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# PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

issue no. 37

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On the COVER:

Tom McLaughlin paints a  
silicone "skin" on a puppet.

*(see article, page 32)*

Editorial

The Future of Puppetry

Welcome to the 37<sup>th</sup> issue of *Puppetry International*—in which we consider the future of puppetry and celebrate three significant anniversaries. First, this issue marks 30 years since Bonnie and I took over the production of UNIMA-USA's magazines. That was 1985. It was called *A Propos* and was only available to our members. (Back then Bonnie still had dark hair and I had, well, *hair*—a lot has changed in the intervening decades!)

We are also marking 25 years since the death of Jim Henson, UNIMA-USA's first president and a man whose foresight, imagination and generosity helped to set puppetry's course toward a brighter future [see Cheryl Henson's article, page 4].

Finally, it is also 25 years since the first "puppetry futurism" conference at Atlanta's Center for Puppetry Arts, a gathering of people active in the field to discuss their plans, desires and dreams for puppetry as we trudged toward the new millennium. More on that conference and "futurism" in a moment.

All puppeteers, even those who do "traditional" puppetry, think about the future, even if it is only to wonder what next season will look like, or if the audiences will be there, or the government support. We dream about making our best show ever, our new theater space, an international tour, or getting our work into a national festival or perhaps Sundance. Many of you took up our challenge of making your dreams or plans public on these pages, and perhaps those stories will prove inspirational to others.

Ken Pfeiste recounts his adventures with short puppet videos created for social media and the active community he found there [page 8]. Robert Blush gives us an overview of the puppetry arts program at the University of Connecticut—with its growing faculty and new facilities, it is training the puppeteers of the future [page 14]. Heather Denyer profiles Werewere Liking, a West African director who is making sure traditional puppetry of that region

will be there in the future [page 10]. Jessica Thebus is using toy theater in her classes at Northwestern University as a training tool for future directors—risky business, given the highly addictive nature of puppetry! [page 19] Tom McLaughlin, responsible for "siliconizing" such well-known puppets as Yoda and Jabba the Hutt, lets us in on the tricks of the trade of this "material of the future"! [page 32] There is so much more: Theodora Skipitares exposes Iranian students to new ways of creating theater, Jyana Browne ruminates on a futuristic bunraku opera, and Honey Goodenough takes us into the world of medical simulation puppetry—a new way of training physicians that looks to have a bright future.

Futurism

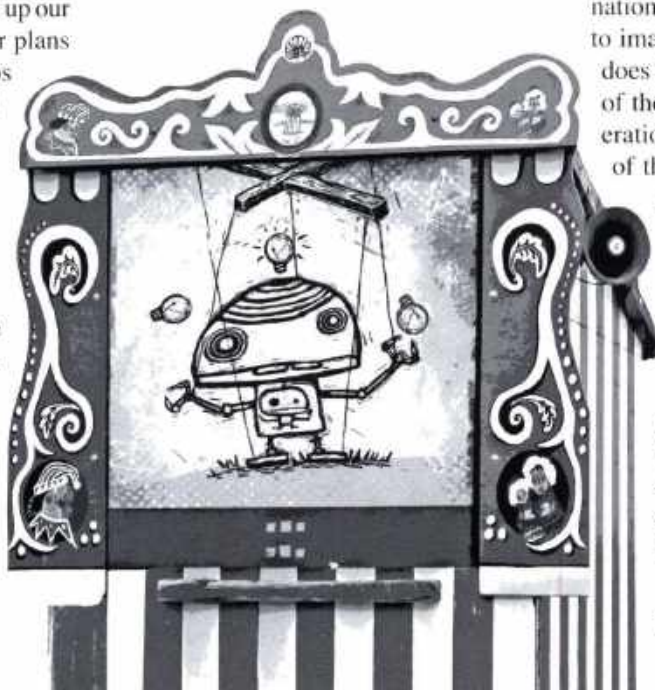
Futurism, as a general term, simply denotes "concern with events and trends of the future or which anticipate the future." Ray Kurzweil, for instance, has been called "America's greatest futurist." As a proper noun, however, it has a very specific meaning. Cheryl Henson explains:

The word 'Futurism' refers to a specific early Twentieth Century art movement. [...] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1909 Futurist Manifesto called for the destruction of art as we know it, the destruction of museums and libraries,

the burning of books and the obliteration of the past. He was an anarchist calling for change. But he was also an artist who introduced notions of sound, text, cacophony and modernism to an elite part of society often disconnected from the tumultuous moments in their own history. Futurism had a significant influence on modern art. It jangled the status quo and shook up complacent aesthetics. But it was an alarm clock that went off a long time ago.

The Futurism Conference and its sequels Futurism II (Watertown, CT) and Futurism III (San Luis Obispo, CA) used the term in its general sense, only capitalized because it is a title. It was Nancy Staub who came up with the name: "The conference title *Futurism* was my choice. At that time some 'scientists' claimed they could accurately predict the future up to 10 years and called themselves futurists." I hope this clears up any confusion as to the difference between futurism and Futurism, and will serve to stanch the flood of letters from indignant avant-gardistas.

Cheryl Henson also reminds us that the future does not exist on its own: "The future will always be built on the past, in reaction to it or in continuation of it, or some combination of the two. The past exists. We need to imagine and then build the future, but it does not have to obliterate the past. Some of the greatest puppeteers of the last generation came out of the emotional ravages of the Second World War: Enno Podelh, Albrecht Roser, Kinosuke Takeda, to name a few. Artists of today should know about these masters of the past and many more." To that list, I would add Bil Baird, whose book *The Art of the Puppet* was a revelation to many of us in the 1970s. For that reason, we include in this issue a remembrance of Bil by his wife Susanna. She provides a very personal glimpse of an artist known primarily for his iconic puppets [page 36].



ROBOT FROM A JIM BRADSHAW ILLUSTRATION

## The Futurism Conference(s)

Nancy Lohmann Staub was the conference organizer for the event in July of 1990. She says that the idea was Vince Anthony's, but Anthony (who hosted the event at the Center for Puppetry Arts, Atlanta, where he is the Executive Director) says he honestly can't remember who first came up with the idea. Certainly both of them must have been inspired by the 1975 meeting at the Detroit Institute of Art proposed and supported by Jim Henson. That event also had the purpose of getting puppeteers to dream about the future of their art and then to bring those dreams into being.

That was the question put to us by Vince Anthony as the conference began: What do you want the field of puppetry to look like ten years from now, in the year 2000? As a way of organizing our thoughts and keeping us on track, he had engaged the services of Greg Bourne, Co-Director of the Southeast Negotiation Network at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Each attendee had written a paper on some aspect of puppetry in advance of the conference: festivals, conferences, seminars, training, centers, puppetry in education, internships, funding, publications and collections. These served as a starting point for discussions of actual events and programs, and then what concrete steps would be taken in order to realize them.

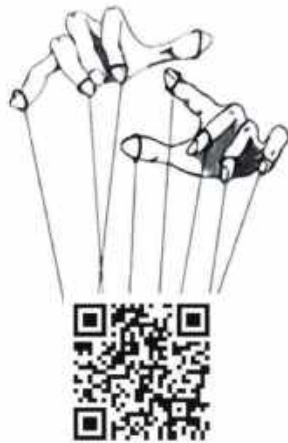
Attendees, in addition to the aforementioned Anthony and Staub, included Leslee Asch (Henson Foundation), Joyce Berty (P of A president), Janet Bradley (Tears of Joy), Mary Churchill (Puppet Showplace), Donald Devet (UNIMA-USA president), Jane Henson, Allelu Kurten (UNIMA-USA general secretary), George Latshaw (The Puppetry Journal editor), Michael Malkin (California Polytechnic U., Chairman, Dept. of Theater), Joann Siegrist, (West Virginia U., theater professor), Steve Whitmire (Henson Productions) and your *PI* editor and designer, Andrew and Bonnie Periale.

Wisely, I think, all the topic areas are what we might call "service to the field" rather than the art of it. After all, if we can train the puppeteer, fund the puppeteer, make

available opportunities for her to perform and commune with other puppeteers, then the art should take care of itself. Probably the best result of the conference was that a bunch of folks devoted to puppetry were able to come together and talk about the future. There were tangible results—Hands Across the Sea, a sort of foreign exchange program for puppet companies. It is also where Bonnie and I first proposed the idea of a puppetry magazine that would go out beyond the membership of the organization. You are reading it now. Other developments were beyond our ability to predict: YouTube videos, puppetry communities on Facebook and other social media, the Puppet Slam Network...

Futurism II was held the following summer (1991) at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, CT. Jane Henson hosted the event, which was part of the first National Puppetry Conference there, led by Richard Termine and George Latshaw. Many of the participants returned from Futurism I, a group augmented by Eric Bass, Bobbi Nidzgorski, Roman Paska and Richard Termine. The reports for Futurism I and II were made available to anyone for \$10, and they provide an interesting snapshot of the puppetry during that era. With the National Puppetry Conference 25 years old now and *Puppetry International* magazine on issue #37, it is clear that some dreams do come true.

*- Andrew C. Periale*



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Be sure to check out the additional material on the UNIMA-USA website.

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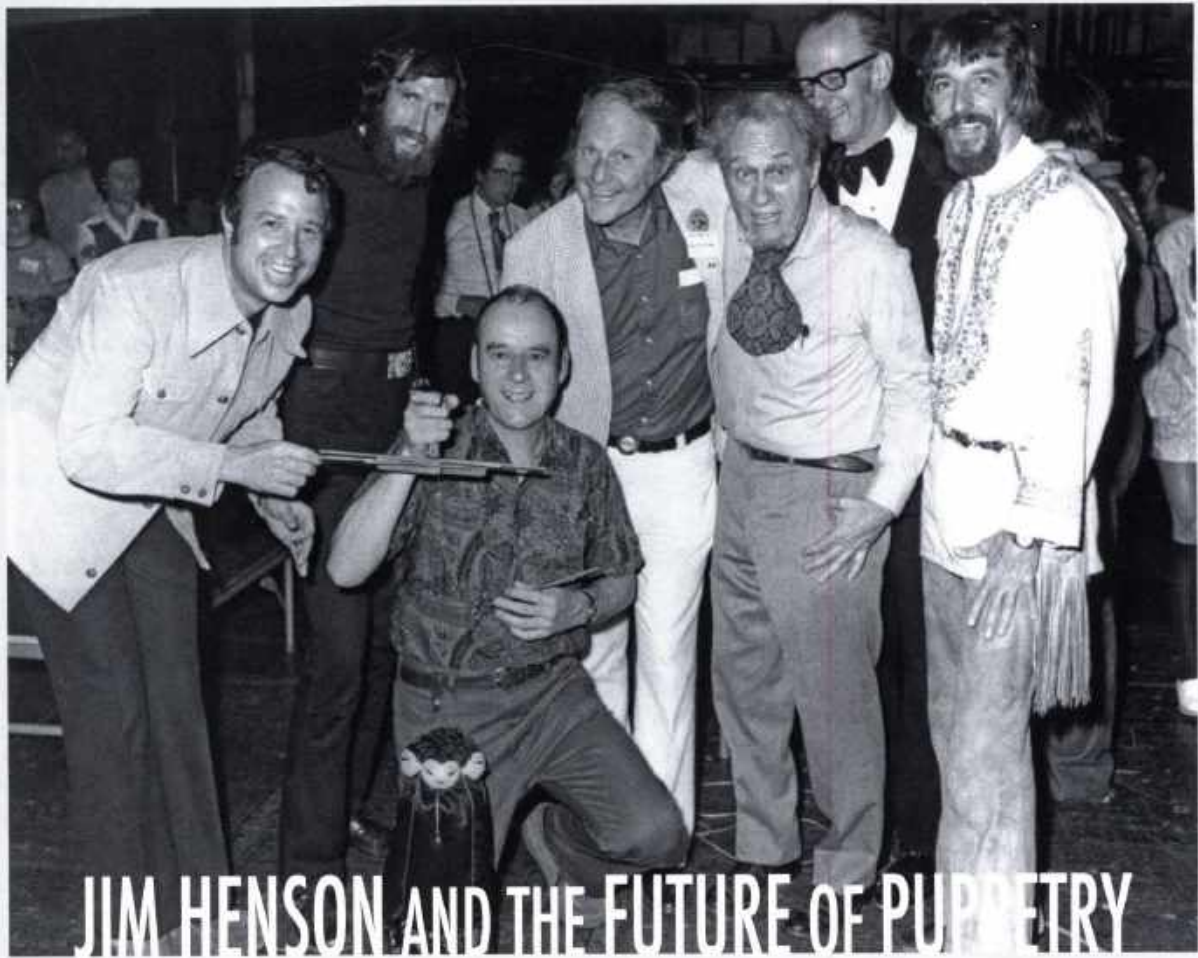
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by Cheryl Henson

The Futurism Conference was about the future of puppetry and there is no question that my father cared about the future of puppetry. He was always interested in the next new thing—ideas, techniques, technology, new performers, new directions. But he also knew that at the core of all good puppetry are two basic and essential elements—a human hand and a human heart. The human hand—the most extraordinary of tools. The human heart—a deep and endless pool of emotion. The manipulation of the puppet, by the performer's hand, brings it to life, but it is the performer's heart that gives it a soul and connects the puppet to its story. The act of bringing a puppet to life is a generous act. It takes focus and skill and a kind of empathy that verges on love to create the illusion of life.

Puppetry has existed throughout human history and will continue to exist. Why then do we worry about the future of puppetry?

Will technology replace the human behind the puppet? Will audiences continue to come to see live puppet theater? How can puppeteers be better advocates for their art? These are some of the questions that we ask ourselves.

The illusion of life alone does not engage an audience for long. Character, story, design; sound, lights, music, voices; humor, wit, language; emotion, message, meaning; it takes so many things to

make a good show. Even then, why should an audience want to spend time in the creative imagination of another? Good puppet theater needs to be good theater as well as good puppetry.

At times, even good puppetry gets dismissed by theater critics. Excellent puppetry is recognized on a subconscious level. It requires a suspension of disbelief that can be hard to access in tandem with critical thinking. Too often puppetry is still thought of as only children's entertainment. We believe that audiences and critics need to see more good work. If they are exposed to more and better puppet theater, theater that touches them on a personal level, then they will come to embrace puppetry as an art form.

Why does it matter? It matters to us. We make it matter. We must be advocates for puppetry. That was my father's message to other puppeteers. Respect your craft, respect your art. Puppeteers should take puppetry seriously as a profession and as an art form. He said this with a light touch, a sense of humor and a smile. Then he worked hard to do his part in making it happen.

Jim was president of Puppeteers of America from 1962-63 when he was only 26. He campaigned to open a chapter of UNIMA here in the US. He served as president of UNIMA-USA from its inception in 1966 through 1980, officially incorporating the entity

# PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

in 1979. Together with Nancy Staub and others, he brought the 1980 UNIMA festival to Washington, D.C. and underwrote many of the costs to be sure that it was a spectacular event. In 1982, he set up the Jim Henson Foundation to support American puppeteers working in their own unique styles. In 1984, he produced a series of one-hour television specials called "Jim Henson Presents," each of which featured six of the best individual puppeteers of his time. My father attended puppet festivals and conferences. He stayed in touch with performers around the world. He worked to build this community and to bring attention to this art form.

Jim died only a few weeks before the Futurism Conference took place in 1990. He was very busy at the time. He had many projects in the works and business issues to attend to. He was stretched thin, but I am sure that he would have loved to be there. In the final report for the 1990 Futurism conference, Nancy Staub writes about Jim's leadership and the origins of the conference:

Envisioning the future is essential to success. In 1975, Jim Henson, President of UNIMA-USA, invited puppeteers to meet, without their puppets, at the Detroit Institute of Arts to share their dreams and make plans to realize some small part of them. About 50 people spent a weekend together that generated a surge of activities including the 1980 World Puppetry Festival, the national touring exhibition "Puppets: Art and Entertainment," and the PBS special "Here Come the Puppets." UNIMA Citations of Excellence were established to offer recognition to puppetry artists and the Puppeteers of America Endowment Fund and the Henson Foundation to give financial support. Jim Henson enthusiastically endorsed this new conference and intended to take part.

Sometimes it is important to create space to think clearly about where you want to go. To get out from the rush and the crush of producing the next show, covering overhead, meeting the next deadline; out from the pressure to perform, to entertain, to be a puppeteer; out from day to day life to take a broader view and imagine where you want to see things go. That bird's eye view, that broader perspective, *that* is what Jim was looking for and encouraged others to find. He would have enjoyed the dialogue.

It was my mother who attended the conference that year. Nancy writes:

Jane Henson set the tone of the meeting, describing the overwhelming response to Jim's death. Thousands upon thousands of letters from all over the world are pouring in expressing a profound sense of loss and love. A tribute to Jim Henson, puppeteer, was even read into the

Congressional Record of the United States of America.

Jim always wanted to make a difference on earth with his creations, and he surely did.

My mother had long had a love for puppetry and for young puppeteers. She never lost her spark for humor and creative thinking. My mother and father founded the Muppets together. They were performing partners for years before they were married, designing and building the puppets as a team. Her humor was gutsy and anarchic. She was an excellent artist with a hearty laugh. My parents balanced each other well, and for many years they were a good team. After they separated, my mother's interest in puppetry never waned. She continued to attend festivals and conferences, to train new Muppet performers and to look out for emerging talent. She was on the board of the Henson Foundation with us, reviewing and selecting grant recipients. She was very much involved in the creation of the National Puppetry Conference at the O'Neill Theater Center, which began the same summer as the Futurism conference. Keeping puppetry at the O'Neill Center was important to my mother. Creating a safe space for experimentation and the development of new work, a space that both nurtured and challenged puppeteers to push themselves as artists, was what she wanted to be a part of.



MARGO ROSE GIVES HOWDY A SEAT ON JANE HENSON  
PHOTO: RICHARD TERMINE

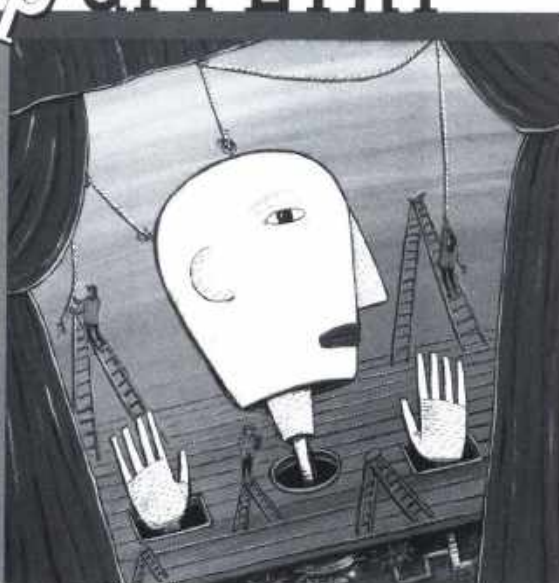
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special. The majority of the shows we presented were for adult audiences because we wanted this art form to be taken seriously as being for adults. Both Nancy and Leslee actively participated in the Futurism conference and were a direct link between the thinking of the conference and the goals of our festival.

Jim's vision for the future of puppetry lives on in the work of The Jim Henson Foundation, The Jim Henson Company and The Jim Henson Legacy. The Foundation, of which I am the President, continues to support the development of innovative, contemporary puppet theater. Since 1982, we have made over 700 grants to support the work of more than 300 artists. The Jim Henson Company continues to honor Jim's love of puppetry. His fascination with technology led to the Henson Digital Puppetry Studio, which captures a puppeteer's hand and body movements and translates them to a computer-generated character, turning puppetry into animation. The Jim Henson Legacy is dedicated to bringing Jim's work to a larger audience through screenings, exhibitions and talks. At the end of 2015, we expect to celebrate the culmination of The Legacy's work with the opening of permanent exhibitions at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta and the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, New York, followed by a significant exhibit at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution in 2017. We are thrilled to know that Jim's work will live on through these exhibitions, through new productions by The Jim Henson Company and through the artist grants given by The Jim Henson Foundation. In addition, my mother's love of the art continues to be celebrated at the National Puppetry Conference at the O'Neill Theater Center including the dedication of the Henson Rehearsal Hall and the launching of an annual Henson Residency for a new work of puppet theater.

My father's vision lives on in so many ways. In our family, it lives in my sister Heather's IBEX performances, the Puppet Slam Network and Hand Made Puppet Dreams, in my brother Brian's improv puppet show "Puppet Up—Uncensored" and so many of his productions, and in my sister Lisa's leadership of The Jim Henson Company and support of all our work. (We mourn the passing of my brother John who was a puppeteer, artist, and father himself) My father's vision lives on in the dedication of his long time collaborator Bonnie Erickson to the Legacy exhibitions and of Karen Falk to the Henson Archives. It lives on in the Muppet performers and builders who keep his characters alive and in the Foundation grant recipients creating their own unique styles of puppetry. It lives on at the Center for Puppetry Arts where so many of his puppets will be exhibited and where new puppet theater is being made every day. It lives in everyone who comes together to make UNIMA-USA a vibrant community, because UNIMA mattered to my father.

My father's vision for the future of puppetry is alive and well in the work of so many people because it was never just his vision; it was always a vision that he shared.

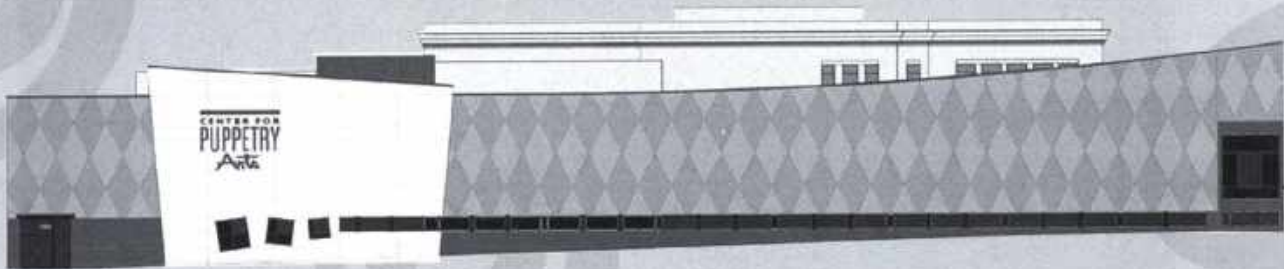
Cheryl Henson has been the president of the Henson Foundation since 1992.

I grew up going to puppet festivals with my parents, visiting puppeteers and watching shows. Although I built puppets in the Henson workshop and did a bit of puppeteering, I was always more interested in the work of others than I was in creating work of my own. It was at a Puppeteers of America Festival at M.I.T. in 1989 that I first saw Enno Podelhl perform his show *Hermann*. It was a small, one-man show about a man, a simple man, an everyman, who loves but is not able to fight for his love. A man with sorrow and regrets. He cooks a real egg. He sees his love sent to the gas chamber. Enno remembers the first time that he puppeteered. He was in a carriage as his mother took him out looking for food in the rubble of their bombed out city. A soldier took pity on them and gave her a rabbit he had shot. She hid it in the carriage with him. He took its head in one hand and its paw in the other and moved them as though it was alive. The soft warm fur in his fingers. The rabbit came to life in his hands and Enno was a puppeteer. (Then they went home and ate it.) I wanted more people to see *Hermann*. I started talking to my father about producing a festival in New York to showcase the best puppet theater in the world. It turned out that Nancy Staub had also approached him with a similar concept, and so the Henson International Festival was born.

Although my father passed away the year after the M.I.T. festival, I worked with Nancy and then with Leslee Asch to bring five festivals to New York. Together, we brought over 120 companies from 31 countries to 13 stages over a decade. We believed that we could change the perception of puppetry by showing the world what great puppetry is. We engaged theater presenters as well as critics. We held symposium sessions on Puppet Theater, engaged funders and critics alike in what made puppet theater



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This interactive exhibition will follow Henson's prolific imagination chronologically, transporting visitors through environments that typified the puppeteer's world such as Jim's Office and the Television Studio.

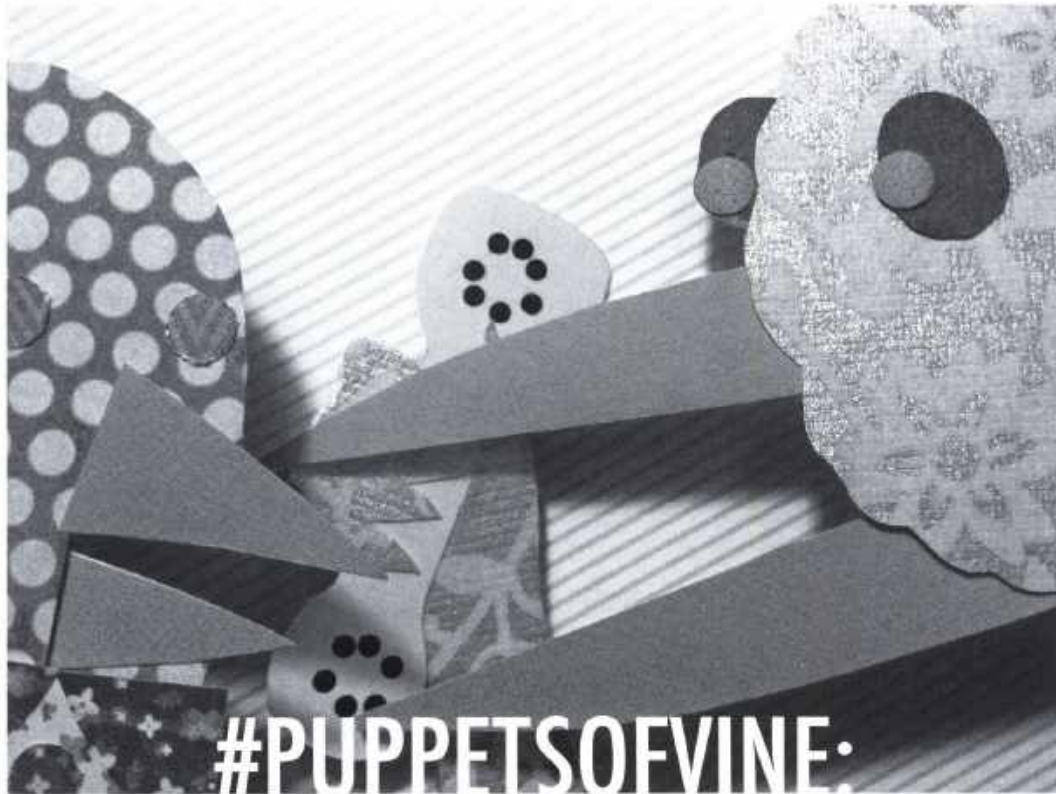


## The Global Collection

The Global Collection will celebrate puppetry traditions in major cultures from around the world. Highlighting the history of puppetry in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, this Collection will also demonstrate the use of the art form as a teaching and communication tool.

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## *Puppets in Social Media*

by Ken Pfeiste

I always knew I wanted to do a puppet show online but I had no practical experience. I needed to learn how to make puppets and perform with them. I also needed to learn how to light them and how to frame them on camera. What I needed was a place to fail.

I had heard about a new social network platform called Vine. It was like Twitter meets YouTube. People used their cell phones to make short six-second looping videos. I watched some compilations and found that it had an appealing immediacy. It reminded me of Jim Henson's Wilkins Coffee commercials which were only five seconds long and were designed for maximum impact.

As soon as I joined Vine, the first thing I did was look up other puppets. The hashtag that led me to them was #puppetsofVine. I found a motley crew of mostly amateur performers using both custom and store-bought puppets. The most polished was Corduroy Cat. He is a small pink hand puppet whose family friendly humor stood out due to the quality of both his construction and his performance. He is performed by Frankie Cordero, a professional puppeteer in New York City who has worked with the Muppets and toured with *Walking with Dinosaurs*.

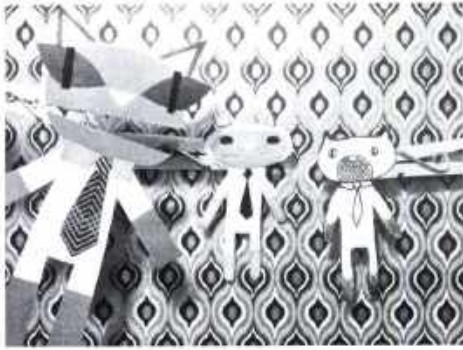
Before I joined Vine, I had intended to use hand puppets, but I started playing around with the idea of a paper puppet that talked, using a clothespin to move its mouth. I drew a cat and an owl, cut their heads along the lines of their mouths and glued them to old clothespins. It was crude but it worked. My wife Molly agreed to portray the owl, and Billy and Lorelai were born.

In my first Vines, I started testing how to move the characters. Over the next year, I started to find my voice and refine the character designs. I bought some card stock and started making puppets out of cut paper instead of drawing them; I added patterns, made the eyes bigger and experimented with different sized clothespins. I have found paper to be the perfect medium for my ideas— it's cheap and I can create a new puppet in about an hour. The characters grew and shrank until I ended up with puppets that looked good on the screen of a cell phone.

The unique time constraints of Vine have shaped my performance style. I've learned how to condense my ideas. It's not just faster but I've had to learn how to edit out every inessential word or pause, which has honed my comic timing. With the luxury of obscurity, I have been able to let the characters grow organically. Because of the low stakes of making a vine and a self imposed mandate to post something every day, I was able to try every idea. I sang songs, danced to records, told jokes, learned stop motion animation and people's reactions told me what worked and what didn't.

It's difficult to tell stories six seconds at a time. After a couple of months experimenting with this, I decided it's not worth it to do a story on Vine and I expanded to YouTube for longer stories. I now try to keep my vines as self-contained as possible.

Of course, the whole point of social media is to interact with other people. There are many ways to do this. You can remake



a vine or make a vine reacting or adding to somebody else's vine but the easiest way is to just leave a comment. This sort of interaction elevates Vine from a stage to a community. The most fun way to interact is to create or add on to a hashtag. I've found this to be a good way to sharpen my improv skills and, as a puppet, I have the ability to say things other people can't.

The most exciting night I have ever had on Vine is with the hashtag #PuppetRapBattle. Rap battles were the meme of the moment, so Corduroy Cat and I decided to start an all puppet version. It was one of the most popular things I ever did. I really only expected puppet Viners to participate but I was thrilled when people started to dig their old puppets out to challenge us. The hashtag trended and I felt the rush of performing, like I was on stage. After a couple of hours and several battles, I decided to forfeit and made it look like the clothespin controlling Billy's head fell apart.

It sounds strange but puppets are accepted as full members in the community. I think this is because using a puppet on Vine is just a heightened version of the selective self-presentation that everybody does on social media. So far, my time on Vine has been an invaluable learning experience. It's a great place to woodshed an idea. I've developed an internal six-second timer. It's been an excellent networking tool, and I think Vine is an ideal place to begin something bigger.

Ken Pfeiste lives in St. Louis with his wife and two cats. You can find his vines at [vine.co/in.Harmonium](http://vine.co/in.Harmonium) and his longer works are at [youtube.com/user/inharmonium](http://youtube.com/user/inharmonium).



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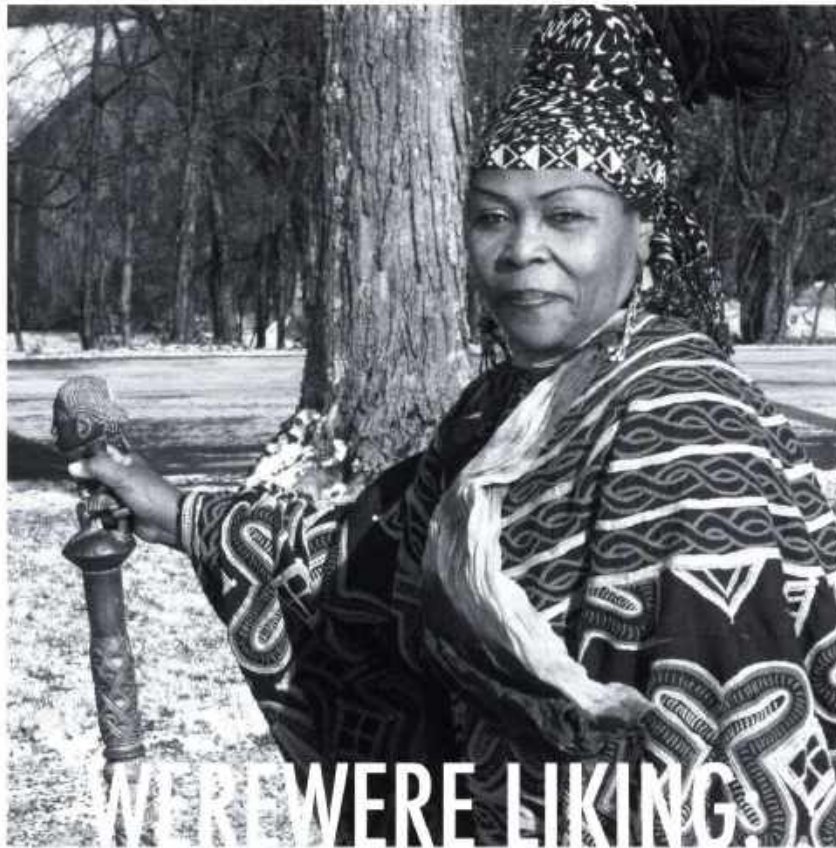
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## *Claiming Puppetry Traditions for Africa's Future*

by Heather Jeanne Denyer

Werewere Liking's performances always begin with a dance: Participants spin around and around to persistent drum beating, perpetuating the atmosphere of a ritual. This is the *Hidjingo*, a Bassa healing ritual. Through this process, everyone present, performer or spectator, becomes an initiate of the Ki-Yi M'bock theatre, and a spiritual connection is made between Africa's past and present. In "Sogolon, the Pan-African Musical, or, the Ordinary Life of an Epic Woman," the past is represented by a feminist interpretation of a Malian epic and the adoption of traditional male *Sogo bò* puppetry for female and child performers.<sup>1</sup>

### Ki-Yi M'bock

Cameroonian auteur-director Werewere Liking was born in 1950 and indoctrinated into the Bassa rituals by her grandparents as a teenager. A self-taught writer, Liking

moved to Ivory Coast where she founded a cooperative artist community in 1985. She gave it the Bassa name, Ki-Yi M'bock, which means "ultimate universal knowledge."<sup>2</sup> Thirty years later, the community has expanded to over eighty members, including a number of women and children taken in from the streets of Abidjan. A self-sufficient community operating without state funding, Ki-Yi has maintained itself by selling homemade crafts and music recordings, as well as tickets to their performances at home and on international tours.

As the village head, Liking is devoted to educating the next generation in the traditions of the continent. As she explains, "In Africa today, people think that the only way to create comes from the West... We still have a lot, a lot of things to share with humanity."<sup>3</sup> She sees an understanding of African traditions as essential to reclaiming the spiritual significance in them that was

lost during colonization. The understanding of past beliefs and events enables young people to address the social issues of today and to work towards a better tomorrow: "The children who live here and who are given this teaching are the stars who, when the time comes, will transmit this knowledge to others."<sup>4</sup> Rather than simply working to keep fading traditions alive, Ki-Yi's purpose is to carry the knowledge of the past to the future. To this end, the theatre they produce adopts traditions from across the continent to produce a "Pan-African" theatre geared towards inspiring social change in the audience, working towards utopia. Liking refuses to simply pass on cultural standards; instead, she re-envisioned them. We can see this in her play "Sogolon," which uses Liking's variation of Malian-inspired puppets to retell the history of the legendary king, Sunjata Kéita from a woman's perspective, as it places the queen at the center of the narrative.

WEREWERE LIKING PHOTO: JOSEPH MWANTUALI

## Sogo Bò Puppetry

In "Sogolon," human performers interact with the full-body puppets based on the Malian *Sogo bò*. This puppetry was developed by the Bambara people hundreds of years ago. The name "Sogo bò" means "the animals come forth," and indeed, a performance entails just that.<sup>5</sup> Young men create the puppets of water buffalo, hyenas, lions, snakes, birds, and antelopes, and perform to the accompaniment of drum music and a female chorus. There is a spiritual connection prevalent in performances, connecting humans to nature. The performers *become* the animals as they are completely encapsulated by the costumes. Their entire bodies from head to foot are covered in a cloth so that their appendages meld with their torsos as the body of their puppet. This is most clear in the snake puppets. More complex animals have large heads made of wood that are manipulated with long rods by the hidden puppeteer. Human puppets also have arm extensions, because the Bambara consider the hands and heads as the most important parts of a man. The heads are perched on top of a frame that sits atop the performers' shoulders, allotting them height and flexibility to move the hands or turn the head. The Ki-Yi puppets in "Sogolon" resemble traditional puppets, although the heads are made of papier-mâché instead of wood. The only other variation that Liking adds to the traditional design is the addition of slits in the body cloth to allow the puppeteers to see better.

Liking researched and wrote about Sogo Bò in Mali in the 1980s. She draws on the force of puppets for performances because she believes that "the ancient African arts affirmed themselves, that is they had something very strong, which could be transmitted."<sup>6</sup> Liking explains this in her book, *The Puppets of Mali*: "Animists believe in the existence of entities which constitute the principles of animation of everything that exists: things, animals, humans, spirits, etc. The essence of these entities... is in contact with the primal source of all vital energy."<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the carved, painted heads symbolize the interconnected spirituality of all life. By blending the performance of live actors and the puppets, Liking creates a stage world rife with spiritual potential.

Because the puppet performers encapsulate the spirit of living beings, it is forbidden for the puppeteer to be visible. In the case of the full-body puppets, the materiality of the performer is denied. For Liking, this is key to the spiritual nature at play in performance. She elaborates that there is such a strong tie between the puppet and the performer that we find it impossible to answer the questions, "Who is the creator, who is the creature? Who is manipulated, who manipulates? Who is flesh? Who is spirit? Who is the initiator and who the initiated?"<sup>8</sup> To this end, the puppets retain their cultural significance even though they have been removed from their original context and are performed by the uninitiated, women and children. Sogo bò performances traditionally reinforced a sense of community among the Bambara people. Liking's theatre uses puppetry in developing a Pan-African community as an "operational theatre" that she considers the "the aesthetics of necessity" for re-shaping the future.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Ki-Yi's theatre does not betray traditional influences but breathes new life into them.



BUFFALO PUPPET  
PHOTO: ROGER TANG

## “Sogolon, the Pan-African Puppet Play”

“Sogolon” tells the story of a legendary hunch-backed queen, considered “the ugliest woman ever to live,” who gives birth to Sunjata Kēita, the future founder of the Malian empire.<sup>10</sup> Liking subverts tradition in her version of the epic to focus on Sogolon, rather than her son. The puppet of Sogolon reflects a further subversion, for in the *Sogo bô* tradition, the dominant female character (played by a male performer in a body puppet) is Yayoruba, who is “the most beautiful woman.”<sup>11</sup> She represents the male ideal of a woman with large breasts and wide hips, who is a good, submissive wife. The puppet of Sogolon resembles her predecessor physically, with the added attributes of horns on her head and a hump back. Unlike Yayoruba, however, Sogolon possesses mystic powers of healing and is therefore, more than an ordinary woman. When he banishes her for bearing a crippled son, Sogolon acts independently of her husband, curing her son’s handicap.

Significantly, in Bassa ritual, of which Liking is herself a priestess, women possess the power to heal. The implied significance for “Sogolon,” then, is the need for African people to heal themselves from centuries of suffering. Sylvie Chalaye claims that “this theatre is an initiation to overcome the traumatic experience” of centuries of oppression.<sup>12</sup> Liking uses puppetry in developing a Pan-African community in an “operational theatre,” which Liking considers the “the aesthetics of necessity.”<sup>13</sup> Ki-Yi’s Pan-African theatre does not betray traditional influences, but breathes new life into them instead. The choice of the heroine resonates with Liking’s ambitions for changing tomorrow’s society by re-considering the roles that women have historically played. For one thing, she and other women of the Ki-Yi troupe create and manipulate puppets, which is traditionally only done by men. Furthermore, Liking rereads history to place the emphasis on the wife who saves the king’s land from destruction, the mother who cures her son who will become emperor. Even more importantly, as her son brings a peaceful rule to the world, Sogolon, as his mother, brings about the opportunity to heal the world. She is the “eternal woman who leads the world to the birth of a renaissance,”<sup>14</sup> a message that is repeated over and over by the chorus. Liking uses the example of the legendary queen to demonstrate her belief that “Africa will only move forward when her women choose the path on which their children will walk.”<sup>15</sup> As Valerie Orlando explains, “It is through this ‘going-back to,’ ‘seeking out,’ and ‘re-identifying with’ the ancient, while drawing new insight into the modern feminine,” that Werewere Liking most formidably writes a new role for the African feminine character.<sup>16</sup>

We can consider Liking’s use of puppetry as what Matthew Cohen considers “post-traditional,” for she appropriates the *Sogo bô* for a modern critical performance. In this style of puppet theatre, “productions usually operate outside traditionally mandated time and space, tend to be highly reflexive, and are often politically aware, even subversive.”<sup>17</sup> In the production of “Sogolon,” Liking uses puppets to reflect one of the political conundrum she observes in Africa. She explains how those in positions of power today are “always inclined towards dictatorship, especially in the context of the poorer countries,” while the freedom of the individual is reduced to the point where he or she resembles “a non-articulated puppet.”<sup>18</sup> Sogolon not only symbolizes the unacknowledged role that women have historically played in altering the future, but the puppet reflects the possibility for audience members to invigorate themselves as if animating a puppet, to take action to change the way things are for a better future.

In this way, Liking adds a political edge to the traditions she adopts. Her use of the puppets is performative, changing how the audience understands the *Sogo bô* tradition and the epic story of Sogolon. The Ki-Yi production subverts both false expectations of an “authentic” African puppetry in traditional *Sogo bô* or of western-style realistic text-based theatre. While local puppet performances have become a rare occasion, practiced only by a few male artists in Mali, Liking’s work honors the tradition through the puppet performance, while adapting it as a modern form that carries over the tradition from the past to the future.

Heather Jeanne Denyer is a PhD Candidate in Theatre at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, working on a dissertation entitled “Challenging Gender Epistemologies through New Francophone Theatre in West Africa.” She is a dramaturg, translator, and a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, (Cameroon 2003-2005).

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BIRD PUPPETS  
PHOTO: ROGER TANG

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The play was co-written with the late playwright Zadi Zaourou and produced in Ki-Yi M'bock in 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> Liking quoted in Mielly b, her translation.
- <sup>3</sup> Liking quoted in Konate, my translation.
- <sup>4</sup> Liking quoted in Mielly b, her translation.
- <sup>5</sup> Arnoldi, 208.
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Orlando, 161, her translation.
- <sup>7</sup> Liking 1987, 31, my translation.
- <sup>8</sup> Liking 1987, 56, my translation.
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted in Mielly b, 33, her translation.
- <sup>10</sup> The character of Sogolon is thus described in the play.
- <sup>11</sup> Arnoldi, 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Chalaye, 68, my translation.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Mielly b, 33, her translation.
- <sup>14</sup> Quote from the play, my translation.
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted in D'Almeida, 137, her translation.
- <sup>16</sup> Orlando, 161.
- <sup>17</sup> Cohen, 178.
- <sup>18</sup> Liking 1987, 56, my translation.

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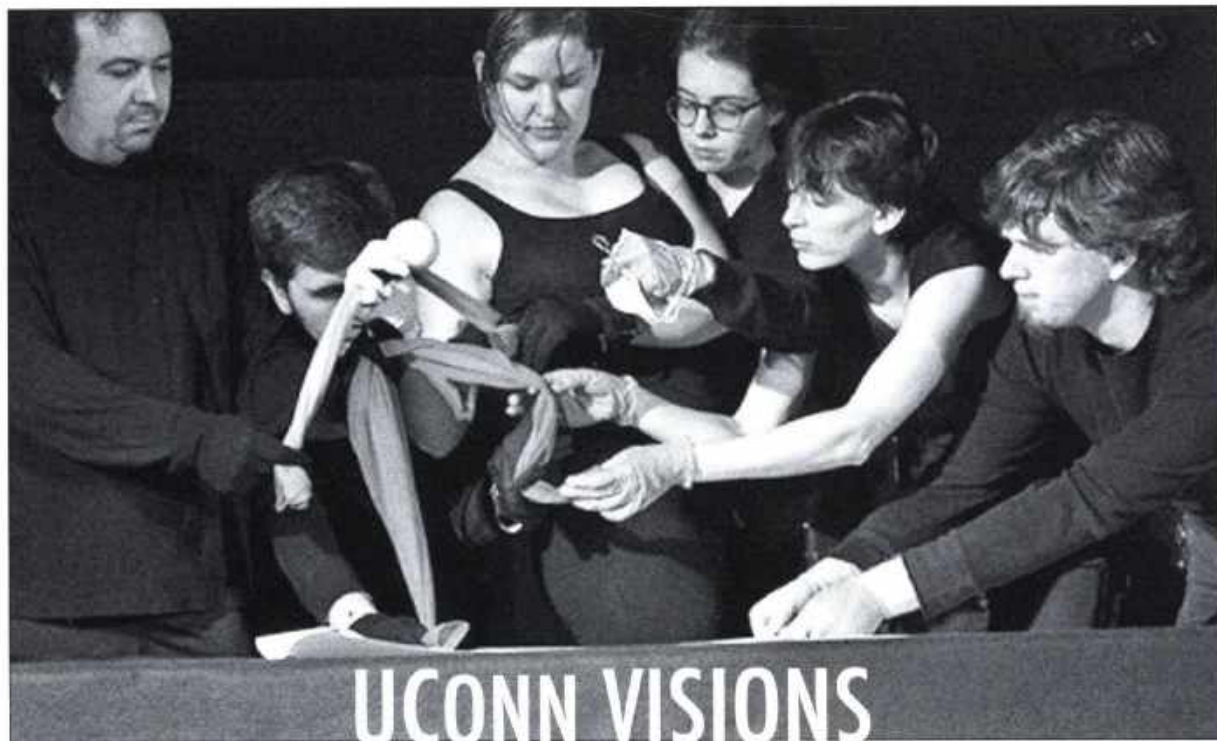
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by Robert Blush

Exciting developments are afoot at the University of Connecticut Puppet Arts Program, where a promising, collective vision for the future of American Puppet Arts has been illuminated over a series of conversations with the faculty. I recently called on Bart P. Roccoberton, Jr. (UConn Puppet Arts Program Director), Margarita Blush (UConn Puppet Arts Program Asst. Prof. in Performance and Directing), and John Bell (Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry Director) to speculate on the future of the field, and, while each voiced different emphases and nuance, the three sets of responses were surprisingly similar. Each is optimistic and excited about the outlook of the field, and their responses can be separated into three categories: audience growth, developing performers, and theoretical advancement, all of which will lead to a more defined and noticeable professionalism in the field. What I have found equally interesting to this theoretical peek into the future is the current mandate of the UConn Puppet Arts Program: progress designed to realize the evolving demands of the profession.

Puppet theatre audiences are growing. The use of puppets in mainstream commercial theatre as well as festivals, which have brought diverse puppet programming to wider audiences, have begun to challenge what John Bell calls our “contemporary puppet paradigm,” i.e., “— that puppetry is dying out.” Blush finds that the current devised theatre movement is bursting with creative artists that call on elements of puppetry in their work, placing performing objects and puppets in non-conforming contexts in

front of more traditional audiences. Roccoberton points to a growing trend in the arts where puppetry is fused with other forms, “finding new expressions,” and giving focus to a theatrical form that is far from dying out. In addition, the Puppet Arts Program is receiving record numbers of requests from across the educational, artistic, and community spectra for creative collaboration. The bottom line is that the value of puppet arts is growing for our audiences – “the popularity of puppets is growing” (Roccoberton) – and extrapolating this trend into the future is highly promising for the field.

There are two contemporary trends among puppet artists that are representative of the progress we will see in the long term. The performer/puppet and performer/audience relationships are evolving in America; more and more we see a new balance that values the performer as well as the puppet. What became clear in the conversations with Roccoberton and Blush is that the performer of the future understands the importance of her own physical presence and its relationship to the puppet. She could be just as captivating and engaging without her puppet as she is with it. For some, this may seem like a break from tradition, but that is not necessarily so. The implication is that the nature of this evolution is rooted in our need for compelling performance that engages a wide audience. What we are also seeing is an increasing number of young artists who are empowered to create performance with their own artistic voice. Through expression that is often imaginative, immediate, and relevant, these artists are indoctrinating new audiences to the profound virtues of their expression and of the puppet arts.



John Bell anticipates growing dialogue on the nature of the puppet arts. As an art form that is often the proliferation of many forms, the field is searching for greater understanding beyond the limited public perception that has sometimes cursed its image. By further advancing our theoretical and practical understanding of the field, its performance elements, and its social and political significance, we will be enhancing our own professionalism and training our audiences at the same time. Bell's suggestion that this form lies at the crossroads of numerous disciplines is an intriguing notion. Much of the theoretical dialogue is already happening for its discrete elements, and I believe that Bell sees the need for dedicated puppet arts scholars to contribute and synthesize these dialogues into conversations that are more immediate and accessible to our field of practitioners.

The mid 20<sup>th</sup> century move towards professionalism in the puppet arts in East Europe had significant impact on the growth and success of puppet theatre in that region, according to Blush, who hails from Bulgaria. She senses a movement in that direction for American puppet theatre, but rather than a dogmatic and institutional-imposed structure, she sees an organic self-organizing based on tremendous creativity, inclusivity, and a disciplined work ethos. Organizations like Puppeteers of America and UNIMA play no small part in this movement, and for Blush, continued disciplined organization

will ultimately mean wider exposure and larger audiences for puppet theatre. In the same vein of thought, it appears that each of the aforementioned visions of the future contains significant components that will further professionalism in the field: The rise of the puppet arts among non-traditional audiences, the developing and empowered performer, and the increase in theoretical knowledge will raise the collective confidence in the American puppet world.

Next year will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Puppet Arts Program at the University of Connecticut, begun by Frank Ballard, and the program is experiencing unprecedented support from all levels of the academic and institutional management. This support is evidenced by the addition of two new faculty members, and three positions for technical and administrative support. The highly visible relocation of the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry also bespeaks both university and community endorsement. The master plan of the program includes the addition of still more specialized faculty to help answer the needs of the field – but as John Bell says, “We need to get good at having this many” before the next expansion happens.

Since its inception, the program has focused on what Roccoberon calls “the nuts and bolts... Our builders know how to perform, our performers know how to build, and they WORK when they leave here,” and he is adamant about maintaining this core foundation to the program. However, a major curriculum adjustment is in the works that will include the opportunity for students to track into one of three specialties: Performance and Directing, Building and Design, and Puppet Arts Studies. Bell has already added courses in theory and history, and Blush's new courses in performance and directing are having visible effects on the students' education. Renewed focus on the empowerment of young artists to create with their own artistic voice also appears to be high on the list of the program's priorities. The support and expansion of the program has clearly had an invigorating effect on Department of Dramatic Arts and the School of Fine Arts, as well as the community and the students and teachers in the program. What remains is the careful and thoughtful pedagogical work that will bring another 50 years of progress.

Robert Blush is married to Margarita, mentioned in this article, and is her most sincere critic. He is a performer, director, teacher, and scholar—currently completing his Ph.D. at CU Boulder with a dissertation on Auteur Theatre in Post-Totalitarian Bulgaria.



JOHN BELL, BALLARD INSTITUTE AND MUSEUM OF PUPPETRY DIRECTOR, LEFT

MARGARITA BLUSH, UCONN PUPPET ARTS PROGRAM ASST. PROF. IN PERFORMANCE AND DIRECTING, ABOVE

BART P. ROCCOBERON, JR., UCONN PUPPET ARTS PROGRAM DIRECTOR, RIGHT

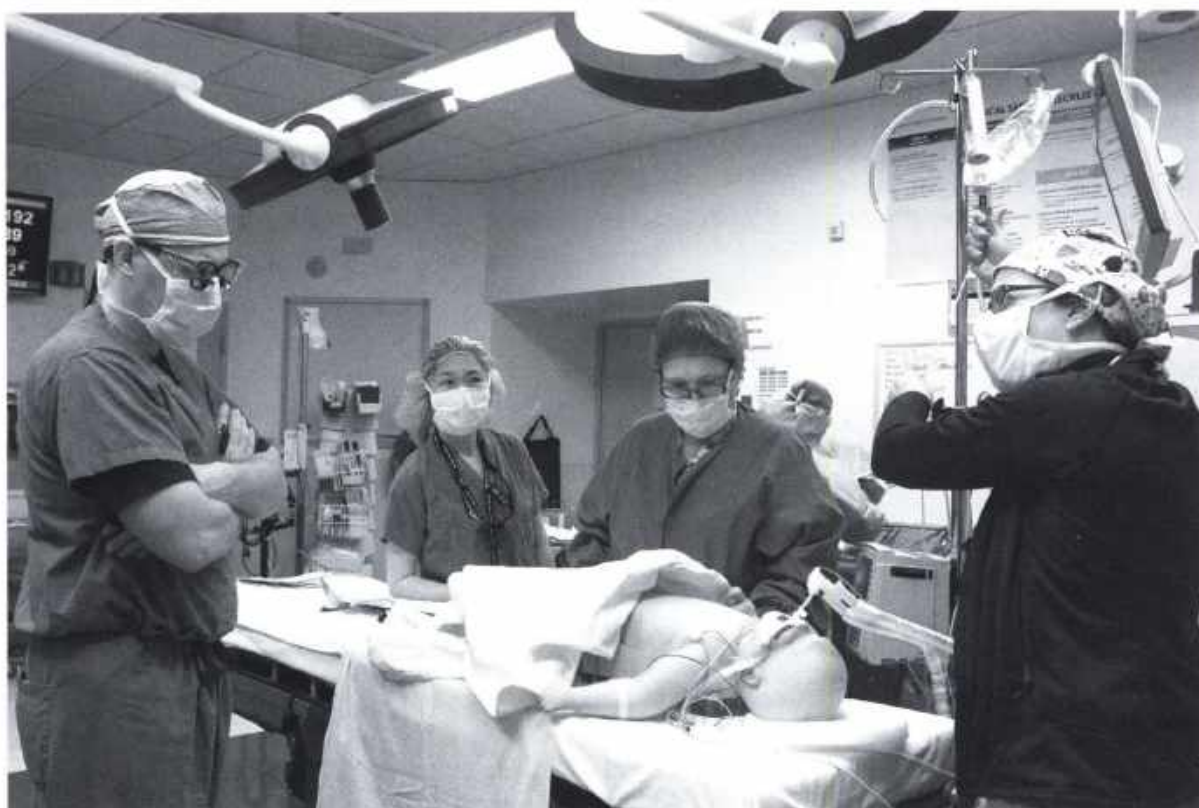


# Enhancing Medical Education with Puppetry Techniques

by Honey Goodenough

Early on a Wednesday morning, a team of doctors and nurses gather in the Emergency Department (ED) at Boston Children's Hospital (BCH). "My chest hurts, I can't breathe!" says a fifteen-year-old boy, who has been brought to the ED after a motocross injury. With patient monitors alarming and heightening urgency, the ED doctors and nurses gather around the patient. They check vital signs and administer oxygen to stabilize the patient. They diagnose this patient with a sternal fracture and cardiac tamponade, and suffering from shock. After the team performs pericardiocentesis in order to relieve pressure causing the chest pain, the patient says, "That's better," with a relaxed tone. Suddenly a voice from the back of the room calls out, "Okay, pause. We are going to bring down the curtain." And with that, the facilitator of the ED Trauma Team Training Course (often referred to as "Crisis Resource Management" (CRM)) brings the scenario to a close. The tension in the room melts away, the room becomes quiet, and the team of physicians and nurses relax. They reached the appropriate diagnosis and successfully treated the condition. At the center of the demonstration is a puppet-like human automaton specifically designed and dressed to replicate a motocross injury, complete with road rash, neck brace, and back board. Now that the goal of the training has been reached, they will debrief the training session to discuss details of the diagnosis, share medical information, and strengthen the team dynamic with the goal of improving patient care.

This scenario is an example of Medical Simulation, an experiential training method adapted out of the airline industry that has been rapidly expanding throughout medical education on an international scale. Over the past two decades, medical simulation has emerged as a highly successful form of training, and has been championed by programs such as The Simulator Program at BCH otherwise known as SIMPeds ([www.simpeds.org](http://www.simpeds.org)). BCH is recognized as a top children's hospital as reflected in their recent 2014-2015 #1 Best Children's Hospital ranking by *USNews and World Report*. Since 2001, under the direction of Dr. Peter Weinstock, SIMPeds has grown to serve from two to over ninety courses for more than twenty-seven BCH departments. Activities occur among four major service lines including skills/team training (SIMTrain), systems/environmental testing (SIMTest), cascading know-how among networks (SIMNetwork), and a dedicated SIMEngineering division. Many departments at BCH now require their physician staff to participate in procedural skills competency courses, and all new clinical spaces goes through simulation prior to admitting patients. SIMPeds has also built incredible international partnerships among twelve pediatric teaching hospitals in seven countries, each focused on the rapid launch of high quality simulation centers. In recent news, SIMPeds has received significant media attention for its unique approach, marrying simulation and rapid prototyping to develop anatomic 3D printed models derived from CT and MRI scans for use in surgical simulation and preparation regarding specific patient procedures.



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This scenario is an example of Medical Simulation, an experiential training method adapted out of the airline industry that has been rapidly expanding throughout medical education on an international scale. Over the past two decades, medical simulation has emerged as a program in hospitals and medical schools. The use of simulation in medical education has been shown to improve clinical skills, decision-making, and teamwork. Simulation is a safe and controlled environment where learners can practice and receive feedback on their performance. Simulation is a powerful tool for medical education and can be used to improve patient care. Simulation is a powerful tool for medical education and can be used to improve patient care. Simulation is a powerful tool for medical education and can be used to improve patient care.



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Medical Simulation is designed to train practitioners by recreating authentic medical situations using theatrical techniques and elements of puppetry to create a reality-based educational experience for medical professionals. These techniques include the use of actors, make-up crafts/moulage, silicone arts and painting, molding and casting techniques, 3D printing, costuming, and high fidelity mannequins/automatons called simulators. These simulators are puppet-like human patients that can imitate a variety of physiological conditions. The simulators, many of which are built directly within the in-house SIMPeds SIMEngineering Division, represent patients of various ages from premature infants to full grown adults. They vocalize, breathe with adjustable respiration rates, have pulses, demonstrate heart arrhythmias, and respond to defibrillation. These simulators can be administered IVs and fluids and be rigged to bleed or hemorrhage on cue. They allow professionals to practice basic procedures as well as complex operations, such as open-heart surgery.

As in most theatrical performances, total commitment is vital. The participants are asked to suspend disbelief and engage with the puppet-like mannequin as they would any patient. The physiological conditions are performed as true to reality as possible, so that the participants are able to fully invest in the educational process. Timing and transition of physiological changes can be critical to the lessons and commitment of the participants. The facilitator, a physician or nurse, acts as the director of the scenario by instructing the simulation specialist to puppeteer the vital signs of the mannequin in reaction to the treatments administered by the medical team. The simulation specialist performs the patient's vital signs, while vocalizing for the mannequin. These responses are a critical part of the diagnosis, indication of care, and determining levels of consciousness. During some sessions, professional actors play the part of concerned parents, asking questions with various levels of agitation, panic, or worry in order to expose healthcare professionals to the issues surrounding the treatment of young patients who will often be accompanied by concerned family members.



The future of medical education will most certainly include increasing collaborations between artists and engineers to develop even more realistic, relevant and engaging simulations across medicine. The Simulator Program at the Boston Children's Hospital is combining this know-how "in house," working at the intersection of the arts, stage production, and clinical medicine—with puppeteering skills forming its roots—to improve the training and support of medical professionals to offer more practice, safer delivery, and better care for kids, worldwide.

Honey Goodenough, in addition to being a puppeteer and Simulation Specialist, Boston Children's Hospital Simulator Program – SIMPeds, Boston, MA, is also on the Board of UNIMA-USA.



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## Where do I think puppets will go?

by Manuel Antonio Morán



process, as it has become more accessible to many more people because of new technology. In fact, anybody can create from their phone/tablet, which has given the field of puppetry on and off the stage a tremendous boost and presence.

However, with such advances, I feel that for the next ten to fifteen years, the tendency will be to go to the "craftsier" side; creators will yearn for things that are not electronic, and will yearn for the handmade "old" style. Even though the new ways are creative, artistic and are equally as valuable, people will value the craft of manual things, and puppeteers will value the return of manual crafting.

In other words, there will be a puppeteer renaissance, where puppet builders/artisans will no longer let the 3D printer do their handy work, nor will they allow their shadow puppets to be replaced with animation. They will feel the need to create and literally "hand-down" their craft to a younger generation.

I believe that for the past ten to fifteen years, puppets have been playing an important role in the American Theater. Currently, the use of puppets as a theatrical resource, on television, as well as in major events like the Super Bowl, proves that puppets have more of a presence on stage than ever before. Furthermore, animation and stop motion have also become integrated into the creative

As the Vice-President of UNIMA, I have had the opportunity of travelling around the world, and I have seen tremendous growth puppeteers experience from collaborating with other puppeteers from a variety of different countries. I believe that in the near future there will be more cross-cultural exchange. This is already evident during many International Festivals. Maintaining open communication is key. Today there is so much information out there, and everybody can have access to it, thus enabling this constant cultural/artistic exchange, which can only enrich the puppeteers' experience/work and, as a result, reshape the future of our field. I believe the improvement and openness in communication will only enhance exchange and strengthen our global partnerships as puppet practitioners.

To sum it all up in a few words, as an Artistic Director, I see puppetry headed to new horizons, where the combination of new technologies and the old ways will work together, where communities across the globe will communicate more, and the exchange of information and ideas will lead us into a future where puppetry will continue to have a profound impact on a personal level, as well as on a world stage.

Manuel Morán, Artistic Director, Teatro SEA, NY

## The future of the puppet is inevitable.

by Janie Geiser

We need these figures, these objects, these dolls, these intermediaries, these ciphers. Made of wood, ash, blood, plastic, cloth, resin, mud, paper, skin, dirt, light, or pixels, they are ancient, contemporary, and necessary.

Puppets are real. They are nothing but themselves. They ground us in their relationship to the material world, yet they move freely between life and non-life. Their breath comes from elsewhere, but they can leave us breathless.

Puppets are uncanny, confusing, durable, disposable, malleable, duplicitous, beautiful, ugly, scary, sublime. They say what we won't say and do what we can't do. They tell

truth to power, they make us laugh, they help us grieve, they embody our stories. They tell us things about ourselves that we forget to understand until we see it through them. We need them to do this.

When I started making performances with puppets and objects, I thought that this was an interesting digression, a phase in my art making. However, I've now spent decades making material performance and I have no interest in stopping. I am in awe of their latent power to evoke emotional states, suggest worlds, and make fun of us.

How will puppets survive into the future? Simply by being themselves.

Janie Geiser, Theater Faculty, Cal Arts



CLOUDED SULPHUR (DEATH IS A KNOT UNDONE)  
PHOTO: AMANDA SHANK



# HOW TOY THEATER SHAPES THE FUTURE

by Jessica Thebus

On a Monday morning, MFA students are coming into class. They are graduate directors and designers. They've been at acting rehearsals and technical rehearsals the night before, working on plays by Tennessee Williams, Sam Shepard or Lynn Nottage. This morning, though, they are doing something different. They set up little stages made out of individual matchboxes. They lay out tiny curtains and fantastical miniature objects and arrange candles and flashlights for lighting. Then they introduce their main characters, who are made of cardboard and wire, paper and tape, and they prepare to present two-minute performances that take place in theaters that are an inch and a half high. This is the Toy Theater class.

As I think about the future of puppetry, I find I want to tell the story of this course, my favorite to teach in the MFA Directing program at Northwestern University. Puppetry can and will take many innovative new forms in the hands of puppeteers, but through this course, I see a different future manifestation for the language and lessons of puppetry. I see how the theatrical gifts of puppetry explorations are received by young directors and designers, and how these gifts become an integral part of the way they think about their approach to the theater, *whether or not they choose to employ puppetry directly in their work.*

The story of the Toy Theater class begins in 2004, when Anna D. Shapiro had just become Director of the MFA Directing Program at Northwestern University and asked me to develop a course for her students. I was thrilled to return to Northwestern (where I had received my PhD in 1997 in Performance Studies), and was eager to teach talented young directors.

I wanted to offer them a course in theatrical storytelling that addressed the choices and challenges encountered by directors and designers when approaching a play, and I wanted to have them come at the subject from an unexpected direction. The MFA program at Northwestern is rich in courses based around text analysis, theatrical styles, collaboration, production and scholarship. What I felt I could uniquely offer in the design of a new course was an opportunity to free students from the assumptions they carry about who they are, what their work is, what they are good at and how they think about the role they play in a production process.

I had seen images and read about the popular table-top Toy Theaters of the Victorian age. I had also been introduced to contemporary Toy Theater in the early nineties through the work of Clare Dolan, Great Small Works, Laura Heit and Janie Geiser. I was a fan of the diminutive worlds, the endless transformation, the simplicity blended with complexity and the handmade humor of scale and surprise. This inexhaustible potential of the form and the staggering variety exhibited at Toy Theater festivals delighted me. And, of course, I had played with putting a toy theater moment in a few of my own shows, but really I was a theater director, not a puppeteer. However, looking for a subject for this unusual course—a place where directors and designers could explore storytelling in collaboration but outside their usual roles—Toy Theater was an interesting inspiration.

In its first year, the class was an experiment, but it proved a very successful one and it is now required for both MFA directing and MFA design students, directors in the second year and designers

DIRECTOR HANNAH TODD WORKING ON  
"THE LOVESONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK" FOR THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY TOY THEATER FESTIVAL

in the third year. I now teach the course with the assistance of a designer, Collette Pollard, who brings her eye and experience in set design to the process. This way we are able to constantly connect the problems and solutions students encounter in miniature to their work in the larger, three-dimensional, real world.

I chose to focus the course on this relatively obscure performance form in order to concentrate completely on the needs of the story being told, and the practical solutions to the problems those needs create. After years both teaching and directing, I am certain that I was made a better director by encountering a broad range of performance problems and seeing them in terms of story. One might not be a puppeteer, but the task of making a puppet to represent a certain character from Shakespeare will intimately connect you to that character through the series of creative decisions you will need to make. In the same way, one may not be a writer, but the task of creating material for the miniature stage forces a series of choices about story, point of view, building suspense, climax, character interaction and theatrical event that are at the heart of a director's process. The Toy Theater class presents the graduate directing and design students with this kind of essential and detailed storytelling challenge. And it does not let them rely on any usual tricks, giving them nowhere to hide from the story itself.

Toy Theater is also a perfect playground for exploring the pairing of spectacle with intimacy. Skill with both intimacy and spectacle are essential to a theater artist, particularly in the theatrical approach to story offered by Sarah Ruhl, Will Eno and other contemporary playwrights. Toy Theater's concentration on spectacle—even at a small scale—asks what the intimate moments are and what the theatrical moments are, and how they are arranged next to each other to achieve what the story demands.

To this end, the course has one large project—for each student to create and perform an original Toy Theater show.

This is a rigorous experience of precise visual storytelling. Because of its economy, the form demands explosive metaphorical imagination joined with a disciplined approach to making materials work, arranging the procession of the images and orchestrating

how the story unfolds. The stage is in miniature, and so *anything* truly is possible—pigs can fly, roses can bleed. An empty stage is available to each artist, they can choose a myriad of things to fill it with, arrange it as they like, and tell the story of their choice. In light of this much freedom, the student needs to make strong choices about the aesthetic path they are going to take. The form exposes any kind of vagary, sloppiness, lack of cohesion and generality. Because students are working alone on this project, they alone must make those choices and commit fully to their own vision. This is most valuable because a young director must *own their own point of view about the world and the story they are telling*, and they must be able to defend it. If they paint it red, they need to know exactly why. And if it is red crayon, not red paint, they need to explain that, too. Everything has meaning and there are no accidents. This is how a director needs to think.

A director must also solve theoretical problems with a practical art, and that is another thing the Toy Theater class teaches. For example, one student was making a piece about heroin addiction, and wanted to personify addiction itself in a puppet. It had to be an evil, completely compelling, powerful force. But what should it look like, and how should it enter? Does it have an actual face—like a character—with an expression? Is it beautifully seductive? Or is it merely a black mist? The student was forced to actually work with multiple materials and try them out practically to create this Addiction Character. Black silk sounds right, but then only seems limp when put inside the stage frame. Seductive sounds right but then ends up not carrying any threat. An angry face actually seems too comic. In the end, the student discovered the phenomenological power of using razor blades and wire to create a faceless, slow-moving creature that was bizarre and quite frightening, and it was the materials themselves that solved the story problem.

The process of the course is this: We begin by reading and watching all available material that might serve as an introduction to historical, traditional and contemporary toy theater. The students thus begin their own processes with a great deal of exposure to the many possibilities of the form.



DIRECTOR RISHER REDDICK WORKING ON  
"THE 100% PERFECT GIRL"



COSTUME DESIGNER ANNA WOODEN WORKING ON  
"THE WALRUS AND THE CARPENTER"

Then they choose material, and materials. Students have absolutely no limitations on determining the subject matter and aesthetic of their own final piece. In ten years of teaching the course, we have had traditional proscenium pieces, overhead projector pieces, pieces using sand trays, antique cabinets, shadow, stiffened prom dresses, ink dropped into water and more. What they all have in common is the process of solving each storytelling problem, efficiently and elegantly in order to get to the next one, and always using the miniature form for the opportunity it offers, rather than trying to bend the material to their will.

This is another essential lesson for young directors and designers, to always see the process with a combination of opportunity and imagination, rather than trying desperately to force the thing that you

first imagined into being. The toy theater process turns out to be the ideal place to examine this—a great example is the student who tried for weeks to create a realistic lion puppet to be a guardian angel in his piece. He tried fur and articulated feet, wood and fabric, and tried many ways to make the lion walk across the stage. Then one day he gave up in frustration and used a large mounted photograph of a majestic, sad-eyed lion as a temporary stand in. The class was thrilled, and there was no question that he had found his guardian angel, even though it did not move or enter the frame the way he had imagined at all. Its truthfulness and poetic silence were exactly what he needed.

The final piece must be ten minutes long, and students design, build and perform it themselves. I should stress that most students are not performers, few are builders and none are puppeteers. They are expected to be uncomfortable with more than one of the challenges the piece presents, and are not expected to have any prior experience. It is not as much about executing high quality puppetry as it is about being wholly, personally responsible for every single artistic and practical choice being made, from material to color to music to tone to image. There is absolutely no one else to blame if something doesn't look, feel or sound exactly right. They spend the ten-week quarter being exacting about every puppet, every word, every idea, every sound and its relationship to the story they are



telling, the effect they are desiring and what they are trying to say. And because the form allows anything to happen, they can make rather large changes all the way along in response to critique in class. One wonderful example is the student who was working with a passage from Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, who made a meticulously detailed Victorian toy theater proscenium stage, and found his love for the words remaining unfocused and remote. He ended up responding to feedback by bringing in a small aquarium and making equally meticulous use simply of stones and water to bring the story to life.

The first piece students make is the matchbox show, described above, so that everyone starts working at the same extremely small scale. They then bring in studies and sketches of their final piece in

shoebox size, and finally in large scale, which is designed to let thirty people watch and be able to at least see something. They also have process record assignments, storyboarding assignments that evolve as the piece evolves and poster design to advertise the Festival that ends the course.

The resulting challenge reveals all of a student's gifts, talents, hesitations and difficulties when they approach their work in the theater. It also gives them a laboratory to push themselves in this detailed storytelling learning process, and they must have both the strength and the vulnerability to perform the end result in public, at the Annual Northwestern Toy Theater Festival. Inspired as I have been by the Toy Theater Festivals I have seen in New York over the years, I am happy to be able to contribute a small one to the landscape. The students are often terrified to perform, but the performance experience crystalizes the lessons they have learned from puppetry as a permanent part of who they are as theater artists. And even though we have added a second show on festival nights, the audience lines up early and it is always sold out.

Jessica Thebus is a theater maker, director and adaptor working in Chicago and nationally. She directs the MFA Directing Program at Northwestern University.





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**Dream of Land**  
Visual Expressions



## BUNRAKU MEETS VOCALOID IN OPERA AOI

by Jyana S. Browne

*Opera Aoi* opens with a digitally altered voice singing a few simple syllables.<sup>1</sup> The isolated syllables begin to layer. The rhythm builds, and the singing climaxes with the syllables, “*mi-do-ri*.” Midori is the name of a software program, a vocaloid. In the film, Midori was once a world-famous pop star. Ten years have passed since she was the reigning pop queen, and the composer who brought her to fame, Hikaru, has found a new singer for his muse, Aoi, a human being. Midori cannot bear being replaced, but she cannot make music on her own. As a vocaloid, she requires a human intermediary. *Opera Aoi* tells Midori’s story using another, older technology that requires human manipulation to come to life: bunraku puppets.

Recently, bunraku puppets have been appearing in a variety of new collaborations that extend beyond the traditional bunraku framework. In 2002, *Sonezaki-Shinjū Rock* took Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s 1703 classic *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* and set it to a new rock music score. The band performed in the background as the puppets took center stage in traditional costumes under rock concert lights. In 2011, visual artist Hiroshi Sugimoto adapted the same play with a contemporary design aesthetic, digital projections, and a restored prologue with newly composed music. *Opera Aoi*, which premiered at Hyper Japan in London in 2014, represents the most radical departure yet. The opera, which was conceived as a film rather than a live performance, is scored with techno music and vocaloid singing in place of the three-stringed shamisen and the vocal work of the chanter. The world of film and vocaloid is so different from traditional bunraku that puppeteer Yoshida Kōsuke said it was “as if a bunraku puppeteer has landed on the moon.”<sup>2</sup> The film’s blending of multiple traditional elements drawn from noh drama and bunraku with the contemporary technology of film, digitized music, and vocaloid software ultimately suggests that the future of the traditional arts lies in making them relevant to contemporary audiences through their integration with new forms.

The source for the opera comes from an early noh play, *Lady Aoi*, which in turn drew from the classical literary masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji*. Both in the noh play and the original, the story centers around the jealousy Genji’s mistress, Rokujō, feels toward his wife, Aoi. In her jealousy, Rokujō’s spirit possesses Aoi, which makes her dangerously sick and, in the original, causes her death. In *Opera Aoi*, the creator, Hiroshi Tamawari, adapts the slighted mistress into a forgotten artistic muse, Midori. Midori, the vocaloid software, becomes obsolete without the composer who transformed her library of sounds into music. In her jealousy, she, too, possesses Aoi at the climax of the story.

This central theme, the importance of the human being who uses the vocaloid technology to create expression and meaning, is underscored by how *Opera Aoi* films the puppetry. First, the film emphasizes the object-ness of the puppets. The first shot of a puppet in the film opens with a long shot. Aoi’s manager sleeps. The natural pose and the distance of the camera make it difficult to distinguish that the sleeping figure is indeed a puppet. Then the film cuts to a close up of the puppet’s polished wooden foot. The camera slowly pans across the puppet to reveal the gaps at the finger joints that allow the fingers of the puppet to move and the black-clad figure of the lead puppeteer. The stillness of the object further emphasizes that it is a puppet. The puppet does not begin to appear lifelike until the puppeteer raises its head a few moments later. In this way, the film highlights that the true creator of the life and emotions of puppet is the puppeteer.

Additionally, the camera generally frames the puppets to include the presence of the puppeteer. Three puppeteers operate the puppet for Aoi: one for the feet, one for the left arm, and the lead puppeteer for the head and right arm. The other two characters, Aoi’s manager and the psychiatrist, are both operated by a single puppeteer. The puppeteers wear black and cover their faces in hoods, but their pres-

# PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

ence behind the puppets and their movements as they manipulate the puppets are a visual presence throughout the film.

In traditional bunraku, the puppeteers are not the only artists who bring emotion to the puppets. The chanter, who recites descriptive passages, portrays all the characters in the dialogue, and sings the lyrical passages, is a critical element in conveying the emotions of the characters. For this reason, replacing the chanter with a vocaloid raises one of the biggest questions of the film: Will the vocaloid be able to capture the range of human emotions to give the story emotional weight? Voice actor Ishiguro Chihiro and vocaloid producer EHAMIC created the vocaloid for *Opera Aoi*, Yuzuki Yukari, specifically for the film. Vocaloid software, which manipulates a library of sounds created by a human voice, debuted in 2000. The process of creating the library of sounds takes about 100 hours.<sup>3</sup> Vocaloid, most commonly associated with pop music and *anime*, intersected with bunraku in 2008 when vocaloid pop icon Hatsune Miku sang a musical adaptation of *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* as a techno pop song. While the juxtaposition of the vocaloid with source material originally created for puppets posed interesting questions about the similarities between vocaloid and puppets, *Opera Aoi* takes the vocaloid/puppet interaction to a new level by using a vocaloid to bring emotional life to puppets.

The vocaloid lacks the raw emotion and human timbre of the unaltered human voice of the chanter. But the range of the vocaloid captures the core emotions of the characters, and the technology allows for a layering of voices that a human voice cannot produce. In the dialogue sections, the vocaloid lines overlay on each other to build momentum within the scene. EHAMIC also layers the vocaloid sounds to create two separate musical sounds. For example, he pairs the sung narration with the melody of one of Midori's hit songs, which was based on a Buddhist mantra. This juxtaposes melody, rhythm, and style and adds musical complexity to the piece.

Ultimately, bunraku is the star of *Opera Aoi*. At the climax of the film, Midori possesses Aoi, who is hospitalized. Aoi's movements become less human and more like a doll being animated by an external force. Her hands hang limp at her sides. Her head falls forward then straightens only to fall forward again. Then her back arches slightly and, when she bends forward, her face transforms.

The puppeteers use a *gabu* puppet head, which opens at the eyes and mouth. The eye sockets appear to deepen. The mouth changes from a closed, petite, elegant mouth to a wide grimace. As Aoi's manager and the psychiatrist attempt to placate Midori's vengeful spirit, Aoi's face continues to transform from a beautiful woman to a demon in succession until Aoi collapses. When she comes to, she will have no memory of the spirit possession.

By focusing on the physical puppet, the puppeteers, and the expressive possibilities of the bunraku puppetry, as showcased in the use of the *gabu* head, *Opera Aoi* affirms bunraku as an amazing art form worthy of our attention. The use of film and vocaloid technology also demonstrates that the traditional puppetry has artistic potential outside the usual parameters. The vocaloid's challenge to the chanter opens possibilities for new experiments that take the puppet beyond the bunraku context. Additionally, film can travel more easily than a live performance and opens new possible audiences. Similarly, vocaloid fans represent a hitherto untapped potential audience. *Opera Aoi* suggests that these technologies, whether the centuries old bunraku or the 21<sup>st</sup> century vocaloid, need a human element to be expressive. It also opens new pathways for audience development to make bunraku culturally relevant to a new generation.

Jyana S. Browne is a PhD candidate at the University of Washington. She recently spent two years in Japan researching love suicide plays in the 18th century puppet theatre.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Opera Aoi*. Dir. Kano Shin. Perf. Yoshida Kōsuke, Yoshida Kanichi, Kiritake Monhide. Star Gate Co. Ltd., 2014. Film.

<sup>2</sup> *The Vocaloid Opera Aoi with Bunraku Puppets*. Press Release. Opera Aoi, 2014. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Josiah. "Hyper Japan 2014: Vocaloid Opera Aoi with Bunraku Puppets Interview." *Parallax Play*. 7 Aug. 2014. Web. 2 Nov. 2014.





by Andrea Balis and Theodora Skipitares

## T.S.

A few years ago, Shiva Massoudi, a theater professor at the University of Tehran, heard about my work and asked for some DVDs of my projects. Repeatedly, she proposed that I come to make a project with her graduate students in puppetry. We became serious about this proposal a few months ago, and I, along with my longtime dramaturg, Andrea Balis, went to Iran in January for an intensive rehearsal and performance of *NO EMPTY CHAIRS*, a variation of our response to Ionesco's *THE CHAIRS*, which had premiered at La MaMa in May 2014. The La MaMa performance had featured twenty-nine chairs. They were performing objects that spoke.

For several years, I collaborated with Ellen Stewart, the founder of La MaMa Theater, on international projects. We created multi-media operas and plays in Vietnam, Cambodia, India, and South Africa, to name a few countries. Ellen had been a pioneer of international exchange projects since the 1960s, but what was unique about our collaborations, which began around 2000, was that puppetry was always an important part of the production. Ellen taught me that international exchange is first and foremost about creating relationships.

One of the characteristics of contemporary puppetry in the United States is its hybrid nature. This is probably true because of the relatively short history of our puppet traditions and also because of our improvisational, innovative approach to artmaking. Emerging artists from many different fields such as illustration, sculpture, animation, and dance have been coming together recently to work as puppetry artists, either alone or collaboratively. This is especially true where I teach—Pratt Institute, an art school in

Brooklyn. Among my students there is an excitement and hunger for the opportunities that working in puppetry provides. Puppet slams are growing all across the country, and several performance spaces feature puppetry events throughout their seasons. As I prepared to go to Tehran, I wondered if we would find common threads among emerging artists working in Tehran.

Unlike the U.S., Iran has a long tradition of puppetry, going back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The poems of Omar Khayyam refer directly to string puppets and shadow puppets. Two puppet scholar/directors Homa Jedikar and Salma Mohseni Ardehali, are actively engaged in making this tradition more visible. Homa, who was one of the first university professors to teach puppetry, says, "If you put something in a university, you will save it." (Homa Jedikar, interview, January 8, 2015)

In Iran, three universities offer B.A. and M.A. degrees in puppetry. All of these degrees are offered in Tehran. Puppetry was added as a course of study in the University during the mid-1980s. The curriculum features building, acting, directing, writing and set design, all related to puppetry. According to Salma Mohseni Ardehali, "The nineties was a turning point for puppetry in Iran. Many of the puppet artists began to make non-traditional works for adults, while others continued to make traditional work. Today, both exist, side-by-side. ... Young artists who have graduated from the university programs are interested in modern and post-modern approaches to puppetry, mainly from Europe. Some of these artists use the puppet—this metaphorical object—to overcome political and social limitations." ([www.academia.edu/6969352/Different\\_Approaches\\_to\\_Iranian\\_Puppetry](http://www.academia.edu/6969352/Different_Approaches_to_Iranian_Puppetry))

A.B.

We brought with us to Tehran interdisciplinary skills of our own, and the benefits of many years of working together and hours of discussion about ways in which puppets relate to text. Theodora brought with her a rich knowledge of contemporary puppetry that stretched beyond her own extensive body of work and included international puppet artists, some of whom were familiar to our students and many who were not. Because access to the internet is restricted, Iranian artists learn about other artists and their performances largely from DVDs and video files that circulate on flash drives.

In addition to my experience as a dramaturg, I brought an expertise with devised theater and especially the improvisation techniques developed by Viola Spolin, which led to the formation of Second City and, of course, Saturday Night Live. In her 1963 book *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin laid out her theories of actor training which focused around improvisation. She believed that improvisers have to be operating in the moment. Improvisation makes it impossible to preplan or second-

guess yourself or your artistic choices. Her system rested on the idea that a structured improvisation provides a particular focus that unleashes the rest of your creativity

We had eighteen students, sixteen of whom were female. Before we arrived, the students had been given an assignment. They were told to find a chair, one that evoked personal memories. Each was to be prepared to explain the significance of their chair, and to work with their chair as a performing object. That made the chair the focus. The search for a chair, the need to find one, did indeed free many of the participants to explore their connections to not just furniture, but to their own feelings. In addition, a core group built a version of the ten-foot "Old Woman" puppet who starred in the New York production, according to instructions that Theodora had provided a month before.

The first thing we had to explain when the workshop began was that, although Theodora would show a clip from the New York production, this was to be completely different. Owing very little to Eugene Ionesco, it would be the production that we would

all make together. And we didn't know what that would be yet. So we began to hear the stories of the chairs. We were well aware of how risky this seemed to the students, who were used to working with traditional play structures. They had to go on faith that this process would work. Furthermore they frequently commented, on the second day of rehearsal and on virtually every day afterward, that this was not a familiar way of working. This referred not just to the project, but rather to the structure of the workshop. Theodora and I both teach, (at Pratt Institute and John Jay College, respectively) and we spend much time discussing pedagogy. We have been influenced by the ideas of feminist pedagogy defined by the Gender and Education Associations as "a way of thinking about teaching and learning, rather than following a prescriptive method." (Homepage, Gender and Education Association, retrieved 2/1/2015) The emphasis is on changing the relationship of professor and student, and by using experience as a resource, empowering students, and leading them to shift their thinking in new directions.

"GRANDFATHER" BY TARA SHOQHI



"I'M NOT A CHAIR" BY FAEZE ALAVI





NO EMPTY CHAIRS COMPANY PHOTO A. BALIS

## The Workshop Plan

We recognized that the lack of a narrative structure made the students nervous. Therefore on the second day of rehearsal we talked about an emerging concept. We explained that, since the stories they had told were almost all memories, the play would center around the idea that this old woman was rummaging through her past. The memories would not be chronological, since that is not the way we think. A few of the chairs had amorphous stories, rather than anecdotes. Some chairs contained shame, rage, fear and hidden emotions. One chair had somehow come to embody curiosity. These would be recurring threads appearing and reappearing throughout the production.

We talked at length about the idea of process. We acknowledged that the rush to decision-making is natural, and that clarity could in fact cut off creativity. We asked them to let the production grow. We assured them that there was time for that, even in a ten day production schedule. On the fourth day of rehearsal, we presented an order for the scenes and wrote it in large red letters on a white board in the rehearsal room. This turned out to be quite close to the final structure. By this point most text adjustments had been made, and we began to work on increasingly detailed puppetry issues. Most

of the students were skilled puppeteers. One or two were exceptional. But it was difficult for some of the students to really commit to the puppets and let them be the focus. We were constantly explaining that the chair was not a prop, that it was in fact the core of each scene. Too often they wanted to explain what was going on, instead of trusting puppetry to tell the story.

By the fifth day of rehearsal Shiva Mas-soudi began to bring other members of the theater faculty to meet us. Homa Jedikar, the professor of traditional puppetry attended rehearsals frequently and saved us from struggling with cultural details that were impossible for us to understand. We never felt any reservation from faculty about the unconventional production we were developing. Instead we felt warmly welcomed by everyone to whom we were introduced.

At this point we had enormous respect for the students. We knew that they were working in unfamiliar ways and they did it willingly. They shared context and background with us. And they shared food with us. We were working long hours, and although we were housed across the street from the campus, we discovered that some of the students had 2-4 hour commutes each day.

Many of the scenes were fully developed and connections between them were emerging. By the seventh day of rehearsal we moved into the performance space. We had to solve production value issues, while at the same time doing work on scenes that needed rehearsing. It was only possible to do this because of the extraordinary degree of student cooperation and support for one another.

By the eighth day of rehearsal we had lights. Musicians had begun to appear and were quickly integrated into the production. We could have something resembling run-throughs of our newly created project, which had indeed been made out of the memories and thoughts of the eighteen Iranian participants. Language created its own problems. Every direction, every question had to be translated from English to Farsi or vice versa. The only text that we added was an introduction (which was written to mimic the rhythm of the closing speech which one student had already written). But the speech was written in English of course and then had to be translated. When it was read and roughly translated everyone loved it. But a more detailed translation didn't work. We were sadly told that what was poetic and lovely in English was clumsy in Farsi. So we gave the translators creative license. Spoken

# PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

Farsi had its own music, which we could hear but not quite imitate.

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reminding each other of the shared life of the play. These students were willing to take chances in an environment that did not support taking risks. We had wanted to provide the sort of empowering experience that comes from making art, taking chances and trying new things.

We conclude with the words of Nazanin Mehraein, one of the workshop participants, "The workshop was a journey for me. An

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In general, it is hard for American students to tolerate ambivalence. They want to know for certain what the right answer is. It was perhaps even harder for our Iranian students who are used to an authoritarian structure. But their courage was amazing. They understood that we were trying to guide them away from what was "correct" and towards what they really wanted to say, and they appreciated it. In part they were able to take risks because of the level of trust and cooperation among themselves. Puppetry always requires cooperation, but the cohesion of this group was remarkable.

They relied on each other not just for practical help with puppetry issues but for much more. One day, for example, a young woman came to us at the beginning of rehearsal and explained that, while she hadn't made any progress on her own scene, she was excited because she had a great idea about another woman's scene. Another woman said that they were often dreaming about the scenes and sharing those dreams with each other. The students were remarkably good at

reminding each other of the shared life of the play. These students were willing to take chances in an environment that did not support taking risks. We had wanted to provide the sort of empowering experience that comes from making art, taking chances and trying new things.

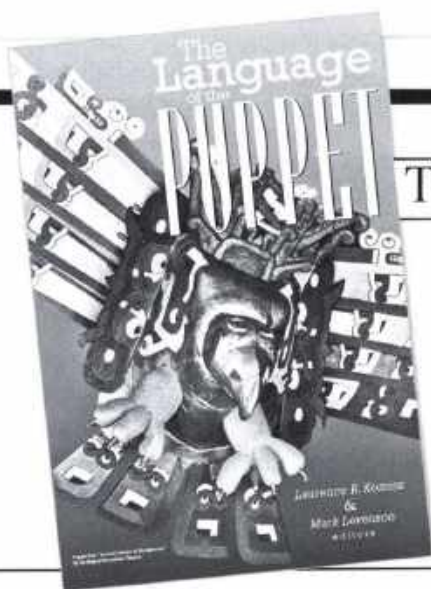
We conclude with the words of Nazanin Mehraein, one of the workshop participants. "The workshop was a journey for me. An adventure. It was really experimental and we learned every day something new. (I learned) the importance of matter of time, when you shouldn't get involved with the details and see a long shot... It was like we had this camera and all the time we were seeing from another angle... In the end we really learned a lot. We learned not to push anything in the beginning and unbind our dreams and wishes and our stories to reach a great destination"



MARIONETTE BY NASIM YAGHOUDI  
PHOTO: T. SKIPITARES

Andrea Balis, longtime dramaturg of Skysaver Productions, has an MFA in directing from NYU and a Ph.D. from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She teaches at John Jay College.

Theodora Skipitares is an award-winning multi-disciplinary artist based in New York. She will be working in India this fall as a Fulbright Fellow.



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# Out of the Archive (and into the Future!)

by Eleanor Margolies

I am sorting through the *Puppet Notebook* archive: invoices from printers and orders from bookshops, ticket stubs, programmes, letters, festival brochures. It's a mixture of pleasant rediscovery and melancholy. How did all those writers find their way to us, with news of far-off festivals and shows? And how generous people were: Poets let us publish poems that mentioned puppets; An illustrator let us put her drawing of a bookseller on our review page. But does anyone need to know how many copies of the magazine were sent in 2005 to a theatre bookshop that no longer exists? What should I do with these two slim volumes about Jan Klaassen, sent as a gift from a Dutch puppet magazine editor for our issue on the Netherlands, carefully packed in a hand-made cardboard box that fits them exactly? And what about this small lino-print entitled "The End of the Pier" that was rolled up in a hand-written letter with German puppet stickers affixed to the mailing tube?

Is there anything in the flotsam and jetsam washed up in the corners of the former editorial office that might be of use in the future? Like a patent office, the *Puppet Notebook* archive contains a mixture of the out-dated, the still in use and the as yet unrealised. There are designs for pages that were never printed, outlines and promises of articles that were never written, scripts for puppet plays that were never produced. There are magazines in Czech, Dutch, French, German, Hungarian and Japanese containing images that might inspire a maker, and historical accounts that a researcher might fall upon. And there are all the leads I failed to follow up...

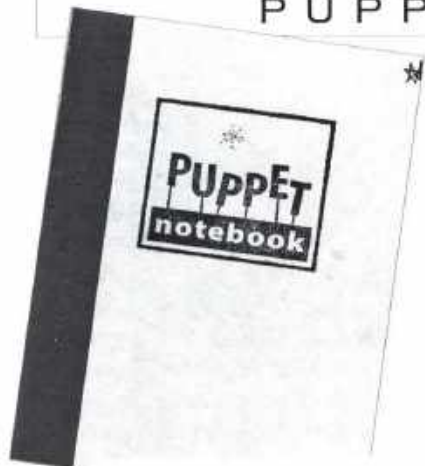
Is there a correspondence, I wonder as I sort through another box-file, between the appeal of puppets and of magazines? Whether sophisticated or hand-made, they share a sense of immediacy—after all, anyone can make one using quite ordinary tools—and ephemerality.

Who wouldn't want to make printed matter for themselves? When I was growing up, my father was part of an editorial collective producing a quarterly journal, at first produced as photocopied typescript stapled between coloured card covers, but later laid out by a *real designer*. I went with him once or twice to the paste-up, where the columns were cut with scalpels from long galleys and glued to blue-lined layout boards with a pungent rubber solution called—for unknown reasons—Cow Gum. Unwanted scraps of gum were gathered into what I imagined to be—melding two A. A. Milne poems in a mental lump—something like the India rubber ball desired by bad King John but as produced by the cow that also gave "milk for his porringer and butter for his bread."

At school, official newsletters were churned out on the Gestetner, the letters gradually blurring and filling up with ink as the stencils wore thin, while the sinister-sounding "Banda" was used for more casual communications—pink or purple hand-lettering, given out to us while the pages were still damp with a sweet, almost fruity solvent.

Later, I discovered the multiple worlds contained in fanzines for bands, poetry and politics, photocopied and stapled sheets, with "ransom letter" style headlines cut from newspapers, handwritten articles alongside typescript, found photos and collage. Those early copiers were not sensitive to grey-tones: Photos came out like Warhol's screen prints, in a bold contrast that made everyone look glamorous. The little magazines, crammed onto a rack by the door of a bookshop or sold by the publisher from a shoulder bag, were often mysterious, providing no more bibliographical information than a PO Box number for correspondence.

So when in 2004, the members of the British UNIMA committee decided to expand the BrUNIMA Bulletin—at that time, produced as folded sheets with text and images photocopied in vivid cyan—into a more substantial magazine, I took to the task as a vocation. I carried around a stack of index cards, each one recording a potential title (*Quiddity*, *Puppetscope*) and tried them out on anyone who would listen, in a low-tech attempt at market research. *Puppet Notebook* won out. To call a magazine a "notebook"



GESCHIEDENIS VAN HET POPPENSPEL IN NEDERLAND



HALO BULLIQUIN

*Handwritten notes in cursive script, including a small starburst symbol and some illegible text.*



*Small handwritten notes below the lino-print illustration.*

ought not sound too pretentious, yet its namesakes would be illustrious: *Theatre Notebook*, the Polish underground poetry magazine *Brulion* and, above all, the *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

A friend designed the first issue using a desktop publishing program. I took on the layout for the second issue. I learnt how to make dropped capitals, bounding boxes and clipping paths. In the first hectic weeks, I dreamt about gutters and overrun text; even when awake, I briefly saw the world as layout, infinitely malleable—it seemed that cycle lanes were like text boxes that could be widened by pulling on one corner. I discovered that the making of magazines is a physical activity, even when it involves shifting pixels.

The digital continues to announce itself as the future, both for theatre and for publications. The digitised back issues of *Puppet Notebook* are soon to go onto the website. Our neighbours, *Total Theatre* and *Animations*, have gone wholly online and the question of whether to keep producing a physical journal—increasingly expensive to print and to post—is frequently raised at British UNIMA committee meetings. Meanwhile, the actual cost of the digital—all those air-conditioned servers in the desert and landfill dumps full of out-dated technology—is near-invisible, paid for by all and by none.

At an international gathering in Pilsen, Czech Republic, in 2012, the editors of a number of puppet magazines discussed the future of their publications. I spoke up for paper—as a cheap material that can travel outside official channels, evade censorship and still function in power cuts. And paper has also returned to the theatre in recent years, often animated to the accompaniment of live music. In Britain, the artists of The Paper Cinema manipulate cut-out pen and ink drawings in front of a video camera in their version of *The Odyssey* and other productions (<http://thepapercinema.com>). Animator and illustrator Matthew Robins plays with hand-made silhouettes in both film and live performance ([www.sadlucy.com](http://www.sadlucy.com)). In *Something Very Far Away*, a collaboration between Robins and writer and director Mark Arends (2012, revived in 2014), video feeds to multiple screens allow for cinematic play with close-ups and dissolves, while the act of animation still happens before our eyes – the performers quite visible as they manipulate small puppets in (outer) space.

It's true that shows using "old" materials like paper sometimes emphasize the retro aesthetic—as with the typewriters and analogue telephones in Yael Rasooly's one-woman object and paper theatre romance *Paper Cut* ([www.yaelrasooly.com](http://www.yaelrasooly.com)). But what makes these shows interesting is not the "period setting" in an earlier era of technology, but what this permits in terms of animation taking place before our eyes. The German company *Thalias Kompagnons* demonstrates this on every scale—from the live painting in *What Does Red Do On Thursday?*, a solo performance for children, to *The Magic Flute*, a production staged with a small orchestra, counter-tenor and live video feed of glove puppets performing in a toy theatre tilted on its back, with layers of imagery that the performers slide in and out below the proscenium like filing drawers.

Apparently out-dated techniques—the use of black and white rather than color, stills rather than moving images – allow us to daydream. They set the imagination alight in a different way from the saturated colour, high speed and high definition of computer-

generated images. In globally franchised shows like *Lion King* and *War Horse*, puppets (as well as masks, costumes and make up) are the vectors of the perfectly reproducible theatrical image, making it possible to perform identical shows all over the world (as Dan Rebellato describes in *Theatre and Globalisation* (2009)). But if paper has returned to the puppet theatre, the hand-made has never gone away.

John Bell has suggested that the concept of puppetry gives a way of thinking about all kinds of direct or remote manipulation of the material world, from military drones to the powerful computers installed on mobile phones. He describes the "studied obscurity" surrounding these "most technically advanced forms of object performance" as like

a return to the kind of mystery that enveloped the Greek automata installed in Fourth-Century BCE temples as oracles. In Greek temple performance, secrecy and mystery allowed advances in performing object technology to be presented as the work of the gods. What purposes are served today by simplistic portrayal of performing object forms? (Bell 2008: 165)

If it's possible to speculate about the future of puppetry at all, it may lie in the combination of increasing technical sophistication with forms of manipulation that expose themselves as manipulation.

Ping! Here's an email from Tim Hunkin, creator of the "Under the Pier" arcade of slot machines and automata at Southwold, on the Suffolk coast. How retro! Who even uses coins these days? The latest machine to join the show is entitled "Art Apocalypse." It asks: "Have you got what it takes to join the armed response team?" What could be more contemporary? ([www.underthepier.com](http://www.underthepier.com)) Hunkin is opening a new arcade of homemade slot machines in London. It seems the future of puppetry is full of the persistence of old forms. I turn back to the box-file and pull out William McClure Brown's lino-cut of the pier and the handwritten letter that came with it.

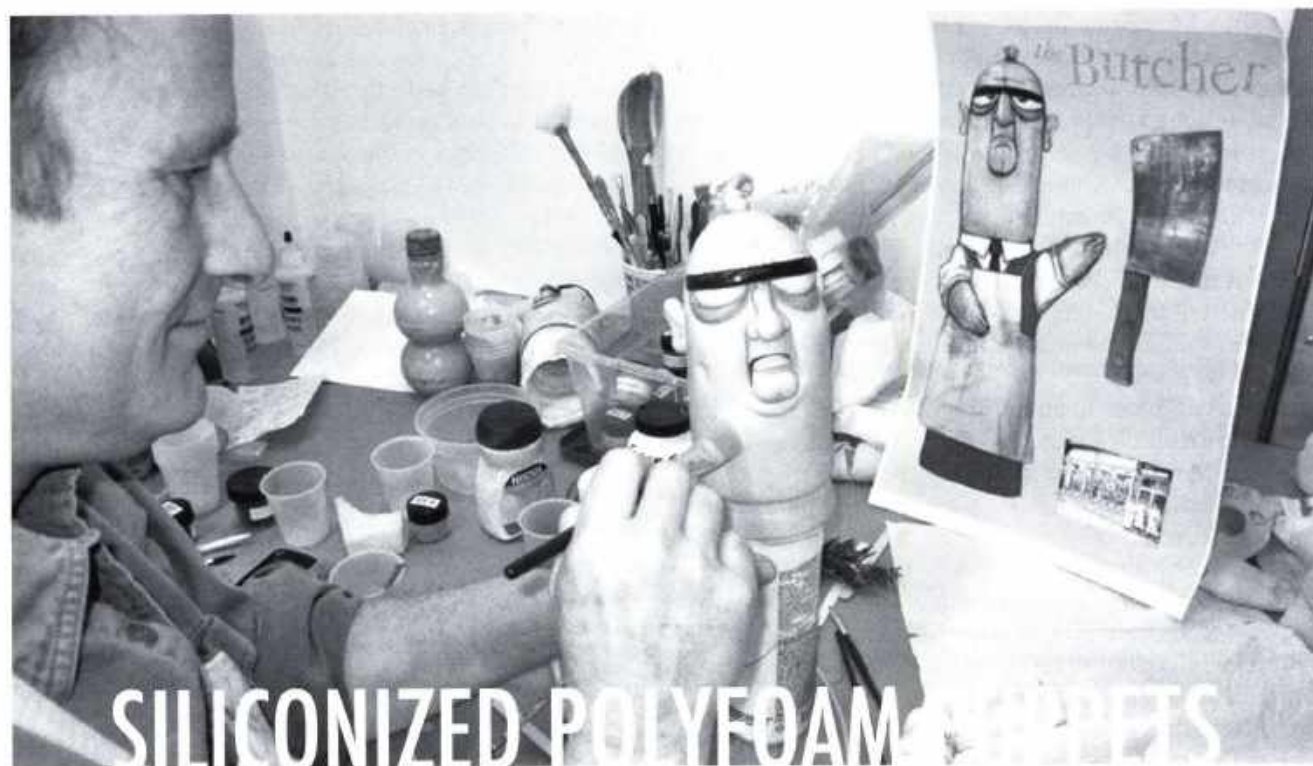
Eleanor Margolies founded *Puppet Notebook* and edited it from 2004 to 2012. She contributed to the Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance (2014) and is currently working on a book about props.



#### Endnotes:

John Bell (2008) *American Puppet Modernism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Dan Rebellato (2009) *Theatre and Globalisation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan



## SILICONIZED POLYFOAM PUPPETS

by Tom McLaughlin

### A FUTURE WITH SILICONIZED POLYFOAM PUPPETS

In the 1960s, when I was a kid, handmade puppets were made of fabric, papier mâché, wood and found items from around the house, like wooden spoons and oatmeal boxes. Store-bought puppets were made of fabric, fleece, wood, injection molded hard plastic or soft(er) vinyl.

It was Bil Baird's molded latex television puppets and latex foam stop motion animation puppets like Michael Myerberg's *Hansel and Gretel* that first inspired my love for rubber puppets. They were sculptural like the rigid Paul Ashley puppets on the Chuck McCann Show and Baird's *Art Carney Meets Peter and the Wolf*, but didn't have that tell-tale slit when mouths moved. They bent and flexed with a range of movements impossible with wooden and paper papier mâché—movements crude by today's standards, but at the time "state-of-the-art."

Back then rubber technology was new, developing and very coveted. Molding and casting "know-how" and rubber formulas were closely guarded secrets. Baird told me that for molds for the 1965 World's Fair, Chrysler molded-latex foam gear puppets were sent to the rubber company to be filled, and he was not allowed to watch the process. Today, you can find tutorial videos on YouTube for free!

In the 1970s, Jim Henson's polyurethane foam puppets brought even greater expression and movement to TV puppetry. These were sculpted foam rubber puppets made using patterned sheet foam and shoemaker's glue, combinations of simple geometric shapes covered in fleece, fake fur and feathers that read well on television screens. Henson's *Dark Crystal* then pushed the envelope with highly detailed latex foam puppets on the big screen in 1982. Anything that

could be imagined and sculpted could now be replicated in molded flexible latex foam.

Silicone is a relatively new puppet material. It started to be used for puppet animatronics on the movie *Babe* in 1995. Silicone's translucency made it the perfect material for the photorealistic talking pig. It wasn't until 2004 that silicone was used to paint latex foam puppets for the ABBA music video *The Last Video*. In 2014 great strides were made with direct application silicone on polyfoam with Puppet Heap's puppets for Brazilian kids' TV show *Que Monstro Te Mordeu?*.

### DIRECT APPLICATION OF SILICONE TO FOAM PUPPETS

Direct application of silicone to polyfoam puppets is a fun new combination. It offers surface treatments for foam puppets beyond fleece, fabric and flocking. Effects that range from intensely colored raw foam, to complex painting, to sculptural buildups that can be smooth or textured. Flexible rubber skin and paint that can move with grace and subtlety on top of polyfoam.

Last year I did two articles for the *Puppeteers of America's Puppetry Journal* on silicone caulking and soft polyfoam puppets. This was an introduction to working with silicone using a material - silicone caulking - that can be purchased at hardware stores anywhere in the world. For anyone who hasn't seen the P of A articles, they are up at Silicone Art Materials' Facebook page. The application techniques covered there equally apply to this article.

## TWO TYPES OF SILICONE

Taking things up a notch, there are two types of silicone: PLATINUM cure and TIN cure. Tin cure silicone comes as 1-part "caulking" and as 2-part systems. Platinum cure silicone only comes as 2-part systems.

## INTRODUCING PLATINUM SILICONE

I'd like to introduce the puppet community to Platinum silicone, which I think is the way ahead for many new puppet-making techniques.

Platinum silicone is superior in many ways to Tin cure silicone. It is "cleaner," has no odor and gives off no by-products as it cures. Pure grades of Platinum silicone can even be applied directly to the skin. It can be made very soft and not bleed plasticizing oils. Fast and slow set versions (even super-fast versions) are available. 1-part Tin cure silicone takes overnight to fully cure to a rubber and smells of vinegar.

Best of all Platinum silicone can be speed cured with a hot hair drier, making build-ups and painting silicone quite fast—far faster than Tin cure silicone. Platinum cure silicone "snaps" to a cure once it reaches a certain temperature. One second it's liquid, the next second it's rubber. With super fast set silicone and a hot hair drier this means near-instant spot curing.

A major advancement in silicone technology is the 1:1 mix type, measured in equal amounts by eye. Previously a scale was needed to accurately weigh the two parts. With 1:1 silicones the exact ratio is not too important. It will set to a rubber as long as both parts are thoroughly mixed together.

All this makes Platinum silicone the ideal rubber for puppets—especially translucent versions, which are easily pigmented.

## SENSITIVITIES

Un-cured Platinum silicone is sensitive to some materials. **Platinum silicone will not cure in the presence of sulfur, tin and amines.** Translated: Platinum silicone will never set up against materials containing sulfur (latex, foamed latex, latex gloves, sulfurous residue from matches), the metal tin and Tin cure silicone and anything containing ammonia like uncured epoxy resin and latex. Some localities have water high in sulfur. If this is the case, use bottled water for clean-up, washing hands and brushes.

If gloves are worn use latex-free, like vinyl or nitrile rubber gloves. As long as contaminant materials are kept away from Platinum silicone work areas, and tools and hands are clean, many materials can be used in the same workshop alongside Platinum silicone.

*\* Be aware that sheet polyfoam can be contaminated with sulfur fumes when bought from foam supply stores that also stock rubbers and latex foam. Platinum silicone will not set up well on contaminated polyfoam.*

## LIKE NO OTHER

As a polymer, silicone can be formulated to span a range of softnesses and hardnesses wider than any other rubber or plastic. From rigid injection molded kitchen utensils, flexible baking trays, tubing,

headphone ear pads, to hand-poured, soft rubber molds and castings, to bouncy gels and even moist sticky goo. All silicone. All made from silica. Sand. I find that amazing.

Silicone has a unique chemistry. It is unlike any other rubber, plastic, glue or paint. Commonly used art and puppet construction materials will not work with silicone. **The only thing that sticks to silicone is more silicone.** Paint and adhesives must be silicone-based.

## SILICONE PAINT THEORY

Paint = Pigment + Binder. With oil paint the binder is linseed oil. With watercolor paint the binder is gum arabic. With acrylic paint the binder is acrylic polymer. For silicone paint the binder is silicone! **SILICONE PAINT = Silicone-Safe Pigment + Silicone + Solvent (if needed).**

Pigments must be carefully chosen to be silicone compatible. Some pigments do not work with platinum silicone, like those containing sulfur or tin.

Pigments are preferred to color silicone. Dyes will bleed out, stain things and tend to fade on exposure to light. Pigments stay in silicone and can be very fade-resistant.

Liquid silicone pigments are pre-mixed—dispersed—in a compatible silicone fluid. This makes it easy to mix into silicone. It prevents lumps and clusters of color like when using powder pigments or artists' paints to color silicone, which can rub off on performers and props.

## HOW MUCH PIGMENT?

You don't need much. Never more than 5% by weight or volume. Any more is a waste of materials and can affect the rubber. Start out with drops, mix in and add more if needed. As a test, smear a small amount on a piece of siliconized paper or in a place that won't show to see if it gives you the coverage you need. Pigments vary. Some are transparent, translucent or opaque. Used in small amounts, opaque pigments can appear transparent. Transparent and translucent pigments often benefit from the addition of opaque pigments.

## SILICONE PAINTING PRACTICE

Practice texture and painting techniques on a piece of paper! Tip: First seal the paper with silicone to give the paper a surface of silicone, using the base color you'll be working with if



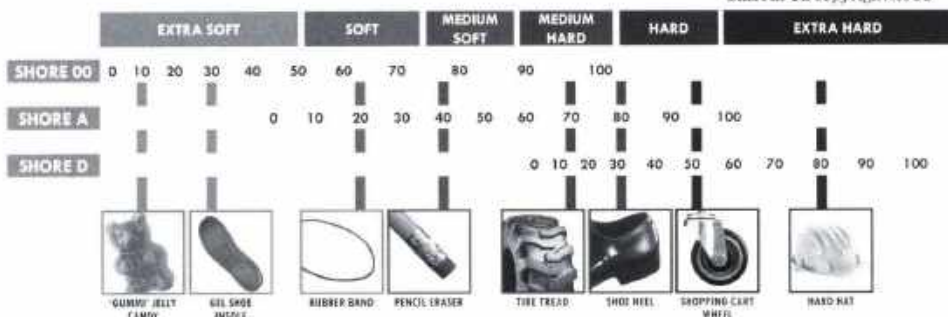
possible. Let it set. Practice on top of that. This will give you a feel for painting on silicone castings. Paint tests won't soak into the paper. You may need several thin coats of silicone to seal absorbent paper. Recycled paper bags work well.

## WHAT & HOW SOFT

A good starting material is a 1:1 (A/B) "10 Shore A Durometer" 2-Part Platinum Silicone. Durometer is a 1-100 scale measuring softness. The "A" Durometer scale is for soft rubbers. 10 Shore A silicone is softer than a rubber band, latex and silicone caulking (20-40 Shore A).

### SHORE HARDNESS SCALES\*

Smooth On copyright 2008



Silicone	Form	Cure Speed	Work Time	Cure Time
Alcone 3rd Degree	paste/liquid	Very Fast	3 min	10-12 min
PolyTek PlatSil® Gel 10	liquid		5-6 min	30 min
Smooth-On Dragon Skin® 10	liquid	Very Fast	4 min	30 min
		Fast	8 min	75 min
Silicones Inc P-656	liquid	P-656Q:	20 min	50 min
		P-656 B/A	45 min	4 hours

Each manufacturer has additives optimized for their silicones. There are softeners and thickeners available that can be quite useful. Refer to manufacturers' websites for information on these and other additives.

## CLEANER SOLVENTS

Naphtha, Mineral Spirits/White Spirits, Heptane (rubber cement thinner), even lighter fluid and Coleman lantern fuel can be used to thin uncured silicone to painting consistency and cleanup. They smell pretty bad. Odorless Mineral Spirits smells the least and can be found at many paint and hardware stores. They all have a medium drying time. They are all flammable. They are all toxic. **All solvents must be used with proper ventilation and safety precautions.**

Cleaner, low or odor-free solvents are available which make working with silicone a safer, more enjoyable experience. D-Limonene is a citrus-based solvent made from orange peels. It has a pleasant orange scent and is a medium-slow drying solvent. It will eat through plastic cups.

Silicone-based solvents are more expensive than petrochemical solvents but are well worth the added cost. Clean, cosmetic-quality, volatile silicone fluids thin silicone for painting and cleanup, have little or no chemical smell and will not eat through plastic. They have evaporation rates ranging from slow (hours) to very fast (minutes). Used in

cosmetics, personal care items and even "green" dry cleaning, this family of silicone fluids is safely used by millions of people each day, and leaves little or no imprint on the environment. Silicone-based solvents to look for are **Smooth-On Novocs** (very fast dry time, slight odor), **Dow 244 Fluid** (medium dry time, no odor), **SAM OSS Odorless Silicone Solvent** (slow dry time, no odor).

## WHERE TO GET

You can buy directly or find local distributors on manufacturers' websites: smooth-on.com, polytek.com, silicones-inc.com, 3rd Degree Silicones and Pigments, 244 Wonder Fluid, OSS Odorless Silicone Solvent and Silicone Art Materials Silicone Pigment dispersions are available fromalconeco.com. Silicone pigments are available from Smooth-On, FuseFX (fusefx.ca) and Factor 2 (factor2.com). Many products, including d-Limonene, are carried by sculpture and special effect supply stores.

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### Endnotes

Durometer comparison chart courtesy Smooth-On. Morgume' made by Casey Miller.

Photos Puppet Heap, Lauren Attinello, Tom McLaughlin and *Que Monstro Te Mordeu?*

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## Courtship with Bil Baird

by Susanna Baird

It was forty-four years ago, 1971 in New York City. My lawyer husband had walked out on me for another woman. After giving up the house we owned together, five-year-old daughter Madeleine and I were left without a roof over our heads. My brave, ever-smiling child stoically marched beside me as I deposited her each morning at St. Hilda's and St. Hugh's Episcopal School, near Columbia University. As a former actress who had left a Hollywood television career for marriage and moved to New York, I proved to have no great potential on the job market. Child support and alimony were not forthcoming, and my relatives had stopped talking to me. I didn't know how we were going to survive.

Through a miracle—and I mean a big one—I landed a job as a chairperson of the Drama Committee at the National Arts Club on Gramercy Park. Meetings were attended by an array of talented painters, actors and writers, where, as luck would have it, I began dating actor Austin Hay, vice president of the Episcopal Actors' Guild, located on 29<sup>th</sup> Street, a few blocks from the Club. Austin, enthusiastic party-goer and pal, would drive me home from work in his 1957 Cadillac limousine, chauffeuring honored guests to state dinners and assisting me with errands, giving life a chance again. All things seemed possible!

While organizing a dinner in honor of John Houseman, I met his friend, Bil Baird—puppeteer, artist, singer and musician, and colleague from the Federal Theater Project. He also was going through a very difficult divorce from a woman he'd married shortly after the death of Cora. Bil owned a 250-seat-theater at 59 Barrow Street in Greenwich Village. The building, six stories tall, was located a few short blocks from the Hudson River. Built in 1931, it was situated among the landmark homes of John Reed and Edna St. Vincent Millay, a few blocks from the historic church of St. Luke-in-the-Fields. It had been a warehouse for a shipping company, covering a whole block between Barrow and Commerce Streets.

Bil's troupe of puppeteers was one of the first ten official theater companies created by the National Endowment for the Arts under the auspices of Robert Whitehead and Nancy Hanks. In the 1930s and '40s, he had designed and constructed sets and props for Martha Graham with sculptor Isamu Noguchi, later traveling for the U.S. State Department, promoting birth control and education programs for Literacy House, in Lucknow, India. Creat-



ing puppet characters for Broadway shows and documentary films, he was a prolific writer of limericks and lyricist for many of his own musical productions. Refusing membership in the Sons of the American Revolution, reveled in the company of friends of all faiths and races, including two Jewish wives and one of Jewish descent.

Thirty-six years my senior, it was something wonderfully indescribable at first sight. Love! Excitement! A mainstay! Short in stature, with penetrating blue eyes, grey hair and beard, he resembled a mischievous elf—a piper ready to find a secret new path, and a new way of seeing things. It was his humor, the way he made me laugh that lightened my spirits and chased away the blues. It was the songs he sang from the romantic past that brought such a joyfully melodic quality to an era of hard rock.

Taking me back to the empty theater on Sunday evenings, or on long weekends, he would strum on his guitar and sing: "I don't want to play in your yard..." or "Don't bite the hand that's feeding you" (a patriotic song from World War I). After an especially amorous weekend, draped in a *lungi* and dragging his huge, brass tuba to the roof, he'd take a deep breath, his cheeks filling with air, and blast out army marching tunes and themes from his puppet shows, announcing to the world earth shaking happenings.

In the summer, we flew to the Baird home in Menemsha, on Martha's Vineyard, where we would paddle around the docks in his homemade fiberglass sea island outrigger, the "Koodledadle do." He drew on rocks we found on the beach, turning them into Viking gods and busty hula dancers, leaving them placed in circles for others to find in the sand. Friends and neighbors strolling on the shore would laughingly pick them up and take them home as souvenirs.

Often, we walked hand in hand, down to the docks on the Hudson River, watching the sunset and dreaming of the future, or go to dinner at The Blue Mill, a restaurant Bil had frequented since the twenties. As winter came, snow gently fell on the city, and in a more dulcet frame of mind, he played selections from Franz Lehar's operettas on the accordion. Being of German descent, a second language spoken in his childhood home, legend and song of the German culture often made its way into jokes and folk tales in our long and happy talks together.

Soon, I began work as his assistant, reading the books in his vast library, which included first editions of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and colorful



volumes of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Best of all, I was learning the history of puppetry and listening to Bil's spell-binding narratives of his adventurous, often complicated life with a dazzling array of friends: Buckminster Fuller, Miguel Covarrubias, Fletcher Martin, Welthy Honsinger Fisher, Mary Rogers, Sheldon Harnick and so many others. In their generosity of spirit and inspiration they remained, both in his imaginative mind and in their vibrant presence, a source of strength and artistic growth throughout his career.

My divorce proceedings dragged on and on. So did his. Time was passing. Woeful accusations were ceaseless and unending. It was a process that took nearly two years.

Feeling alone and uncertain of the future, I was left totally devoid of direction and confidence, and with the exception of Bil, there was no one I could talk to. Madeleine began to suffer strange weaknesses and fainting spells. We were being moved from location to location.

Arriving unannounced with a semi-conscious daughter at the home of two friends, Stephen Garmey, Vicar of Calvary Episcopal Church and his Roman Catholic wife Jane, we were ushered into their book-filled apartment, the bright sunlight pouring through the windows of their living room overlooking Gramercy Park. The walls were covered with original serigraphs of Sister Mary Corita, and the air was filled with the delicious aroma of Jane's spectacular cooking, for which she later became famous. Jane went right to work! Providing a roof over our heads for eight long months, we stayed in rooms in the church next to their apartment, recently vacated by nuns.

Bil visited every evening, to sing my daughter to sleep and chat in the kitchen in the basement, where the nuns plied us with sandwiches made with Wonder Bread. Sometimes, at night in the empty church, he would play the organ with all the stops pulled out. An Episcopalian, he pounded out traditional hymns that reverberated loudly throughout the building, shaking the stained glass windows fronting Gramercy Park. Occasionally, much to the annoyance of Stephen, he would play "Poor Butterfly," which always made me cry. At last, the long and ugly process of divorce came to an end.

Late one afternoon, after everyone had left for the day, Bil proposed to me in the front pew, and then, collecting Madeleine after school, took us back to the Barrow Street theater. Darkness had fallen. A sleepy silence enveloped us as we entered the lobby and took the freight elevator to the living quarters on the fourth floor. Leaving Madeleine with me he went quietly upstairs to his workshop.



Suddenly, Charlemagne the lion popped up from behind the living room couch, his head nodding joyfully from side to side. So eager, so gentle in his soft voice, he began to talk to Madeleine, asking if she thought it okay if Bil married her mother. Totally forgetting the lion was not real, she focused on his face, wooden teeth and red mane. His big soft paws patted her head and pleaded in prayerful supplication. Becoming quite shy, but full of pride and importance, she blushed a little, hemmed and hawed. Charlemagne did his stuff, nudging her with his nose, telling her about the wonderful travels

and adventures we would have together and, if she liked, could take part in one of the puppet plays.

It took almost one hour, with Bill's arms lifted above his head behind the couch on bent arthritic knees. Madeleine giggling, threw her arms around the puppet's furry neck, kissed him and told him it would be wonderful. Bil slowly stood up, rubbing his elbows and knees, with tears in his eyes and received a kiss from her, too. We began jumping from joy, holding hands and dancing around the room. To top it off, out came the bagpipes, and the strains of "Amazing Grace."

Here's to Saint Charlemagne, both the warrior who fought against heathens, and the lion who remained a steadfast, loyal friend and companion, whose veneration reached new heights that long ago night in our new home!

Despite fears of conflict and economic strife, life for all three of us became an unbelievable miracle of love, learning, meeting new responsibilities and experiencing the joy and happiness of being one, together.

With Bil, I was fortunate enough to carry on the programs of birth control in the West Indies that he had started in India for World Education decades before we met. I assisted in classifying his collection of puppets, paintings and Indian artifacts, now housed in a special wing of the Charles H. MacNider Art Museum, in Iowa.

Helping to organize lecture tours, assisting in courses in construction and performance at his school located in his theater, which was an accredited program for students studying for a Masters Degree at Brooklyn College, we returned to his native Iowa, starting a tradition of instruction and history of puppetry at the MacNider Museum, joining teachers and craftsmen to develop projects that would further their knowledge of other cultures and foreign lands. After waiting a year, Reverend Stephen Garmey officiated at our wedding, and Jane became Madeleine's godmother at her baptism at St. Luke-in-the-Fields. Alleluia!

## International Festival in Taiwan

by Sha Sha Higby



SI-LOU OF TAIWAN'S HSIN HSING KU PUPPET SHOW TROUPE

Last October I attended the International Yunlin Puppet festival in Wuwei, Taiwan. I gave six performances, two more impromptu performances, and two very popular DIY arts-in-education workshops. For the most part, performances presented and encouraged the spectrum of traditional puppetry with international groups performing in the daytime so as to encourage attendance. School groups also had a venue for their puppetry, which tended toward the conservative, and was primarily Taiwanese. Using traditional Taiwanese hand-, rod- and string-puppets, an amazing movie drama "PILI" performance that used handmade rod-puppets with articulated eyes and mouth and painted eyelashes. They used incredible Hollywood-style special effects. This show was most impressive, with its strobes and fire-crackers, moving rolling painted backgrounds, and fighting scenes. This provided quite a contrast to the cute hand puppets of Yunlin, which employ delicate hand articulation, but amazing spontaneity.

In addition to the full gamut of Taiwanese puppets, there were groups from the Philippines (a show geared more for children), and a group from Japan using 350-year-old Japanese spring puppets that are operated by two or sometimes three people. Also the Takeda marionette theater, Takenoko-Kai, featuring Edo style marionettes half the size of the original 90 cm puppets, with what seems like hundreds of strings, performed their own adaptation of the original.

From the Russian Federation came Puppet Theatre Vstrech, with Iiya Obuklova and Natalia Lepetukhina, established in 2007, with a rather traditional rod-puppet play of Petrushka. Another group came from Havorask, Russia, which was more of a well-done family affair with Petrushka and Russian song. The kids did a great job.

Also from the Kingdom of Cambodia came Sovanna Phum Art Association, a wonderful shadow play with puppets, actors, and dance. It depicted the sad story of an old Cambodian folk tale of how war transforms people, with illicit passion, a cruel murder, a vengeful ghost, and a loyal dog. It was balanced and well done.

Then, of course, there was me—not really a children's theater. I nearly dropped dead after eight shows, the first of which was performed the day I arrived for TV in front of the mayor. That was the hardest day. I also exhibited the costume in their fabulous museum for twelve days while we traveled around Taiwan, which was as beautiful as I'd always heard.

The daytime shows were the international groups, performing for children. The Chen Wu Chou Pam Puppet Troupe from Taiwan amazed us with all the special effects!

From the Republic of The Philippines came the Roppets Edutainment, a cool guy using the head of a faceless puppet in his mouth with the rest and the legs and arms controlled by the hands. He danced to western style music and also also did a dance with black light, white foam outlining the body.

I adored the Hsin Hsing Ku puppet show group Si-Lou from Taiwan. He is 83 and is so imaginative, playing like a child. We spoke to each other in Japanese. He does very intricate glove puppetry and gives away lots of puppets to the audience to encourage the people to participate in their tradition.

At night I would go to see the Taiwanese groups with the elaborate box stages, colorful battle scenes, historical dramas. It reminded me so much of my days in Indonesia watching hours of Javanese rod-puppetry without knowing the language. These Taiwanese rod- and glove-puppets were a whole lot more active. From Taiwan came the Oh Puppet Company, which appeared to be of aboriginal descent; the Ah Chung Glove Puppetry presenting a crazy *Journey to the West*; a battle of rogues running wild, definitely very active; the Yunlin Second Prison Agency of Corrections, ministry of Justice, presenting *The New Three Kingdoms*; the Ancient Capitol Palm Puppet Troupe; the Taichung Puppet Theatre; Wu Zhou/Hua Yuan; the Jin Yu Yuan Palm Troupe, presenting the *Pawn Shop of the Soul*; the Chao Ming Lou Palm Troupe of the Far East, presenting the *Story of the Tiger and Cat's Kindness and Hatred in the 12 Animals of the Chinese Zodiac*; the Sheng Ping Wu Zhou Yuan company presenting *The Resurgence of Heroic Wine*; the Wu Chou Siao Tao Yuan Palm Puppet troupe, presenting the Taiwanese folk tale *Only the Relative Assists You in Face of Danger*; the Big Alliance Palm Troupe of Taiwan, presenting *The Legend of Puzi Feet*. Each



CAMBODIA'S SOVANNA PHUM PRESENTS *THE STORY OF A DOG*

show presented by the foreign groups involved many photos taken of the children with the puppeteers, and that seemed to be half the fun.

The Taiwanese children are great and very well behaved. I think they loved that they could get practically on top of me when I performed, and responded to every gesture. They screamed and giggled. It was the most gratifying show I did. The temperature there was tropical, so all that weight of the costumes in a bodysuit was a bit overbearing.

I learned about the Pili, puppet phenomena from TV, DVD, and video games—dramas done with Barbie-doll-style puppets, perfectly crafted wooden-faced dolls, with moving, lower lips and eyes costing thousands. The clothing was a little too opulent with pearls, compared to the fine workmanship of the faces. It is fabulous that this handmade tradition could work itself into a DVD master series sold in 7-Eleven stores, and marketed everywhere in the last eight to ten years—a fairly unknown resurgence of Taiwanese Puppetry.

Sha Sha Higby is a performer/auteur. Her performance is a whimsical journey of life, death, and rebirth through ephemeral images that evoke the passage of time and day, or the shifting of the seasons—a journey in which movement and stillness meet. [www.shashahigby.com](http://www.shashahigby.com)



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## *The Puppet and the Modern*

by Marie Jirásková (text) and Pavel Jirásek

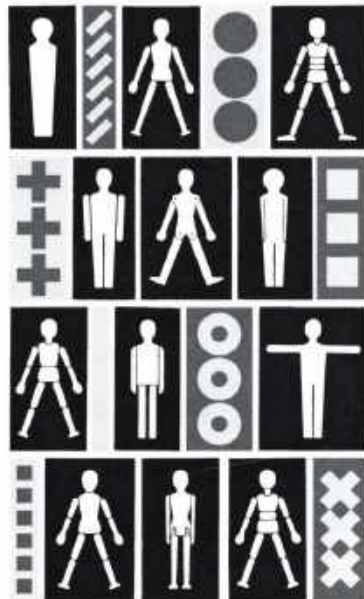
Arbor Vitae, 2014

456 pages

*The Puppet and the Modern* (the English edition of *Loutka a Modern*) provides a thoroughly illustrated survey of the most significant puppet makers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1950s, a time of transition between the classical, German-influenced 19<sup>th</sup> century traditions of puppetry in Bohemia and the later modernist innovations. In doing so, it also provides the reader with a general understanding of the history of Czech puppetry during this time, although that is not the book's primary intent.

The importance of puppetry in what is now the Czech Republic and Slovakia will hardly be news to readers—after all, UNIMA was founded in Prague in 1929. What did surprise me is the sheer scale of involvement in the creation of performances. By the end of the 1920s, the authors estimate that there were over 2,500 registered school puppet theaters and puppet theatre clubs actively performing, with at least another 2,500 family theaters. Presuming a minimum cast of 20, their math indicates a need for 100,000 figures! Much work existed for designers and sculptors, as well as for businesses engaged in the mass production of puppets for the home theatre market.

As theatre professionals and puppet collectors, the writers are uniquely qualified; they bring a practical perspective and appreciation of the challenges and innovations that are illustrated throughout the book. While the book primarily focuses on actual figures and their makers, much attention is given to the scenery and extended world of the puppet theatre. In fact, this is cited as one of the major attractions of puppetry to the scenic designer: the ability to create a visually rich world where the reality of the human figure and its proportions do not interfere with the artist's vision. This was an especially significant development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde, as the earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century figures often substituted for human performers and strove to replicate the designs of the conventional stage and the proportions of human actors. But of course, there is a



direct relationship between the necessities of the theatrical text and design; therefore, as puppet theatre became more accepting of non-realism in its dramatic texts (although not without controversy), it also became more comfortable with stylized figure proportions and other design elements. Largely through its illustrations (the primary content), the book does an excellent job of tracing the development of more stylized design practices and shows how even the home theatre came to reflect the emerging aesthetics of the professional stages.

The book is more inclusive than most puppet surveys, presenting profiles of the makers and designers of puppets used professionally, in clubs and in the home theatres. The overwhelming popularity of the Czech home theatres required the mass production of both puppets and printed settings, not unlike in the heyday of the English toy theatre. As a result, different methods evolved to meet the demand, both in the casting of puppet parts (in plaster and later, plastic) and through the use of wood lathes to turn them. The domestic puppet theatre in turn influenced the professional ones. The book also profiles several visual artists who used puppets as thematic material for their work. A painter and illustrator, Mikoláš Aleš, often utilized traditional puppetry themes in his work. He was so influential, several series of domestic puppets based upon his designs became the first mass-produced Czech puppets, with the licensing rights passed between different businesses over time.

I was surprised to learn that rather than adhering to a “folk” aesthetic, travelling puppeteers would often purchase or commission professionally carved figures, as these were considered to be preferable when mounting quality productions. But in time, professional companies would consciously adopt figures that emulated and reinterpreted the stylized proportions of the very same folk puppets previously considered insufficiently sophisticated.

The primary contribution of the book lies in its extensive documentation of the major designers and creators of puppets during this period; few were previously known to me, and then only because of their presence in the 2013 “Strings Attached” exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art. Of these, the most famous is Josef Skupa, known for his characters Spebl and Hurvinek. The authors argue that an earlier toy puppet character, Bejbl, created by Josef Čejka, influenced the 1919 design of Spebl; it's informative to compare images of the characters and see how they vary from puppets common in 1919. Versions of Skupa's creations pop up throughout the book, as toys and puppets—even as a sewn hand puppet.

While the book focuses primarily upon the string marionette, lesser known hand puppets and articulated flat puppets are also profiled. Czech stop motion puppetry, while receiving only minor attention, is primarily represented by Skupa student Jiří Trnka. In much later years, Obraztsov-style rod puppetry dominated the stage, but these appear to be beyond the scope of this book. A kind of string puppet renaissance took place after the end of Soviet influence.

With its focus placed almost exclusively upon designers (for both puppet and scenery) and puppet sculptors, this book may be too specialized for those wanting to get a more general, introductory view of the world of Czech puppetry. But while the focus remains on the figures and their creators, I do not wish to give the false impression that this is “merely” a collector’s guidebook. The scholarship is solid and insightful, and the book makes invaluable (and inspirational) contributions to our understanding of new Czech puppetry movements in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. As such, it

complements other recently published Czech puppetry books. These include the photographic survey *Ceska Louka* (also by Pavel Jirasek, with Jaroslav Blecha and Vaclav Jirasec, in Czech), which provides a greater view of the classically carved figures of an earlier period, and *Strings Attached: the Living Tradition of Czech Puppets*, an exhibition catalog and essay collection by Joe Brandesky, Beth Kattelman and Nina Malikova. A large, lusciously illustrated volume, *The Puppet and the Modern* provides rich documentation of a period important to both Czech and world puppetry history.

**Note:** As of this writing, *The Puppet and the Modern* is available in the USA through Amazon, and for much less than the identical Czech edition.

—review by Bradford Clark,  
Bowling Green State University

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MFA Production by Jason Hines

photo by Cathy McCullough

## *Sicilian Epic and the Marionette Theater*

by Michael Buonanno

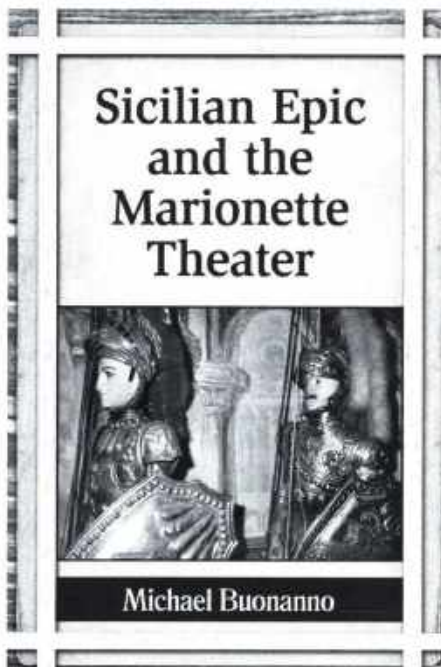
MacFarland and Company, 2014

225 pages

The iron-rodded marionettes of the Sicilian *opera dei pupi* provided entertainment for generations of families in Italy and in the new world. The most famous story dramatized in the *opera dei pupi* was derived from the French tales of the King Charlemagne, his paladins and their battles against the Saracen knights. In the climactic battle, the knight Orlando (or Roland) sounds his horn three times in order to warn his sovereign of a trap. This sacrificial effort by the epic's protagonist causes his own death, and the paladins pass into legend.

Michael Buonanno, a professor of both English and anthropology at the State College of Florida, Manatee/Sarasota, uses his specialties to examine the folklore of the Sicilian people from several perspectives. His fieldwork took place in Palermo, and his book serves to show how Charlemagne's tales, shared throughout many countries, evolved so as to address specifically Palermitan concerns. Having spent much time conversing with the citizens of Palermo, Buonanno came to recognize the popularity of the complex knight Renaud was far greater than that of the saintly Orlando, the conventional hero. Having given up arms and turned to a religious life, Renaud is the Han Solo of the *opera dei pupi* - he returns at the last moment to take his place in the battle of Roncevaux. The author portrays Renaud as the romantic bandit of the story - one who is willing to break the rules in service of a greater good, and especially to protect his loved ones from outsiders. He finds a parallel between Renaud and the outlaws of Sicily's romanticized secret societies - including the Mafia - that were thought to resist oppression, although frequently through criminal means. In addition, the saintly Orlando serves as a representation of the clergy, while the aristocracy represents the various outside powers that have occupied Sicily over the centuries - including the Italian aristocracy.

Buonanno's study looks at how these characterizations serve to reflect the relationships and negotiations between potentially conflicting segments of Sicilian society. An early discussion of Palermo's history and the diverse cultural influences traces the origins of Sicilian identity. Buonanno also examines the religious hostilities that underscore the battles between the Christian paladins and the Muslim Saracens. He became



painfully aware of them after inviting a Muslim friend to a performance; his friend shrugged off his embarrassment, observing that what they had seen were "just stories."

I was initially disappointed by the author's choice to present his scenes as short narratives, rather than as a conventional script. Translations of *opera dei pupi* texts are surprisingly rare, making these scenarios all the more valuable. (Buonanno cites Bullfinch's *Legends of Charlemagne* as a good resource for the Italian tradition.) But of course, performances have always been largely improvised from short scenarios indicating key characters and plot lines - an approach shared with many puppet traditions. While Buonanno transcribes a short 1980 performance of *The Death of the Paladins*, indicating how phrases were stressed and elongated, the prose versions of the tales are sufficient for his thematic analysis. (Unfortunately, the transcription as printed appears to suffer from a layout problem, with some jumbling of Italian and English versions.) I hope that additional translated transcriptions are forthcoming.

As the book concerns itself with the narrative themes of the *opera dei pupi*, relatively little attention is paid to details of the actual performances, although much to his credit, the author never loses sight of the text as part of a living event. He describes dialogue techniques that parallel speeches of real-life bandits. His concern is in why and how traditional audiences (almost exclusively male) responded to these dramas - how the *opera dei pupi* presented characters and plotlines that would bring them in the door, night after night, before the media age. Tony De Nonno's wonderful 1981 film about the Manteo Marionettes of New York, *It's One Family - Knock on Wood* makes the same point - the *opera dei pupi* spoke for the members of the community, drawing them together, and in doing so became much more important than "mere" entertainment.

While the majority of the book examines the *pupi* narratives, the author concludes with some discussion of Palermo folk tales and how they reflect the same kinds of cultural negotiations contained in the major epics. These kinds of "close readings" of texts can often become incomprehensible to those outside of the affected disciplines, yet for such a densely packed book, *Sicilian Epic and the Marionette Theater* is remarkably accessible. Buonanno never strays far from fundamental questions: Who are our heroes? What are their qualities? How do we see ourselves in them? How do we mold them to reflect our values? And in doing so, how does the entire process keep us together as a community?

—review by Bradford Clark,  
Bowling Green State University

## *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*

Edited by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell, 2014  
351 pages

Cresting in on the wave of our current puppetry renaissance is also the advancement of scholarship in our field, so “Look-out folks, the surf’s up!” with the publication of *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*. This publication is a series of essays by practitioners and scholars, bringing both stories from the trenches and threads from our history into a lively volley of theory and practice, dialogues and traditions, and investigations and hybridizations. Resulting mostly from the synthesized fruits of “Puppetry and Postdramatic Performance: An International Conference on Performing Objects in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” held in April 2011 at the University of Connecticut, the *Companion* is itself a tangible object that resounds with the ideas of our day concerning all things puppet.

Co-edited by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein and John Bell, North American leaders in the field of puppetry scholarship, this volume also contains scholarship and response from twenty-eight other artists and scholars including several foreign contributors. They aptly claim their book, “the most expansive collection of English-language puppetry scholarship to date.”

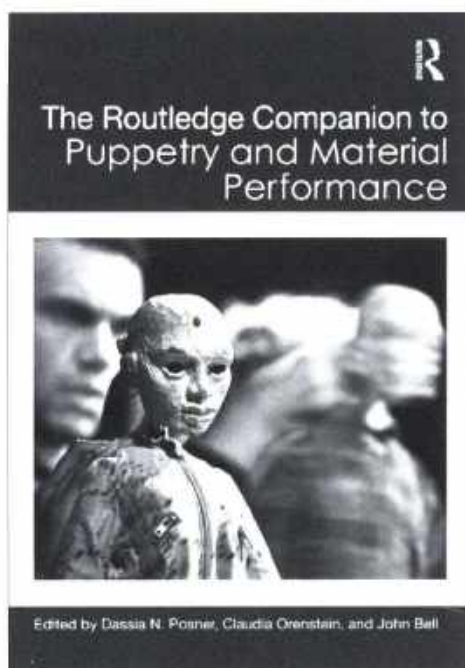
In addressing our current times as “a puppet moment,” Claudia Orenstein suggests an intimate relationship with puppetry: “Puppets and related figures that combine anthropomorphic elements with craftsmanship and engineering serve both as important metaphors and tangible expressions of our continually changing understanding of what it means to be human.” Dassia Posner poses a fundamental perspective shift: “If we begin with the assumption that objects contain life, will and intent by virtue of their design and inherent nature rather than taking for granted that humans wield (and thereby dominate) inert matter, such a view allows for a productive rethinking of how we interact with objects on the stage.” John Bell proposes we search for the invisible in the puppet by looking into “philosophical, theoretical and scientific studies that attempt to understand the nature of things; by oral histories connected to puppet practices around the world; and by the “texts of the actual puppets, masks and performing objects.”

Along with new research on numerous fascinating historical figures or movements that any puppet aficionado would relish, essays delve into such topics as:

- removal of meaning in the sensuous theatre experience of post-dramatic children’s theater
- analyzing the rhythm, music and other-worldliness of Petrushka’s voice
- deepening a perspective on the uncanny as a uniquely modern concept
- forging the idea of visual dramaturgy
- considering the use of material objects in ritual practices of grieving
- proposing theatrical spectacle as collaboration between the artist and audience
- diving into a fascination with the miniature through the emergence of model theater performance
- dissecting and discerning the reading of the puppet show through narrative theory
- crossing the intersection between robots and puppets

More culturally advanced theoretical practices (from film, literature, sociology, politics, philosophy, semiotics, etc.) are drawn upon in an attempt to define new theoretical approaches to puppetry. I suspect an advanced degree in puppetry could be attained by anyone willing to further pursue the numerous bibliographical secrets cumulatively revealed in this single volume. This *Companion* gives platform to the thinkers of our day in their search for an articulation to our truly unruly art form. The vitality audiences have seen on our puppet stages in the recent decades is dynamically revealed here in vibrant thought and discourse.

—review by Blair Thomas



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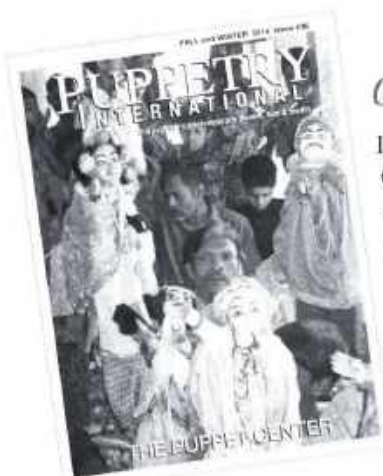
*Setting the Record Straight—*

Dear Andrew C. Periale,

Going through Issue 36 of *Puppetry International* (Fall and Winter 2014), I came across "Charleville-Mézières, The World Capital for the Arts of Puppetry." I was happy to see photo 22, showing one of our very talented trainees' work. But I was very surprised that I was announced as the only director of the workshop. The International Institute engaged two artists to direct this workshop: Narguess Majd and me. We both taught and accompanied the trainees all during the three weeks and as your magazine is known to be a source of accurate information, I thought to let you know.

I hope that you and your group will continue the fruitful work which has great importance among international publications on Puppetry.

Best wishes,  
Alain Lecucq



*Correction—*

In PI#36, our Puppetry Centers issue, we misspelled the author's name for the piece on the Puppet Showplace Theater in Brookline, MA. This should properly have been attributed to Roxanna Myhrum.

# 2015 NEW ENGLAND PUPPET INTENSIVE

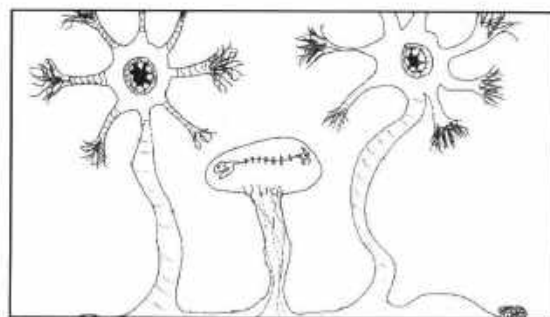
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—Marilyne Fournier, 2013 NEPI Participant

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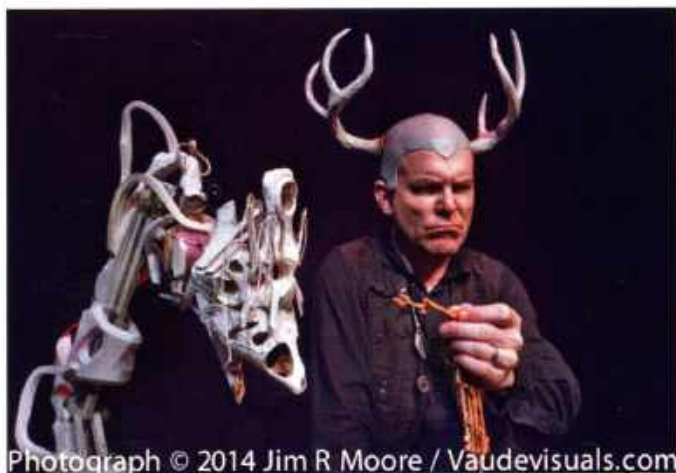
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L-R: *Zverge* (Photo by Richard Termine), James Godwin's *The Flatiron Hex*, Wyatt Cenac's *Brooklyn* and *The Adventure's of Liverwurst Girl*.



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