

Thoughts on How to Build New Audiences for Puppetry

An inquiry by Maria Nicklin

A question was posed to a number of notable puppeteers, theater directors, and others with firsthand experience, "Would you agree that most American adults and teens do not consider puppetry as an art form aimed at them, that it's just for children?" The responses were almost tied, yes versus no. Another question, "What steps could be/are being taken to build new (and older) audiences while sustaining puppetry's young audience base?" led to even more compelling observations.

For those inside the puppetry community, The Jim Henson Foundation's [Puppet Happenings](#) weekly newsletter, *The Puppetry Journal*, or *Puppetry International* reveals a great deal of puppetry geared toward older audiences. But for those who are not, some may think puppetry, especially live performance, is for children; something they might only experience at school assemblies, especially in rural areas.

"The fact that there is demand for puppetry for children inevitably perpetuates the perception [that is it for children]." – Leslie Burton, [Puppet Showplace Theater](#)



"Many consider puppetry a child-centric art form because we associate it with our own experiences of watching puppetry as a child -- whether through television programs such as Sesame Street and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood or live puppetry performances at schools, libraries and churches." – Darin Johnson, [American Theater for Puppetry Arts](#)



"How many audiences can support adult puppet theater? Not enough. It was a business decision [to focus on shows for children in school]." – Michael Cotter, [Blue Sky Puppet Theatre](#)



How then, can new (and older) audiences be built while sustaining puppetry's young audience base? Almost all of the responses included one or more of the following overarching, strongly interconnected, essential elements: education, craftsmanship, promotion, funding, and community.

Read on for insights from prominent puppeteers, theater directors, and academic-based individuals about how each element impacts the growth of new audiences.

EDUCATION

The scarcity of puppetry arts education in classrooms (elementary school through university) and the limited access to puppetry performances especially in non-urban areas influence perceptions such as, puppetry is just for kids or worse, puppetry is scary; and likely responsible for why there's more paid opportunities to create and perform work with K-12 schools than with arts venues. Here are a few reflections addressing the need for continued educational opportunities in the puppetry arts:

"Entertainment venues, unlike schools and libraries, depend on ticket sales to pay the bills, 'to keep the lights on' that is why more 'adult' geared puppetry is too great a risk; it's more a sure thing for kids; those shows people understand." – Elizabeth Bracey, Director, Franklin Park Performing and Visual Arts Center



"Schools have always been big customers for puppeteers, I suppose, because one could get a large cast production for the cost of just a couple of actors ... Many adults, if they watch movies, see a great deal of puppetry, though they may not realize it. Many of the aliens, animals and other characters and creatures are animated (entirely or in part) by puppeteers. These puppeteers don't get top billing -- they tend to be listed among the special effects personnel" – Andrew Periale, Perry Alley Theatre



"[My] shows for children are original, high-quality, and have serious subject matter, for example: drug and alcohol use, social awareness, climate change, social action; there is always something for adults [too]." – Michael Cotter, [Blue Sky Puppet Theatre](#)



"When I do perform for the older elementary students, it's intriguing to watch this attitude [puppetry is not cool] (usually) be worn down and eventually these students do become engaged in the performance. It's just a matter of getting over this stigma that puppetry has been saddled with first ... At this age students realize the power of puppetry and how it can be used for satire, conflict resolution, interpreting current events, etc." – Drew Allison, [Gray Seal Puppets](#)



"Puppetry is an art form that when done well, it looks easy to do. So, it may be tempting for someone without any experience to assume they'd be great at it right from the start. But it's a skill that requires training and practice like anything else in the performing arts. I think that the more an audience gets to see skillful puppetry, the more they'll respect it and give it the dignity I think it deserves." – Dylan Shelton, [Madcap Puppets](#)



"There are not a lot of puppet theaters in the USA, especially in rural areas. Many people have never seen a puppet show before or learned of the history of puppetry arts ... [you can] Build new audiences by: Working with state departments of K-12 education on teaching puppetry as part of the standard course of study on drama ...Collaborating the colleges/universities to showcase puppetry arts to education majors (social workers, speech language, ESL, psychologist, etc.)" –Kathie Guild, [Puppet Show Incorporated](#)



"... promoting puppetry arts in university programs throughout the country would contribute greatly as well." – Leslie Burton, [Puppet Showplace Theater](#)



"So many universities now including puppetry in their theater programs for the first time is producing the largest generation of new puppetry artists I've ever seen, who mostly seem dedicated to puppetry for adults. However, how this translates into the consciousness of the average American teenager and adults who perhaps don't go to theater, I don't know." – Linda Wingerter, [The Stringpullers Puppet Company](#)



"I have been teaching a college level introductory course to puppetry at William & Mary in VA for the past 5 years. It is titled "Puppetry In Performance" ... By the end of the semester [students] do have a much greater appreciation of the (hard) work of puppetry, its possibilities and its place as an art form ... I guess an important first step is looking to how the Puppetry field can connect with the theater field (educational/professional) in a more proactive way." – Mark Lerman, [Virginia Theater Machine](#)



"Professional training, increased opportunities, and a broader range of operational support are critically needed to allow a larger number of self-employed puppeteers



work professionally in the field and build appreciation and engagement with the public.” – Shannon Reagan Dunham, [Wyndwolf Puppets](#)

“America doesn’t have a deep tradition in the art form as is found in other countries. Additionally, we have lots of puppetry that’s aimed at children and not nearly as much aimed at adults.” – Penny Benson, [Puppets, Masks & More](#)



“There is nothing wrong with using puppetry in schools as a tool to support academic subjects. In educational circles, it is called “arts integration.” It introduces children to the art form or its existence. However, if we are to aim to develop new audiences, it would be reasonable to do more.” – Jacek Zuzanski, [Dream Tale Puppets](#)



[Click here](#) to read Jacek’s excellent essay in response to the questions for this article.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

Whereas some poorly executed shows may lead audiences to consider the art form as child’s play, exposure to “programs of high artistic quality” (Zuzanski) creates a sense of appreciation. It may be unconscious, but it’s there. Greater appreciation leads to greater support. Following are a few quotes underscoring the influence of craftsmanship in the puppetry arts:

“Some storytellers use puppets to tell stories in a way that is aimed for the youngest kids, which is OK but often they don’t have any training in puppetry so adults might see the puppetry and dismiss it. Same with church ministries sometimes. I don’t fault those people or programs but I think it can work against the awareness or appreciation of the art form in unintended ways.” – Nancy Riggs, [Piccadilly Puppets](#)



“There is no formula for creativity. Audiences recognize the humanity in making things original, especially if the artist can imbue that “thing” with a super-life ... Craftsmanship is vital because you recognize the skill and expertise in it. Look for beauty in the invisible stream from which we all ripple out ... When the juice is flowing, spoon in positive ideas; which can plant seeds into the soul, and if those expressions take root in willing soil, the recipients will walk away elevated and enlightened.” – Craig Marin, [Flexitoon](#)



"It is something about puppetry's connection to folk and popular art. Some elements of the work may be "primitive" or "underdeveloped," but when combined with other powerful, excellent, or extraordinary elements the artistic work can reach a high level of artistry and influence cultural and social transformation." – Jacek Zuzanski, [Dream Tale Puppets](#)



"The most successful shows have so many layers and are a delight for everyone but those older kids who attend with their younger siblings often go reluctantly thinking they are too old but then loving the show ... I do feel the design of the puppet effects the appeal." – Charlotte Anne Dore, [Rosalita's Puppets](#)



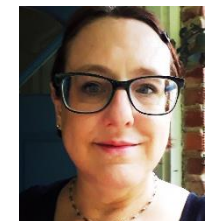
"If family audiences find your work engaging, I think they'll remember you and try to see more. A venue that has a tradition of bringing in high quality performances will naturally see their audiences grow. I think it's the same with performers. I try to connect with the audience as much as possible during a show. I want the teachers, parents, and other adults to enjoy it as much as the kids do. If the audience shares a fun and memorable experience, you're building a relationship with them, and they'll want to connect with your work year after year." – Dylan Shelton, [Madcap Puppets](#)



"Good adult puppet theater still has to be good theater and has to have the kind of tension that draws the audience in. And exciting visuals to get people in the door." – Eric Bass, [Sandglass Theater](#)



"Despite the fact their scenery is mainly a low-tech scroll (sort of crankies style), I love to hear the audience react with oohs and ahhs when it changes. It's [Tanglewood Marionette's, *The Dragon King*] really a show that appeals to all ages. Its reliance on traditional stagecraft proves that video and fancy effects aren't the end-all be-all of production. Adults were still asking me weeks later when the show would be back." – Laurie Swygert, Director of Membership Services for [UNIMA-USA](#)



"As a participant observer of B&P's work, I see B&P creating performances that are intended to be able to be seen (and somehow grasped) by people of all ages and various life experiences." – Josh Krugman, [Bread and Puppet Theater](#)



PROMOTION

On the topic of promotion, there were many diverse and inspiring ideas shared. One puppeteer, who asked not to be cited, offered, "Puppetry for children is the norm and while theater and dance companies use puppetry, they do not seem to capitalize on the term Puppetry. Perhaps it is the word ... Theater and dance companies use puppetry but don't call it puppetry — it's just another way of making theater. It's another theatrical device. So maybe it's the American need to box performing arts into categories." One of the most compelling and motivating takeaways: be your own best advocate. Promotion takes a lot of work but it builds community and strong community connections help build new audiences. Following are a few insights regarding promotion:

"Advocacy can change the external views of puppetry and artist pay ... The stigma that puppets are only for children continues to harm the income and performance possibilities for puppeteers, but can be changed through advocacy and outreach efforts." – Shannon Reagan Dunham, [Wyndwolf Puppets](#)



"We see puppet shows as a way for children to be introduced to the theater experience, and also as an activity that parents can enjoy just as much as their children. The stories are beautiful and often culturally significant and are reimaged by the creative world of puppetry arts ... in Loudoun there are a lot of competing activities, senior centers may enjoy the shows, older fairy tales that would appeal in the same way a play or ballet; it's about how it's marketed." – Elizabeth Bracey, Director, [Franklin Park Performing and Visual Arts Center](#)



"Many live puppet shows that are sold as kids shows should be billed as family entertainment, because that's really what they are ... best seen by multi-generations, all enjoying the show together and possibly getting different things out of it." – Erik Torbeck, [Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers](#)



"We've had success cultivating our local community with a Puppeteers' Happy Hour group, which convenes periodically to provide feedback on works in progress, network, and enjoy professional development opportunities with visiting artists. I recommend gathering together a small group of aficionados, listening to their interests, and collectively devising ways to bring a couple of small dreams into reality. The puppet community you begin with will beget more of the same in time." – Ian Bannon, [Mayo Street Arts](#)



"Puppet Slams and new works of puppet theater, theater that incorporates puppets and puppet films are gaining in popularity and availability. We just need to keep putting it out there and supporting what is happening around us. Large scale productions get the most press, and that's helpful, but smaller works also have the ability to reach multiple audiences and spread the word." – Penny Benson, [Puppets, Masks & More](#)



"(Our theater) thinks that arts shouldn't be above or apart from the daily life and needs of a community, so we feel that it is our job as artists living in a place to build relationships and connections wherever we can be of service. For us, that means being responsive, and building unlikely collaborations and partnerships (with farms, general stores, churches, town government, etc.). We are a theater company that tries to function more like a civic center than an arts organization." – Rose Friedman, [Modern Times Theater](#)



"I would like to see festivals include content intended for families and children as a promoted segment of their programming. We must value audiences of all ages by indicating the intended audience age-range, in much the same way as any other entertainment form." – Steven Widerman, [The Puppet Company](#)



"In terms of building more of an audience for adult puppetry, I think minimizing a given performance's identification as a "puppet show" helps. Though we are proud to be puppeteers, we think of puppetry as one form among many integrated into our work—and therefore better identified simply as theater rather than as puppet theater." – John Farrell, [Figures of Speech Theater](#)



FUNDING

The need for increased funding for artists is indisputable; it allows puppeteers to create quality work – and live. Compromised quality may weaken chances for support. The good news: the other essential elements (education, craftsmanship, promotion, and community) can be harnessed to increase chances for greater financial support. Following are thoughts regarding funding for puppeteers and the puppetry arts:

"Puppetry arts in the United States is significantly underfunded. As a result of inadequate funding, puppet theater is often produced on a dime – impacting quality,



craftsmanship and scale of productions.” – Darin Johnson, [American Theater for Puppetry Arts](#)

“For building new audiences while sustaining the old audience base, stable support for puppeteers is the key. When artists get the funding they need, the array of work being produced will suit the tastes of everyone.” – Dmitri Carter, [Northwest Puppet Center](#)



“Expanding funding opportunities and creating business sponsorships for puppet companies to flourish.” – Kathie Guild, [Puppet Show Incorporated](#)



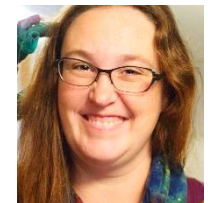
“Many faculty also have access to funds to cover such intensive training but do not know or even consider puppetry as an option. While a small step, what if 7-12 new faculty participated every year and brought such a course to their campuses every year thereafter?” – Mark Lerman, [Virginia Theater Machine](#)



“Welcome corporate sponsorships, e.g. Pepco.” – Michael Cotter, [Blue Sky Puppet Theatre](#)



“Non-puppeteers who are patrons of puppetry should be encouraged to donate to puppet organizations, such as Puppeteers of America, through donations and attendance at events or performances. An increase in non-puppeteer patrons will improve funding for puppetry support organizations and increase attendance at puppet engagement opportunities from self-employed puppeteers.” – Shannon Reagan Dunham, [Wyndwolf Puppets](#)



COMMUNITY

It’s important to create connections with individuals and groups outside of the world of puppetry so they can know about the multifaceted nature of the puppetry arts, and its ability to educate, enchant, and even heal.

“Puppetry is all the arts in one,” (Craig Marin). The awe, wonder, appreciation, and respect that may arise with this knowledge could foster a growing network of new audiences for the puppetry arts. You may find an unlikely supporter who could help with things like arranging classes, finding funding, writing articles, and promoting your work. Following are some reflections on the topic of community building:

"A big part of that effort is to work with and for people who we do not think, act, or look like: In other words, we want to entertain and include everyone in our extended rural community, and create shared experiences in which everyone can feel welcome. It's not easy to do this, it requires ongoing and consistent effort and learning, and it's not always comfortable. But connecting with the full breadth of people in our neighborhood sharpens our thinking and our work." – Rose Friedman, [Modern Times Theater](#)



"In dialogue and through meetings with our potential new audiences, we may have a chance to discover often economically tough business ... probably the most obvious way of building new audiences: finding and partnering with presenters ... It is great to join forces with like-minded artists, presenters, and educators, to work together with other cultural workers and people passionate about changing the world we live in and shape."

– Jacek Zuzanski, [Dreamtale Puppets](#)



"Modern day traveling shows through rural areas could also offer workshops and socials, bringing both the joy of puppets to rural citizens and an increase in income ... The traveling puppeteer could be a new permutation of an old lifestyle." – Shannon Reagan Dunham, [Wyndwolf Puppets](#)



CONCLUSION

You are all at different stages in your career and may have implemented many or all of the essentials listed above. Overall, you've conveyed an optimism for the vitality of the puppetry arts.

Keep establishing connections and letting people know about what you do, especially via non arts publications and platforms. Have conversations with those outside the puppetry community (or who are just becoming familiar with the art form – you bring a lot of good energy and inspiration to the world overall when you talk about what you do.

The younger audiences will someday be the older audiences and that's why the community you grow and nurture with people of all ages will be an ongoing source of strength, understanding, respect, and support for your work for years to come.

CREDITS & THANKS



Our contributor **Maria Nicklin** (left, with Madeline) can be found online at <https://www.furyworks.com/>. There you'll see that Maria is a talented illustrator, and a passionate puppeteer with a particular fondness for crankies, as well as a terrific writer.

Writer's note: Thank you to all of the wonderful individuals listed below who took the time to respond to the queries for this article and provided guidance. It was inspiring to meet everyone and I hope this article reflects your perspectives accurately. – Maria Nicklin

Drew Allison, [Grey Seal Puppets, Inc](#)

Ian Bannon, [Mayo Street Arts](#)

Eric Bass, [Sandglass Theater](#)

Penny Benson, [Puppets, Masks & More](#)

Elizabeth Bracey, [Franklin Park Performing and Visual Arts Center](#)

Leslie Burton, [Puppet Showplace Theater](#)

Dmitri Carter, [Northwest Puppet Center/Carter Family Marionettes](#)

Michael Cotter, [Blue Sky Puppet Theatre](#)

Charlotte Anne Dore, [Rosalita's Puppets](#)

Bonnie Duncan, [The Gottabees](#)

John Farrell, [Figures of Speech Theatre](#)

Rose Friedman, [Modern Times Theater](#)

Joan Gardiner, [Unison Pottery & Tile](#)

Kathie Guild, [Puppet Show Incorporated](#)

Darin E. Johnson, [American Theater for Puppetry Arts](#)

Josh Krugman, [Bread and Puppet Theater](#)

Mark Lerman, [Virginia Theatre Machine](#)

Craig Marin, [Flexitoon](#)

Andrew Periale, [Perry Alley Theatre](#)

Nancy Riggs, [Piccadilly Puppets](#)

Laurie Scheer, [New Nature Writers](#)

Dylan Shelton, [Madcap Puppets](#)

Laurie Swygert, [Center for Puppetry Arts, UNIMA-USA](#)

Erik Torbeck, [FrogTown Mountain Puppeteers](#)

Liz Weaver, [Paprika Creative](#)

Steven Widerman, [The Puppet Company](#)

Linda Wingerter, [The Stringpullers Puppet Company](#)

Jacek Zuzanski, [Dream Tale Puppets](#)