

FALL and WINTER Issue #22

PUPPETRY

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PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

the puppet in contemporary theatre, film & media

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ON THE COVER:

Giant puppet from France's
Royal de luxe
(see page 4)

photo: Jordi Bover



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From the Editor—

BIG

—Andrew C. Periale

Human beings are impressed by big stuff: Shaquille O'Neal, the Statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore—all big.

We are a “super-size me” culture that buys in bulk and dreams of “living large.” Our suspicion that size matters is no recent phenomenon. Consider the so-called Wonders of the Ancient World: big times seven. I don't know who voted to determine which wonders made the list, but I'm sure “bronze spear point” was never in the running despite its larger impact on our history over time than, say, the Colossus of Rhodes.

But humans were awed by the Colossus, as they still are by Mounts Fuji, Everest, Kilimanjaro, tidal waves, mushroom clouds, comets, constellations and, ultimately, the universe.

Those who have believed in a God or Creator of the Universe typically pictured the entity as big, huge, even humongous. Ancient Egyptians had earthly existence springing from the union of anthropomorphic sky and earth

entities (Nut and Set). The Greek gods were Titans and, later, Olympians; the names say it all.

But why? Why don't we encounter religions that believe the universe was created by a flea, for instance? Fleas have laid armies low, after all, have decimated whole populations with their ability to carry Plague, yet though we despise them, we do not fear them.

Perhaps the need for a real whopper of a God is coded into our DNA. Though Haeckel's theory of Recapitulation has been discredited in its particulars (namely, that our fetuses appear to progress through forms resembling creatures from which we presumably evolved—amoeba, fish, amphibian, politician and so on), it is a useful metaphor. With our embedded cellular memories, we emerge from the womb's ocean into a world of giants—parents who wield absolute power over us. With luck, these awesome creatures prove benevolent, loving beings. Over time, they become

less gigantic, and we are left with a deep longing for the next big thing.

As an adult, being in the presence of giant- or mega-puppets has the powerful effect that parents (by sheer dint of size) have long since failed to exercise over me (unless I happen to be visiting them over the holidays).

In our last issue, we sought out the world's smallest puppets, in whose presence puppeteers looked titanic. We stood like gods beside our “Mini-me” simulacra. In this issue we stand in the presence of figures that make even Shaquille O'Neal look like an infant, or, in some cases, a flea.

The largest of these are actors in pageants and celebrations, rituals of death-and-rebirth, or creation. They reinforce the bonds of community, remind us that there are both things and ideas in the universe bigger than we, and give us hope that the humongous forces that rule our lives may also be benevolent and loving.

We like to remind our readers occasionally that *Puppetry International* is published by UNIMA-USA. Its mission (along with all the other national UNIMA centers) is to promote international friendship and understanding through the art of puppetry. Now *that* is huge! We welcome all. Check out the website: www.unima-usa.org



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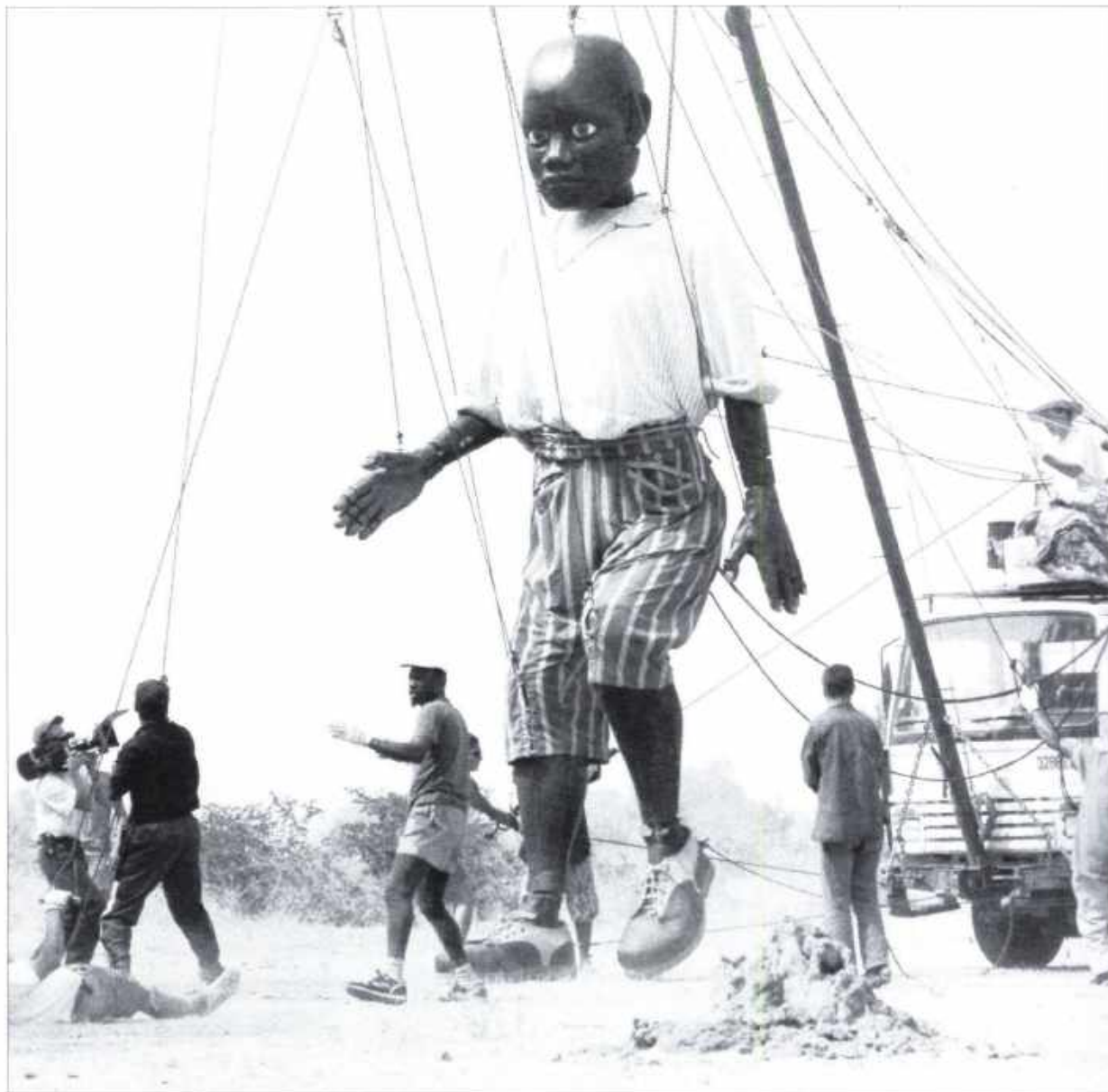
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You'll find links to Giant Puppet organizations and companies from around the globe. There is a magazine, a calendar of events, a gallery of photos and various other services. A fascinating look into a world that would have given Gulliver nightmares!



PUPPETRY OF THE SPECTACLE:
ROYAL DE LUXE'S GIANTS

by Kara Reilly



photos by Jordi Bover

*The spectacle... is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity.
It covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory.*

– Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967¹

The French street-theatre company Royal de luxe is best known for their large-scale public spectacles with enormous mechanical puppets. Funded by the French Ministries of Culture, their work came to English-speaking audiences' attention following *The Sultan's Elephant*, a performance which focused upon a gigantic elephant and mechanical little girl's wanderings through central London in May 2006.² Part of a decade-long series of performances featuring giants, beginning with *The Giant who Fell from the Sky* (1993), these humongous marionettes overtake a city and participate in daily urban rituals, including washing, dressing, eating, sleeping, and walking through city streets. Director and founder Jean-Luc Courcault explained that his drive to create gigantic marionettes came from his long-time desire to communicate with an entire town. His inspiration to build giant marionettes occurred while flying over Rio de Janeiro,³ perhaps while looking at the statue of Jesus that dwarfs the city. Courcault expressed his interest in giants this way: "People have believed in giants since the beginning. Every culture on earth has stories about giants. I find the giant more powerful than God or religion."⁴ While the giant is a mythic character, the company rarely uses these puppets to tell coherent stories; instead, they create expensive spectacles to produce wonder in their audiences. In this sense, Royal de luxe is the contemporary equivalent of Renaissance court spectacle: a state-funded performance created to awe the public with overwhelming theatrical imagery. Their work is reminiscent of Prospero's command during the masque scene in *The Tempest*: "No tongue, all eyes! Be silent!" Two of Royal de luxe's earliest performances were *The Giant who Fell from the Sky*, as performed in Le Havre in 1993; and the 1997 production of *The Birth of the Little Giant* in Cameroon.⁵ I have found that while in France the performances of Royal de luxe accomplish their intended purposes of entertainment; in Africa their performances are fraught with problems linked to tourism, globalism, and neo-colonialism.

The Giant who Fell from the Sky, produced in Le Havre in the autumn of 1993, began with the thirty-eight foot wooden Giant—dressed in a peasant blouse and short trousers with long, straight gray hair and bangs—pinned down on the asphalt in a city square like a modern-day Gulliver trapped by hundreds of ropes. Families with young children walked around the huge puppet marveling at his size, touching his hands and feet, and watching him breathe (his mouth slowly opened and closed, blowing puffs of smoke as his long wooden ribcage rose and fell). Numerous performers dressed in late eighteenth-century red velvet livery costumes emerged and began to untie the giant to groom him. Their long red waistcoats swung back and forth as they used long brushes for his ears and blew cloud dust off his lips. Together they lift the giant's feet; a system of pulleys is attached to the giant and

he is gradually brought to a standing position by an industrial crane. The giant's gray hair bounces back and forth as his liveried servants/captors assemble themselves into place on their various positions on the crane. Suddenly, the giant's eyes open, and he scans the crowd. The liveried men then begin to walk the giant down the boulevard. His head is at eye level with the third story of most buildings. That night, the giant sleeps out under a full moon. In the morning, townspeople find bizarre occurrences that are products of the Giant's dreams throughout the city: a smashed car, a tumbled chair, and the Giant disappeared without a trace. Spectators wander around in the destruction, gingerly touching smashed cars. The following year, Royal de luxe brought the Giant back to Le Havre for *The Giant who Fell from the Sky: The Last Voyage*. This time the performance ended in the harbor where a raft waited to take the Giant on a sea voyage.

French spectators were fascinated by the Giant. Documentary film footage shows many audience members in a state of wonder, staring wide-eyed at the Giant. Elderly men and women are brought to tears, and children laugh. Courcault's aim is to engage an entire community in a particular performance. He explains: "When I bought bread during my first spectacle in Le Havre, everyone spoke of the Giant. I waited in line and listened... It's the subject of discussion for the community. That's superb."⁶ However, while everyone may talk about the production, it seems that, apart from the company's elaborate spectacles of mechanical wonder, there is little desire to tell a meaningful story. Instead of telling a simple story with images, what dominates the audience's experience is the sheer scale and virtuosity of the Giant puppet. Much like a Hollywood action blockbuster in which each element of the plot only exists to create another visually stunning explosion, Royal de luxe seems to be more interested in showing their technical skill than in relaying a compelling story.

Four years later, in *Birth of the Little Giant* (October 1997), Royal de luxe created the following scenario for a spectacle, seemingly connected to the Havre production:

Once upon a time a lost giant on a raft during a tempest was carried away to the coast of Africa....He found a village of black giants who gave him a son that he called the Little Giant.⁷

The country the Father Giant's raft purportedly drifted to was Cameroon. However, the Father Giant never actually appeared in *Little Giant* performances, which took place in Foulou, a rural village in northern Cameroon where Royal de luxe was in residence for six months. An opening moment from the film documentation of the Foulou performance shows a twenty-foot-tall realistic wooden puppet of an African boy whose brown eyes scan the crowd. This Little Giant wears a

white shirt, short striped trousers, and oxford shoes. A bib is draped around his neck. Before the Little Giant stand apron-wearing performers who assemble huge balls of dough to feed to him. A black actor works the marionette's mouth and neck as the puppet looks at the crowd of children and adolescents while chewing. Some children watching the puppet eat laugh, but others look on in surprise. One young man tells the camera "A female elder said, 'What? The whites there are fools. They feed wood!'" For emphasis, he repeats: "They feed wood." The opening shots of Deleuze's film have shown the poverty in the village, and the earthen huts in which the residents live; later we see a group of people eating hungrily from a communal dish.

In explaining his ultimate motivations for these giant puppet performances, Courcault said, "When I see a penniless young kid in the streets of Rio laughing at one of my shows, I'm happy. That's all. It's simple."⁸ But while these technically amazing puppets are seductive, and arguably bring a "simple" pleasure to hungry spectators, the ironic implications of a well-funded European theater troupe performing the feeding of a poor Cameroon child while many actual Cameroon children are themselves poorly fed seem not to

have been considered by Royal de luxe. One wishes they had considered Macheath's advice in Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*: "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral" (first the meal, then the morality).

Beyond the fact that Royal de luxe and the Cameroonians shared the French language, the actual choice of Foulou for *Birth of the Little Giant* was accidental. Courcault explained:

We installed ourselves in black Francophone Africa for evident reasons of language. Then I could not go into countries agitated by rebellion nor to those too European, like Senegal or the Ivory Coast.... In all cases, I chose the Extreme North right away, for that countryside, it is so green it is as if one is in Auvergne.

In Courcault's explanation we can hear echoes of the languages of both tourism and colonialism: Foulou reminds the company of France, and the vacation area of Auvergne.⁹ Courcault goes on to say:

One day we passed by Foulou in Cameroon. There was a vast uninhabited place, with coverage from the sun by trees. We chose it without knowing that it was a sacred place for the village.¹⁰

The company set up their camp in a sacred area used for the ritual sacrifice of chickens and sheep. When asked about this decision, Courcault explained that the chief of Foulou had given them permission to stay there. "It's difficult to understand, but the Africans believe and at the same time they don't believe. Or, so they say that, with foreigners, their beliefs do not have the same status." Courcault recalled that the chief brought them to the area with the blessing of his staff. Nevertheless, their inhabitation on sacred ground caused members of the village to express "that the whites are in league with the devil."

To further complicate these issues of cultural tourism, Courcault said that the chief told him, "It was good that the Whites installed themselves in this village, because they have the money and they bring it to the village. Effectively, we would hire cooks, people to do housework, guards, people to sew. That economic dimension is very important in Africa."¹¹ Perhaps a little too true to their name (which means "royal luxury"), Royal de luxe's visit may well have brought some economic advantages to the village. At the same time, when villagers perceived the theatre company as a source of revenue, such economic



terms greatly changed the dynamics of the performance. When Royal de luxe performs in European urban spaces, spectators see a French-based theatre company funded by the French Ministry of Culture, performing for their entertainment. But when Royal de luxe performs in remote areas of rural Cameroon, it is hard not to see them as neo-colonialists, pursuing their own goals through the power of their wealth.

In one particularly striking moment of the Foulou production, the Little Giant sits before a chessboard facing “his Majesty, the King of France.” The king wears a long eighteenth-century periwig. The two play chess as an announcer calls out the movements made on the board. This part of the performance would seem to be a citation of the famous chess-playing automaton “The Turk” that entertained European royalty in the late eighteenth-century, and Royal de luxe are inheritors of this automaton tradition.¹² Automata are often noted for their contribution to aristocratic excess, but what is surprising and disappointing about Royal de luxe is their utter failure to look critically at that tradition, and understand the contemporary contexts and consequences of monied excess today.

Critic Robert Eagleton noted that in Royal de luxe’s London performance of *The Sultan’s Elephant*, “The Indian robotic elephant was, in fact, an African robotic elephant (it has African elephant’s ears)”; an obvious mistake, but symptomatic of the Orientalism which characterized their London performance.¹³ This was not a one-time occurrence but instead a larger problem for Royal de luxe, whose productions, in the grand tradition of Orientalism, seem to say that all “Others” are the same, and not unique cultures unto themselves. This is a far cry from recent intercultural performance practices that have demonstrated how it is, in fact, possible to absorb the influences of other cultures while at the same time respecting their particular distinctiveness.¹⁴

Some residents of Foulou were excited about the presence of the Giant; in Deleuze’s film, one is quoted as saying, “I think that he is a type that is born in Foulou. They [the theatre company] say the Little Giant is born in Foulou. If he is born here, then that’s our brother also, no?” Another resident muses: “We are told that possibly, sooner or later, with the evolution of science, we will be able to achieve a man who can create man.” In an effort to attract an audience, a member of Royal de luxe acts as a carnival barker, and driving through city streets in Cameroon, he cries, “Come and see the giant who walks, the giant who looks, a giant who eats, a giant who laughs.” But what, unfortunately, is missing from the performances of Royal de luxe is a giant who thinks. §



Endnotes

¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 15.

² *Four Magical Days in May*, (London: Artichoke, 2006). This book chronicles Royal de luxe’s performance in London. There are videos of *The Sultan’s Elephant* on Youtube.

³ Jean-Luc Courcault, et. al, *Royal de luxe 1993-2001* (Nantes: Actes Sud, 2001), 29.

⁴ *Four Magical Days*, 72.

⁵ My understanding of these performances is based upon director Dominic Deleuze’s two films *Royal de luxe* and *the Myth of the Giant* and *The Travels of Royal de luxe*, which total some six hours of footage along with texts co-authored by Royal de luxe: *Royal de luxe, Le Grand Répertoire: Machines de Spectacle* (Nantes: Actes Sud, 2003), and *Four Magical Days in May*.

⁶ *Royal de luxe*, 41.

⁷ *The Travels of Royal de luxe*.

⁸ *Four Magical Days*, 70.

⁹ *Royal de luxe*, 71.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *Royal de luxe*, 83.

¹² For more on the Turk, see Mark Sussman, “Performing the Intelligent Machine” *The Drama Review*, Vol. 43(3), 1999: 81-96. The company’s awareness of the context of automata is evidenced by the opening pages of their book *Royal de luxe*, which includes catalogue pages of mechanical animals; a direct citation of nineteenth-century Parisian automata catalogues. See also “The Story of Machines” by designer Delarozzière in *Le Grand Répertoire*.

¹³ Robert Eagleton, “The Sultan’s Elephant,” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 16(4), 2006: 523-5.

¹⁴ Patrice Pavis, *The Intercultural Performance Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996).



THE NYC VILLAGE HALLOWEEN PARADE

by Rolande Duprey

A PARADE OF PUPPETS

In 1973, rumors were going around that people were playing dirty tricks on trick-or-treaters: putting razor blades in apples; LSD in candy; muggings and abductions of children. Was Halloween safe any longer? Some people were going to keep their children inside and forego trick-or-treating. Maybe Halloween should be done away with altogether!

Living in Greenwich Village with his young family, puppeteer Ralph Lee made a historic decision – he would take his children and his friends out and parade through the streets with some of his larger puppets that had been built for other shows. It was a small group, maybe 50-60 people banging drums, wearing masks and carrying puppets. Just people who wanted to keep Halloween fun.

By that time, political protest with puppets was certainly the Zeitgeist. But Ralph's quiet streetwalking parade did not protest anything political. He was reclaiming the ritual, creating an alternative to the fearful machinations conjured up through urban legend. The puppets had nothing to do with Halloween; they had been built for other shows. There was no theme. Indeed, most people participating in that first parade hardly thought it would become a tradition, much less a showplace for all things puppet.

Within a few short years, the parade had grown. Puppeteers came to make puppets solely for the parade. Bands came to play. The Village's gay community had joined in, producing wild costumes, some of which, like the characters from the Wizard of Oz, have become a Parade tradition – there are hundreds of interpretations each year. And every year, more people joined in. Last year it attracted two million people. Four thousand New York City police officers assure the crowd's safety.

PUPPETS / PUPPETEERS

In 1979, Jeanne Fleming took over the artistic and organizational duties. By then, dozens of puppeteers, some famous, some soon to be famous, had worked on the parade at one time or another. This trend continues.

For example, Ralph Lee's giant spider, always a feature at the parade, still made its appearance at the Jefferson Market Tower. Fifteen years ago, the spider was in dire need of re-building and Basil Twist offered to remake it. Twist took a group of high school students around the neighborhood to find any kind of garbage on the street he could use to make

the puppet, and finally found a large batch of Styrofoam. The spider is now a giant marionette and manipulated by Basil from the balcony of the Library.

Jeanne Fleming, Gigi Alvare and Ania Aldrich took over making the thematic giant puppets that lead the event each year. When Debby Lee Cohen, a community artist, came in and worked on them, the designs became more elaborate. Alex Kahn was twenty-four when he started volunteering for the parade, working with Debby Lee and Jeanne.

Sophia Michahelles, a voluntary performer as a teenager, began working on the puppets after graduating from college. Alex and Sophia became the official puppeteers of the Halloween Parade in 1998. Along with Jeanne Fleming, they decide on a theme each year, and develop a body of work to articulate it and establish it at the front of the Parade.

When the theme is announced, puppeteers and art makers are invited to participate. In 1998, for example, the theme was "Metamorphosis." That same year, Luna moths were re-introduced to Central Park, so Alex and Sophia created caterpillars that glowed from inside. At a given moment, they spread themselves into a circle and did an insect strip tease, eventually turning into giant Luna Moths whose wings doubled as shadow screens. Unlike real moths, these eventually transitioned back into caterpillars and returned to the parade, to go through their metamorphosis again and again.

"We feel we are part of a continuity of official designers," says Sophia. "Part of the work inherited is to bring out the old puppets, refurbish them, and put them to use to represent the theme of the Parade."

For example, Debby Lee Cohen recreated the giant snakes (seen every year) from the design of Ralph Lee, and in 1998 the snakes shed their skins and were re-covered by Alex and Sophia. "There is a curatorial aspect to our work as well as the new design work..." says Sophia.

Since 1998, in addition to a formal, dedicated theme, the parade has also involved formal "work days," where the community is invited to participate in building the puppets. Alex and Sophia have coined the term "Puppet Raisings." "It is part of the concept for us; it's how we design. Usually it takes a few weekends in the fall, depending on how much we are building."

In the mid-1980s, Marty Robinson's plant designed for Little Shop of Horrors was in the parade. "Indeed, it was the Grand Marshal of the Parade. My reasoning was that only a puppet—a *famous* puppet—could be the Grand Marshal!" proclaims Fleming.

Puppeteers Cooperative and Bread and Puppet have developed work for the parade. Michael Curry was in the parade with his body-puppet skeleton long before he built them for Julie Taymor. Yvette Helin, Oliver Dalzell, Gretchen Van Lente, and Eli Worden have contributed. For several years, Amy Trompeter built puppets with her students from Barnard College. The Burning Man community and the Madagascar

Institute now contribute puppets.

Each year the Parade commissions young artists to create new work for the Parade. One of last year's commissions was Bart Roccoberton's student, Sarah Beth Parks, who designed and built a giant pumpkin/shadow theatre for the parade. There are also hundreds who make what Jeanne calls "personal puppets"—elaborate solo pieces on their own themes. Serra Hirsch has come as a Bookcase and a Fortune Telling Booth among others.

Besides puppets and puppeteers (forgive me if I've missed anyone), the parade has been known for its inclusive spirit. In New York, famous for its various ethnic parades, this event is truly diverse. "It is New York's Carnival," pronounces Jeanne Fleming, "Every ethnic community is involved. The adults took over the holiday, and celebrate it with the New American Family—the one made up of folk's friends. You don't have to go home, like Thanksgiving. You can celebrate it where you are."

RESPONDING TO A CHANGING WORLD

The parade also reflects technological advances as time goes on. The most relevant advance has been the ability to travel with lighter weight lighting equipment. Mini 12 volt LEDs and luminescent fiber have transformed the possibilities for pageant puppets.

In 1998, car batteries were used to perform the lighting in the Luna Moths. In 2000, they began using luminescent fiber. Last year, the Giant Pumpkins (worn by a single performer) were lit on two levels with light-weight 12-volt LEDs.

Probably one of the most talked about puppets was the Phoenix, designed by Sophia Michahelles for the 2001 parade, which oddly enough, was not that high-tech.

"That year, the theme was supposed to be 'The Year of the Crone,' and we started building a giant Baba Yaga, complete with her house on chicken legs," remembers Sophia. "But then, 9/11 happened and everything was on hold. I began to think, 'What am I doing as a Pageant Puppeteer? Why didn't I become something useful like a doctor?' But then, I realized that I was in a unique position to do something helpful. We changed the theme to 'The Phoenix Rising' a week after September 11th. It was a desire to offer something beautiful to New York."

That year, the parade almost wasn't. "Because of the threat of more terrorist attacks, (Mayor) Giuliani didn't make the decision to go ahead with the parade until October 26th," Fleming told me. "But the parade had become a symbol of whether NYC would go on. And the Phoenix was a symbol for the city itself. There was complete silence at the actual rising of the Phoenix. You could have heard a pin drop. But by the end of the Parade, people



were smiling, dancing. It was extraordinary.”

Sophia Michahelles: “And people had made a decision to come out that night – when they had been warned to stay inside – they came and reclaimed the night, much as it had been done in 1973. It reaffirmed to a lot of us why we do what we do.”

The parade faced another challenge after Katrina destroyed New Orleans in 2005.

As Fleming recalls:

...I worked from around September 1st with the Jazz Foundation of America that was raising money for NOLA. They put me in contact with many jazz musicians (including the Rebirth Brass Band and the Hot 8), who I gathered together from all over the country and got hotel rooms and rehearsal space. I hired many other NOLA artists to work on the parade so they would have some purpose in NYC. Together and over the internet we contacted as many NOLA evacuees as we could (many of whom were living in NYC hotels near the airport, including the Queen of the Mardi Gras Indians). 8,000 folks showed up that night.

Sophia adds:

We built four giant lanterns, lit from within with 12 volt LEDs, each symbolizing a site destroyed by the hurricane. The Magnolia Housing Project from the Ninth Ward, The Steamboat House, a row of shotgun shacks, and Preservation Hall were represented. A casket was also present, in order to complete the jazz funeral procession. Refugees who showed up knew what to do – ‘second lining’ with their parasols.

Jeanne Fleming:

Others were on and around a float that hosted the Grand Marshal of the Parade—a brilliant ten-year-old musician, Glenn Hall, whose family had lost everything in Katrina. Under the sponsorship of Jet Blue, we brought his whole family to NYC for a week where they enjoyed shows, meals and many other great things in cooperation with other local sponsors (he even appeared on CNN!)....and we did two benefits after the Parade for NOLA musicians. It was quite a lot of work... but it was joyful!

For more on the parade and additional images,

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WELFARE STATE INTERNATIONAL: *Gone but Not Forgotten*

by John Fox

On April Fool's Day, 2006, Welfare State International presented its last spectacle. After thirty-eight years of producing a wealth of pageantry, community arts and celebratory theatre around the world, the company said its final farewell to fans with "Longline: The Carnival Opera." By all accounts, it was a rite of passage to be remembered, as should many of WSI's works.

Thirty-eight years of banging drums, fools, food, music, puppets, processions, politics, flame, rituals, lanterns in darkness, ceremonies, celebrations and civilizations.

Protean and ubiquitous, WSI transformed from a small, very independent group of artists in 1968 into a widely respected touring company, eventually building a great arts center (Lanternhouse) in Ulverston, Cumbria.

In December, 2006, John Fox wrote on the subject of puppetry for the Puppet Centre Trust. The last half of that article is reprinted here.

—R. Duprey



So, what is a puppet ?

I hate definitions that exclude, so let us say puppetry includes any animated object including automata and sculptures (rather than props) that may be activated in performance. Over the years we have energized hundreds of them.

Stunning large animated objects were: the ten-ton scaffold skeleton of the Titanic raised and lowered nightly from a crane in Limehouse Dock in 1983; Caroline Menis's Phoenix Lantern, the size of a tennis court elevated 50 metres into the Glasgow night sky for the Finale of the City of Culture Lantern Parade in 1990, and Alfred Nobel's flashing motorised Dynamite Factory, built literally in his own image, for our landscape opera Lord Dynamite in Newham in 1991.

My favourite was our swan song icon of March 2006 by Gavin Lewery when a lifeboat/lantern Ship of Fools laden with illuminated passengers—a prehistoric

elk, a heron and a spinning two-faced moon—disappeared into the night on a tidal wave of silver rain and Roman candles.

Our puppet images could also be very small. In *Piranha Pond*, for example, our second allegorical film for Border TV, crabby old politicians in an English old folks' home are devoured by clockwork-armoured piranha fish (invented by the late Greville White) which erupt from the goldfish pond.

Our biggest puppet in human form was undoubtedly the 30-metre skeleton which rose up over the giant Houses of Parliament fireshow, directed by Boris Howarth, on November 5th 1981 in Catford, London for 15,000 people. Virtually all the giant (often wobbly) puppets of the British community art movement owe their origin to Boris and Maggie Howarth.¹

At Catford, Maggie Howarth placed [Margaret] Thatcher on a triangulated car chassis. My favourite, though, was a delicate stork fabricated by Andy Plant and Tim Hunkin ten metres high on top of a car, which delivered a vulnerable egg on the steps of Government.

These "Houses of Parliament" shows were getting bigger. (*Catford* was the seventh) and although we were starting to have anxieties about spectacle, it wasn't until after "Raising the Titanic" (1983) that we put our thoughts into action.

In 1983, preferring our spectacle to grow in a participatory context, we started a seven year residency in Barrow in Furness with a *Tapestry of Shipyard Tales*.

Along the way, we used a few puppets (Queen Victoria on an elephant gun carriage chased by the giant Bee off Barrow's coat of arms, was a classic) but our final extravaganza, *The Golden Submarine*, in 1990 was a cornucopia of puppetry.

Barrow is dominated by Trident submarine hangars known locally as "the sheds." We planned to construct a small replica of the sheds in a grassed amphitheatre on the edge of town and move them in a political carnival.

So John Wassell (now the co-director of *Walk the Plank*) built a hanger weighing 13 tons, with Tony Lewery. Fashioned with scaffolding and canvas to slide on aluminium rails when

pulled with a big winch, it was also a huge shadow screen. Inside, over 100 cardboard shadow figures attached to pulleys and conveyor belts (all made by Mandy Dyke) performed ludicrous repetitive tasks.

Julian Crouch, the founder of Improbable Theatre, who teases remarkable heads out of foam and muslin, made Hooray Henry's atop a full size siege tower of consumer goods and cruise missiles.

Lord Shelbent, another giant puppet which could rise up on a hydraulic ram from the top of a car (by Ray Brooks... with removable bloodstained hands by Julian) ordered the launch of the final apocalypse by hurling a champagne bottle at the submarine.

The bottle missed the submarine but hit the sheds, which automatically launched themselves down the slipway to reveal another extraordinary puppet, a blood-red mechanistic pecking cuckoo (by Roger Bloomfield) which was devouring souls from the skeletons of shipyard apprentices.

Shelbent meets his comeuppance from the final puppet: a twenty metre-high nuclear propelled vacuum cleaner

made secretly by women cleaners.

I like felling giants. I did it first when, as I child, I pulled a glove puppet costume up to my elbow to make the giant in Jack and the Beanstalk.

As a grown up I also did it in July 1982 at the Togamura Theatre Festival in Japan when, in *The Wasteland and the Wagtail*, twenty participants carried a monstrous corpse of King Lear down a mountain slope. Flanked by skeletons dangling from a moving ski-lift, the King came to rest on a funeral bier in the valley. Here, clown surgeons sliced him open with chain saws to reveal a flute-playing girl/wagtail, who rose from his belly.

This connection with childhood brings me almost full circle. But not just back to me at eleven years-old, but to the politics of play.

Just as the consumer spectacle turns our dreams into commodities, so the wilderness of our imagination is anodized by too much information and too much choice.

Tiny things and tiny puppets discovered and created in an environment of accessible non-competitive play can transform us totally.



I have seen adults cry at simple shadow puppets made from bits of cardboard, wire and tape presented in the front windows of terrace houses in Bolton.

I have seen them cry, too, at the end of our *Civilisation* as a 90cm cardboard liner was folded into a hell-fire pit in the ground and a cradle of blue stars reappeared to float to earth.

In Bali, the Dalang—the shadow play master, a shamanic priest—carries the ancient wisdom of the *Ramayana* and facilitates all rites of passage.

Using carefully cut shadows silhouetted on big circular canvas

screens, framed with plaited hazel, we have evoked creatures that live above, below and inside the waves of Morecambe Bay.

With a bit of blue plastic and a tiny bird skull, Hannah Fox transformed a ghost orphan child into a night-heron. Videotaped live and projected on screen with our shadow puppets of fish (enhanced with another projection of diatoms shot through electron microscopes) this multi-layering of images and forms gave us the beginning of a sophisticated creation myth for our own age.

Meanwhile Mr Punch, the crude commedia archetype — the ancient

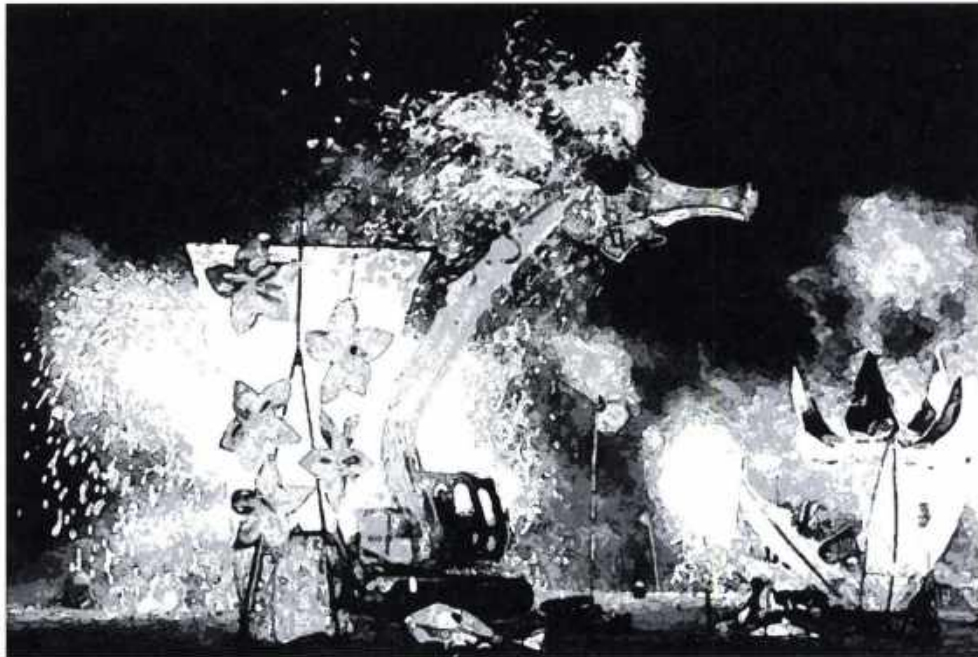
psychotic male force — is still around. He has gone berserk in Iraq and will certainly have his finger on the trigger of the second Trident.

So puppets won't go away. As Peter Schumann indicates, we need them to tell us the truth. But, as Ridley Walker might have asked:

*Do they need us?*²

¹ *Engineers of the Imagination* (Coult and Kershaw, Methuen 1983/90/93/95/).

² *Ridley Walker*. Russell Hoban. Picador.



The book about their work, *Engineers of the Imagination*, has become a bible for those who wish to develop community-centered pageants and performances. *Eyes On Stalks* (Methuen, 2002) is an autobiographical book by John Fox who, with Sue Gill and others, founded WSI. Fox and Gill have gone on to create their own company, Dead Good Guides (www.deadgoodguides.com) which publishes practical manuals about new ceremonies for rites of passage including funerals, baby namings and time capsules. There is also a large archive of videos, articles and books about WSI available on line. More information can be downloaded from www.welfare-state.org.

YAYA COULIBALY AND COMPANY SOGOLON

The Coulibaly family of Mali boasts a puppetry tradition going back over seven generations. Their performance at this year's FIDENA festival in Bochum, Germany, showed Western audiences an African tradition of over-life-sized puppets. These are "walk around" figures, each animated by a single puppeteer.



FIDENA, at forty-nine, is one of Germany's oldest theatre festivals. The thirteen companies on this year's roster represent some of the most arresting and provocative work in the field, including Wilde and Vogel, Frank Soehnle, and a toy theatre "mini-fest."

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Dancing with Fire: *The Ultimate Effigy*

by Rachel Bowditch
photos: John Tzelepis



Illuminated Eyeball Bicycles created by John Krieger

There is a yet unnamed art movement that may prove to be of some significance, and Burning Man is close to its center. It often manifests itself as circus, ritual, and spectacle. [...] It is a movement away from static gallery and formal theatre and towards site-specific, time-specific installation and performance. [...] It is profoundly democratic. It is radically inclusive, it is a difficult challenge, and it is beckoning (Christine Kristen 2003:343).

Burning Man is as epic as the Ramlila of Ramnagar¹, as flamboyant as New Orleans Mardi Gras and Brazilian Carnival, and as spontaneous as a Rainbow Gathering. Steadily, since its beginnings in 1986 on Baker Beach in San Francisco, Burning Man has transformed from director Larry Harvey's personal healing ritual into a contemporary cultural phenomenon where ritual, religion, visual art, and performance collide on an enormous scale. During the week before Labor Day, approximately thirty thousand people gravitate towards the ancient lake-bed (or *playa*)² of Lake Lahontan in the Black Rock Desert in northwest Nevada to build a second world: "Black Rock City."

Black Rock City is a simulation of a real city replete with street signs, roads, theme camps, art villages, hundreds of mammoth interactive art installations, an eighty-foot high temple, hundreds of art cars, a post office, four daily newspapers, an airport, and hundreds of planned and spontaneous performances. A forty-foot wooden mega-puppet of a Man

stands on an altar at the center of Black Rock City as the *axis mundi* of the Burning Man community, a centrifuge around which art, performance, and community revolve. This giant puppet stands at the end of a monumental avenue lined with wooden spires, like a Neolithic temple complex surrounded by a semi-circular array of civic architecture, with the linear streets modeled from two o'clock to ten o'clock, replicating the shape of an enormous sundial.

Following detailed blueprints developed by Harvey in 1990, constructing the iconic puppet requires the coordinated effort of several crews focused on different parts of the figure: pedestal, neon, laser, rigging, pyro and the Man himself. The Man Crew, consisting of eight volunteer builders, meets each year in February to discuss preliminary plans. In June, they reconvene at a work ranch in the Black Rock Desert to begin the first phase of building the wooden puppet, working from ten rudimentary blueprints. Surveying Black Rock City starts at the beginning of August, when "ground zero" – where the Man will stand – is established and a total of three hundred and fifty separate wooden parts are assembled. In mid-August, a five-mile trash fence demarcating the perimeter of the city goes up and the construction of the base begins. Before the 2,300-pound mega-puppet is lifted onto the base by a crane, the neon crew moves in to wire it. According to carpenter Captain Bob, being on the Man Crew elevates you to the status of "demi-god" within the Burning Man community. He remarks, "You become extremely popular because you are responsible for building the heart of the event, the center of power, the central icon. That is a very powerful thing" (Interview with author 2006).

While the basic design of the Man remains the same, subtle changes occur each year to reflect the year's given theme. In the early 1990s, the Man stood on the playa surrounded by bales of hay; however, since 2001, his base has become increasingly complex. Each year Harvey selects the artistic theme which is reflected in the design of the base beneath the Man from a monolithic altar in 2001 (*Seven Ages of Man*), a light house in 2002 (*Floating World*), and the "Great Temple" in 2003 (*Beyond Belief*) modeled after the Aztec Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan, to a geodesic observatory in 2004 (*Vault of Heaven*), a fun house maze in 2005 (*The Psyche*), and an art deco maze in 2006 (*Hope and Fear*). Burning Man consciously appropriates symbols that pervade popular culture, generating myths with a post-modern twist.

In 2005, the green and pink neon Man stood upon a complicated labyrinth of tight spaces, narrow doorways, and revolving doors. After reaching the maze's center, a participant could ascend to a platform on the second level for a panoramic view of Black Rock City. For the first time in Burning Man's history, the Man became a true puppet in that participants could physically manipulate the mega-puppet by pushing a shaft on casters and bearings to turn the Man 360 degrees.

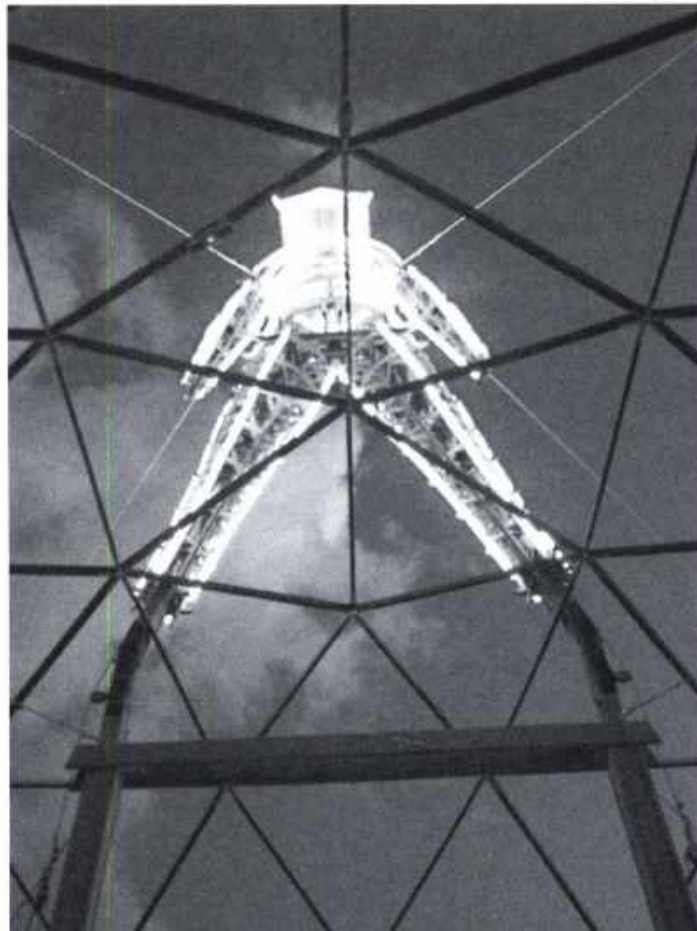
Two main discourses run throughout the event: ritual and performance, both infused with a sense of play and the carnivalesque. These two threads operate as a Mobius strip, twisting performance and ritual in such ways that one cannot say which is "dominant." The entire event negotiates a delicate balance between these two extremes. The week leading up to the burn is a modern-day Saturnalia. While the conflagration is a massively entertaining spectacle, it is also a ritual that produces real-life changes and transformations in which some participants change their careers, their locations, their relationships and even their names. As a counter-cultural phenomenon, Burning Man is a generative space for the rehearsal of alternative lifestyles and identities, which are quickly absorbed into mainstream culture.

Practicing creative tensions between individual

invention and collective artistic creative process, Burning Man revives the ideals of many avant-gardeists of the 1960s and 1970s: ideals of community, democracy, and collaborative creation. The open expanse of the Black Rock desert offers artists and performers the opportunity to work in larger-than-life scale, making it one of the most popular destinations for experimental performance, installation art, fire dancing, and art cars in the United States. What makes Burning Man an anomaly is that the for-profit Burning Man Limited Liability Corporation does not accept any corporate sponsorship nor does it apply for grants or outside funding. The entire event is generated by ticket sales through word of mouth and the internet. In the climate of corporate sponsored festivals, it is rare to find a large-scale arts festival that does not have some form of corporate backing.

The question remains: Why do so many people make the pilgrimage to the Black Rock Desert to build an elaborate city filled with installations, temples, theme camps, and art cars only for its chief symbol to go up in flames and the entire city to vanish even more quickly than it emerged? What is it about this mega-puppet that casts such a potent spell over the community? Burning Man participates in an extensive history of bonfires and the burning of effigies that can be found throughout the world. There are too many examples to cite more than a fraction. From Guy Fawkes Night celebrated on November 5th³, the Gaelic celebration of Beltane on May 1st⁴, the burning of a straw effigy of Judas on Easter's Eve in Germany

and the burning of piles of Judas masks (chapyekam) by the Yaquis at the climax of their Easter celebrations to the burning of Ravana in the many Ramlilas of north India⁵, burning effigies, walking on or through fire, or leaping over it, is both a magical feat and a means of spiritual purification. In the Southwest of the United States, the burning of the Zozobra⁶ mega-puppet in the Fiesta of Santa Fe, New Mexico is a relatively recent fire rite. Whether or not Larry Harvey had any direct knowledge of these predecessors, his Man certainly is the same kind of figure of purification, celebration, destruction, and rebirth.



Man on observatory, 2005

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

In analyzing the motives of “Burners,” it is impossible to pinpoint any single reason why individuals participate. Motivations vary from person to person and are often deeply personal, making it impossible to generalize about a single motivating factor. Some are drawn to a huge party in the desert, some are in search of community, and others come to be inspired by or create art and performance, as well as to find a deeper meaning in life. It soon became clear to me that everyone who finds his or her way to Burning Man is in some way a “seeker” of experience and personal transformation. When I asked participants what the Man symbolized to them, the theme of the Phoenix rising out of its own ashes occurred in many of the seventy-five on-site interviews I conducted. People spoke of burning the old and allowing the new to be reborn, of the cycle of death and rebirth, of an opportunity to reinvent yourself anew each year. I decided to go to the creator and director of Burning Man, Larry Harvey himself, and ask him, “What does the Man represent to you?” Harvey responded, “It certainly has to do with change. [...] Fire is huge, it always has been. We started with essentially the two first human technologies: fire and the lever. [...] Gathering around a fire has a potent psychological effect on people and I think it always will” (Interview with author 2004).

On Saturday night of the seven-day event, the Man burns. The site gates are closed and the population of Black Rock City stabilizes. During the day, the Man, Base, and Pyro crews are busy loading the Man with fireworks and preparing for the burn. Around dusk, 30,000 people gravitate towards the mega-puppet on his pyre, creating a series of concentric rings of spectatorship. The beginning of the ceremony is signaled by the Man raising his arms above his head, an enormous gesture achieved by ropes and pulleys operated by the Man crew. This is met with loud cheers of “Burn him! Burn him!” This signals the Fire Conclave, a group of over six hundred fire performers from around the country, to begin spinning fire around the “Great Circle” surrounding the Man. Fire performers dance with poi⁷, fire fingers, and fire wings, as

well as flaming hula-hoops, swords, rope, and staffs. After a signal from the Fire Conclave leader, Crimson Rose, one by one the fires go out. There is thunderous applause from the crowd. Before the applause dies down, fireworks burst out of the Man’s head. This is the moment everyone has been waiting for.

Flames begin to lick up the sides of the giant puppet as more fireworks explode out of him. Fire begins to consume the Man, licking up his legs and body towards his face. Suddenly, he collapses directly into the flames and is swallowed whole. The crowd roars their loudest, most ecstatic scream yet. As soon as the Man falls, people surge in a Dionysian frenzy toward the fire and begin to run counter-clockwise around the pyre. Everyone seems to be experiencing an intense state of *comunitas* and *flow*⁸. There is an oceanic feeling of belonging, ecstasy, and total participation. Many people remain around the fire, while others slowly drift back to other parts of the city. What used to be the Man becomes a huge bonfire that burns until dawn. With the Man gone, the city loses its central point of navigation. Beyond the flurry of activity surrounding the Man, the city opens up into a vast sea of people dispersing in every direction. The catharsis is complete after a seven-day pilgrimage to the desert. The giant puppet is reduced to ashes. The ritual is over – until next year.

Black Rock City provides a place for the creation of community – a temporary world inviting artistic experimentation within an imagined universe. Burning Man can be seen as a ritual, festival, performance, and playground serving as a unique window through which people can choose to make and remake their worlds. As a cultural performance, Burning Man produces and reproduces culture, molding and shaping tradition as well as inventing it. A festival such as Burning Man is a powerful vehicle for forging new social realities. Many people leave Burning Man transformed, others only transported. They start new relationships or end old ones, switch continents or careers, or redesign their lives in dramatic ways. Few people leave unchanged.

Just as abruptly as it appears, after its week of intense existence, Black Rock City vanishes. An important coda of the festival is the total cleaning and restoration of the desert, erasing all evidence of Black Rock City’s evanescent presence. During the months of Black Rock City’s non-existence, the Burning Man community exists online, connected across the U.S. and globally by an elaborate “Burning Man Regional Network.” It is beyond the seven days in the desert that the seeds of an alternative creative way of living are planted into the everyday.



Motorized cupcakes, 2005

Burning Man doesn't pretend to be self-sustaining and in fact celebrates its ephemerality and disappearance as a radical, political act. The Burning Man diaspora with the iconic megapuppet at its center — both a community and a global enterprise, a ritual and a business — offers a commodified ritual experience in “participatory culture,” mutating and transforming from community to community, yet also remaining recognizable as Burning Man — a brand as distinct as Coca-Cola. Burning Man has created new paradigms of performance, installation art, community, and ritual reawakening, bringing an avant-garde spirit into the 21st century. As Larry Harvey has proclaimed, “This is not just an event. This has become a movement” (Harvey 1999).

Rachel Bowditch is an Assistant Professor of Theatre and Film at Arizona State University. She is a performance studies scholar and theatre director. She recently received her doctorate in Performance Studies from New York University.

Footnotes

¹ The Ramalila in Ramnagar, India is an annual 30-day epic festival retelling the Ramayana and the story of Rama and Sita where thousands gather around multiple stages throughout the city.

² The “playa” or beach, entirely devoid of vegetation, is one of the largest in the United States. It is about twenty-seven miles long and twelve miles wide, bordered on the west by the Calico Mountains and on the east by the Black Rock Range. The entire Black Rock Desert and its associated wilderness areas encompass 1,857 square miles in which there are no paved roads. The Desert is surrounded by Washoe County, Pershing County, and Humboldt County.

³ Commemorating the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot on the 5th of November, 1606, Guy Fawkes Night has been celebrated in the United Kingdom ever since. The current celebrations take the form of a series of torch-lit processions through the town. Effigies of Guy Fawkes and Pope Paul V, who became head of the Roman Catholic Church in 1605, feature every year (See Cliff Bonfire).

⁴ Beltane is a specifically Gaelic holiday, celebrated on May 1st in which large bonfires herald in the summer in the hope of good harvest, prosperity and well-being to all. These celebrations date back to the Druids and continue to this day (See Beltane).

⁵ An effigy of Ravana, Sita's kidnapper, is burned on the 26th day of the Ramlila. As Richard Schechner notes in *The Future of Ritual*, “After dark, Rama shoots an arrow into Ravana's giant effigy which all day has stood on Ravana's fort. Five hot-air balloons are released from behind the effigy—their tiny yellow flames remain visible for a long time in the night sky. [...] Then the effigy is set ablaze. Ravana's cremation signals his final surrender to Rama and his release from his demonic self” (Schechner 1993: 147-149).

⁶ Although the Fiesta dates back to 1712, it was Santa Fe artist Will Shuster who added Zozobra in 1924. The burning of the Zozobra effigy originated as the focus of a private fiesta in Shuster's home. He drew inspiration from the Yaquis, mentioned above. The name Zozobra derives from the Spanish word “the gloomy one” and is the epitome of anguish and anxiety. Burning the Zozobra dispels the hardships and trials of the past year. Now a public event, the Zozobra, drawing a crowd of more than 30,000, is burned over the Labor Day weekend, the same date as Burning Man.



⁷ By far the most popular fire performance tool at Burning Man is poi, derived from the Maori of New Zealand. “Poi” is Maori for “ball” and originally consisted of a flax bag used to carry small objects. When a length of rope is attached, it resembles today's poi. Traditional poi were used as cooking tools and eventually found themselves in action songs and dances. Poi were also adopted as a tool for warriors to develop strength, flexibility, and coordination. Lighting poi is not traditionally Maori and developed outside of New Zealand. Fire poi are made of Kevlar wicks attached to ropes or chains. The wicks are soaked in fuel, usually paraffin or kerosene, set on fire and swung around (See Home of Poi).

⁸ “Communitas” and “flow” are two key terms in the field of Performance Studies. Communitas or anti-structure, a term coined by anthropologist Victor Turner, is the Latin term for community distinguished from community of everyday life (Turner 1969:96). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has done extensive research into the phenomenon of “flow” and its connection to communitas. His study revealed elements and distinctive features of flow as an autotelic (no external rewards or goals) experience, the merging of action and awareness, the loss of ego, and a positive self-concept. In the process of achieving communitas through flow experience, participants refashion themselves through masking, costuming, and acting in a predictably disorderly fashion (Turner 1966:x).

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SCULPTING TIME:

Open Hand Theater's Use of Characters as Stages

by Rolande Duprey

■ At the beginning of Open Hand Theater's *Magic Flute* (a collaboration with Syracuse Opera) the stage is entirely empty. A small puppet booth enters the large empty space, and out from it pours seemingly endless yards of fabric, becoming first the billowing storm, then the mountains, then the cyclorama/shadow screen. Finally it transforms into the black cape of the eighty foot "Queen of the Night" marionette, looming over the play. She serves her human form by allowing it to ride her giant hand onto the stage.

Artistic Director Geoffrey Navias enjoys using puppets as stages. It evokes the archetypal—that which is the foundation, the background, the core of the play. Early on, in 1978, he staged a Thanksgiving play in which the stomach of a large puppet became a stage. Last Christmas, *Mr. Jacob's Remarkable Snow Flake Collection* used giant puppet Grandparents who morphed into the stage wherein all the family resided. The audience was reminded of their presence by their characters being the great shoes of the original puppet. The relationship between the iconographic shoes continued to thrill and test the audience's perception throughout the play.

I spoke with Geoffrey Navias this past spring, asking him about the work.



Magic Flute collaboration between Syracuse Opera and Open Hand Theater

Do people understand these references? Do they put it all together? Mr. Navias insists that what he searches for is the intuitive response, not a linear – critical decoding of the images:

Most of us walk around with pieces of subliminal overlays of stories... we operate within them in order to make sense of our world. [These works] are multi-layered; everyone understands them on some level. I try to search for the universal aspects of the personal story. Sometimes a cultural paradigm is used as a backdrop, and sometimes the story challenges and/or disrupts the paradigm.

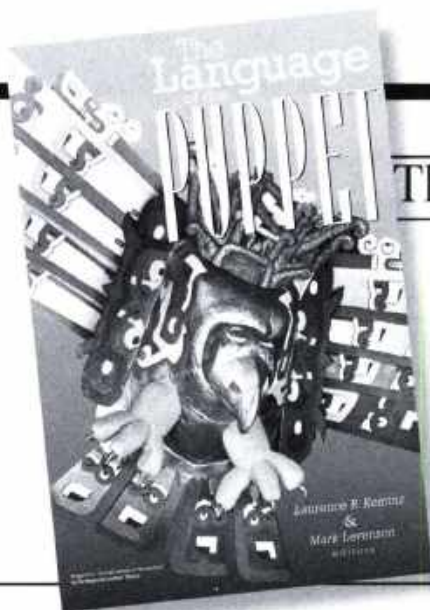
Open Hand Theater's commitment to the community is evidenced by their continued collaboration with a multitude of groups in the area, including arts, education and social service agencies. But it has also formed international alliances. In the early nineties the company formed a partnership with the Russian Skomoroch Puppet Theater to create a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They toured the show in the U.S. and Russia. As with other OHT shows, *Midsummer* included giant puppets, live actors in masks and a range of smaller puppets.

Part of the use of giant puppets is that we are using puppetry in a larger, sculptural way. It's architecture in movement, and movement focuses us in time. In theatre we can sculpt time, and our experience of it.

OHT has initiated rituals within the community of Syracuse. Their staging of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* happens every other year, using giant puppets and additional players from the area. They also offer a two week-circus skills camp in the summer, which culminates in a day-long festival and performance.

In 2001, this festival occurred on September 14, just days after the bombing of the World Trade Center. All over Syracuse, and other parts of the nation, festivals were cancelled as we tried to make sense of the destruction. Geoffrey Navias made the decision to go ahead with the festival as planned. It was a tremendous decision. It gave to Syracuse an opportunity to heal, and a place to come and share their feelings and memories. That particular circus was especially powerful. A puppet dance was added to the performance, in which the act of mourning was enacted by large specters offering small ordinary objects of remembering, bringing a stillness and quiet to the busy city street.

Rituals transcend the specific. They cut across generations and touch upon the original moment. And within this, are moments of deep realization of death, of sacrifice, of gifts. These moments are what we (in theatre) all strive for – those 'AHA!' moments that can be sparked by all kinds of things... moments in which you sense the vastness and interconnectedness of all things, of the tenderness of life, that it is time-limited and precious. ■



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In February, 2005, about seventy people gathered to brainstorm possible themes for our upcoming annual Mayday Ceremony. Amidst the considerable grief expressed for the Iraq war, someone asked that our theme be in alliance with a major Disarmament Rally scheduled to be in New York the same time as our event in Minneapolis. And someone else asked that we look to the “underground” for wisdom of how to live in the world.

Our discussions of military disarmament and personal disarmament mingled with a look below the surface. We wondered how many layers we would have to travel down

in order to disarm ourselves — down, down, all the way down through the dissolution of individual ego and into the core of the earth.

Large Puppets often arise as the collective embodiment of what we cannot express in words. Somehow our amorphous talk and our desire to transform our deep grief into compassionate action raised the shape and gesture of a huge papier-mâché body. And this body enabled us to enact the transformation of “Uncle Sam” into “We, the People” — enabled us to rehearse our own muscles, breath, and love for the difficult task of disarming our own shielded egos.

*Can we transform our grief (and anger) into compassionate DISARMAMENT?
Can our participation release JOY?*

Participants in the meeting asked for several other things:

- That we no longer enact a spectator democracy where we become immune to the violence perpetrated by the USA in the name of our citizenry, but rather that we activate a participatory democracy.
- That we honor the transformative power of compassionate love.



WE THE PEOPLE. WAKE!

In the Heart of the Beast

When all words fall short of the grief expressed, discussion of DISARMAMENT’S true meaning led to questions of how far down we would have to go to disarm ourselves.

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And when we began talking
about a journey deep into the
center of the earth,

We knew that only a puppet
could EMBODY.

When words cannot express
the depth of GRIEF yearning
to rise,

when it takes the love and
breath of many to enact a
TRANSFORMATION,
then,

sometimes it is useful to enter
the body of a large puppet.

The great effort and teamwork
it takes to raise a large puppet
becomes a passionate
rehearsal.

This is a rehearsal for what
might be.

Rise with muscle, breath and
love.

Enact a deed.

Rehearse.

We who lift them into their
journey—
for the journey of our own
lives—
the work of muscle, love and
breath,
enactment of the muscle, love,
and breath of many
to rehearse enacting their
(and our) desire.

Sometimes it takes the love
and breath of many
to raise a large
puppet and enact a
TRANSFORMATION
words cannot express.



We knew that only a puppet could EMBODY.



What does it mean to “disarm”?
 How many layers must we
 penetrate
 if we would truly be disarmed?
 Such questions mingled with
 great grief
 expressed for the war in Iraq.

So much grief!

Were people asking for a way
 to shed
 commemorating the sixty
 years since Nagasaki and
 Hiroshima?

We challenged ourselves:

No longer enact a
 spectator democracy,
 No more immune to violence
 perpetrated by the USA
 in our name,
 but activate a participatory
 democracy.



I wondered how we could activate this grief. §

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MEGA-PUPPETS AND GLOBAL CULTURE

by John Bell

An interesting aspect of giant puppets is that they are so often absent from lists of the various forms of puppetry throughout the world. For example, in a biographical sketch of Tony Sarg in the back of *The Puppet Theatre in America* (1949), Paul McPharlin makes no mention at all of Sarg's creation of inflatable giants for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parades—certainly one of the most important contributions to American puppet theater of the twentieth century. Twenty-four years later, in *The Art of the Puppet*, Bil Baird does mention Sarg's giant inflatables, as well as Remo Bufano's larger-than-life marionettes for a 1931 production of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* at the Metropolitan Opera, but other than that, the focus is wholly on smaller-than-life puppetry; there is no sense of giant puppets as a pre-twentieth-century tradition. Even Max von Boehn's remarkable 1929 puppet history (published in the U.S. as *Puppets and Automata*) only mentions giant figures on three out of 248 pages; and A. R. Philpott's admirable *Dictionary of Puppetry* (1969) doesn't even have an entry for the term "giant puppet." Thankfully, Eileen Blumenthal's 2005 *Puppetry: A World History* moves easily among and through all sorts of different puppet forms, including giants, but part of Blumenthal's ease of dealing with mega-puppets might come from her familiarity with the work of Julie Taymor and Bread and Puppet Theater, who popularized giant puppets in the late twentieth century.

Although giant puppets would seem to be naturally included in almost any general definition of puppetry (for example McPharlin's "theatrical figure moved under human

control"), there is something about them that places them outside the minds of many who think of puppets. In a way, giant puppets are the "elephant in the living room" of puppetry—an undeniably huge presence, yet somehow difficult for us to deal with. Why might this be so? I think it has to do with the obvious discomfort of scale that giant puppets bring with them. If the manipulation of handpuppets, marionettes, rod puppets, shadow figures, and other smaller-than-life forms brings with it a pleasing sense of security about the powers and abilities of human agency, giant puppets (even though they are also set in motion by human hands) perform a relationship in which humans are not the biggest things around. While the human-to-small-puppet ratio establishes a kind of confidence, the human-to-giant-puppet ratio inevitably brings with it a sense of unease and doubt. This unease and doubt can also be pleasurable, but the way that the two human-to-puppet ratios exist as opposites makes it easier (especially for modern puppeteers) to focus on the puppets that offer greater complexity of movement, greater control, greater attention to detail.

If McPharlin, Baird, von Boehn, and Philpott had been able to turn around and fully notice the giant puppet in the living room of theater history, their focus might have included the traditions of such figures, which like the history of other forms of puppetry is extensive and world-wide. There is not yet any comprehensive history of the global traditions of giant

2003 Corpus Christi celebration, Peru

photo: Melania www.melania.grasser.co.at/cuzco.htm

puppets, but if and when such a story is written, it would need to consider some of the following instances of mega-puppet performance.

The tendency to construct effigies bigger than humans must stem from a desire to visualize god-like powers. Historically, puppets of all sizes were created in religious contexts, to represent gods, humans, and other creatures; and within such contexts over-life-size figures could easily be seen as powerful gods. Certainly the cultural histories of Egypt and India give us evidence of the human ability to create such giant sculptures of gods. I imagine that while such figures might first have appeared as immobile statues, the idea of carrying around such figures in ritual processions or dances must have been appealing. One can see this kind of manipulation today in Spanish Catholic cultures of the Old and New World, where statues of saints are mounted on wooden frames meant to be carried on the shoulders of believers, in Corpus Christi and other processions. Similar traditions mark the Hindu celebrations of Ramlila in India, where the giant figures representing Rama and other characters from the Ramayana are carried in procession and then, at the end of the ceremonies, burned to ashes.

Hugo Blümner, in *The Home Life of the Ancient Greeks* (1895), mentions processions “in which the statue of *Dionysus-Eleutheros* was [...] carried by torchlight to the theatre of Dionysus, where it was set up in the orchestra,” and one imagines such images as at least life size, if not bigger; and certainly looming above the heads of the citizens of Athens who watched them pass by. Michael Byrom, in *The Puppet Theater in Antiquity* (1996) mentions “colossal animated effigies which were used in the victory parades and processions that preceded the circus games at Rome.” Notable among such figures, Byrom writes, was “the Manducus, a human monster with horrific jaws and teeth which could be made to clash ter-

rifyingly together by means of a hidden cord.” Byrom does not explain exactly how big Manducus was, but the tradition of a giant monster with jaws flourished in the centuries after classic Roman culture, in the Hellmouth figures of medieval European religious spectacle. Illustrations of medieval theater from the 9th through the 16th centuries show numerous examples of Hellmouths as giant beast-like heads (without bodies) attended by masked demons that must have operated the puppet’s jaw, eyes, and fire-breathing apparatus. On the vast scale of much medieval religious spectacle, Hellmouths were usually set up on stage left (balanced by Heaven, stage right), ready to receive the damned of the Bible whose stories were played out among the “mansions” filling the rest of the performance space. Such giant figures must have been among the most exciting and popular elements of medieval community spectacle (I know *I* would rather have performed in a devil mask, pulling on a rope to open the jaws of Hell, than to have dispensed wisdom on stage right as an angel.) These figures had cousins, too—ambulatory giants central to both the Christian/pagan rites of carnival and the festival of Corpus Christi, which promoted the Catholic faith by means of spectacular street performances and processions.

René Meurant, in his *Contribution à l’Étude des Géants Processionnels et de Cortège* (1967), notes that the recorded history of such giants in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands begins in the 15th century; but it is also the case that giant puppets were (and still are) an important feature of Spanish religious processions going back to the thirteenth century, when a papal decree created the celebration of Corpus Christi. The central activity of the Corpus Christi celebration was a procession of the communion wafer (the Corpus Christi, or body of Christ itself) through the streets of Catholic cities and villages across Europe; and communities soon augmented these processions with giant puppets, which defined the events



Ramlila celebration, Punjab, India
photo: Pankaj Sharma

as spectacular. Such giant puppets were also used in the more riotous celebrations of Carnival (or Mardi Gras), which carried the energy of the ancient Festivals of Dionysus into the Christian era. Whether such puppets originated in Spain and then extended into the rest of Europe or emerged in some other trajectory of influence, the fact remains that such giant figures were part of the performance language of European culture from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance. Technically, such giant figures tended to be constructed by a combination of vertical poles and horizontal wicker hoops, inside of which a performer or performers could lift and carry the giant figure. Such giant puppets not only enlivened and defined the various street spectacles of European urban and village life, they also came to represent characteristics of the towns in which they were built and performed. They became mascots, as it were, much in the way that over-sized masked characters represent the characteristics of American sports teams.

The history of these European giants was not really written down until the invention of folklore in the mid-nineteenth century, so our knowledge of them is less than that of actors' drama in the same centuries. But writers from different disciplines have often been intrigued with the significance of such giant puppets, and chief among such writers was the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (written in the 1930s, but not published until 1968) explored the whole carnival culture of excess and irreverence as an important socio-political tradition central to human creation and the assertion of popular renewal through a life-death-rebirth cycle; and his touchstone for this was François Rabelais' outrageous sixteenth-century novel *Gargantua*, which captured the spirit of carnival through its imaginative exploration of the life of one of its giants. Key to our contemporary understanding of Bakhtin is the fact that he wrote his study during the Stalin era, in which context his historical look at carnival's licentious shenanigans encourages a philosophy of resistance to power by means of antiauthoritarian community celebrations.

When Spanish settlers in the New World brought their giant puppet traditions with them, they found that such spectacles meshed neatly with existing ritual performances practiced by Native Americans. Thus, in the colonial world, *gigantones* acted out multi-faceted rituals of contending powers, creating new traditions in cities such as León in Nicaragua.

In the northeastern United States, probably because of the pervasive influence of Puritan culture, carnival traditions and religious rituals with giant figures did not establish themselves with the strength they had had in the Old World. Carnival culture did create footholds in such cities as New Orleans, where performance with giant figures has long been a feature of that

city's community life. However, when anthropologists in the late nineteenth century began to explore Native American culture in earnest, their encounters with giant puppets of the Zuñi people in New Mexico startled them.

The Shalako figures created and performed by the Zuñi (to this day) are giant rod puppets about twelve feet tall whose prominent feature is a large wooden bird-like head with goggle eyes, a feathered crown, and a moveable two-piece beak which clacks like a slapstick to produce its distinctive percussive sound. (This is eerily similar to Byrom's description of the Roman Manducus.) The head is attached to a single vertical pole held at the waist by the puppet's solo operator, and colorful blankets hanging from the head conceal the puppeteer all the way down to his shins.

In 1882, the anthropologist Frank Cushing witnessed a Shalako ritual himself, and it is interesting to see how this Victorian American reacted when confronted with a tradition which his ancestors had probably celebrated centuries earlier in Europe. He writes:

After dusk, the giant figures [...] across the river came in one by one. They were, by all odds, the most monstrous conceptions I had seen among the Zuñi dances. They were at least twelve feet high. Their gigantic heads were shocks of long black hair with great horns at the sides, green masks with huge, protruding eye-balls, and long pointed, square-ended, wooden beaks; and their bodies were draped with embroidered and tasseled cotton blankets, underneath which only the tiny, bare, painted feet of the actor could be seen. The spasmodic rolling of the great eyeballs and the sharp snapping of the beak as it rapidly opened and closed, together with a fan-shaped arrangement of eagle-feathers at the back of the head, gave these figures the appearance of angry monster-birds.

Cushing sees the Shalako performance as spectacular primitive ritual, and, as a scientific American, can only consider the power embodied in such figures as a delusion of the "uncivilized" Zuñi people. And yet, Cushing is struck by that uncanny power, much the way his ancestors might have been, in the encounters with giants in their own communities of sixteenth-century Europe.

In other words, to return to the question of power, what seems to be central to the importance of giant puppets is the way their larger-than-human stature makes us consider the relative limits of human agency in a world which appears to



Dusherra festival, part of the Ramllila celebrations in Kapurthala, Punjab, INDIA

Visit the city's website: www.kapurthalaonline.com photo: Pankaj Sharma

be governed by larger-than-life forces. For Cushing, coming from a culture just then maturing into a sense of unlimited economic, political, and cultural power (which would climax in the coming "American Century"), the encounter with the giant puppets of the Zuñi people was unsettling, an intimation of larger forces we don't really understand.

The giant puppets created in the past few decades by Bread and Puppet Theater, Julie Taymor, Michael Curry, the Burning Man community, or the French company Royal de luxe all build upon such uncanny power imbalances, which the mere presence of giant puppets articulates as a tangible force. §

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PARADING WITH THE PINK PANTHER PULLING POSSE:

An Account of Being a Balloon Handler in the
Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade

by Meron Langsner



Waking up at an ungodly hour on a national holiday, wearing a completely ridiculous costume in front of thousands of live spectators and a national broadcast audience all

while performing physical labor in the cold? Sounds like a good time. Or at least it did to me as a college student in 1994, when I was offered a chance to be a balloon handler in the 68th Annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

The offer was extended well in advance of the event. A friend whose father worked for the corporate side of Macy's was the ringleader. He was able to make the arrangements and serve as the point person through which my friends and I signed up. Early instructions and directions were sent out to us, including our balloon assignments. There was a minimum weight requirement to be a balloon handler that, technically, I did not meet. I told my friend that my weight would need to be exaggerated on the forms and was informed that my weight had already been "padded," and that all was well.

Early Thanksgiving morning, the volunteer parade staff converged on a New Jersey warehouse. At that hour, excitement and incoherence were in a pitched battle for our consciousness. Food and (more importantly) coffee were provided. We were given our costumes and introduced to our balloon

pilots. "Pilot" is a bit of a misnomer; they are actually the chief puppeteers for each balloon. They give specific instructions to their balloon handlers:

when to give more slack, take in more rope, how to move as a group, and so on.

The parade route was such that the balloons could not be allowed to fly at their full height for the entire time. Being a pilot is no small responsibility—many of the handlers were doing this for the first time, and as news stories in later years would demonstrate, those balloons can be dangerous when out of control. Pilots did not handle a specific spool of rope, but could relieve a handler for a few minutes when necessary.

From my perspective as a balloon handler, my pilot was a constant presence. We were always being given instructions as the wind and parade conditions changed. The pilots would also actively encourage the handlers as a group. I remember mine as having a great sense of humor and also being very aware of signs of fatigue in his team. More than once he made sure someone was briefly replaced so that they could catch their breath. The spectators, unaware that this is difficult and challenging work are focused on the performing object rather than its manipulators. Each balloon's handlers wore identical

costumes/uniforms identified with their character, and a sense of team spirit quickly materialized.

Each strand of rope was attached to a large spool held with both hands. There were a few extra people on each balloon so that handlers could take rests if needed and as determined by the pilot. Handlers march the entire route pulling down against a massive balloon that wants very much to go up. As I was somewhat underweight for the job, it was even more of a workout than I'd expected.

I was assigned to the Pink Panther, a balloon that has since been retired. My costume was a bright pink jumpsuit with a matching cap. These were worn over my street clothes, including my jacket. The balloon had the cartoon Panther wearing an inner tube sporting the words "Macy's Parade Lifeguard." The inner tube seemed to be a stabilizing factor in the design of the balloon, and provided an area for many of the ropes to attach. I understood that the balloon itself was nearly ten stories high, though from my perspective I could only see parts of it. I was pulling a spool somewhere along the right side of the balloon slightly behind the center. I was aware that the tail was trailing to my left and behind me for quite a distance. Occasionally I would be able to see the balloon's head if I peeked up, but most of my focus was on the labor at hand and on the crowds watching us.

Other friends of mine were assigned to Sonic the Hedgehog, Snoopy, The Cat in the Hat, the Nestle's Quik Bunny, and Barney the purple dinosaur. It was a mix of old and new characters.

Once the parade itself was underway, I noticed that the majority of spectators looked at the balloon and barely noticed the handlers. Our costumes made us match our balloon and helped us blend in, but we were almost invisible to them. My group's pilot told us that the Pink Panther was one of the most popular balloons and that we would enjoy the crowd humming the theme song to us. He was right, too. Though the humming was sporadic, many of the balloon handlers would join right in. Many in the crowd were surprised when my friends and I would engage them, as if our presence had registered with them for the first time. (There were also clowns interacting directly with spectators, so our behavior was not entirely out of the norm.) There was actually more opportunity to interact with the crowd than with the other handlers on my balloon.

Ahead of us in the parade were some NYPD mounted police. At some point, the container used to hold the horse manure spilled over directly into my path in a wide enough area that there was just no way to walk around it and still hold my balloon. A police officer along the side of the route saw my predicament and pointed me out to his partner. Approaching the pile of manure, I took in a bit of slack in my rope and did a combination Tarzan swing/*grand jeté*, sailing safely over the "road hazard." The police officers applauded.

The event itself was soon over. At the end of the parade route, workers relieved us of our balloons and costumes. After a brief reunion with my friends, we all went off—sleep deprived—to our own family celebrations.

Not long after, we each received colorful certificates in the mail from Macy's Special Productions "to express and record" their appreciation of our time and efforts and acknowledging our participation in the parade.

On the whole, participating in the parade was enjoyable—a great opportunity to not only peek behind the scenes, but to participate in one of the largest holiday spectacles in the country. As an event it was well organized, and we were always treated politely. Perhaps the strangest aspect of being a balloon handler was being simultaneously in plain sight and behind the scenes as we all disappeared behind the overwhelming presence of our balloons.

Meron Langsner is a doctoral student in the Department of Drama at Tufts University. He holds an MFA in Playwriting from Brandeis and an MA in Performance Studies from NYU, and is active as a playwright, director, and fight director.

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CREATIONS FROM THE COOPERATIVE

by Ira Kantor

It's mid-afternoon, June 15, and Esmeralda decides to stroll around Boston's Newbury Street. Her hair is a frilly mesh of blue and purple; her face a bright and rosy banana yellow; she is bathed in striking red fabric. She's self-conscious about her flat hands, although they are the smallest features on her eight-foot-high frame.

Sara Peattie, Esmeralda's bubbly four-foot-ten-inch creator, stands by her side, guiding every step of the way. Peattie's billowy plaid flannel shirt and dark apron are splattered with paint the same color as her graying hair. Carefully, she instructs Esmeralda how to walk and proudly carry her head high.

"The character of a puppet is the way it moves, but giant puppets are half puppetry and half mechanics," Peattie says. "They're capable of doing you real damage and therefore are treated with real respect. If you had one of these fall on you, you would never forget it."

After some necessary coaching, Esmeralda is off and stomping, graceful all the while. She is of the Malian variety - a traditional feminine puppet of beauty with a long neck. Esmeralda eagerly waves and shakes hands with restaurant patrons, toddlers, even police officers. However, she cannot speak as her puppeteer's mouth comes out of her neck. Therefore, her presence is established through both the gaiety and carefulness with which she moves.

"Is there a parade going on?" one Taj Hotel bellhop asks as Esmeralda reaches Arlington Street.

"A lot of what [giant puppets] can do is overawe people," Peattie says. "They have to be surrounded by people who are taking care of them which automatically makes them royal or scary in some ways."

After her brisk outing, Esmeralda will once again become lifeless inside the Puppeteers' Cooperative, a home for giant puppets and puppeteers situated in the spacious yet murky basement of Newbury Street's Emmanuel Church. Walk through the Cooperative's diminutive front door and a world of gods, animals, and other beings awaits. Their smiles and meticulously designed faces become eerily real the closer one gets to them. You expect at any moment one might actually spring out and come to life on its own.



"You have this access to abstract characters, so it makes sense to use those, which right away [means] you're entering into mythology," Peattie says. "Even if the god is 'The Bad God of Traffic,' that's still a mythological figure."

The Puppeteers' Cooperative was established by Peattie and long-time collaborator George Konhoff more than thirty years ago after both had served respective tenures in the renowned political puppet troupe Bread and Puppet Theater. For Konhoff, who passed away in 2001, an additional background with the San Francisco Mime Troupe contributed to his overall tenacity when arranging and putting on the Cooperative's numerous puppet parades and pageants. This has since evolved into the Back Alley Puppet Theatre. However, Peattie, who attended Antioch College in Ohio while a member of Bread and Puppet, says she was simply drawn to the mechanical aspects of constructing giant puppets. Her main goal has always been to give them their own credibility within the genre's numerous ramifications.

"I think the Puppeteers' Cooperative was created with the notion of being able to share the skills of making puppets with the world," says Theresa Linnihan of the Cooperative's New York branch. "The whole notion was to create workshop situations across the country to teach people how to make these puppets [and] to demystify them."

"Sara, in creating the Puppeteers' Cooperative with George Konhoff, moved away from the beautiful, dark, black-and-white imagery of Bread and Puppet and moved into the primary colors," Linnihan adds, "[She] moved into creating figures that were comical, endearing, [but] still political."

On any given day, Peattie spends upwards of fourteen hours within Emmanuel Church's low-ceilinged basement tinkering with ideas and

designing mega-puppets. Birds, jazz musicians, demons: no being is off limits. Once the leering face of Poseidon comes into view inside the Cooperative, it's clear that cardboard and papier-mâché are two of her preferred media. But it's her manipulation of these materials that makes her puppets appear, both physically and metaphorically, larger than life.

"There aren't that many people who are willing to sit and think about a piece of cardboard for years," Peattie says. "Sara's very concentrated, and nimble with those little hands," says Linnihan. "She creates puppets that can float over your head or take giant steps down the street or crane their necks or shrug their shoulders or shimmy as they go into a parade."

While Peattie labors intensively on her individual puppets, she is more concerned with spreading her concepts and skills to anyone interested in following in her shoes. Although there are arguably an infinite number of ways to craft giant puppets, Peattie's more common methods are compiled in a thorough booklet entitled, "68 Ways To Make Really Big Puppets." This informative guide not only features dozens of elaborate puppet sketches but also discusses the various media used in constructing giant birds, crocodiles, and demons, to name a few.

Additionally, Peattie is invited to lead intensive community workshops all over the country, the goal being to create giant mobile puppets that can be incorporated into any major outdoor event. Yet, for Peattie, money was never a motivating factor in her decision to become a puppeteer. She asserts that puppetry's (and for that matter mega-puppetry's) collective accessibility is advanced only by one's own imagination and means of interpretation.

"I think [puppet accessibility] depends on the local environment," she says. "In some communities it seems familiar to them, in some they only know hand puppets. It isn't enough of a subject in America to have a general understanding [but] it doesn't bother me."

"I think that a big puppet—whether you see it inside or you see it outside in the street or you see it come across a meadow—is anthropomorphic," Linnihan says. "It is landscape and humanity combined, that's why it's so powerful."

Peattie says her giant puppets generally begin with a skeleton made from bamboo and chicken wire. In formulating this basic structure, she can then determine how her puppet can best be manipulated. However, the size alone of a puppet of this caliber makes it seem a tough labor of love. Because the ceiling height of the Cooperative reaches no higher than nine feet, Peattie's puppets, many times, have to be taken out in a back alley for further testing.

"I have warm and happy feelings about every puppet," she says. "But at the same time, I realize it's gonna be something I'm going to have to cope with down here. In a way, I have

better feelings about other people's puppets because they're not my responsibility."

Whether situated on a tripod or stemming out of a backpack, most of Peattie's giant puppets can only turn and function within a specific radius. Although Esmeralda easily slips over her puppeteer's head, her towering gait makes it virtually impossible for said puppeteer to manipulate her without moving his or her entire body in the same direction. Furthermore, natural elements like wind and rain pose potential and obvious dangers to the way a giant puppet can function during outdoor events.

"Because mega-puppets are so big, it's like there's more leeway," Peattie says. "You need to have a show where you assume that things are going to go wrong from time to time, and figure out how you're going to cope with that."

"Sara's technique is so lightweight," adds Linnihan. "I'm not going to say you don't sweat because the perfume of puppeteers is sweat, but you're able to enjoy learning that puppet as you jump into it and play with it. Less is more when it comes to a giant puppet."

In exposing her giant puppets to others, Peattie also oversees the Cooperative's adjoining Puppet Free Lending Library, which is home to over a hundred mega-puppets. Dragons, cats, horses, and angels are just some of its inhabitants. Borrowers often use these puppets for school functions, political demonstrations, benefits, and, occasionally, religious ceremonies.

"It's nice," Peattie says. "You get to know a random slice of people who do odd things."

Peattie adds that, while anybody is free to come down and borrow these puppets for his or her own purposes, a lot of times students will simply stop by and make their own. Once in a while, people will donate puppets to the library, but more often than not, what's in there is up for grabs.

Although it is difficult to trace the exact origins of giant puppets, Peattie says the greatest context they fit into is that of political demonstrations and social commentary. Inside the Puppet Free Lending Library, two angelic papier-mâché mega-puppets lie across a table. Both were used by Emerson College senior Gregory Corbino in his self-produced piece about the Virginia Tech shootings in April. Suddenly, a topic of universal relevance became even more heightened when the striking visuality of Peattie's puppets came alive on stage at the Puppet Showplace Theater in Brookline.

"When people walk in a demonstration, there's often this implied reproach of, 'I'm a human being, I'm walking, why are you on this sidewalk?' It makes people aggressive," Peattie says. "A puppet carries less of that human reproach; it gives people detachment from the guilty feelings the demonstration is inducing."



photos: Dasia Posner

Over the years, Peattie and her giant puppets have also been involved in a number of national festivals and exhibitions including Boston's New Years Eve gala, First Night. During the celebration's parade, the Marshal's Grand Procession, Back Alley and Cooperative puppeteers and parade captains work together to recruit people to help carry close to a hundred and fifty puppets. These volunteers are taught simple choreography in the afternoon and are supported throughout the parade. If the weight of the puppets or the often frigid weather become too much for somebody, new puppeteers are recruited from the audience.

"The kind of puppets I make have to be made so that somebody can get in them and just go," she says.

This past fourth of July, Peattie once again teamed up with the Governors' Institute of the Arts in Vermont, a two-week residential program for high school students, to create another "Triumph of the Arts" parade. It's a tradition that has lasted close to twenty years, with Peattie contributing puppets and prototypes that complement specific art movements, such as surrealism, each year.

"Every single day that Sara's there, she comes out in the morning [when] we have a meeting and

says, 'Today, we're building the robots,' and she'll bring out a prototype of the robots," says Donny Osman, director for the Governors' Institute of the Arts. "I can't even remember everything that she's got."

"Sara's like the little engine that could," Osman adds. "She just keeps on rolling."

When it comes to building new giant puppets, Peattie says ideas never stop coming. She is currently working on an electronic robot designed to project images in its television-screen eyes via cameras in its fingers. Her ultimate goal though is to work with the port of Seattle in creating a crane dance because the mechanical lifting devices are already huge and actually "act like cranes." If this proves impossible though, Peattie's content to keep on having fun toiling away within her basement haven where her puppets represent a kind of eccentric yet personable family. They're great company and they always know when to keep quiet.

"Her humor is just so wonderful and so imaginative, and I believe that these giant puppets are totems," Linnihan says. "They're images that the audience can look at and instantly fall in love with because somehow it's a giant depiction of an emotion—a yearning that we feel in ourselves—and it's really bigger than we are."



Ira Kantor is a freelance journalist and graduate student in Boston, MA. His work has also appeared in The Boston Globe and Elmore Magazine in New York.

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Wake, Faust Puppet by Randy Spolnik, Skeleton puppet by Lynn Limer, Photo by East Side

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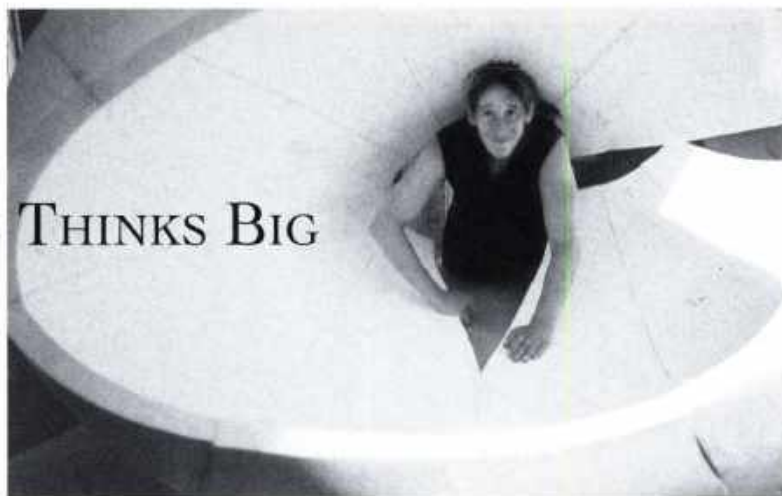
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Pinocchio, Old Trout Puppet Workshop of Calgary, Alberta, Canada

LISA STURZ THINKS BIG



Ironically, I was attracted to puppetry by the pleasure of creating detailed miniature worlds that are hard to produce on a large scale; yet I have come to specialize in giant puppets and costumes. The bigger my studio is; the bigger the projects become and my barn in North Carolina is often full to capacity.



I draw rough sketches to get familiar with the figure from a mathematical point of view and to understand its unique geometry. I decide how the weight is best distributed and where to place the poles to give the puppeteers the most control.

I look for materials that are light-weight and structurally sound. Most of my large figures are hollow with a skin of mini-cell foam, with a skeletal structure of aluminum, rope and plastic.



The internal structure distributes the weight, supports the shape and integrity of the form, and creates a housing for the rods that will be used to manipulate the figure.



I once took a personality/career test and the results indicated that I would make a good rabbi or priest. This makes me chuckle when I think about the origin of puppetry in religious ritual and of the Indonesian shadow theatre specifically, where the priest (dalang) performs with the puppets. Before the puppet is completed there are specific rites that accompany the carving of the eye which endows the figure with life and connects it to the ancestors. I think about this every time I work on the eyes. I just can't help it. From this moment on the figure has a personality – the whole tone changes because now the figure is looking at us and seems to have an opinion.





Before we add the finishing details, we take it out for a ride. The moment of truth comes when we screw in the poles and take on the weight. There is a much awkwardness in the beginning before we figure out who needs to take the lead, and how to work together to manipulate moving parts.

It's almost done and we can taste the excitement. We've been working hard and now we give it some last minute detail and basic finesse. We airbrush dimension and highlights onto the figure so it doesn't look like a giant piñata. We add trim around the eyes and insert the teeth and tongue.

Loading the truck properly can take several hours and lots of rope and bubblewrap. We send it on its way and start sweeping the floor.

The text has been extracted from an article written by Storz for the Puppetry Journal (Winter, 2006). The photos reflect that and her newer work, as well.



LES SAGES FOUS

A small, ensemble theatre from Trois Rivères, Quebec, its members refer to themselves as “a universe where objects are born, grow old and die... a theatre of image, grotesque and sublime.”

Seeing them perform PARADE ISSIMO outdoors was sublime indeed. One performer played a sort of Mother Courage of Birdland, pulling an enchanting cart with all her worldly possessions, including an enormous egg. The other two performers rode about on wild ostriches of dinosauran proportions that are intent on hatching the egg.

Played in and among the spectators, the effect of these giant puppets is awestruck delight.

www.sagesfous.com

—Justin Kaase



Oshun, Yoruban River Goddess



was built and operated by your editor for Boston's Revels (originally under the auspices of Underground Railway Theater) for "River Sing," a celebration of the autumnal equinox. 2007 was her fourth year at the event, which features Dixieland jazz and Samba bands, Alpenhorns, Tibetan throat-singing and choruses on both sides of the Charles River.

Love that dirty water!

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The Wise Men, Parade the Circle, 2004

design: Robin VanLear photo: Philip Brutz

SIZE AND WEIGHT

by Michael Bodel

Fiberglass, bamboo, silk, aluminum and lauan. The struggle between a puppet-maker's dreams for mobility, and the physical realities of gravity and torque often hinges on the issue of weight. In the field of giant puppetry, reducing mass is critical if the puppet is to move naturally and with articulation. The battle begins with what materials are chosen, especially when the puppet will be operated by only one or a few puppeteers. The structural issues in giant puppet construction are a useful starting point for a broader exploration into the concept of *lightness* as it relates to both the human and puppet form. I personally came to puppetry by way of dance, so the relationship between the weight-bearing body of the puppeteer and that of the puppet has always interested me.

With any three-dimensional art, the designer balances a positive increase in strength with a negative increase in weight. In giant puppetry, walking this line presents even more of a challenge because of the larger-than-life scale, and the need for a fluid range of movement. I started thinking about this issue while watching Murphy Winters construct a series of carnival puppets for the Cleveland Art Museum's *Parade the Circle Celebration*. Based in Trinidad, Winters has worked as the primary structural designer for Peter Minshall for more

than two decades, constructing the giant puppets that head up the Calaloo Company's legendary Carnival bands. Minshall, himself, transformed the masquerade tradition in the eighties with his signature puppets Tam Tam and Saga Boy (both more than 4 meters tall, operated by one puppeteer) and what he refers to as *dancing mobiles*.¹ Similar to the *extensions* that choreographer Alwin Nikolais experimented with in the early days of dance theater, these elements are part costume and part puppet, extending from performers' bodies and multiplying their size.² As the engineer, it is Winters's job to make such puppets and structures capable of moving with grace and precision.

"The Midnight Robber" provides a good example of Murphy Winters's technique. This is a tall puppet designed by Robin van Lear, based on the traditional Trinidadian character of the evil braggart.³ It is a backpack puppet similar to the Bread and Puppet Theater's giant skeletons, in that it is strapped to one puppeteer's back and operated by rods connected to the puppet's hands. The chief difference is that Bread and Puppet works primarily with wood, screws, twine and cardboard mâché, all of which are heavy materials.⁴ At eighteen feet tall, The Midnight Robber towers above the

crowd, yet weighs under forty pounds (less than some two-and-a-half foot tall Sicilian marionettes!).⁵ Winters builds backpacks of fiberglass or thermal plastic, molded to the puppeteer's back. The spine of the puppet is aluminum, the arms are dryer air duct, the legs are 3/4" PVC tubing. Both the hips and neck are slender lauan girdles that attach to the main spine with elastic so that the head can bobble and the hips can swivel. Whenever wood is used, it is either cut into thin rings or densely peppered with holes to shave off weight. The skin and cape are a light silk that glows in vibrant colors and flows when it moves. Fiberglass wire is threaded through tubes sewn in spirals down the fabric to create full volume in the arms, legs and torso. All this allows for the puppet to move fluidly, for his skeleton head to turn and his legs to kick in a human manner. He prances and poses in all of his arrogance. However, such a design is both labor intensive and expensive. As Winters admits, "Good things are not cheap."⁶

Another, less expensive approach to building light structures is to use cane, which can be bent and joined with string or tape to create an armature. This technique was used by South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company where designer Adrian Kohler built a cane giraffe that became the centerpiece of their 2003 piece, *War Horse*.⁷ Connecticut based Ann Cumberly took this technique a step further with her five-person hippogryph (half horse, half bird), which consisted entirely of a cane structure with no fabric or maché skin at all. The hollow creature was light enough that a single puppeteer could tip it back on its hind legs, rear above the crowd, pawing at the air and turning its bird-like head.⁸

As the height of a giant backpack puppet increases so does the torque on a puppeteer's shoulders. For puppets with high centers of mass, this means that a handler can hardly tip the puppet more than a few degrees without losing control or putting too much strain on the spine. It is important that the head and torso of such figures be as light as possible. In the case of *The Midnight Robber*, the head and cowboy hat are brown paper glazed in contact cement or maché on an armature of aluminum wire. In Julie Taymor's *Lion King*, some dancers wore gazelle puppets as headpieces; Michael Curry's innovative use of high-tech materials (Kevlar, carbon fiber) lent them the strength and lightness required to stay secure during the high-energy choreography. Another clear stress point is in the joint between the puppeteer's hand and the puppet's. For this reason, many designs feature cloth arms, so that the arm weight is minimized, even if the legs have articulated upper and lower sections.⁹

One always feels the power of height, and the attention that a "gigantes" commands on stage or on parade. However, I believe that a puppet's weight, or lightness, can have just as dramatic an effect on an audience's experience. More powerful than an observer's cerebral perception is his physical reaction — a visceral response he feels as his body witnesses a puppet's massive form moving through space. The power comes from the quality of the puppet's movement, whose sweeping dexterity defies our normal, physical reality. Its lightness in contrast with its size, shifts it from a giant world to a divine world.

The representation of gods by giant puppets runs throughout history in part, I believe, because they can create the illusion of supernatural floating or even flying. Although his fabric forms were not humanoid, Basil Twist extended the idea of weightlessness in his 1998 *Symphonie Fantastique*, which was performed in a thousand-gallon tank of water.¹⁰

On the other end of the spectrum are designs that accentuate a puppet's weight. These giants make an observer feel the diminutive frailty of his own human body. We see this in the creatures of *Royale de luxe's* street spectacles: *The Sultan's Elephant*, *The Giraffe Hunters* and *The Little Giant* which stand between five and eleven meters tall.¹¹ *The Sultan's Daughter* walks the streets of Nantes suspended from a crane by thick ropes. Neither the steel structure of the crane nor the large boat pulleys are masked, giving a sense of the entire load the wooden puppet generates. Tiny puppeteers run around her feet in their signature red tailcoats, pulling cords that lift her eyebrows and raise her arms. At one point several puppeteers struggle under the weight of the puppet's shoe as they fit it on her foot. Both the visibility of the hoisting devices and the frantic performance add to the impression that the girl is of a different plane, pulled from the matrix of her giant land and placed among the miniature world of humans.

The Dutch group *Dogtroep* achieves the same effect comically in a street performance in which an animatronic dragon bows over an Amsterdam bridge, flinging one of its puppeteers into the water far below. In another piece a 6m fish puppet is pulled from the ocean, only to open up revealing a factory inside the fish.¹² The metal mechanism of such animatronic gigantes situates the puppet in the heavy realm of modern machines. This is in contrast to the light constructions I have been discussing, who defy their size by moving as naturally as a human body.

From a metaphysical standpoint, the most incredible opportunity that light puppet constructions provide is for one giant creature to be operated by one human. Returning to the notion of giant puppets being seen as divine, a puppet becomes a god on the shoulders of a human. Although the connecting mechanisms and technology must increase as the distance from the puppeteer to his puppet does,¹³ the lightest and cleanest designs maintain the duality between a body in motion and an object in motion. A human's movements amplify themselves effortlessly in the movements of a super-human.¹⁴ The connection of the puppet's arms and feet to the puppeteer's arms and feet emphasizes their symbiotic connection and bridges their two worlds. Even in parade and street performance, outside the context of post-modern theater, these tall and dexterous puppets become a study in animal motion. As in Edward Muybridge's kinesiological photographs, attention is drawn to each moment in a creature's action. When the handler doesn't need to strain under the weight of his puppet, the focus remains on the puppet's physicality: its smallest gestures or boldest turns. The structural designer's paired construction, coupled with the puppeteer's choreographed movements, combine to create a figure that may from afar appear human, up close, divine. §

Dame Lorraine & The Midnight Robber, Trinidad
Carnival & Parade the Circle, 2003

design: Robin VanLear

puppeteers: Scott Heiser, Ronald Guy

photo: Howard Agresti



Endnotes

¹ Minshall, Peter, and Peter Stepan. *Masman-Minshall: Trinidad carnival Artist*. (New York: Hatje Cantz, 2007).

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¹³ Kaplan, Stephen. "A Puppet Tree." *The Drama Review* (Fall 99 vol 43). 28.

¹⁴ Peter Minshall as quoted in "Homers Carribean Cruise." *Economist* (vol 330 Issue 7852). 90.

Michael Bodel creates work at the intersection of dance, puppetry and image theater. He is currently living in New York, developing a dance theater piece to premier at HERE's American Living Room Festival in July.



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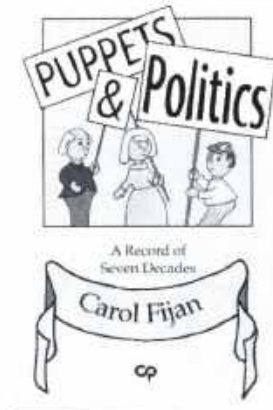
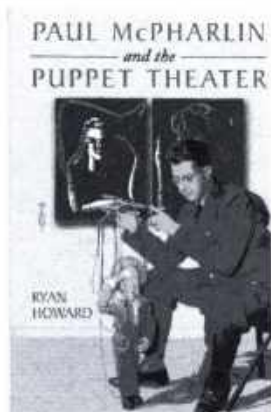
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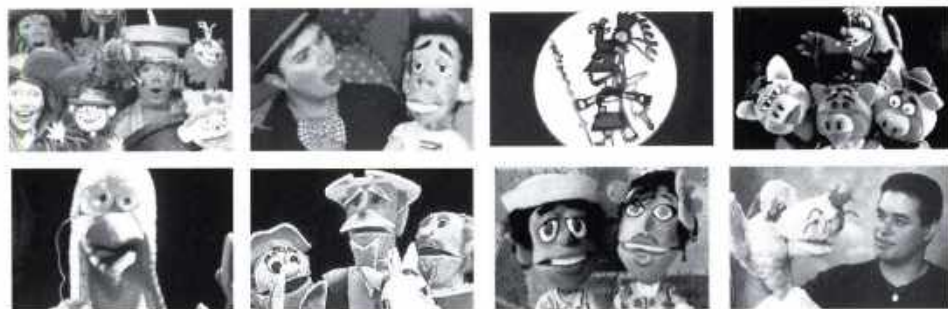
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