and MECATE, a new organization was formed called Monte Verde Cultural Exchange.

In September of this year, I coordinated a Monte Verde project involving members of Bread and Puppet, *Pregoneros* Theater of New York, *Agua Sol y Serano* of Puerto Rico, and 62 members of MECATE.

MECATE, which means rope in Spanish, stands for Campesino Movement for Artistic and Theatrical Expression. It is an independent cultural organization combining social activism around issues of land reform and health care, with the promotion and support of community theater, music and dance groups. The director is Nidia Bustos. She is an extraordinarily courageous and gifted person who left the University in Managua during her third year to help organize people living in the





countryside to fight against the dictator Somoza. After the Sandinista triumphed in 1979, she helped bring together many of the campesino theater and music groups. These had sprung up as a way of expressing opposition to the repression of the National Guard and Somoza. These groups drew upon traditional music, dance and, at times, the use of masks and puppets. They became the nucleus of MECATE.

For MECATE, there is no debate over mixing art and politics. Born out of a combination of traditional culture, Christianity and revolution, their art combines creative expression with local issues so fluently that it would be hard to separate the two. Music, theater, farming, painting, land reform and health care have everything to do with each other—they live these things each day. Perhaps the most important aspect of their relation to art is that they do not make a living from it. They are subsistence farmers who own small pieces of land and work on collectively owned fields of corn, beans and other crops.

In spite of tremendous difficulties, MECATE continues to work with extraordinary success. They have organized over eighty different music

and theater groups who regularly perform, but political violence is still common and several of their members have been killed—singled out by small bands of former contras.

Our project began in Vermont. We purchased a diesel truck for MECATE with the money raised through donations, performances and grants, and transformed the truck into a versatile mobile theater. On the back we built wooden sides that fold down to make a 14 x 16 foot platform. Three of us drove the truck 5,000 miles to Nicaragua loaded with puppets, tools and materials.

Meeting us in Managua were 62 members of MECATE and: Pedro Adorno, an artist and puppeteer with the Puerto Rican theater group *Agua, Sol y Serano*; Linda Elbow and Claire Dolan from the Bread and Puppet Theater; Genevieve Yeuillaz, a French actress and puppeteer having a long association with Bread and Puppet; Susie Dennison, a dancer who has worked with Bread and Puppet since she was very young; and Jorge Merced from the *Pregones* Theater in the Bronx.

The Nicaraguans who took part in the project came from all over the country and ranged in age from 12 to

66. Most of the adults were farmworkers belonging to music or theater groups affiliated with MECATE. They took valuable time off from planting to participate in the workshop, leaving large families behind. There were many teenagers and, for some of them, it was their first time away from home.

Our first two weeks were spent working together at the house MECATE has in a quiet neighborhood off the *Carretera Sur* in Managua. The first days were divided between mask and puppet construction with clay and papier-maché (the glue was made from yucca starch), building stages from bamboo, painting, sewing, rehearsals, presentations of works in progress and discussions.

In all, we produced ten short shows with hand puppets, masks, cut-outs and *cantastoria* (Italian tradition of story singing—the story then being depicted in a series of pictures painted on cloth or paper), and a spectacular Bread and Puppet-inspired circus. It included puppet tigers, apes, giant puppets, big heads, a bull fight, stiling, political skits on health care and corrupt evangelists, and a *cantastoria* on the life of Augusto Sandino.





We had our first outdoor performance after three days in Managua using a few circus acts and two short cantastorias.

During the next week and a half we worked on shows about the eating habits of dogs belonging to the rich, a land owner who keeps his office clean for his horse, expropriated land and the struggle between previous owners and collectives, street children, and traditional corn festivals.

Then we went on tour. We hired another driver with a truck—a huge, beautiful, solid old clunker, which fit most of the cargo (including 70 mattresses) as well as 20 people. The truck we brought down carried 35 people along with all the poles and stages on top, and the rest of the group travelled in MECATE's 4-wheel drive pickup—15 people standing up.

During the next 15 days we performed in over 20 locations throughout Nicaragua. We went to communities in the mountains where we sometimes had to walk two to three miles before arriving because the roads were impassable for our trucks.

Las Lagunas is in the region of Boaco. It is a small village located high up in the hills with tall trees

shading the wooden houses of the 800 or so residents. The quickest way there is on a narrow path that winds its way up for more than a mile. another longer road is barely passable for 4-wheel drive vehicles, but most people take the path up or down by foot, or on horseback.

Los Alpes is from Las Lagunas. Antonio Amador is a founding member and works as a promoter for MECATE. When the National Guard was on the way to Las Lagunas in the late '70's to arrest the members of Los Alpes, he told us, he and the other members of the group burned all of their masks and costumes before fleeing to fight in the revolution.

Now Los Alpes has 20 people in their group who take turns performing all over the country. Their latest show is about cholera. When I asked one of the older members how they store their masks for use in future shows, he said, "Oh! We don't bother—when we need one we just make another."

We took our circus and small shows to parks, neighborhoods, and city plazas and performed for audiences often numbering several thousand.

At night, the musicians from MECATE would often provide music

for community dances that were always well-attended. These dances were amazing. I wondered how the musicians, who had gotten up at 5:30 in the morning, travelled all day on dirt roads while standing up in the back of a truck, and then performed in a show, could still have so much energy and enthusiasm—enough to sing and dance for hours.

They just love to do it. They have a tremendous capacity for enjoyment despite all of the hardships they endure and this attitude is contagious. What a wonderful gift. It's in their art and their politics, too. Art and politics like that is necessary, and good inspiration for puppeteers.

Michael Romanyszyn is a puppeteer living in New York City, and coordinator for Monte Verde Cultural Exchange. The project described was made possible with support from the Bread and Puppet Theater, *Pregonos* Theater, Jane Henson, the Jim Henson Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. Monte Verde is helping MECATE start a bus company and will be taking the first of four buses to Nicaragua in June. Another circus will be produced in January.

For more information call: (212) 228-4849 . •





# Faust and Kasperle

## *a curious alliance*

It is easy to see how the learned Dr. Faust and the incorrigible Kasperle would find themselves sharing the same stage spotlight, for they complement each other's nature perfectly. Imagine the Western Cultural Canon as a giant megalopolis. In its smoking urban core at the edge of the old historic district, there is a square where the great avenues of Secular Humanism, Occult Mysticism and Religious Orthodoxy all converge. In that square stands a monument to the great mythic avatar of intellectual folly and spiritual pride, Doctor Johannes Faust. His grim visage, patinaed by the exhaust fumes of the centuries, is all but ignored by the torrents of traffic that flood through there on the way to glass and steel New City. Yet his presence in that square under the shadow of the Old City walls defines that place and gives it its name. Around the corner from Faust Square— off a narrow alley on which folk, pop and high cultures rub shoulders— another legendary monument to human folly resides. His name is Kasperle, and he's the good-natured and boozy descendent of renowned Italian street performers. He too is something of a neighborhood institution. He is often seen loitering by the service entrances to the stone edifices that line the Doctor's square. Despite their obvious class differences, these two old cultural monuments— the fallen doctor and the upstart puppet— make good neighbors.

The Faust legend is rooted in an actual historical figure who was born in Germany around 1480 and who died in 1540. It is unclear whether he received a university degree, but contemporary sources attest to his career as a charlatan, medical quack, astrologer, alchemist and prankster. A few decades after his reportedly violent death, his exploits had

been collected by students in Wittenberg and Erfurt and turned into literary fodder. The slim biographical material had become an accretion of medieval morality play, arcane alchemical esoterica, renaissance humanist philosophy and good old-fashioned ghost story. A minor intellectual huckster had been transformed into Europe's earliest example of a pop culture superstar.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Faust legend had already been adapted to both live and puppet stages and was being performed across Europe from Paris to Prague. An English translation of the earliest published German text (1587) fell into the hands of the Elizabethan playwright, Christopher Marlowe. His *Tragicall Historie of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* was performed before Queen Elizabeth in 1590 and published for the first time in 1604. Marlowe banked heavily on the lurid, supernatural aspects of the legend, without neglecting the anti-Catholic tastes of his audience. He drew Faust as a humanist whose taste for luxury and for the world's vanities corrupted him. Though Faust is carried off to Hell at the end of the play, Marlowe only thinly disguises his sympathy for his character's intellectual revolt against the crumbling strictures of medieval thought.

Marlowe's play remains a benchmark of Western dramatic literature to this day. By itself, this would not have insured the inclusion of Faust in the pantheon of western cultural archetypes. What did more in this regard was the joining of the Faust story with the popular German puppet figure of Kasperle. Kasperle was the irreverent puppet offspring of the Comedia dell'arte comic servant, and thus a blood relation to that family of puppet stars that includes Mr. Punch, Polichi-

nelle, Petrouchka, Kharagöz and others. He was the German low-life incarnation of this tribe. As such, it was natural that he should step in to fill the role of comic servant when Marlowe's play was adopted to the puppet stage in the early part of the seventeenth century. When Kasperle took over this role, he came close to upstaging the doctor himself. His ribaldry was a perfect counterpoint to the dark tragedy of Faust's fall. His thirst for beer contrasted with his master's thirst for an elusive wisdom, and his anti-intellectual buffoonery underlined the serious philosophical underpinnings of the play.

Kasperle's popularity helped insure that the Faust story became a staple of the European puppet theater up until the early part of this century. Each company created its own variation of the script. One in particular, written by a German showman named Bonneschky, first published in 1850 but probably dating from much earlier, has been reprinted in English by Paul McPharlin and Max von Boehn.

As a child, Goethe certainly witnessed some of these itinerant Kasperle/Faust puppet shows, and they may have provided the seed of inspiration for his later magnum opus. Goethe went far beyond the standard treatment of the legend with its black-and-white morality play logic. In the end, Goethe hadn't the heart to send his hero to Hell. Instead, Faust's soul is snatched from the devil's grip at the last moment and is carried off to heaven in a grand apotheosis. Goethe and the Romantics of his later years found in Faust a metaphor for their own striving after a wisdom transcendent of religious dogma. As part of their interest in folk legend and literary expression, they collected and published many of the local

*by Stephen Kaplin*



variants of the Faust play, insuring their survival down to our century.

Though Faust was among the most frequently produced puppet plays in Europe, he failed to take root in America, or rather, he lay dormant like a seed. Recently, in a strange case of cultural suspended animation, an authentic nineteenth century puppet Faust has sprung back to life in New York City. In 1991, the Czech/American puppeteer Vit Horejs found a trunkful of old Czech marionettes in an attic of the Jan Hus church on the Upper East Side. The puppets, between 100 and 150 years old, were carved out of linden wood, with pine bodies and cherrywood limbs. They had last been used in performance in the 1930's, after which they had been forgotten. Horejs refurbished the costumes, which had rotted away, and rebuilt the controls. He had to go back to Prague in order to find an authentic playscript. After diligent searching, he found an old re-issue of an anonymous 1862 version of the play, roughly contemporary with the German Bonneschky text. The language was an archaic Czech laced with German words and outdated topical references. In translating and editing it, Horejs tried to keep as close to the original in spirit as possible, while at the same time making a script that would play for an American audience. He tried to keep the topical feel of the original by inserting contemporary references and political jibes. For instance, since the play was first presented around the time of the Gulf War, Faust asks Mephistopheles, when first interviewing him, how many sorties per minute he could fly. Horejs said that when they first performed this new/old Faust, he and his collaborators were a little "too pious" in sticking to the historic forms and staging techniques. But over time, they refined it to play well for American audiences who had little or no knowledge of the original Faust legend nor of the centuries-old puppetry tradition. It is stirring testimony to the durability of these folk traditions that they could be revived after half-a-century of hibernation.

Faust's penetration into the deepest layers of the European cultural psyche is nowhere better demonstrated than in the most recent film of the illustrious Czech puppet animator and film maker, Jan Svankmajer. Like Horejs, Svankmajer was drawn to the traditional Czech puppetry forms which had featured Faust for centuries. But unlike Horejs, Svankmajer did not bind himself to reproduce those forms verbatim. Rather, he used his cinematic technique to create a sort of meta-Faust that drew upon all of the diverse theatrical expressions of the Faust legend. By stitching together Faust's various dramatic incarnations—Kasperle puppet play, Marlowe, Goethe and Gounod's opera—Svankmajer concocts a timeless essence of Faust. Not only do the various epochs and genres of theatrical representation merge seamlessly, but the grimy, backstreets of contemporary Prague collide with the fluid geographies of theatrical hyperspace. The sheer mastery of his technique aside, Svankmajer's film should be viewed as a profound study of the interpenetration of myth into everyday reality. (For more on Svankmajer's Faust, see *Puppetry International No.1*.)

The conflation of various theatrical texts is one strategy for locating the mythic core of the Faust legend. Svankmajer's film creates a sort of everyman Faust, at once epic and mundane, yet totally enveloped in the very sophisticated technology of film animation. Another approach to this conflation strategy, using a low-tech presentational style, is demonstrated by the recent production of Ninth Street Theatre's *Toy Theater Faust*. The show is performed by three manipulator/narrators, using traditional toy theater conventions on a small, table top stage with a 20" x 12" proscenium opening, and 6" flat cardboard figures that were reproduced from 16th and 17th century sources. It alternates between a series of scenic transformations or tableaux with accompanying text derived from Marlowe and Goethe, and entracte scenes featuring Kasperle with dialogue loosely drawn from

Bonneschky's Kasperle/Faust. This miniaturized Faust production has more in common with the sequential graphic art of a comic strip than with a traditional dramatic stage production. It is a "Cliff Notes" *Faust*, designed to be performed in living rooms and lofts. Yet even in abbreviated, compressed format, Ninth Street's toy theater production retains the formal essence of the Faust myth.

The aforementioned productions notwithstanding, the theatrical Faust has fallen on hard times of late. Although it seems that, as a man who craved a "world of profit and delight, of power, of honor and omnipotence," Faust would be at home in many a multi-national corporate boardroom, as a cultural emblem he has been eclipsed by a galaxy of lost souls thrown up by our entertainment and news media, Kurt Cobain being only the most recent. To counter this trend, Aaron Beale, the founder and producer of NADA, a storefront performance club venue on Manhattan's Lower East Side, has curated a year-long "Faust Festival," featuring over 100 various Faust-inspired performances. Both Vit Horejs's *Johannes Dokhtor Faust* and Ninth Street Theater's *Toy Theater Faust* appeared as part of the festival. Though not limited to puppets, quite a few artists exploited the expressive power of performing objects, including Stuart Sherman's mini-spectacles, Monika Gross's potato-headed Faust featuring an all-vegetable cast, and Jim Torok's low-tech slide show animation of "Walking Man's" Faustian adventures.

Faust continues to haunt the Western cultural landscape, even if he has become a somewhat peripheral presence on the stage. As the chaos and revisions of our own time come to resemble the historical period that gave birth to the Faust legend, his dire tragic voice sounds clearer. The technological Faustian bargain that we have all cooperated in signing is coming due. I can only hope that when the clock strikes midnight, that I am standing in Kasperle's shoes, rather than the Doctor's. The clown with a taste for beer is the only one still smiling when the final curtain falls. •





*Faust and Mephistopheles  
from Toy Theater Faust  
(1995)*

*Director: John Bell  
Designer: Stephen Kaplin*

Photo: Stephen Kaplin



*Jan Svankmajer - FAUST  
Scene in the garden*



*The Czechoslovak-American  
Marionette Theatre,  
Directed by Vit Horejs*

photo: David Schmidlapp

## A Chalk Circle

In January of 1995, a new version of Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* saw the light of day (this was midwinter in Finland—perhaps the metaphor is not apt). It was the result of an unusual collaboration between Eric Bass's Sandglass Theater (Vermont), Ralph Denzer (New York), the Helsinki City Theater, and students from the University of Art and Design (Helsinki). Eric Bass, the show's director, is best known as a creator of original and highly personal work using puppets, actors and music, but he had long been interested in the Chalk Circle material and jumped at the opportunity to take on Brecht.

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a frame story—an illustrative moral tale within a larger drama. Bass has invented a new frame for the story. This play begins, essentially, where Brecht's play ends. The characters who were obliged to "get out while the getting was good" at the end of Brecht's story (Azdak, Gruscha, Simon and two musicians) are now on the road in a sort of gypsy/carnival wagon. They perform their story with puppets wherever they can find an audience. The City Theater of Helsinki transformed their black box theater into a battlefield for the show (complete with scattered trees and gravestones). The itinerant actors are performing for the theatre audience as if it were a crowd of villagers (this

might seem an anti-Brechtian notion, but since the audience is lounging among trees which are obviously stage props, it's okay). Two soldiers, old "iron shirts," appear. They are suspicious of the vagabond players, who must now perform for their very lives. The soldiers get caught up in the action, playing themselves and other characters and, in the end, one of the soldiers casts his lot with the thespians. He leaves his weapons with the other soldier who now finds himself in the ironic position of having all the guns and no stomach to use them.

The extraordinary puppets were made by scenography students under the direction of Eric Bass, Finn Campman and Eeva Ijas. Music was by Ralph Denzer.

The piece will be remounted this summer in Armstrong, British Columbia (Canada). It will be performed out of doors by a company with a history of caravan theater. In



Heidi Herala with "Grusha" in Sandglass Theater's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*

photo: Patrick Pesonius

September it will be back in Helsinki. The City Theatre (the second largest company in Finland) does not generally remount shows, which speaks very highly of the impact of the production, but perhaps also of the strangely compelling nature of the puppet.





*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

photo: Patrick Pesonius

*A Chalk Circle*



## A Chalk Circle

# Why Brecht? Why Puppets?

by Eric Bass

Some things are indisputable. It is indisputable that Brecht was unique, whatever one may think of him as a playwright, director, poet or in his personal life. He changed theater as only a few people in this century have done. Perhaps the depth of his influence is only now really being felt; Tony Kushner has cited him as a major influence on *Angels in America*. In his own way, Brecht has been a major force in giving theater back to the audience. In Brecht's day, in many areas of theatre, playwrights had forgotten the fun, the sense of play (as opposed to empty frivolity). Theater is a game played between the stage and the audience. Some directors and playwrights have tried to hide this. Brecht reminds us of this at every moment.

At the forefront of Brecht's theories stands his famous *Verfremdungs-Effekt*, meant to distance us emotionally from the action of the stage, so that we do not identify with the characters, but see their problems objectively. At first glance this seems cold, heartless and terribly serious, even unenjoyable. It seems to be all about thought, which we associate with dreary work, but rarely with having fun. In fact, the opposite is true. Brecht spoke and wrote about humor and fun, and they are two of his great resources in this same *Verfremdung*, for they remind us that this is theater, not life. The paradox is that in that reminder, we often feel life most deeply, both for its humor and for the vitality of humanness in our hearts.

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is not cold. Ruthless, perhaps, but never cold. The warmth is found in the characters who cannot help their humanity, even at risk to their lives. They are not heroes. They are not even necessarily good people, but they manage to leave behind them, as Brecht would say, a good (or slightly better) world, and that is quite something. They are fools, to be sure, for it is foolish to act against one's own interests. We, who are not fools, cannot identify with them.

We can only hope to find some such foolishness in ourselves and to hope we leave traces of it as we pass through this life.

Such a fool is the puppet, with whom we also cannot identify. The puppet in the world of actors. A small being of limited capabilities and borrowed life, the puppet seems a nothing in the world peopled by giant descendants of gods and apes. Life is too big for it, and demands too much of it. But the puppet, because it is a fool, does not know this. The puppet cannot help itself. It is simply more human than we of flesh and blood. It is not true that we manipulate the



Antti Aro with "Azdak" in  
The Caucasian Chalk Circle

photo: Patrick Pesonius

puppet. It is the puppet that opens within us a way to play with the world. The puppet gains nothing from this play. It only acts according to its best nature. It is we who profit.

Strife is at our borders. In Bosnia, in Gaza— dare I mention the Caucasus? Even closer. Our language has been inverted, for in this world, what is action? what is play? what is a puppet? and who is a fool?



## A Chalk Circle

### A Letter to the Director

"A man decides about another man's lot." Bertolt Brecht used to say. And he was proved right, among other cases, in my unimportant example:

In 1956, the Polish Ministry of Culture enabled me, a young and somehow promising director, to visit for several weeks the theaters of East Germany. Half of the time I spent in the dark left-hand corner of the Berliner Ensemble house watching Brecht's rehearsals for "The Life of Galileo" and, at the end of that period, experiencing the emotions of long conversation with the Master himself, and his Polish assistant Konrad Swinarski, later to be famous in the Polish theater. The emotion was created by my pious attitude towards Bertolt Brecht as theater reformer, playwright and director, multiplied by my audacious offer which I dared to present; I will put his *Kaukasische Kreiderkreis* on the stage by means of puppet theater, if he agrees to change the prologue and permits me to cut the text keenly. Brecht answered smiling that using scissors while preparing the play for the stage is right and the duty of every creative director and, what was more, he himself had had reservations about the prologue. Then he took one of the photographs which were on the table and wrote at the back; "To the ensemble of the 'Lalka' Theater, sincere wishes for success with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* with puppets-Bertolt Brecht." Before I left Berlin the wishes had been supported with a letter to the Polish Ministry of Culture, in which Brecht confirmed his approval for presenting his play as puppet theater

and promised to write a new prologue.

I was coming back to Poland as proud and self-centered as Governor Abashvili [sic] without any inkling that "then the fortress was a trap;

The goose was plucked and roasted  
But the goose was not eaten  
Noon was no longer a time for eating  
Noon was a time for dying."

Almost right after my visit to the Berliner Ensemble, Bertolt Brecht was declared a political dissident and his plays were banned in all the countries of the "socialistic bloc."

Half a year later it came to a real tragedy-Brecht died, and, though soon afterwards his name returned in glory to all the theaters in the world, I have to confess my cowardly retreat from old intentions; I did not have the courage to ascribe Brecht my ideas, to castrate his words, to rearrange the events described by him... shortly and crisply: I became afraid of the responsibility and the danger of the production.

My friend Eric, I send you this description of this incident as a warning: Learn from someone else's mistakes; you won't have time to make all of them yourself. And believe me, the mistake you didn't dare to make is the most painful. I can still feel the pain of that one.

Yours,

Jan Wilkowski  
Warsaw 19.11.94

*Professor Wilkowski is perhaps Poland's best known director of puppet theatre. Recently retired, he was for many years the director of the puppetry school in Bialystok.*

## FILM



Mayami: *Between Cut and Action*  
by Tony Labat

photo: Marita Sturken/  
Courtesy Electronic Arts  
Intermix



Babel Town (1992)  
by Janie Geiser

photo: Dona Ann McAdams



Jan Svankmajer and  
Svatopluk Malý  
Director of Photography  
FAUST



## FILM

## A D A R I N G S E R I E S

*In May and June of 1994, San Francisco Bay area residents were able to see a wide range of puppetry on film thanks to the Pacific Film Archives and Kathy Geritz. The following are taken from the program notes prepared for the series.*

—Editor

PFA stages puppet extravaganzas—Seven evening programs featuring works, from the archival to the experimental, that imaginatively use puppets, dolls and masks. We've pulled strings to add clips of puppet performances, a serialized puppet animation, test dummies, and other surprises. Other events in the series include the East Bay premiere of the Chinese film *The Wooden Man's Bride*; a Larry Reed Shadow Play performance; and Julie Taymor's fascinating stage-on-film of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*.

Puppets and dolls dramatize another world—yet one which is never entirely separate from our own. Both puppets and dolls come to life only through human manipulation; somewhere, someone is holding the strings. Like the wearing of masks, their presence indicates a doubling, whether carving out an alter-persona or miniaturizing the self. And this doubling allows for the staging of scenarios suggestive of power relations—maternal guidance, the desire to hide or protect one's real self, or to throw one's voice onto another.

Masks, dolls and puppets share certain limitations: an awkwardness of movement, a singular or narrow range of expression. It is a stilted existence that at times calls to mind the deadening impact of being acted upon by social and political forces, thus shifting our attention to the "backdrop." The schematic figure of the puppet can untangle the rich shared

references that make stereotypes so readily recognizable, but it can also provide a liberating cipher for projecting and exploring otherwise censored expressions. —Kathy Geritz

### **SERIES PROGRAM NOTES:**

#### **The Wooden Man's Bride *Huang Jianxin (China, 1994)***

This gorgeous film, set in the arid chill of northwestern China in the 1920's, embellishes the rigid sexual codes that oppress women with a bizarre twist: a young bride is forced to marry a wooden statue of her dead groom. The dreamlike, operative melodrama begins with the bride's kidnapping and release by bandits and her discovery that her husband-to-be has died in a botched rescue attempt. Now it's just her and her mother-in-law, who arranges for Young Mistress a life hitched to an effigy. It's a blueprint for (sexual) revolution. Sheer physical beauty and political pageant play devilishly with a sobering focus on the harsh rhythms of life in a primitive backwater. Wang Yumei is memorable as the formidable dowager, and Taiwanese pop idol Kao Mingjun plays the bandit chief who has a soft spot for opera and for lovers.

#### **Wayang Bali: A Balinese Shadow Play**

*Larry Reed and the  
Shadow Play Theater Co.*

Reed, the Bay Area's extraordinary shadow puppeteer, who most recently performed *Xanadu*, presents a shadow play drawn from the Indian Mahabharata myth cycle. Five brothers' struggle for power against a hundred jealous cousins involves gods, demons, magical weapons and, inevitably, a beautiful princess. The main characters speak Kawi, the ancient language, which is translated for the

audience by servants and clowns. The Dalang or shadowmaster manipulates dozens of carved leather puppets, while behind him gamelan musicians follow with sound effects and melodies created on bronze metallophones. The techniques have been passed from generation to generation for centuries, while the dialogue changes with each performance. The shadowmaster is said to be a practitioner of white magic who weaves spells and mantras into the performance for the good of the people. Blending improvisation, drama, and slapstick, Wayang Bali creates a magical world of shadows and returns us to a time before cinema—a time which nevertheless held cinema in its imagination.

#### **A Potpourri of PFA Puppet Pleasures**

*Curated and Introduced by Russell  
Merritt. John Mirsalis on Piano*

Tonight we strike a blow for the puppet film, unaccountably ignored amidst the renewed interest in commercial animation. We've gone to the PFA vault and, with some help from sister archives, selected the cream: an array of puppet films that extend from Edwin S. Porter's delightful *The "Teddy" Bears* (Edison, 1907, 18 min). We've found rarities: a charming unknown Starevitch called *The Navigator* (France, 1934, 12 min), featuring two dogs honeymooning on a drowning ship; and an excerpt from a Nazi-produced children's parable, *The Boy Who Wanted to Know What Fear Was* (Germany, 1935, 10 min). We will excerpt puppet scenes from live-action features, such as puppets reacting to a suicidal bureaucrat in the madly satiric Soviet film *My Grandmother* (K.Mikaberidze, Soviet Georgia, 1929, 11 min excerpt, 35mm). Also, *Please Excuse Me* (Lubomir Benes,



Czechoslovakia, 1974, 5 min, 35 mm). Watch out for added surprises—including a film by Karel Zeman, and Academy Award nominees and American puppet heroes of the past. —Russell Merritt

*Russell Merritt is a film historian currently teaching at Stanford University, co-author of Walt in Wonderland and of the Emmy-nominated program D. W. Griffith: Father of Film (1993).*

## The Great Gabbo

*James Cruze (U.S., 1929)*

Von Stroheim's first appearance in a talkie had him playing opposite a puppet. As the Great Gabbo—famous ventriloquist, ego-maniac, and spurned lover—Von Stroheim ushered in the long line of crabby ventriloquists who live and can only express affection through their wooden alter-egos. This is considered one of Von Stroheim's great performances, but *Gabbo* has other pleasures of a campier kind. Cheaply produced for Sono-Art, a poverty-row independent, the film's technical crudities were abetted by lunatic dance numbers, notably "Web of Love" with Don Douglas and Betty Compson as a spider and fly surrounded by a swarm of writhing chorus girls impersonating terrorized insects. The film long ago passed into cult status as the epitome of early talkie strangeness. After *Gabbo*, director James Cruze, like Stroheim, saw his career crash in the talkies. Writer Ben Hecht, on the other hand, was just warming up —Russell Merritt

## Heidi

*Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy (USA, 1992)*

Preceded by a short: *This is a Dead Boy* (Michael J. Collins, 1992). Using wonderful, mysterious tableaux, dolls and masks, Michael Collins fractures a fairy tale, exposing loss of hope, the prevalence of evil, and the inevitability of death.

Where the traditional story of Heidi is smothered in rustic innocence, in Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy's brilliant and truly grotesque retelling Heidi finds herself in the confines of a mock chalet inhabited by her twisted grandfather and

her putative sibling and seducer, Peter. Using life-size dummies, ghoulish masks, wiggly costumes, and a claustrophobic, curiously colored set with haylofts, peepshows and unadorned rooms, the artists depict scenes from the degeneration of a "rural gothic" family. The six tableaux obsess on the disciplinary rituals of childhood and the morbid re-routing of sexual drives. Incest, parodic violence, and a weird fascination with bodily functions serve as the disturbing crux of *Heidi*, but Kelley and McCarthy go beyond the family plot to dramatize desire and the body as perverse social production. In this compulsive work, nature struggles with nurture in a precipitous land where the cuckoo clock has no hands. —Steve Seid

## Stravinsky's Oedipus Rex

*Julie Taymor (U.S., 1993)*

Preceded by a short: *Screenplay* (Barry Purves). An exquisite *kabuki* performance in miniature. A tiny rotating stage is the wondrous site for the unexpectedly expressive puppetry and *fusuma* screens.

In Julie Taymor's startling rendition of the Stravinsky opera (libretto by Cocteau) there are two Oedipuses. One, attired in a costume with soaring shoulders, a Minoan headdress, and large sculpted hands, performs the traditional part of the King of Thebes. The other—a *butoh* dancer encrusted with layers of clay—parodies Oedipus's every gesture. He is a full-scale puppet, a man not in command of his movements. The other is a king, but also a puppet to the angry gods who have delivered him to his tragic fate. Taymor, widely known for her ambitious puppet theater, has slyly accented an essential mechanism of Greek tragedy, that man is but a plaything tugging against the strings of fate. Only through the self-recognition of Oedipus's crimes can the puppet shed its sodden shell to reveal the fully rendered man beneath. Designed for a Japanese festival, Taymor's staging includes sculptures and a *benshi*-like narrator. With Jessye Norman as Jocasta, Philip Langridge as Oedipus, and Min Tanaka as the Oedipus dancer.

—Steve Seid

Film and stage production directed by Julie Taymor. Opera by Igor Stravinsky. Libretto by Jean Cocteau. Saito Kinen Orchestra conducted by Seiji Ozawa. Masks and costumes by Taymor, Emi Wada. Sets by George Tsypin.

## No Strings Attached: Puppets, Dolls and Masks

The use of puppets and dolls often raises the question, who is controlling whom? They can be an effective, even chilling way to suggest the invasiveness of government or popular culture, a sense of fragmented identity. A fascination with the complex reverberations of being acted upon can be seen in Lewis Klahr's use of *Cosmopolitan* magazine cutouts, Peter Celli's invasive medical procedures, and Steven Dye's observations from outer space. In a permutation on the use of puppets and dolls as stand-ins for our experience, Emily Breer and Janie Geiser (whose *The Red Book* screens May 3) created new models whose experiences cannot be limited by the stage laid out for them. In Tony Labat's *Mayami*, Winston Tong and his evocative dolls perform in spaces created between "cut" and "action" with *Miami Vice* as backdrop. In these works, the question of who is the author or maker is complicated: who speaks and with whose words; who acts and on which stage—society? the artist? the puppet or doll? —Kathy Geritz

*Cranial Invasive Reproductive Procedure* by Peter Celli (1992, 7 min). *LUN* by Steven Dye (7 min, 16mm). *Altair* by Lewis Klahr (1994, 8 min 16mm). *What Happened* by Richard Kizu-Blair, *Sculpture* by Elizabeth King (1991, 3 min). *Babel Town* by Janie Geiser (1992, 7 min, 16mm). *Superhero* by Emily Breer (1994, 4 min) *Mayami: Between Cut and Action* by Tony Labat with Winston Tong (1986, 14 min).•



## MEDIA

# The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Digital Manipulation

by Jed Weissberg

This essay argues that the world of computers can benefit from lessons taught to it by the art of puppetry.

I have recently undergone a transformation, a transformation that started when I became a graduate student at the Interactive Telecommunications Program of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. In the past six months I have moved from being a puppeteer trying to hawk my goods wherever possible, to being on the "cutting edge" of today's technology frontier. I have become heavily involved with computers, for the most part working with online systems, that area of the cyberworld which involves communication over phone lines between remote computers. Specifically, I have become a "web master," a person who runs a computer serving as a repository for World-Wide Web pages, the graphics- and multimedia-based area of the Internet.

A few months ago I started to receive numerous requests from my puppeteer friends to explain "precisely" what I was doing, and how the computer might be of use to a puppeteer. Around this same time it became obvious to me that the most useful skills I had which applied to my new work were those



I had learned as a puppeteer. Specifically, these involved the relationship between the manipulator and manipulated, methods of combining objects to create a greater whole, and the imagination and skills that allow puppeteers to animate inanimate objects. I now answer my

friends that the important question is not what computers can bring to puppetry, but what puppetry can teach computers.

Puppetry is a three-way communicative art form between the puppeteer, the puppet, and the audience, and computers are crying out to possess exactly this ability of crossover communication. Large corporations are spending vast sums of money to discover how to create this feeling. But most of these companies, being narrow-minded, are looking at film and television for their lessons.

I probably should have realized the connections between computers and puppetry sooner than I did. Many of the terms commonly used in the world of computer design are based upon "puppetry" metaphors. For example, "MacroMind Director," the preeminent software to create CD ROMS, names all of its elements "puppets," and it is

the job of the programmer using MacroMind Director to manipulate these "puppets."

Unfortunately, the implications of these terms are not fully understood by those computer designers who have assigned them. When they use these

metaphors they conceive of puppetry almost exclusively as a metaphor for dictatorship, in which the puppeteer has supreme command over the puppet at all times. They cannot imagine that there are times when the puppet has more prominence and control than the puppeteer. The first lesson computers can learn from puppetry is what it means to be a manipulator: the manipulator's relationship with the manipulated object, and their combined relationship with the viewing audience.

The computer operates in a digital world, and it can work with numerous media: text, sound, graphics, video, etc. All the information stored in a computer, no matter the type, is simply a series of 1s and 0s bundled so that they can be later recombined by an algorithm to form copies of the original work. These objects

are infinitely manipulable and repeatable. It makes no difference to the computer what particular numbers represent or how many times it has recombined the digits. The job of the computer programmer is to move these "objects" around so that the end users feel they are witnessing a greater whole. Like puppets, these objects can do "anything"; but also, like puppets, no single object can do everything. This is the second lesson that computers can learn from puppetry: how to discover the capabilities of separate objects and how to combine those objects into a single whole. What else have puppeteers been doing for thousands of years but combining objects and discovering what they can do?

In a recent edition of *Wired* magazine, Peter Gabriel said that what the computer was missing was some "Africa." I think what he wanted to mean by this

was a certain wildness, flamboyance, and imagination. Computers are becoming an ever more prominent part of our existence, and this presence will increase. We are at the point in our society's history where we are deciding the role of the computer in the future, and it is important that people who have distinct visions of our world begin to use computer technology. The tools are becoming inexpensive and user-friendly. Artists need to become involved.

I am convinced that the art of puppetry has a great deal to offer these new technologies. Puppeteers' skills lie in their abilities to use the objects of our existence in order to find innovative ways of representing the world we live in. The state of the art in computers sorely needs this vision and imagination. •



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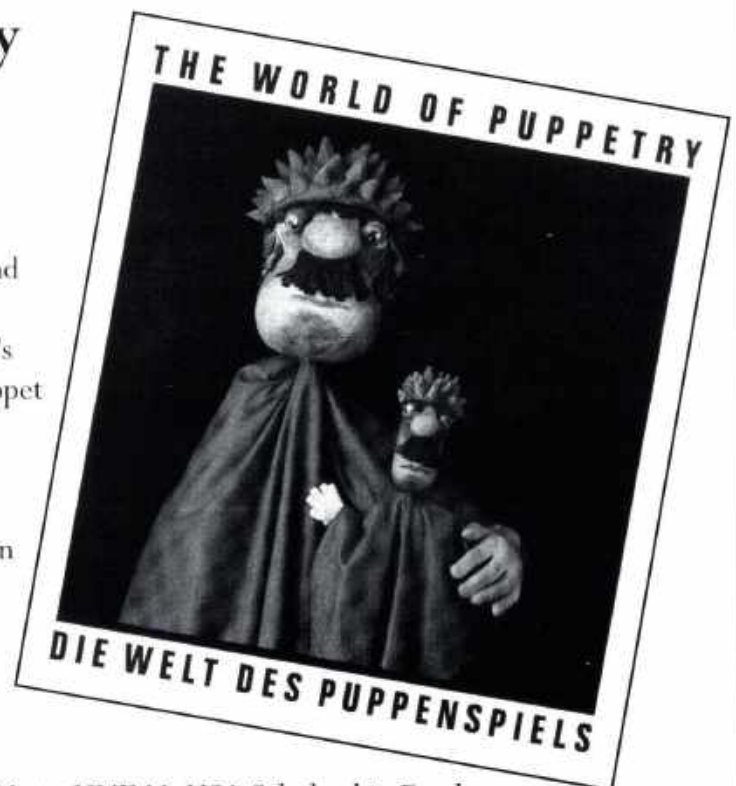
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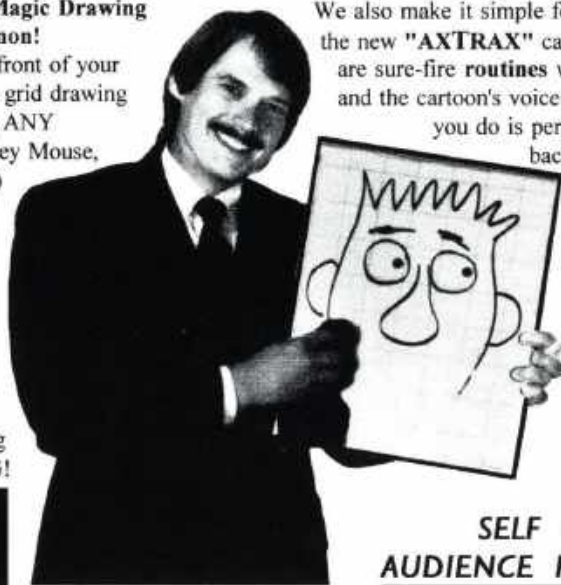
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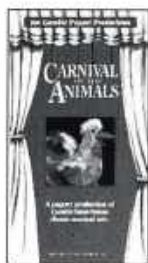
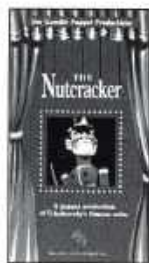
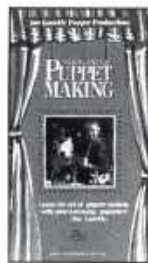
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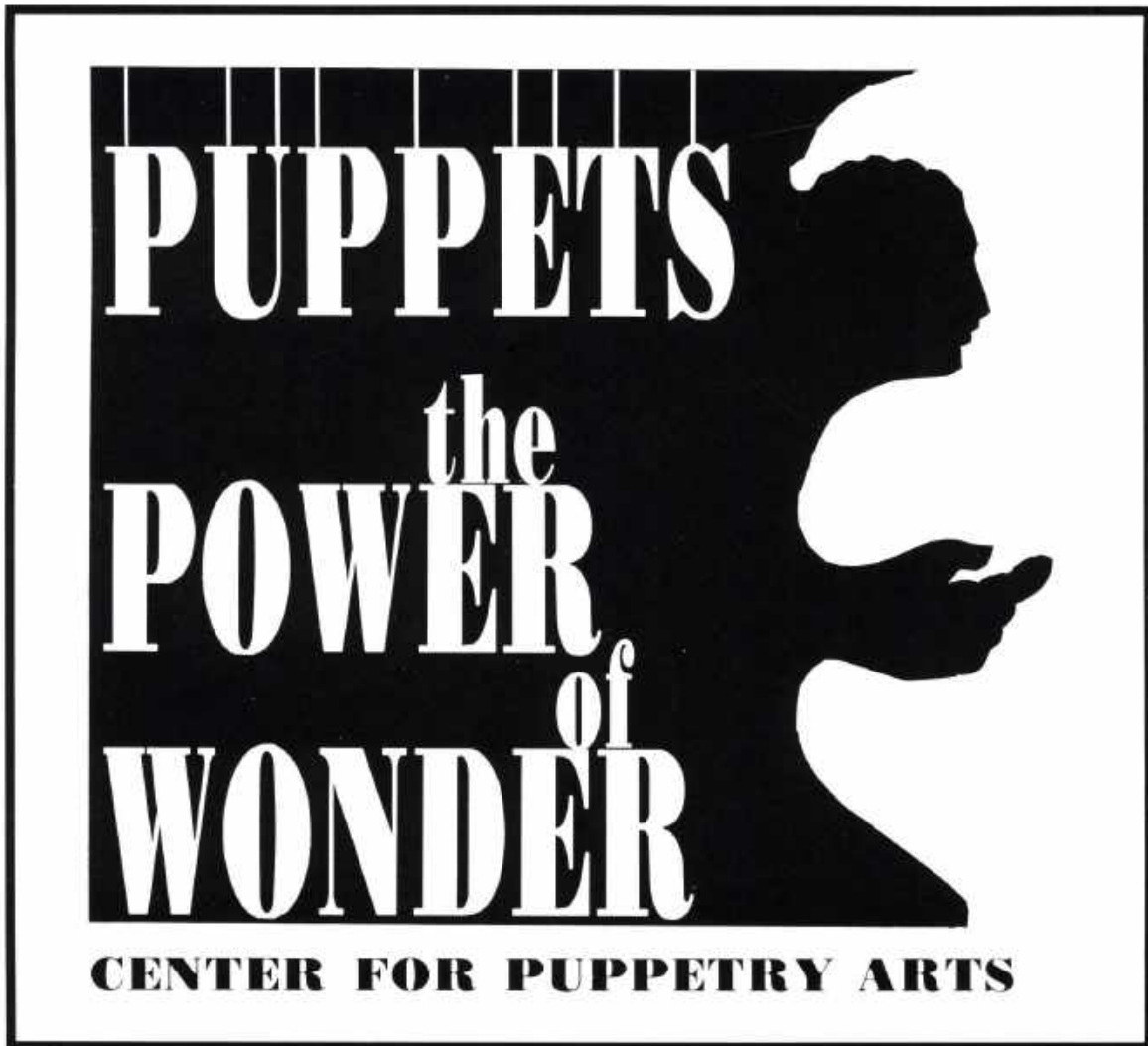
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