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INTERNATIONAL



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# PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

*the puppet in contemporary theatre, film & media*

issue no. 10

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*Cosmo Allegretti, puppeteer and designer  
for "Captain Kangaroo"*

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## Editor's Page—

When I was born, television— still an enormous boxy affair with a smallish black and white picture tube— had not yet permeated American culture. My parents bought our first color set in the summer of 1968 so that we could watch Olympians compete, their skintones ranging from metallic green to glorious bubblegum pink. VHF "rabbit ears" were augmented by a UHF "hoop," until cable made antennas obsolete for most Americans. Now TV is truly ubiquitous in our culture. Large screen, pocket-sized, and now the promise of high-definition TV arrives just as high-speed, broad-band internet may make TV as we know it irrelevant. More simply put: my parents grew up in a world without television, I grew up with TV as a constant influence, while my nieces and nephews may already be looking beyond television. All this in 50 years!

The term "television" was first used in 1907 in *Scientific American* magazine to describe the transmission of pictures. John L. Baird gave the first demonstration of a television system in England in 1925. In 1927, American inventor Philo T. Farnsworth applied for a patent and, with Vladimir Zworykin, broke television free from the limits of the mechanical scanner by creating an all electric system. The wonders of television were introduced to a broader public at the 1939 World's Fair in an exhibit sponsored by the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), which then owned NBC. Although invented and demonstrated prior to World War II, television is essentially a postwar phenomenon. There was a limited television viewership in the U. K. in 1936, and in the U.S. and former U.S.S.R. in 1939, but regular network television began in 1946. In 1948, fewer than 2% of U.S. homes had television sets. But from that point on, it swept





the country. Perhaps that is because it appealed to the populace's most pressing postwar desire—to be left alone.\*

Through it all, from the early experimental models to the birth of the commercial networks, public television, cable and satellite, puppets have been there: entertaining, educating, parodying, satirizing, cajoling and, of course, "selling soap."

One of the first artists to begin to create programming for television was Burr Tillstrom, creator of the popular and brilliant *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*. Beginning in 1947, this show was performed LIVE and much of the material was tailored and adjusted in response to fan mail. *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* was joined by other pioneering shows of the time, including *Puppet Playhouse Theater*, later retitled *Howdy Doody*, which ran from 1947 - 1960. Other significant programs featuring puppets were *The Paul Winchell Show*, *Captain Kangaroo*, *Andy's Gang*, *The Bunins' Foodini the Great*, and Bil Baird's *Life with Snarky Parker*. The proliferation of variety shows offered additional venues for puppet guest appearances on shows such as *Ed Sullivan*, *Jack Paar* and *Sid Caesar*. Both the Spanish entertainer Señor Wences and the little Italian mouse, Topo Gigio, made regular appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

The first artist to really create work for this new medium (rather than simply moving theatrical puppetry from the bridge or castelet to the small screen) was Jim Henson [see review of *Jim Henson's Sketches and Doodles* . . . page 16]. From a five minute daily spot on local TV, his *Muppet Show* was eventually seen in 108 countries.

Broadcast technology moved swiftly around the globe, with network television beginning in 1946. Regular programming involving puppets was established in Canada (1947), Czechoslovakia (1953), Luxembourg (1957—exported to France in 1965), Germany (1953) and Japan (1956).

*PI* #10 takes an affectionate look at puppetry on television. While we don't have enough pages to cover the subject exhaustively, we do hope to shine a light into a few dark corners of this vast subject.

Media Editor Donald Devet weighs in with two exciting interviews—Eric Jacobsen of Disney's *House of Poo* [page 6], as well as Kathryn Mullen and Michael Frith, the creators of *Between the Lions* [page 10]. Michiko Ueno-Herr introduces us to one of her favorite Japanese TV shows growing up [page 14]. Nikki Tilroe remembers working with Shari Lewis [page 17]. Your editor reviews the Mazzarella Brothers' new documentary on the history of puppetry in America [page 20].

But wait, there's more: Brussels' Toone Theater, a festival in the Urals, and a review of Basil Twist's *Petrouchka*.

Read on, MacDuff!

—Andrew Periale

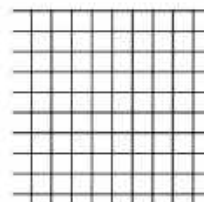
\*All quotes, as well as information about the early days of television, are from Leslee Asch's as yet unpublished article, "Puppetry in Television."

OPPOSITE:

*Captain Kangaroo and Bunny Rabbit*

TV puppetry by Gerry Anderson

*Robert Homme and friends from the program The Friendly Giant*



## PI # 9 Revisited

*A number of readers responded to our "Propaganda" issue.*

Tue, 24 Apr 2001

Andrew,

The spring issue of "Puppetry International" is outstanding. I have always considered myself quite well read in puppetry but the information on "Puppetry in Post-Revolution Indonesia," "The Forgotten Yun Gee" and the articles on puppetry in German and American (1930's) propaganda were new topics to me.

Thank you for your hard work,

*Dortis Grubidge*

Dear Editor Periale:

We should like to add some information to the PROPAGANDA issue which was a most interesting issue to date.

At three P of A Festivals (1994, 1995 and 1998) the PUPPET GUILD OF LONG ISLAND performed "60 Years of Puppets and Politics."

Using the original scripts and puppets, the play covered social and political issues from the depression years of the 30's through the present scene. Some of the topics covered were Medicare, desegregation, the cold war, McCarthyism, Vietnam, racism, and the landing on the moon.

The audiences were most receptive and puppets again played their role in making important statements about life around us.

Our Guild is proud to have been a part of Puppets and Politics.

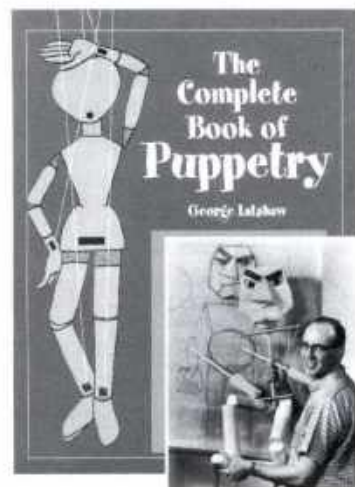
Sincerely yours,

Carol Fijan, Puppet Guild of Long Island



Your Editor, Andrew Periale, and Designer, Bonnie Periale, were recently honored with the Puppeteers of America "George Latshaw Award" for "significant contributions to the field of puppetry through writing and editing." George Latshaw was the longtime editor of *The Puppetry Journal*, as well as being an author, performer and director. In 1999, he was the first to be given the eponymous award.

The Periales received the award at a gala evening of puppet theatre at the recent national festival of the Puppeteers of America in Tampa, Florida.



*George Latshaw, on the cover of his recently reissued classic book [see review, PI#9]*



*A fine example of puppet propaganda recently came to our attention.*

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) - In a bid to promote puppets as powerful tools that can be used to convey messages on life threatening issues in Africa, community health awareness activists are organizing an international puppet festival to be held in Nairobi next year.

"It is not a new concept. Traditionally, Africans used shadows, masks and marionettes," Eric Krystall, senior advisor of the Community Health Awareness Programmes, or

CHAPS, said at a media briefing Wednesday night. "We are getting a good response."

Krystall said CHAPS, which was initially a private family planning program, has created puppets to educate the public on AIDS (news - web sites), malaria, corruption, drug abuse and violence against women.

He said in the past seven years, CHAPS has trained over 350 puppeteers,

who have formed about 40 troupes based in rural and urban communities throughout Kenya.

The organizers are holding regional festivals to raise funds and create awareness for the international festival from February 15-23, 2002.\*

\* Excerpt from "Festival Uses Puppets for Lesson"  
by Associated Press, writer- George Mwangi  
<http://www.kenyapuppet.com>



While *Spitting Image* is no longer seen on American TV, it is still very much alive in other parts of the world, where its satirical barbs have been very controversial. In Moscow, Putin has been very upset with *Kukla*, and in Israel:



The most popular puppets among viewers were then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

The chairman of the Central Elections Committee, Supreme Court Justice Mishael Cheshin, yesterday rejected a petition to ban the satirical program *Ha hartzufim*, the Israeli version of *Spitting Image*, last night on television. The petition filed by "The Campaign for Eretz Yisrael," a group which seeks to advance the values of Zionism and of Jews settling in all of the Biblical Land of Israel, claimed that the show served as election propaganda for Prime Minister Ehud Barak.\*

\* Excerpt from "Cheshin Rejects Plea to Ban TV Puppets," by Gideon Alon in *Ha'aretz* Newspaper online.



### ERRATA PI #9

> Though listed in the Table of Contents, Jan Meissner's name was omitted from her wonderful review of the Toy Theatre exhibit.

**Jan Meissner** has published fiction in *Story*, *Joe Magazine*, *The KGB Bar Reader*, *Columbia*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Fiction*, *Epoch*, London's *Woman and Home*, *The Quarterly* and *The Texas Bound Anthology*. She lives in New York City and is currently at work on a novel.

> Photo credits for the article on Figures of Speech Theatre's production of "She Who Loves" go to Miranda Ring.

> In the caption on page 35, "Queneva" should read "Guerrero"

*The Ultimate Vicarious Experience:*

## An Interview with Eric Jacobson

text & photos by Donald Devet

It's not an attractive shade of green. More like a green gone bad—too bright, too gaudy, too demanding of attention. Ironically, it's exactly the shade of green that a video camera loves to ignore because this green hue is designed to electronically disappear. Looking at a composite picture on the video monitor, all you see are two puppets, Roo and Tigger, emerging from a spaceship plopped down in a computer-generated Scary Woods. The effect is magical. The green is nowhere to be seen. And neither is Eric Jacobson, one of a cadre of puppeteers who bring puppets to life in the new Disney Channel series, *The Book of Pooh*, now in production for a second season.

Like a doctor prepared for surgery, Jacobson is cloaked from head to foot in green—smock, pants, boots, gloves, hood—the better to disappear. His presence may not be seen but it is certainly felt. As the head of a team of puppeteers for Roo and Piglet, he is involved in almost every scene. Puppeteering on a major television series may sound glamorous, but in reality it's a tough job requiring extreme amounts of stamina and patience—two qualities that the 30-year-old seems to possess. His working day begins at 8:30 a.m. and often lasts until 7 p.m.





Quiet and soft-spoken, Eric seems to melt into the background even when he isn't wearing his green suit. But don't let his youth and shy manner fool you. Eric is a veteran television performer who has worked on such high-profile series and films as *Sesame Street*, *Bear in the Big Blue House*, *The Puzzle Place*, *Once Upon A Tree*, *Rory's Place* and *Elmo in Grouchland*, as well as numerous commercials. Eric has experience in theater puppetry, as well: Steven Wideman's The Puppet Company, The Czech-American Marionette Theater, The Swedish Cottage Marionette Theater and Basil Twist's *Symphonie Fantastique*.

What is it like to be a television puppeteer? How does it compare to work in the theater? I sat down with Eric during his lunch break from a busy morning shoot to answer those questions. But first, a little background.

### How did you get into puppetry?

**Eric:** Jim Henson once said that no child grows up dreaming of being a puppeteer. I tripped into it, like a lot of puppeteers do. I came to New York to go to film school at NYU. I know many puppeteers who share the same background. When I graduated from film school in 1993, I already knew I wanted to be a puppeteer. I became disenchanted with the film industry at large. If I was going to be in the film industry, I wanted to do something worthwhile. So I leaned toward children's TV.

I was one year into film school when Jim Henson passed away. A number of events like that pushed me toward the kind of things Jim Henson did. I realized how important this one man had been to my childhood, my maturation. I wanted to do something to help continue the legacy that he left behind. I didn't know how, exactly. I was able to get an

internship with the Henson Company. Only later did I discover that this was the right way for me to go—working with the company that Jim founded and doing the kinds of things he did in puppetry.

Doing children's television puppetry is "hog heaven" for me. I'm working behind the scenes and in front of the camera at the same time. A lot of the knowledge I acquired at film school, I've been able to apply— a knowledge of focal lengths and the lens of a camera really helps me to help the cameraman do the job. For example, I know I can only move the puppet just so far before it goes out of focus. I can offer suggestions. I can speak the cameraman's language.

### Are the worlds of TV and theater puppetry different?

**Eric:** Typically, there has always been a distinction between puppeteers in the realms of television, film, and theater. But to tell the truth, they aren't that separate anymore. On new shows like *The Book of Pooh* and *Between the Lions*, you have casts with an interesting mix of backgrounds. The Bunraku style of puppetry used on *The Book of Pooh* requires an army of puppeteers. Since Bunraku is a more traditional form, the theater skills of many of the puppeteers transfer very well. As more shows begin showcasing different styles of puppetry that have their roots in theater, I think you will see the line blur more and more. I hope so. It's fun to work with all my friends on a single project.



### Did your theater work help your television work?

**Eric:** Sure. Any kind of experience you can get performing in front of an audience or camera is going to help you grow as a performer. There are common sensibilities that can be applied, but they are very different disciplines. You have to work hard at both to gain any kind of competence. The techniques are different, but the acting and the relationship between performer and puppet are similar.

Doing live theater every so often keeps me on my toes and reminds me that there is an audience out there. I think anybody who works in television can benefit from doing some theater. And anybody who works in children's television can definitely benefit from doing a birthday party or two!

### Does your television work help your theater puppetry?

**Eric:** Puppeteering for television is a refined art. The camera comes in very close. You have to be sure your movements are precise. That precision carries over to theater puppetry. When I do theater, I tend to gravitate toward other kinds of puppetry that are not used on TV. I don't use hand puppets on stage. I enjoy working with marionettes—having a distance from a performance. I'm aware of what the audience can and cannot see. I can project myself into the audience. That's why I enjoy TV puppetry so much. I can make the puppet look exactly the way I want it to for the audience's eye because I'm seeing through their eye while I'm performing.

Obviously, one thing live theater provides that television doesn't is immediate feedback from your audience. There is nothing like hearing a live audience gasp, laugh, or even moan while I'm performing. I know if I'm getting through and, when I do, it feels great! In contrast, there's a lot of guess-

work involved in performing for a television audience. A television audience exists in another time and place, separate from the performance. And even though the numbers can be in the millions, you lose the group dynamic.

### What's it like to bring a character to life on television?

**Eric:** I'm acting out the part with a puppet on my hand and trying to execute TV puppetry technique— a refined and delicate art. It takes years to develop that muscle. And I'm never working alone. There are other assistants or other puppeteers working another puppet that I have to relate to. There's a lot of discussion on the set between the puppeteers, team members and amongst the teams. Because we see everything we do on a TV monitor as we do it, we have no excuse for how it looks.





A lot of self-direction takes place—I see something and change it right away before it becomes an issue. I work with the director to give him or her what they want.

### Is there a lot of pressure in this job?

**Eric:** Because of the nature of the business, you don't have weeks and weeks to rehearse a show. You have a few minutes before they roll tape. If you're lucky, you'll get two or three takes to get it right. So I have to look at the big picture and let some things slide and be happy if I get 80% of what I want. There are instances when I'm unhappy with a certain take and ask for another go. Usually the director is agreeable. They want the best looking show, as well. That's what we're all here for.

There are time constraints. To get it perfect, you could waste a whole day shooting one scene. You have to learn to be efficient and to compromise when you have to. I try to develop my abilities to the point where I can do it fast and make it look good.

### When you watch your work being televised, what goes through your mind?

**Eric:** I'm very hard on myself; I'm my own worst critic. Many times the director says, *I'm going to buy that one. It looked great. I don't know why you would be unhappy.* And, admittedly, when I watch the show months later, I don't even remember what I was complaining about.

### What advice would you give to someone who wants to do what you do?

**Eric:** You must beg, borrow or steal a camera. A practice camera is more important than a puppet. You have to have that camera plugged in and on all the time. Whenever you walk past your TV, you can't help but stick your arm up and practice. That's what I did. You have to love it, too. You have to be obsessed with puppetry and TV puppetry. It has to be really fun. And if it's really fun for you, you'll practice your socks off and you're going to get really good. It takes time. If you're obsessed with it, it's a joy, a passion. You'll see progress. And you'll know if you're any good or not because it's an objective performance.

If you have an eye for it, you will see the mistakes that you make and you will correct those over time and you'll get better. If you're just starting and you haven't spent five minutes in front of a camera and you think you're terrific, you probably are never going to grow as a puppeteer and you're not really going to become good at TV puppetry.

### Are you obsessed with TV puppetry?

**Eric:** I think of TV puppetry as the ultimate vicarious experience. Many times we find ourselves in a movie theater wishing we could be that movie star larger than life on the screen. But we have to sit back and be on the receiving end. In the case of TV puppetry, you get to actually walk up onto that screen like in *Purple Rose of Cairo* and become that character and continue to enjoy the show.

That's my big rush—being able to walk up onto that screen. That's why I went to film school in the first place. I was enchanted by the experience of going to the movies and losing myself in the world of the film. And that's what I do in TV puppetry. I absolutely can't think of anything else I would rather do than to be a puppeteer. I get paid to play with puppets!



#### OPPOSITE:

Monitors on the set of *The Book of Pooh* are used to adjust the computer-generated sets to match the action of the puppets.



# Permission To Go Nuts:

*An Interview with Kathryn Mullen and Michael Frith*

by Donald Devet

Eric Jacobson is part of a second generation of television puppeteers weaned on a steady diet of *Sesame Street* and Muppet films. But the first generation of puppeteers who worked with Jim Henson didn't have such models to emulate. They had to make it up as they went along. Mostly male, they tackled the complexity of performing with a monitor, often inventing techniques that are considered commonplace today—video assist, blue screen and waldos. The technical side of performing puppets on film and for television was intimidating, especially, according to Kathryn Mullen, for women who wanted to get into the act.

Kathryn had no intentions of going into puppetry. She was an actor and a director of children's theater in New Orleans when Nancy Staub introduced her to Jim Henson. Jim was on the lookout for female performers to add to his troupe and Kathryn fit the bill. Tall, talented and energetic, Kathryn jumped in with both hands, manipulating background characters on *The Muppet Movie* (1979). She had no idea that the work would be so challenging; before she knew it, she was hooked on puppets. For the next twenty years, Kathryn performed nonstop—in *The Muppet Show*, *The Great Muppet Caper*, *Muppets Take Manhattan*, *The Dark Crystal* (as Kira), *Sesame Street Presents: Follow that Bird*, *Christmas Toy*, *Wubbulous World of Dr. Seuss* and all 96 episodes of *Fraggle Rock* (as Mokey). She is currently



Kathryn Mullen performing "Mokey" on *Fraggle Rock*.

Coordinating Producer of Puppets and Puppet Captain on *Between the Lions*, the reading series produced for PBS by WGBH in Boston.



Over tea and cake in their New York City apartment, Kathryn and her husband Michael Frith, Creative Director and Conceptual Designer for *Between the Lions*, enlightened me as to what it was like to be among the first wave of Muppet performers twenty-five years ago, and what the state of the art is today.

**Kathryn:** I look back on that early Muppet stuff and it looks pretty crude. We did some sloppy work on *The Muppet Show*. The two-minute bits, which were only seen in the U.K., were done at the very end of the day when everyone was tired. We never worried about the technical stuff like our heads showing. We just had fun doing it.

**Michael:** There's one shot in *The Muppet Movie* where you not only see heads but you see the trench that the puppeteers were standing in. That would never happen today. The cropping and framing were different back then.

**Kathryn:** What stands out the most about those early days was the spirit and dedication of everyone involved. For all four seasons of *Fraggle Rock*, the performers and the Canadian crew gave 120%. It was a great team, even though it took awhile to win over the camera guys. They were skeptical about doing a series with puppets. But once they saw that *Fraggle Rock* had a real message and a group of performers who worked hard at "getting it right," overtime work was never a problem.

**Michael:** That spirit and dedication is unusual. You don't see it very often.

When the puppeteers perform some insane piece on *Between the Lions*, they say, "This is how it must have been in 'the old days.'" There's a wonderful story about the shooting of the Muppets' 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary special. There was one shot that called for a huge assembly of puppets—almost every Muppet ever made. Kevin Clash was Puppet Captain at the time. In the monitor, Kevin noticed that there was one rabbit puppet in the background, jumping up and down and stealing focus. Kevin ordered the director to tell the puppeteer manipulating that rabbit to cut it out. The director looked under the set to see who was killing the shot. When he saw that it was Jim Henson, the director told Kevin, "You tell him." And that's what the puppeteers have been missing—the permission to go nuts.

**Kathryn:** It was always a contest on *The Muppet Show*—how much upstaging you could get away with. Anything you could think of was considered valid. We challenged each other. Sometimes Jim and Frank (Oz) wouldn't notice some crazy bit of business until they viewed the playback. Everyone had a great time.

**Q:** How does today's generation of puppeteers' work compare to the early Muppet performers?

**Kathryn:** I couldn't be more thrilled or amazed by the quality of the current puppeteers who have taken the basics of working in television that we invented and refined them. The eye of the performer has become more sophisticated. And so has the eye of the audience. Growing up watching *Sesame Street* and the Muppet films, the puppeteers of today have taken puppetry to a higher level. I don't feel I'm as good as these new puppeteers. But I don't feel a need to perform. There are many wonderful puppeteers out there—more qualified television puppeteers than ever before. When I first began, there was only a handful who could manipulate a puppet well, work with a monitor, coordinate with an assistant, act and do a vocal and, at the same time, watch themselves do it. It took at least three years for me to become comfortable with working puppets on TV.

**Q:** Even though you work exclusively in TV and film, you've expressed an appreciation for theater puppetry. How does that manifest itself?

**Kathryn:** On the series, Michael and I work on, *Between the Lions*, each program deals with a story that the lion puppets tell. The producers wanted the story illustrated with animation. We coaxed them into letting puppets do the job. We want to incorporate a variety of puppets into each program—to show the world that there are other kinds of puppets besides the movable mouth hand puppets.

**Michael:** Our idea met resistance. The producers thought using other kinds of puppets would make the show less appealing to older kids. They thought puppets were only for little children. They just didn't get it. We had to fight tooth and nail to convince them otherwise. During the first season, we did an African tale built and performed by Tim LaGasse and Jim Napolitano using elaborate stylized cardboard figures. When the producers saw what they had done, they got excited.



Kathryn Mullen performing on Sesame Street.

Napolitano, *Between the Lions* has been an extraordinary series to work on. We're lucky to have every one of them on the set.

**Kathryn:** Here in New York, there has been a television puppet renaissance. Three series were in production—*Sesame Street*, *Book of Pooh* and *Between the Lions*, all at the same time. Even though there are more puppeteers working in television than ever before, we were having to scramble to find puppeteers to get all the work done.

**Kathryn:** So now we've been able to have our theater friends perform as guests artists—James Godwin, Leigh Secrest Godwin, John Pavlik, Sal Monteo, Albrecht Roser of Germany and Teatro Hugo & Ines of Peru. By appearing in this series these puppeteers have an opportunity to reach a wide audience, more people than they ever could with their stage performances. And the audience becomes educated to all forms of puppetry. That's the power of television.

**Q:** What's the future of puppets on television and film? Will computer animation replace puppets?

**Kathryn:** I don't see that happening. There will always be the desire to see three-dimensional objects move in real time. There is something about the relationship between the puppet and the performer that cannot be duplicated or replaced.

**Michael:** Jim Henson was always pushing for greater technical achievements. I think he would be pleased with the way technology has been used to serve the telling of a story with puppets. What's happening right now in TV is amazing. After *Fraggle Rock* ended, I thought I would never get a chance to produce a show at that level and with that kind of energy. But I was wrong. With puppeteers like Heather Asch, Jennifer Barnhart, Jim Kroupa, Tim Lagasse, Peter Linz and Jim



**Q:** What's the next big thing for puppets in film or television?

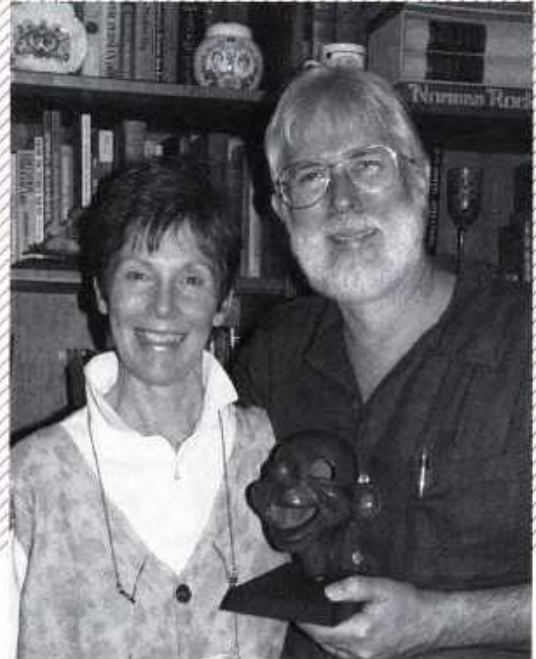
**Michael:** I think there needs to be another movie produced using puppets to tell an adult story. Jim was heading in that direction with *The Dark Crystal*.

**Kathryn:** Jim always kicked himself for not having cast child actors to play the parts of the Gelfings, Jen and Kira, in *The Dark Crystal* instead of using puppets. He thought the movie would have been a bigger success. But I don't think he was right. The movie suffered because of a mish-mash of a story. And that's what we need— a good story.

*A final note:*

Kathryn Mullen, Michael Frith and Eric Jacobson share a similar passion for their work. They have dedicated themselves to using their energies and talents in an art form that continues to reveal new facets with each passing generation. As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the future of puppetry in the media of film and television is in good hands.

*Donald Devet is a puppeteer and director of puppets, both live and on television. He is the co-author of "The Wit and Wisdom of Polyfoam Construction."*



Kathryn Mullen and husband, Michael Frith, in their 5th Avenue apartment with a carving of Snarky Parker by Bill Baird.



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## A Case Study on Hyokkori Hyotanjima and Shin Hakkenden and Their Socio-Psychological Impact in Japan

by Michiko Ueno-Herr

In 1993, Japan celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of TV broadcasting. NHK (Japan's nationally-broadcast commercial-free TV station) and other commercial stations combined their efforts and asked one million people throughout the country which program they would want to watch again on television. Voted as No.1 favorite program of all time was *Osbin*, NHK's morning serial drama about a girl who is sold as a servant but overcomes her hardships. (Incidentally, this program has been extremely popular in other countries where it was shown, including China, Hawaii and California.) The second most popular program was *A Little House On the Prairie*, which was produced in the U.S. and shown on NHK with Japanese voice over. The third most popular program was *The Silk Road*, a travelogue by NHK, which traced and explored the cultures along the ancient trade route between the West and the Far East. (This program was truly a monumental achievement and an ultimate challenge for the grips and engineers.) And the fourth pro-

gram that people wanted to see again among all the programs produced in Japan the last 40 years was *Hyokkori Hyotanjima*, the puppet show which was aired on NHK from 1964 through 1969. It was also honored as "the most popular program across three generations of TV viewers."

As if to make sure that the above result had not been under the influence of the contest's main sponsor, a weekly literary magazine *Bungei Shunju* conducted their own poll. *Hyokkori Hyotanjima* surfaced as the 5<sup>th</sup> most popular television program of all time and reconfirmed its place in the Japanese people's hearts.

"Hyotanjima" means a gourd(*hyotan*)-shaped island (*shima*), and it is the main "vessel" of the story. "Hyokkori" is an adverb that describes sudden and unexpected appearance of someone or something, and it is also an euphonic word for "hyotan". This fictitious gourd-shaped island was originally a part of a large landmass. In April 1964, when this TV series began, the volcano on the



Regular characters Torahige (left) and Don Gabacho (center) from *Hyokkori Hyotanjima*





photos ©NHK

gourd-shaped part of the land erupted and separated it from the rest of the land. Then, the gourd-shaped "island"- five miles across- began to drift into the ocean. The island would bump into mysterious kingdoms or it would be visited by pirates and other surprise characters. After an incident or two at these encounters, the island went on drifting again, and nobody knew where it was headed.

The island residents- that is, the regular characters- included four adults and five children: Don Gabacho (self-proclaimed prime minister of the island), Miss Sunday (school teacher), Dandy (former mobster), and Torahige (former pirate), Doctor (very intelligent and knowledgeable boy, or present-day "geek" or "nerd"), Pudding (cute girl), Chappi (Peppermint Patty- like tomboy girl, but not so cynical), Dump (strong boy), and Teke (kid who likes to eat). According to NHK's annals, the object of this series was "to teach children the true meaning of justice, love and courage, and to nourish their strength to live their life." In retrospect, one wonders how this island ended up with this selection of characters to teach those lessons.!

Rocky and Bullwinkle for the Americans; *Hyokkori Hyotanijima* for the Japanese. These two draw perfect parallels in terms of wittiness, speedy delivery of lines, social criticism, and overall goofiness and funkiness. *Hyotanijima* owed its literary

success to Inoue Hisashi and Yamamoto Morihisa who created and write the show. For NHK which is often viewed as conservative and bureaucratic, it must have been rather courageous to hire these two young writers, both at twenty-nine years of age when the series began, and two directors who were even one year younger than the writers. Yamamoto, after graduating from Waseda University (one of the elite schools in Tokyo), began writing children's books. He was known for his humor and fast-pace style. Inoue has been writing not only for children but also for general audiences. His seemingly laid-back style contrasts sharply with his keen insights in the human life. Inoue is now a writer of best-selling novels.

The puppets for *Hyokkori Hyotanijima* were designed by Kataoka Akira of Hitomi-za and manipulated by the members of the company. The puppet performance was directed by Suda Rintaro, also of Hitomi-za. In 1999, Suda received the 50<sup>th</sup> NHK Broadcast Culture Award, for his effort in supporting puppetry programs on television since the beginning of broadcasting in Japan, having produced an indelible impression on the viewers, and helping them dream their dreams.

(Hitomi-za's profile may be read in English on their web site: <http://www1e.mesh.ne.jp/hitomiza> )

(continued on page 39)

# JIM HENSON'S DESIGNS & DOODLES: A MUPPET SKETCHBOOK

written by Alison Inches

This book, bound in green (what else?) and sporting playful cover art, looks at first glance as if it might be something for children. It is not. Author Alison Inches has created a lovely memorial to Henson, exposing his gentle genius in a book that is part biography, part early history of the Muppets. The six chapters bear headings like "Foam Follows Function," "Cartoons to Commercials" and "Spinning Muppet Tales: from Storyboards to Storytelling."

Throughout, Inches uses Henson's drawing, painting and collage to trace his development as an artist. There are many sidebars containing personal anecdotes or shining a light on some hidden morsel of Muppet lore. Always, we see Henson as the man we imagine him to be—kind, generous and tirelessly creative.

Unlike other books on the Muppets, there are no photos here; this turns out to be a real strength, for in the many sketches and doodles, we are let in on the creative process. We can see in these quick scribbles how many of the characters we know so well—Rowlf, Kermit, Fozzie Bear—had their genesis. We also learn how they developed, thanks to the help of Henson's closest collaborators: Don Sahlin, Jerry Juhl and others.

The book follows Henson's life and work up until around 1976—the first season of *The Muppet Show*. This is a choice which makes sense,

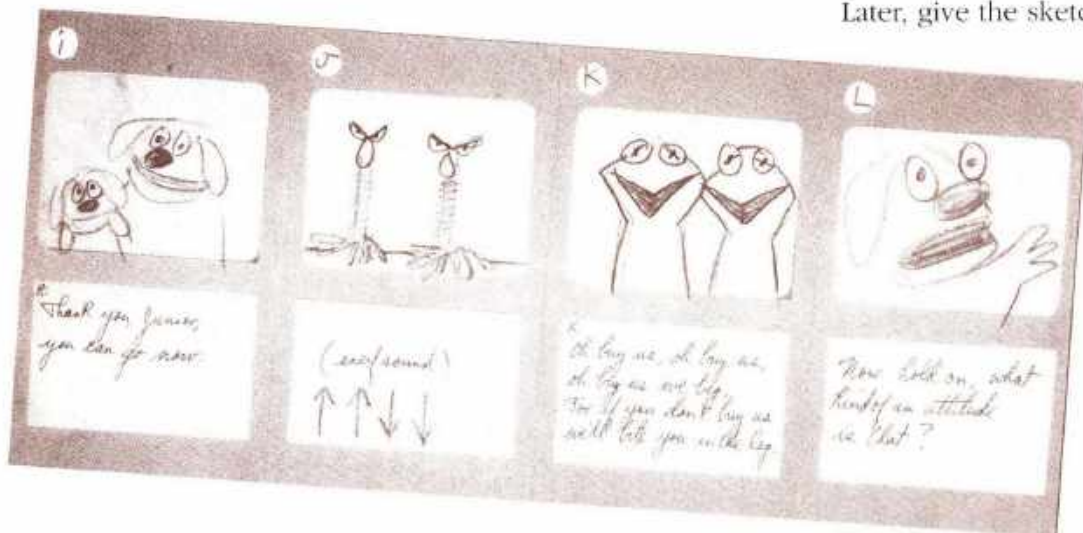
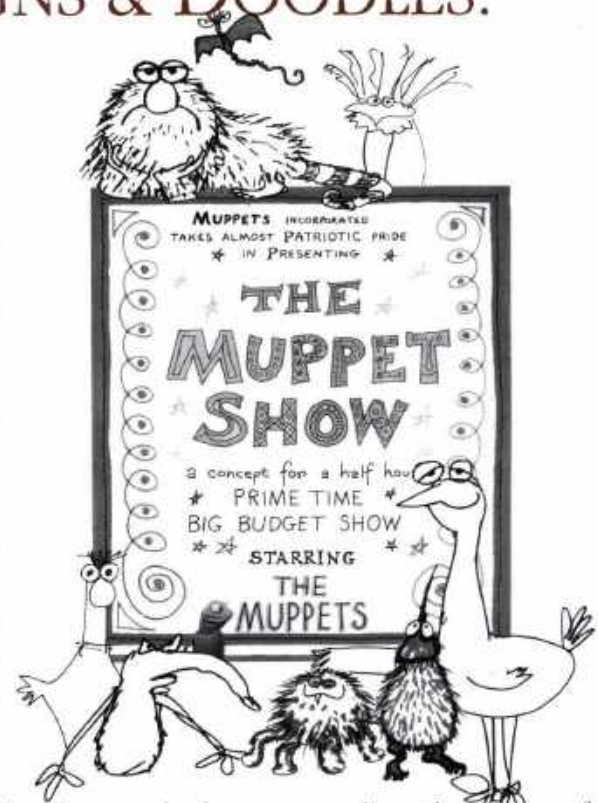
for the doodles may be best at revealing the genius of an artist "becoming," and with the premiere of *The Muppet Show*, Henson "arrived."

My wife, a gifted visual artist, once told me about an exhibit of drawings by Edward Gorey. This was early in her career, and seeing that Gorey used "Wite-Out" on his drawings had an absolutely liberating effect on her. Jim Henson's sketches should have similar impact on young artists accustomed to seeing Muppet characters only as finished TV performers. The underlying message seems to be: stay loose, be free, keep it simple.

Later, give the sketches to your designer (even if your designer happens to be you!).

There's a lot to look at in this book, and you'll probably be tempted to begin by skimming all the artwork, as I did. This book, though, is worth reading—cover to cover.

—reviewed by  
Andrew Periale



—from the storyboard for an Ideal Toys commercial, 1966



## TV Puppetry:

### *An Experience with Shari Lewis*

by Nikki Tilroe



*Imagine being on tour*, checking in to your hotel late at night and finding two messages at the front desk from Shari Lewis— whom you've never met. They read, "Call Shari Lewis about a job offer."

This happened to me. I went to my room to call. Was my heart pounding! But I talked to her and she said her master puppeteer, Pat Brymer, would call me to discuss the project, *Lamb Chop and the Haunted Studio*, in depth. Several people had recommended my involvement. A few weeks later, I was on a plane to Vancouver, BC, to work again as a TV puppeteer.

I knew I would have to gain her confidence and respect. The special was, in fact, my audition. No pressure there! The production was challenging and wonderful to do. It was fascinating to watch Shari work. I had always respected her, but working with her on set made me realize how demanding (in a positive sense) she was. How disciplined she was. Because we were both trained as dancers, there was a mutual respect and understanding. Shari gave me room to *do*. She observed my actions and reactions to situations. We walked through the studio one day, looking for "puppet places." Will puppets be able to work here or not? We looked for possibilities. Some places turned out to be more possible than others. Puppet characters were run not just as hand puppets, but were operated using strings/wires. In one segment, Charlie Horse and Hush Puppy slid down a staircase banister. What took well under a minute on TV took three weeks to rig as a type of marionette and to get the track to work on the banister.

Do the four days of on-location recording of *Charlie Horse and the Music Pizza* sound like fun on the beach? Here comes the surf, sand, high surf, sand, wind, higher surf, higher wind. Not a hurricane off the coast of Malibu, CA? Yes. The puppet grotto wound up against the cliffs. I worked out an escape route in case the tides got too close— which almost happened. It sounds funny until you realize that we were surrounded by lights, cam-



eras, monitors, power cables— all subject to attack by water. The escape route was up the cliffs. Thankfully, we didn't have to use it. There were rattlesnakes up there. The sand fleas were enough, thank you, and the red ants. (Shari and I were both bitten while in the middle of recording segments. When you are holding your arms up in the air with puppets on them, there is nothing you can do but hope the beasts won't consume you alive.) Then the wind came along and sand whipped up, toppling the large puppets and puppet costumes— I'm talking close-to-gale winds, here! *Oops*— there go the tents. So much for the glamour of television production on the beach.

Sure, it was hard work, but it was also fun. Where else can a grown-up feel five years old again? Every free moment, I could be found gathering shells and stones. So what if the glare on the monitors was so great that we could hardly see an image? So what that the helicopter shot blew us over? So what that the eroding beach and huge surf and mega-undertow echoed the tensions on the set? I still found joy in being there. The rest of the production took place inside, safe and sound, the CBC-TV studio in Vancouver on a fake beach... HAH! With both arms raised to hold the puppets through a hole, the beach sand sifted down onto us and our monitors. Great!

*In the two specials* I worked on with Shari Lewis, I was put into what I think of as “origami” and “crumpled-paper” positions. On *Charlie Horse*, we worked on a raised floor so the puppeteers could work standing or sitting in pits. It was great. We also worked with “rollies”— carts with wheels. I often shared a pit with Shari.

Working with Shari Lewis was always a wonderful challenge. She treated all of us with respect. The crew and the puppeteers adored her— she inspired loyalty. Not perfect, Shari had her flaws, as we all do, but with *Charlie Horse*, she took on new challenges. Puppeteers were: Master Puppeteer/Builder Pat Brymer, and Gord Robertson, Lee Armstrong, and myself. Shari did what she had rarely done before— worked in the pits and overhead. She seemed to enjoy it after awhile. She also allowed other puppeteers to work her puppets. She did the voices, of course, but as she let go of needing to be in the figure, it freed her to develop a deeper connection with the characters.

above- Location shoot, Malibu Beach

opposite- Set of beach, Vancouver, BC

Nikki Tilroe, “Junior,” Shari Lewis, Pat Brymer



*I will never forget* a scene in which Shari was sitting at a table in the *Music Pizza*, with Charlie on her left and Hush Puppy on her right. They were discussing their recent audition for “Little Red Ridinghood.” Charlie had gotten the part of the wolf; Hush, the part of the Mother, complete with a “Shari” wig. Lambie had auditioned for the lead but didn’t get it. She walked across the scene in the foreground, crushed, upset. She heard the joy of the other characters and had to enter again and wound up between Shari and Hush. *[Stop tape.]* Shari and I exchanged puppets— I went from Lamb Chop to Hush. *[Start tape, continue scene.]* I voiced my concern about upstaging everyone with Lamb Chop. Shari said “Go for it, Dear— make it big.” So I did. Lamb was so upset that she played pain and agony as she staggered to her famous “Camille” faint. Charlie talked almost the entire time, but Shari was staring at Lamb

with her big brown eyes totally focused on her. It was a great scene, and it worked because of Shari’s wonderful reaction to Lamb. It was impossible to upstage Shari. She knew how to “share the space.” And she did.

As with all creative endeavors that involve many people, everyone had to cooperate. It was a give-and-take situation. It was not always easy. Television budgets are tight. There were time constraints, and tempers had a tendency to flair, but never did Shari’s ego take over. She worked harder than anyone else. The show was important to her, and it has become an important contribution to the art of puppetry in television.

*Nikki Tilroe is a dancer, teacher, director and puppeteer who has worked for Jim Henson and Kermit Love, among others.*



*The Mazzarella Brothers Documentary,*

## THE AMERICAN PUPPET:

*The History of Puppetry in America*



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It's unprecedented. One is tempted to say "miraculous." The Mazzarella brothers have not only completed the first comprehensive documentary on the history of puppetry in America, but have found a major audience for it—the documentary begins airing on PBS stations this fall. This ambitious project was some 20 years in the making. The research was exhaustive and uncovered many hitherto unknown treasures. The final project is a necessarily incomplete, but beautiful tribute to the pioneers of this most diverse and idiosyncratic of the performing arts.

The seeds of this project go back over two decades. While Mark Mazzarella was making his living as a magician and escape artist, he would often cross paths with fellow Connecticut performers Bart Roccoberon and the Pandemonium Puppet Company. Mark became fascinated by puppetry and, as the video production company which he started with his brothers Tony and Tom began to grow, they would contact Roccoberon for help in locating puppeteers for their educational videos. Over time, Mark became fascinated (his brothers might say "obsessed") with the history of puppetry. By 1995, Mark had convinced his brothers to move ahead with the documentary project, which soon began to consume the brothers' time and personal resources at a pace which served to energize Mark, but often left his brothers shaking their heads. Still, while Mark was the



Augustus White, Vaudeville Punchman

researcher and visionary on this project, this was a true collaboration; Tony scripted the documentary and wrote the original music, while Tom was the video editor and cameraman for the many interviews which are woven in among the archival material. And, of course, all three were major investors in their video.

Much of the history of this art form is packed in boxes which sit in attics, library basements, and small private collections around the country. Mark soon became aware of the type of tireless detective work needed to uncover the facts of this vast "whodunit". One clue linked puppet impresario Tony Sarg with Nantucket, so off they went to the tiny, picturesque island, where they discovered a treasure trove of materials in the public library! Other clues led to the Library of Congress and the National Archives. These excursions yielded gems as well, such as the first film of puppetry (some trick marionettes shot by Thomas Edison), a 1774 newspaper ad for a puppet performance (alongside notices of runaway slaves), and an entry in George Washington's diary in





Tony Sarg, Father of Modern American Puppetry

which he notes spending eleven shillings six pence on a puppet "shew." Living puppeteers proved a rich source of information, as well. Margo Rose, Fred Thompson, Jane Henson, Bart Roccoberton, Shari Lewis and Alan Cook (among others) shared generously and—as several of the interviewees have since died—provided a touching counterpoint to the many historic photos, film clips and rotoscopes from the early days of television.

"It was difficult," says Mark Mazzarella, "to know when to stop." Finally, though, the time had come to assemble all the bits and pieces into a coherent whole. The 20 miles of tape got edited down into a four hour documentary which was cut down to two hours for PBS. PBS, though, wanted it cut to one hour. The result is a wonderful documentary which garnered a standing ovation at a preview screening at the recent Puppeteers of America National Festival. That it is an incomplete history goes without saying. Mark Mazzarella mourns the loss of entire lines of research due to the severe time constraints. The Mazzarellas, though, have accomplished something in *The American Puppet* that no puppe-

teer nor puppetry organization has been able to accomplish—the filmed history of their own art form. The Mazzarellas will make much of their research available to puppeteers and scholars through the Puppeteers of America Video and Film Library, and other institutions. Mark, Tony and Tom have helped puppeteers in other ways, too, spending thousands of dollars restoring and duplicating film which they borrowed from puppeteers in order to help assure that certain rare bits of puppet history do not vanish entirely. It became clear to them, years ago, that the several hundred thousand dollars which they put into producing this documentary would never be recouped. As Mark says, though, "It's not about the money." It's just for the love of the art.

—reviewed by Andrew Periale



Shari Lewis in the 60's



# THE TOONE THEATRE:

## *Where History Lives On*

by Cynthia Elyce Rubin



*Retired puppets are suspended from the ceiling in the Toone Museum.*

Through centuries, many great powers of Europe have fought, won, and lost domination over the territory known as Belgium. Located strategically among the prominent waterways of the Low Countries, this small country is today one of outstanding diversity. Its capital Brussels is the international headquarters for NATO, as well as a center of ancient architecture and folkloric festivals. Modern highways trace ancient water routes, while this busy city displays 21<sup>st</sup>-century architecture alongside ornamental medieval facades. High-tech industry flourishes here alongside traditional crafts such as lacemaking and tapestry weaving, cornerstones of economic activity since the Middle Ages.

In Brussels, nowhere is this more evident than in the very heart of the city at the Grand-Place (Market Square), called "the finest square in the world." There is nothing quite like it anywhere else in Europe. Here in the city's historic center, there is a sense of timelessness as one admires the medieval and Gothic architecture of professional guilds and former private homes. Ornamental gables and balustrades, hanging banners, gilded facades, and sunlight beaming from golden rooftop sculptures all give the impression of another century. Forget today's hordes of tourists; just look around and take it all in. Begun in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, Europe's finest expression in stone and once the pride of the Hapsburg Empire, the Grand-Place, has always been the very heart of Brussels.

Not far away from this bustling tourist mecca is a teeny, tiny alley barely noticeable from the street. The *impasse Schuddeveld* (meaning cattle field) hides a building dating from 1696, where a living puppet tradition continues to be very much a meaningful part of Brussels' cultural life. For centuries, marionette or puppet shows have been a Belgian passion. Hundreds of theatres once existed nationwide; in Brussels it is said that, at its height, there were forty active puppet theatres. Today, a small wooden sign announces the remaining Toone Theatre, the last of its line, dating back to the early 1800's.

The Toone dynasty began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Antoine Genty in Les Marolles, Brussels' working-class neighborhood, where Antoine



*José Géral shares a trademark checkered cap with the best known of Toone characters, the adolescent urchin, Woltje, protector of Right and of orphans*

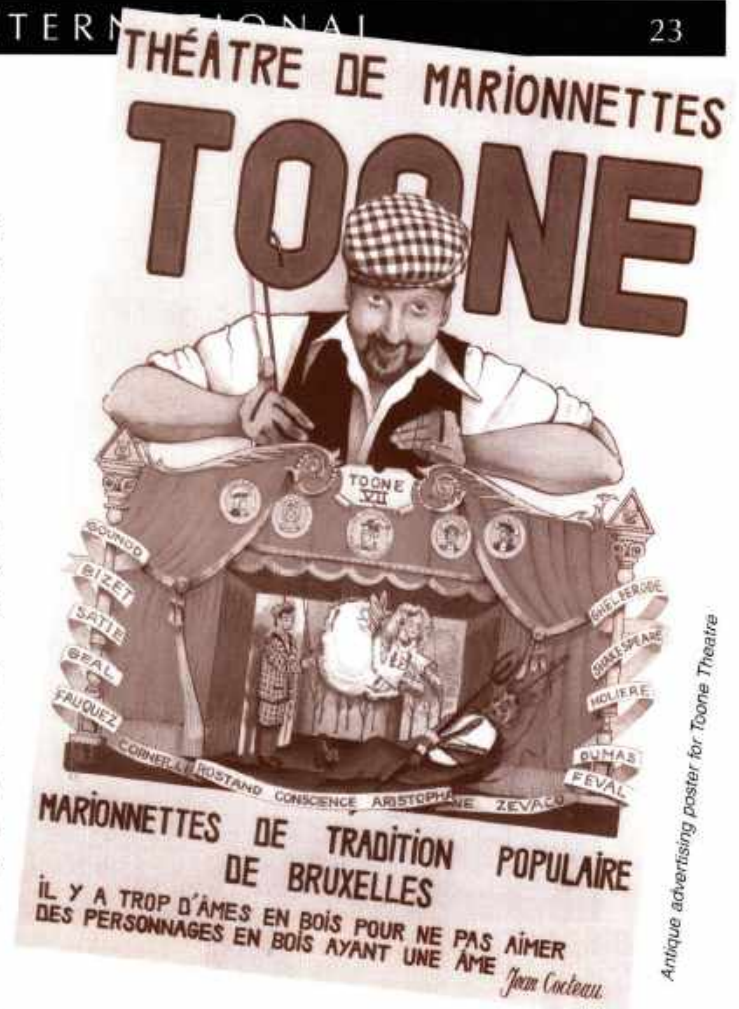


was called Antoon or *Toone* in Brussels dialect, a mix of French and Flemish. Since then, the title of Toone is the name for each new manager or puppet master. (The Toone dynasty has almost never been passed on within a family.) Early performances helped many of the illiterate Marolles inhabitants learn how to read (indeed, the first two Toones were illiterate themselves), and some were morality plays in which lessons in good and evil came alive. Often, the audience would yell or jeer at the villains of the story and even pelt them with vegetables and apple cores. The Toone would calm or sometimes reprimand the audience from the theatre stage.

There were also puppet serials like our present day soap operas, which went on and on, often with nightly installments of some 50 to 60 episodes. As they do today, most of the original play themes centered around legend, religion, or political satire. Although historical dramas, such as the *Three Musketeers*, *Faust* and *The Temptation of St. Antoine*, were also in the repertoire, medieval epic poems relating legends of Charlemagne and his nobles have always been popular. But television and the movies turned out to be overwhelming competition, and the marionette theatre, always located in Les Marolles, turned into a dying art form. In 1963, Pierre Welleman, the sixth Toone, was forced to close it down.

However, a small group of dedicated individuals succeeded in reconverting the Toone Theatre, giving it a new permanent home renovated by the City of Brussels, thus insuring a stable future. On the ground floor of the converted 17<sup>th</sup> century building is a lively bistro with food and drink available; authentic marionettes can be purchased, as well as small versions as souvenirs. The theater is in the attic, above the second floor. Smaller than our normal theatre, this theater seats little over 100 people on rows and rows of flat, cushioned benches. In front of the raised stage hangs a painted *trompe l'oeil* curtain, pretending to be one of fine, draped velvet.

All the plays are in the Brussels dialect. Often, the classics have been rewritten to include local place names and inside jokes. Unlike the traditional hand puppets familiar to the English-speaking world through the characters of Punch and Judy, the puppets that became part of life in Brussels were always large, carved and painted, wooden figures operated from above by strings *and steel rods* / attached to various parts of the puppets' bodies.



Antique advertising poster for Toone Theatre

These marionettes, averaging three feet tall and weighing about 20 pounds, loom large on stage and often engage in a kind of slapstick comedy. Once in a while, the puppeteers' arms are seen working the marionettes, but the audience, mostly adults, learns to disregard this visible sign of human presence. Six puppeteers are required for each performance. They are grouped three on each side of the small stage, one behind each plane of scenery, and they manipulate the puppets, passing them back and forth across the stage and holding them from above by metal rods. Often the handpainted scenery transplants the great classics by depicting familiar Brussels' sites. Lively barrel-organ music is played before the performance and during intermission. In some of the plays, live and recorded music underscore the dramatic action of the puppets' many gestures. José Géal, today's seventh Toone, is the voice for all the characters.

The best-known of the Toone characters is Woltje (meaning the little Walloon). He is "tall like seven apples" and recognizable in a black-and-white checkered suit. Mr. Géal is particularly attached to him and wears a signature black-and-white cap as a symbol of his devotion.





Puppets duel on stage

All Toone characters are produced and repaired in the Toone Workshop, which can be visited by appointment. In the small Toone museum, open during theatre intermissions, hundreds of retired puppets, some in various stages of production, are suspended from the ceiling and on display around the room. Their characters, some going back to the Middle Ages, continue to reflect the average Belgian's intense love of puppetry and to keep alive an important aspect of Brussels' vibrant past. •

*Cynthia Elyce Rubin is a visual culture specialist with a Ph.D. in Folk Art.*

#### SOURCES ---

Toone Puppet Theatre  
Impasse Schuddeveld 6  
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*The following essay was written by Robert Rogers, a previous contributor to PI. Since it expresses a very particular point of view regarding the state of contemporary puppetry, we decided to pair it with an essay by Stephen Kaplin, another frequent contributor, who covers the same subject from a very different point of view. Where do you, dear readers, come down on this matter?*

## A Plea for High Standards

by Robert Rogers

One of the more vivid images I recall from my childhood is that of the stage of the Bil Baird Theater in Greenwich Village—actually one of the two small side stages that were positioned to the left and right of the main proscenium. In my recollection, the house lights are out, the spotlights are on, and Bil's famous singing frogs are the focus of the show.

I've come to realize, now, that whenever I create a new puppet, and then place it on the stage, I am doing so partly to recapture that kind of wonderful moment which I experienced in that, sadly, long-gone theater at 59 Barrow Street in New York City.

Bil Baird's puppets were, for me, the pinnacle of puppet design and performance. And it is significant to remember that his theater presented the same high standards as productions in other theaters around the city—theaters that featured live actors, even those theaters situated farther uptown "on Broadway" (in which he also performed). His productions contained no excuses, nothing pretentious, amateurish or sophomorically experimental.

Now, after 21 years as a professional puppeteer, I've come to feel that his great legacy, and that of the puppeteers who must have inspired him, are starting to be forgotten, and in some cases even disparaged, by those who should be paying it the greatest homage. I'm referring to none other than many current-day puppeteers.



In the name of innovation and experimentation, the actual art of puppetry is being distorted and destroyed. I don't know of any other art form in which (in some circles) rejection is the name of the game, effort is deemed more important than result, and lack of ability wins out over accomplishment.

Yes, in what seems to be an increasing community of self-proclaimed master puppeteers, the understanding of puppetry, the faith in puppetry, and the power of the puppet is, ironically, being undervalued.



Surely, if a person were to go buy a car and a salesman showed him an experimental model, he'd probably pick something else. But experimental puppet theater is the proud and trendy category of shows that don't follow the rules, by puppeteers who wouldn't even know where to start if they tried.

Similarly, a novice musician would never tell an audience, "I don't know how to play my instrument very well, but the fact that I'm standing on stage with it is what's really important." I can't count the number of performers who I have seen, from puppetry festivals around the world to a most successful current Broadway musical, who do just that.

Thanks to those who practice this *modus operandi*, the world of puppetry, which like a roller coaster, has had many ups and downs, is now heading downhill with no turn in sight.

When I began my career, the common cry heard among puppeteers was that they didn't receive the same kind of respect from their audiences as did other performers in other disciplines, like dance or music. About that time, I noticed that puppeteers of my generation, as a kind of reaction to this problem, began to change the ways in which their productions were being presented. They opted out of working behind the curtains of proscenium puppet theater stages and began to perform in what was newly described as Bunraku style—wearing loose fitting black garments and working in full view of audiences. Of course, Bunraku has always been about a great deal more than that. It involves learning a repertoire as sophisticated as Shakespeare's, using a vocabulary of gestures, and knowing how to direct an audience's attention from oneself to the puppet. But back then, either many of my contemporaries didn't know this, or they just didn't care.

They also adopted and started promoting the use of life-sized and larger-than-life-sized puppets. I thought then this was a gimmick, and I still do. Oversized puppets are unwieldy. They may provide a sense of excitement—like balloon figures in a parade—but they are incapable of subtle acting, the hallmark of good puppetry.

It was as if puppeteers were trying to distance their work from the characteristics of those older, established and (I hate to use the word) traditional puppet theater companies as a way to achieve that notoriety which they so frustratingly sought. I always thought that improving

the quality of their plays and abilities as puppeteers was the answer. But, by and large, that never seemed to happen.

What did happen was that the act of being a puppeteer began to be part of the show. I have to admit that, over the years, I too designed several marionette productions that allowed audiences to see my crew of puppeteers and myself at work. But we were always positioned behind a backdrop that rose to the height of our chests, with the stage lights focused only on our puppets. We did not try to compete with the puppets, and did not deliberately call anyone's attention back to ourselves.

I must say that many audience members found this juxtaposition fascinating. And lately, the personal, handmade, non-mechanical type of puppetry which I perform seems to quite easily receive the kind of respect that was so much harder to come by two decades ago. Perhaps, in this computer driven age, my craftsmanship is being regarded in the same way as that of a violin maker, and my performing niche is considered very much like that of a classical musician.

In any event, while I don't consider myself to be a traditionalist, my work does contrast with that of a growing number of puppeteers who are moving the emphasis of puppetry away from the world of theater to the world of spectacle. With that has gone what I think is the magic of puppetry, the stagecraft of puppetry and, sadly, the skill of puppetry. In fact, many people even seem to go out of their way to call attention to the symbolism of their puppets rather than what they are able to do with them.

You can be sure that in the history of the world of visual art, a man like Pablo Picasso, known for his highly abstract work, actually knew all about—and was very good at—the fundamentals like composition, perspective and shading. His art was informed because he was well grounded in the basics. Remember, Picasso may have ended his career painting portraits of people with two eyes on one side of their heads, but that wasn't because he didn't know where they really belonged.

Likewise, puppeteers looking for the new, the controversial, the non-commercial should remember their heritage. Don't make a style out of deficiencies, and don't reject those who have come before you. •



# ART: Sometimes "Down & Dirty"

by Stephen Kaplin

Can the present ever measure up to the past? It seems that every generation sings the same song concerning the passing of a golden age. Has the art of puppetry just gone through such an age of wondrous achievement and passed out the other end into a period of decadence and decline? Bil Baird's legendary Barrow Street Theatre seems to be a particular magnet for nostalgia. Embodying the rich genius and skill of American Puppetry, Baird's theater marked a high water mark for mid-century American string puppetry, the same way that Papa Schmidt's theater embodied the German tradition, or the Manteos the Sicilian.

But, while aspiring to such glory, professional excellence and the high technical and artistic standards, Baird's theater ultimately fell victim to the unmanageable economics of trying to own and manage one's own performance space. The theater eventually folded, in large part because such a tiny house, even when full of enthusiastic audiences primed by glowing critical reviews, could not pay the union scale wages for its team of performers and craftsmen.

In subsequent years, the Darwinian economics of the entertainment and real estate industries made it certain that no one was going to replicate Baird's noble achievement. After all, who could afford to buy an entire Greenwich Village townhouse and then convert it into a puppet playhouse, rather than overpriced condos? In addition, a shift in the direction of American puppetry away from European styles of string puppetry towards Asian influenced bunraku, rod or shadow techniques, plus the revolution in puppet construction and design brought about by the phenomenal success of Jim Henson's Muppets, meant that Baird's puppets seemed somewhat dated by the time I first saw him perform at the 1980 UNIMA Festival in Washington D.C. By that point in time (a critical watershed in the development of contemporary Ameri-



photo: R. Termini

**Preston Foerder shares the stage with his puppets in *Tales of the Brothers Grimey*.**

can puppet theater) the marionette, the delicate and high strung epitome of the puppeteer's craft, was on its way out. So, given the grim realities that a career in the arts entails even in the best of times (and the early 80's, if anyone cares to recall, were not the best of times), what young person could afford to throw their passion, skill and talent into a field that required several decades of devoted effort to master, and even then offered up only a modest living? And with just a handful of professional training programs such as UCONN and UC Berkeley, how was a youngster with such perverse aspirations to find training and opportunities for apprenticeship? Given such a situation, a far sounder career move was to shuffle off to Hollywood and learn how to make monsters and dinosaurs.

For those hardy souls who persevered in their pursuit of folly and who were determined on a career in live puppet theater, it made a great deal of economic sense to simplify production values as much as possible. If your studio and budget are tight, you quickly discover what things you can do without— and the bulky bridge apparatus, proscenium setups and road boxes full of dozens of finicky controls and figures (along with the dozens of finicky craftsmen needed to make and repair them) are big albatrosses. So get rid of them! Explore alternatives! I know in my own career, a chronic lack of studio and storage space has caused me to focus more intensely on two-dimensional puppetry genres, such as shadow and toy theater. Part of the challenge has been to design and create spectacular productions that pack away into a flat folder.

It is natural that puppeteers, crafty and resourceful lot that they are, learn to adapt to the contingencies of their day and age. By doing so, they create forms and styles of performance that fit the cultural contours in which they operate. In



short, every culture invents the style of puppetry it deserves. Given this reality, it's hard to fault American puppeteers for cultivating a skeptical attitude toward the wisdom passed down by the marionette impresarios of a bygone age. A wild, iconoclastic tendency has always been a strong aspect of modern American art. We've never had the sort of worshipful regard for the past as other countries, such as Japan, Israel or even England. So our icons tend to have rather short shelf lives.

Small and simple, though, is but one direction into which contemporary puppetry has evolved. The other (typically paradoxical) extreme of modern puppetry is the development of puppet performances in the streets and fields, outside the confines of the proscenium or even the theater's boxy limits. This genre of puppet performance features oversized, giant puppet figures in all varieties. Spend some time in a Vermont field watching a Bread and Puppet pageant and you will see that these large figures are indeed capable of subtle acting.

I have written at length on the nature and cultural context of giant puppets in a previous issue of this journal, and don't wish to belabor the point now. Suffice it to say that giant puppets, rather than being a quick gimmick foisted upon a dim public by puppet companies as a way to achieve notoriety, is more accurately a means of realizing some of the more primal aspects of puppetry art, rooted in sacred

ritual or empirical political power display. These forms still resonate. They are still used to embody mythic and archetypal social constants in religious ceremonies, parades, and other social spectacles.

No doubt, the art of puppetry is in a state of extraordinary flux. New forms evolve, but the older forms don't simply vanish. The art of puppetry as a whole has responded to the same currents that have shaken all of Western Culture in recent decades. Our times demand a flexibility of form and a transparency of technique. One always makes the choice as an artist whether to preserve the old or invent the new. Few are lucky as Picasso to have it both ways (a radical classicist). Picasso's rejection of the style of academic European painting, was linked to his growing awareness, in the light of growing African, Asian and scientific influences and models, of how constraining and self-limiting the mainstream conventions had grown. Look at his art in the context of his time and you'd see that he was part of a generation of artists who were reacting against the florid apogee of high European culture, which was on the verge of senselessly destroying itself in two World Wars. And you can't reject the accomplishments of Klee, Miro, the Duchamp Brothers, or any of the other great modernists who insisted that the placement of eyes on the canvas was secondary to the interplay of color, shape and rhythm. In the same manner, modern music and jazz exploded the structural conventions of classical European music.

So here we are—a century removed from Modernism's ebullient beginnings and half a century down the road from it's grand, gaudy flame-out. We are past post-mod and even post-post mod, in the cusp of a millennium so new that it has yet to have a face. While the loss of previously popular forms of puppetry is alarming (cultural forms, like ecosystems, can become polluted and stressed, leading to a dangerous loss of a stabilizing diversity). But my feeling is that puppetry—that lowly, marginalized, awkward scion of the performing arts—is the cultural equivalent of kudzu. And young artists are, as always, actively engaged in sending out feelers towards the new forms that will suit the shifting cultural terrain of this new era. Of course, a balance must be struck between conservatism and iconoclasm, between the new and the old. But this balance is a dynamic, shifting point, not a stone edifice. We don't need any more Cultural Revolutions aimed at wiping clean the cultural slate with raw force and blood. But neither do we need any Royal Academies and Grand Central State Theatre Institutions, embalming the classics in gilt and marble. What is most useful is finding interesting ways to meld the surviving relics of the past with contemporary theatrical practices so that audiences of mixed ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and especially young people, can connect meaningfully to our art. •

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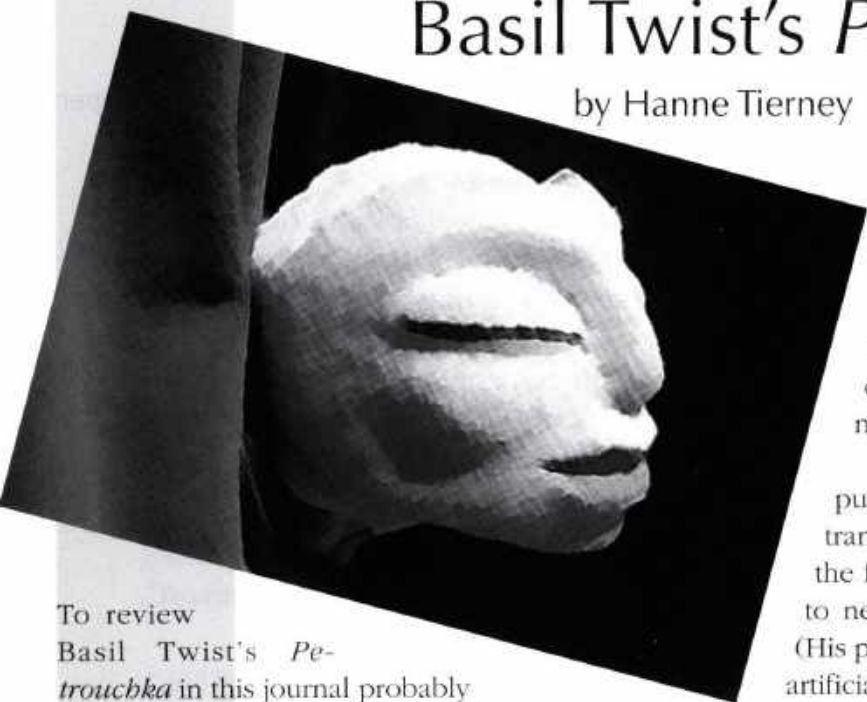
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## Basil Twist's *Petrouchka*

by Hanne Tierney



To review Basil Twist's *Petrouchka* in this journal probably means preaching to the converted. But *Petrouchka* offers a good opportunity to review the reviews about it, given that, as is usual with puppetry, they were written by critics in other fields.

Originally conceived for Diaghilev's Ballet Russe and set to music by Stravinsky, *Petrouchka* tells of the hopeless loves of puppets at a country fair. Petrouchka loves the ballerina, who loves the moor, who loves the ballerina and kills Petrouchka, who miraculously ends up alive and well. In Basil Twist's production, at the small studio theater at Lincoln Center, Russian pianists performed Stravinsky's score on two grand pianos, one on each side of the stage. The prelude to the ballet was accompanied by a choreography of small squares and circles, skillfully moved by the puppeteers. Basil Twist experiments with abstract shapes in a way close to the floating movement of Disney's *Fantasia* and the visual music created on computers; patterns and shapes are formed, are undone, and are reformed. He did not intend for these squares and circles to be anything else but themselves and to do what they can do: to arrange and rearrange themselves. It was an exercise in possibilities.

The atmosphere of a Russian fair unfolded itself through a lively and quite wonderful dance of flowers and various objects. Onion-domed buildings appeared and disappeared, setting the stage for time and place. Then the three puppets, Petrouchka, the Moor and the

ballerina entered and began to act out their doomed love triangle. The puppets were about four feet tall and had the look of a nineteenth century country fair. They were beautifully manipulated by the puppeteers.

Their manipulation represented the fine art of puppetry at its best: superbly mastered technique transcended into pure emotion. Basil Twist is one of the few puppeteers who trusts his art sufficiently not to need human beings interacting with his puppets. (His puppeteers could not be seen.) The puppets were artificial objects endowed by the viewer with passionate emotions only because of the artistry of the puppeteers. Since not a word was spoken, words could not beg for anyone's sympathy. It all hinged on the gestures of the puppets. Artistically, the performance of these puppets equaled the performances of Bunraku puppetry. A case can be made for Basil's use of representation vs. non-representation, but this becomes a question of preference and not of quality. Obviously, he plays and experiments with both, although realistic representation brings out his immense intuition for this art.

The reviews of Basil's piece make a serious case for why this field needs to train, educate, create (whatever word applies) informed critics. Jack Anderson, a dance critic for the *New York Times*, could not make any sense of Basil's work in terms of puppetry; instead he wrote an entire review questioning Basil's choice of subject, i.e. complaining that *Petrouchka* was meant to be performed by human dancers— an obvious complaint from a dance critic. It seemed a waste of good space, given that Basil is one of the foremost puppetry artists in the US; he warrants serious criticism.

The music critic for *New York Magazine* loved what he saw, but again praised the piece for its clever content by reversing the human and puppet roles and the wonderful things the puppets did for Stravinsky's music. It is frustrating not to have otherwise intelligent people accept this field for the complicated and fascinating art that



it is and to review it on its own terms. (Perhaps that deficiency stems from the long-standing job puppetry has had of bailing out the theater whenever the theater finds itself at a loss and throws in a puppet here and there for quick renewal.)

The field does have knowledgeable reviewers and writers, but, unfortunately, the papers writ-

ing for general audiences don't seem to use them. And many professionals in the field don't want to review work, probably because in the end it makes for bad friendships. The time has definitely come, though, for puppetry to generate a body of criticism that is informed, intelligent and meaningful and that establishes criteria for quality. •

FALL, 2001

## Dragon Dance in Quereteros

### LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS

Dragon Dance will be in Quereteros, Mexico—about three hours north of Mexico city— from September 27 to November 4. We will participate in the Day of the Dead spectacles with a Mexican company, *Comparsa*, whom we have worked with since 1994.

We are puppeteers and our work will primarily be making large figures such as the boats that Cortez burned off Vera Cruz in 1512, a number of skeletons, and other masks and puppets. We will rehearse the programs using local musicians and dancers, and then we will perform them, for four nights in a row, during the Day of the Dead weekend in the central plazas of Quereteros.

You are invited to join us for any number of days— the whole month, the last two weeks, or even the last few days. It will surely be a rich, memorable cultural exchange experience.

We look forward to hearing from you,

*Sam Kearson*, Director

802-223-4051

skerson@hotmail.com



### Dear Readers:

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Cheliabinsk was an exciting festival to attend as recipient of a UNIMA scholarship, for many reasons, both as a place and from a puppetry point of view. I was delighted to discover that Cheliabinsk has a special significance for many Russian puppeteers as a city which was once the centre of exciting and innovative puppetry during Soviet times, but which, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, had fallen into the doldrums. There had been no Festival in the Urals district for ten years until the 1996 one at Tiumin and the 1998 one in Yekaterinburg. Now it was Cheliabinsk's turn to host the festival. "Could the Golden Age be revived with this Festival?" was the big question everyone was asking. The first issue for me was: "Where was Cheliabinsk?" I could not at first find it on a map at all, but then I purchased a post-1993 guide book and all became clear. Cheliabinsk had been a closed city because of the armaments factories Stalin had built there, retreating behind the Urals to protect them from Nazi bombing (at one point there was talk of renaming the city Tankograd). It was also the centre of Soviet nuclear research under Kurchatov who split the atom for the Russians (using espionage material from the west) and then went on to independently develop the H-Bomb for Russia. The city therefore disappeared from the map. It was strange to be one of the few westerners to have set foot in the place since perestroika. So where is it? Slightly to the east and therefore the Asian side of the Ural Mountains.

There were grandiose public buildings in neo-classic (Stalin-period) style, recently undergoing renovation, mainly painted in pale yellow with white stucco laid out in the grand plan, the main square dominated by a vast statue of Lenin, and then rows and rows of depressing concrete apartment blocks: a startling contrast. The general impression was of greyness: grey apartments, dirty, grey or beige Ladas, grey pavements (many in disre-

pair), boarded up shop fronts. However, the Russian warmth, humour and passionate intensity with which everything is discussed, the extraordinary hospitality and friendliness I received, and of course the quality of the puppetry, way and above made up for this.

I think it is important to be aware of the Urals' tumultuous puppetry background to better appreciate the excitement and emotional tension, the hopes and fears, that this festival aroused. The distance from Moscow was, in fact, the chief reason why puppetry flourished here in the 70's and early 80's under three talented puppeteers: Valeri Valchovski, Victor Shrayman and Roman Vinderman, who all trained at the prestigious St. Petersburg Drama Academy. Unable to find work in St. Petersburg or Moscow where anti-semitism at that time forbade Jews to be leaders in any sphere, the three travelled far from Moscow to the Ural "zone," where the authorities turned a blind eye to the three of them working as puppeteers, considering also that it was only for children. So here, with the "freedom" of being ignored by the authorities, they developed an extraordinarily inventive, experimental puppetry in opposition to the Obraztsov school which dominated the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, however, this particular critique of Soviet society was no longer relevant. The need to retreat and explore new ways was reflected by all three directors leaving the Urals district for other areas of Russia (and in Shrayman's case, to Israel for eight years) to better reassess the changed circumstances and the need for new thinking.

*The Little Hunchback Horse—Yekaterinburg production showing proscenium arch and curtain in traditional Russian folkloric design.*



In the meantime, puppetry in Cheliabinsk stagnated with no new creative ideas. The physical state of the auditorium of the Kukol (Puppet) Theatre was a sad symbol of the mental deterioration: boarded up and declared too dangerous for public access. So one extraordinary symbol of hope for this festival was the renovated Teatr Kukol. In May, building works had not even commenced, but by September it was complete- an amazing achievement. Inevitably, there were teething problems: the children's toilets flooded on the first day and the audience had to walk across the foyer on bricks. No one seemed to mind. They were

all just so delighted to have the old auditorium completely renovated and a magnificent new facade, including an extended foyer furnished with wooden folk-art sculptures of fairytale characters and a charming Gothic turreted tower. The theatre's logo on the gable front is a striking hand with three fingers outstretched, the first finger and thumb joined, which also cleverly looks like a jester's eye and the fingers his cap.

I arrived with Natalia Raitarovskaya (the Moscow UNIMA representative) at 4 a.m. Moscow time (6 a.m. Cheliabinsk time). Thereafter it was three shows a day, more or less, for nine days.

Both professional companies and students on drama courses presented their work, so the standard was very variable. As the Urals district covers a vast area, some companies had travelled hundreds of miles to get there, each company putting on a show for children and a show for adults. I had some preconception that perhaps Urals' puppetry for children might be folk and fairy tale-based. This was not far from the truth, though this had *not* been so in Soviet times when only such tales that could be rewritten to promulgate a simple Soviet moral had been allowed (1). Now a folkloric revival was indeed under way, though not many of the tales on offer were Russian ones, apart from the well loved *The Little Hunchback Horse* and *Little Baba Yaga*, though the latter performance was based on a German version of the tale. Hans Christian Andersen was the favourite (*Thumbelina*, *The Tinderbox* and two performances of *The Nightingale*), but also performances based on tales by Charles



Perrault, Tove Janssen,

Oscar Wilde and St. Exupery amongst others. *Little Baba Yaga*, performed by Zalotoyi Piotooshok Theatre and directed by B. Chodiriev, deserves a mention as the most imaginative, aesthetically whole production, with set, costumes and acting all contributing to an excellent magical, witchy atmosphere: net hung with leaves to symbolize the forest, actors draped in flowing, semitransparent robes and with grotesque papier-maché heads supported on the actors' shoulders so that the actors' own heads appeared to be hunchbacks during the witches' dance. Little Baba Yaga herself was a rodpuppet worked from inside the back of the head and body by a visible manipulator. The manipulator/actress, S. Medvedeva, was superb and in fact won a special mention from the jury as best female lead.

Most of the puppets in the shows for children were glove or rod worked from above (or behind the head), apart from one theatre from Bashkir who used rods worked from below. The Bashkiri are a Muslim, formerly nomadic people who were forcibly settled in Soviet times. Their production, *The Long, Long Childhood*, adapted from two short stories by one of their most famous national writers, M. Karim, was performed in their own language, and the audience listened to it on headphones translated live into Russian. Meanwhile, I had it relayed into English for me by an interpreter. *Long, Long...* was simply told with very lively characterization of the boy puppets appealing strongly to the children in the audience. Little touches like the boy puppets leaving in a group and one boy putting his arm round the other's shoulder, and the way the cow and goats frisked about,

Exterior of the classical Youth Theatre, (formerly the State National Theatre), Cheliabinsk



showed good observation; this performance received a special nomination from the jury for their manipulation techniques— a skill which they noted should not be forgotten with the Russian predilection for visible Bunraku techniques and actor-led performances. One of the tales addressed the problems of rural migration to cities "where they say they give you bread for free." The children set off to the city only to have stones thrown at them, a tale which has a strong resonance for their people and worldwide. I had an interesting discussion with Gulnara Valitova, the director, and another member of the company, Guziel Samigullina afterwards, about the parallels with other beleaguered minority languages and cultures and larger neighbours. They told me that Bashkiri is now taught in their primary schools and their chosen second language is German.

My favourite show— and the jury's— was *Little Red Riding Hood*, performed by the Orienburg Theatre and directed by Alexander Zabalotni. A conventional set— a board painted as a wall— was both playboard for glove puppets (Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf and a cat chasing a mouse who had "escaped from the previous year's play" and kept appearing at scene changes, etc.) and support for window and gables of the granny's house. Sounds ordinary enough, but it was hilarious. Brilliantly acted by visible actors and puppeteers' voices alike, fast paced action, witty verbal jokes and slapstick, it kept the full age range amused. The Granny (an actress) had red cheeks like a panto dame, as did Red Riding Hood. The wolf was a splendid scruffy door-mat with a humorously long beagle-like nose, so he was not too scary. The wolf was cleverly introduced before the action started by two narrators (a comic and his sidekick, played by two actors who stood before the puppet board) so that the smaller children would not be afraid of him when he appeared in more ferocious role later.

It was interesting to see how many of the performances used narrators, though not all as successfully as the above. In *R.R. Hood*, the narrators were used throughout as commentators, but also actors in the plot, giving the story a modern and immediate relevance. In other performances, I wondered if the narrator was a lazy way out and rather slowed the action.



For younger children, a narrator can be very successful as in *The Magician's Hat*, based on Tove Jannsen, performed by the Kurgan Theatre. The narrator, a young man in black top hat and tails, sat in a rocking chair by a window set in the playboard where snow fell outside and set the scene like a story within a story— rather charming and reminiscent of bedtime stories for the nursery age.

This interest in narration, storytelling, was what struck me more than anything. This was evident in performances for children, but especially when it came to the performances for adults. It is one reason why acting skills (and a serious acting and drama course training as well as puppet manipulation) are deemed essential in Russia. This could also be one reason why performances ranged in quality— some performers had little acting talent— but why, when it was good, it was much more satisfying as theatre (for my taste) than purely visual theatre (i.e., without words).

To concentrate on the very best of the performances for adults, there was a thought-provoking and moving re-interpretation, suggesting parallels with the author's life, of *The Nightingale* by the Tiumen Theatre company; it was directed by Alexei Lielyavski and the nightingale was played both by a mechanical bird when in captivity and an actress when set free. The singer/actress wearing a long white dress underlined that the story reflected Hans. C. Andersen's unhappy courting of a famous singer of the day. The other characters, the Emperor and his courtiers, were played by rod puppets manipulated on

*The Nightingale— Tiumen Theatre company production*





stage by visible puppeteers, Bunraku style.

I was particularly impressed by *Ruslan and Lyudmil*, performed by Pierro, the Orenburg theatre company, directed by Alexander Yarilov (the same company who produced *Red Riding Hood*). *Ruslan and Lyudmila* was based on one of the most famous stories in Russian Literature by their well-loved author, Pushkin. A mini-stage with proscenium arch decorated with scroll-like swirls was set on the larger stage, and two main narrators, dressed in late 19th century costume, a man in black tie and tails and a woman in a stylized black wig and full-skirted brocade dress, told the story throughout. The puppets were not so much puppets as carved figures which the narrators pushed around the miniature stage. Only when the mountain/giant head appeared was there anything like a conventional puppet with its latex lips and moveable eyelids, manipulated inside the back of the head by the female narrator. There was also a stunning lighting effect when a spotlight with a shadow cutout of the wicked magician flashed around the auditorium walls and main proscenium arch to gasps from the audience.

One of the most hilarious informal cabaret acts put on in the Art Club after supper each evening also involved pushing figurines around a table-top. These were clay pots with eyes and nose on the lids and the mouth suggested by opening and shutting the lids. They also turned out to be whistles. Apparently, the pot whistles are a folk art in Archangelsk (in the North) where the two puppeteers came from originally, but they had developed the idea of turning the pots into puppets. This was brilliantly performed (and whistled): a satirical version of the well-known Russian fairytale *The Little Hunchback Horse*, which rivalled anything in the main official

festival. The puppeteers were Anatoli Archilov and Larisa Valiebskich, now based in Kurgan.

A satirical spoof of a typical Russian folk tale, *The Water of Life*, was one of the chief highlights of the festival. This was directed by Andrei Drigeen, who also acted with his wife, Yelena, and with Anatoli Pristai. It was particularly popular with other puppeteers who crammed into the studio theatre of the Theatr Kukol (ignoring safety regulations deemed necessary in Britain) with high expectations, since these were Theatr Kukol puppeteers and it was Andrei's debut as a director. It began with a philosophical,

wistful monologue by Andrei in tattered jeans as introduction (the use of narrator again) which suggested the existential interpretation expected of the audience! Then it was all played through the puppets, but with the same semi-satirical, wry tone throughout. Quite superb acting and characterization from all three. The only comparison could be *Spitting Image* in the west, though this performance used "types" rather than specific political personalities, and the puppets were visibly manipulated by the actors/puppeteers standing behind the stage platform. This was roughly the story of a little girl who goes to a well to get magic water to cure her ill relation, but on the way she keeps meeting other people who are needier. She gives the water away, so she keeps having to return to the well. The three main encounters were with drunk policemen, which was a humorous but swinging attack on both the problem of alcoholism and greedy materialism now that capitalism has spread across Russia. One policeman wants a fridge, another a bigger flat for fear that his wife will leave him. There is a happy ending with all the policemen cured at the end, but this was biting stuff— and perhaps where Russian theatre is going— not only satire, but an analysis of what it is to be Russian now, with the breakup of the Soviet Union and all its resulting problems.

A fascinating and intellectually intriguing performance was the sublime highlight of the whole festival. This was

*The Water of Life— directed by Andrei Drigeen:  
Anatoli Pristai on left and Andrei Drigeen on right.*





*Case History* (or, *The History of Illness*) written and performed by Alexander Borok (also a director at the Cheliabinsk Theatr Kukol). Although mainly a monologue by Borok, it did involve many other actors; one of them, Sergei Plotov, was Borok's co-writer of satirical material for their own separate theatre company, "Black Theatre." (This has no connotations of ultraviolet light "black theatre," but would be better translated as Theatre of Alienation influenced by Harums, an avant gardist in the 30's, killed by Stalin's regime.) *Case History* was a meditation on the nature of being an actor, and was told chiefly through quotation or reference to all the major acting roles, from Hamlet to various characters in Chekhov, Moliere, Gorki and all the other major Russian roles well-known to the audience (which was mainly made up of other actor/puppeteers, directors, etc.). This show was not open to the general public. The in-references were appreciated by the audience, but the questions it asked were relevant to everyone: What is it to be an actor? How is it possible to know what is real? How do you know who you really are? It only incidentally involved puppets as one more example of actors playing parts or being puppets themselves. Hitler appeared as a marionette (almost the only marionette in the festival), and even Punch (Petroushka) for a brief appearance. No one carped that there should have been more puppetry in a performance for a puppetry festival. I too found it fascinating that this should be the case. After all, puppetry is

a branch of drama above all, is it not, and if the play's theme requires only a minimal use of puppets, then that is enough.

Did the festival live up to the weighty expectations? For some, not. But then, this was a festival which included two of the fabled three, Victor Shrayman as jury member and Valeri Valchovski as President of the Festival, who have higher standards than most. They have a mantle that needs to be passed on and geniuses take time to mature. All agreed though—perhaps Borok will be the genius they are waiting for but his time, they say, will be in the future. I can only say their standards must be higher than ours. Borok (perhaps tempered with his writing partner, Plotov) are already defining the Russian Theatre of today (puppets or no).

Would I recommend this festival to others? Definitely, yes. This is not a festival with international companies, nor is it a showcase of the best in all Russia, being open only to companies in the Urals district, but it is certainly a festival to experience what it is like to live in Russia today, away from Moscow and the tourist trail, and to see and discuss puppetry with passionate intensity with a people who take puppetry as seriously as we only afford straight drama in the west. •

*This is an edited version of an article which first appeared in the BrUnima Bulletin in March, 2001. Stephanie Green is the co-editor of Br(ish)Unima Bulletin, a writer and occasional puppeteer.*


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*The Little Hunchback Horse— Art Club cabaret performance showing Anatoli Archilov and Larisa Valiebskikh with clay pol puppets*



Hyokkori Hyotanjima, Shin Hakkenden-

continued from page 15

NHK, which has a dedicated channel for educational programming, was in many ways the forerunner of programs for children. The station's *With Mother* began in 1959 and is still running. From early on, this program incorporated puppetry in their original songs and story telling. The station was also innovative in the scheduling. Instead of airing all of their children's programs in the conventional morning slots, they scheduled some programs in later part of the afternoon when children have come home from school. *Hyokkori Hyotanjima* was aired Monday through Friday at 5:45 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.; thus, many adults actually were able to watch the program.

The original series premiered on April 6, 1964, and ended on April 4, 1969.

It was never rerun, and the videotape of 1,224 installments has been erased. However, in 1990, a letter to Asahi Daily Newspaper ignited the interest in this legendary series. In 1991, NHK Enterprise, the station's subsidiary production company, recreated part of the series with as many of the same staff and cast as alive and well. Between 1991 and 1996, the total of 61 episodes were revived, though they have not been aired again. For the true enthusiasts, part of the new series is available on video.

In this cyber age, one method of measuring popularity of anything may be the number of web sites created in its honor. There are several sites— all in Japanese— which are dedicated to the details of the original series.

In terms of near-cult following with a lost puppet series from the analog television era, one must not forget to mention *Shin Hakkenden* which was created and performed by Tsujimura Jusaburo. *Shin Hakkenden* was based on Nanso Satomi Hakkenden (The Legend of Eight Dogs of Satomi Family in South Chiba) written by Takizawa Bakin (1767-1848). The original story was published between 1814 and 1841 in 106 volumes, and it is said to be the longest romance novel written in Japan. The television series- inevitably a slightly abridged version- aired from April 2, 1973 until March 28, 1975 (Monday-Friday, 6:30-6:45 p.m.) with total of 464 episodes. The average viewers' rating was 20%, often hitting 30%. With this phenomenal reaction, however, the series was never rerun, and the videotape of all but three episodes has been erased.

*Shin Hakkenden* was the fifth puppet series on NHK (the first series began in 1956). Compared to the previous puppet shows which were clearly influenced



Landmark Japanese television:  
*Shin Hakkenden*

photos ©NHK, Hitomi-za



by the western design and techniques, this one was in many ways unique. First of all, the story and the characters were historical Japanese, though fictional. It employed some traditional Japanese theatre techniques, such as the scene change done by the stage assistants dressed in black. The production and puppet designs pursued a certain realism instead of deformation that is typical of puppet shows. The background music and sound effects were played on traditional Japanese instruments. Part of the story was told by a storyteller who was dressed in black like those stage assistants in kabuki, and he spoke in the Japanese version of iambic pentameter. The puppet characters spoke in the historical speech style as well. The part of storyteller was performed by singer Sakamoto Kyu, who was known for singing the original "Sukiyaki" song.

For this show, Tsujimura Jusaburo created over 300 puppets in a distinctive style. He adapted the kabuki makeup on the puppets' features. He looked toward bunraku for inspiration, though the influence does not appear obvious. Tsujimura admits that *Shin Hakkenden*

was his "turning point" towards creation of puppets and display dolls based on the traditional Japanese literature and culture in general.

Following *Shin Hakkenden*, Tsujimura created the puppets for NHK's next puppet series *Sanada Juyushi* (Ten Warriors of Sanada). This was also historical epic based on another Japanese literature. It was fairly popular during the run of the show. Its after-effect, however, could not compare to that of *Shin Hakkenden*. Tsujimura's puppets may be visited at his web site: [www.jusaburo.com](http://www.jusaburo.com)

Finally, the research for this article made the author wonder if the Japanese people are more likely to have a mania about these shows. The advancement in technology has made it easier to express one's obsessions. Once the web site links were found, it became clear: Thanks to those maniacal fans, the legends will live on. The object of this study was to introduce two significant puppet series on Japanese television, and to explore their impact in the Japanese society. As for the latter, puppet shows with solid contents—both characters and story—and simple but distinctive style, especially if they are experienced during the child's formative years, will linger on in his or her memory for many, many years to come.

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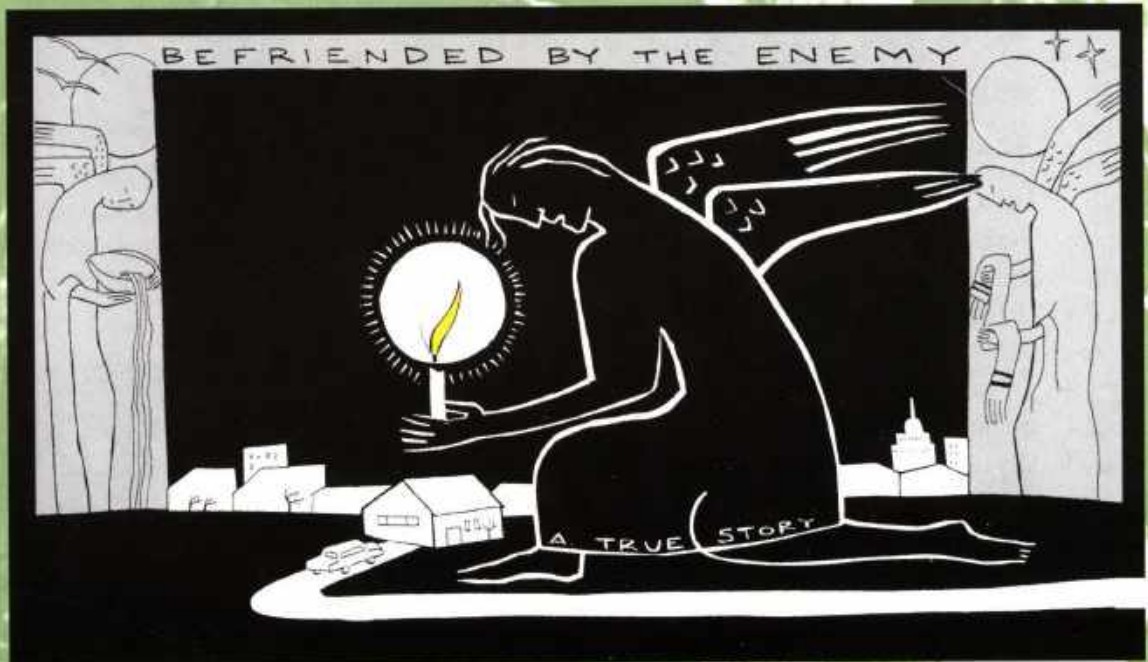
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