



OPAL



SUMMER 2012

The Fourth Wall

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AUDIENCES FOR ONTARIO PUPPETRY—STRONGER THAN EVER?

Andreas Krebs, *OPAL* Editor. andreas@wildrun.ca

We have another excellent issue of the *OPAL* for you this summer. The theme this time is "audiences," and we have meditations on surfing, the fourth wall, the crazy ontology of moving objects, and more. My own experience with audiences is only just beginning, but I have to say that I'm really heartened by how Toronto audiences respond to puppetry.



Tim Holland
Photo by Dahlia Katz



Joel Brubacher
Photo by Dahlia Katz

My partner Suzanne Gallant and I recently organized a puppet slam in the west end of Toronto, called The Toronto Puppet Explosion, and we were amazed by the community response. Sure, we set tickets at the bargain price of \$5, but the place was packed, and on a Wednesday night no less! Knowing that people want puppets in their lives warms the cockles of my heart. And these weren't even kids—in line with Jamie Ashby's defense of puppetry as more than just a saccharin spectacle for schoolchildren, we put on a sold out show to a whole crowd of cynical urban hipster types.

This appetite for puppetry really bodes well for the future of our art form. In this issue, Mike Harding says that whether we hang ten on the audience wave or sink below it has everything to do with the attitude we bring to the show. But in order to surf at all, we need the beach—er, audience. And in my pretty short-lived experience, it seems there is no lack of appetite for puppetry in Ontario.

Note: Special thanks to Dahlia Katz for use of her amazing photography throughout this issue. www.dahliakatz.com



Puppet Slam Performers
Photo by Dahlia Katz



A MESSAGE FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Mike Harding, Applefun Puppetry

“Your living is determined not so much by what life brings to you as by the attitude you bring to life; not so much by what happens to you as by the way your mind looks at what happens.”

– Khalil Gibran

Audiences. Where would we be without them?

My feeling is that performing for any audience is like riding on an ocean wave. On a good day it will carry you, and you'll feel like you're flying. But on a bad day you can feel like you're drowning. Not to put too much pressure on us, but I think that more often than not we sink or swim based on the energy that we, the performers, bring to the stage. In this way, a puppet show is like life.

When viewed through this lens, whether the audience is good or bad, at least you get to surf. As our own Ronnie Burkett once said, “All that an audience really wants is someone to breathe with them.” So, everyone take a deep breath...and hang ten!

WARHORSE TIMES 3: THE FOURTH WALL OR NOT, OR WHY I ADMIRERD THE STAGE PLAY BUT DIDN'T LOVE IT AS MUCH AS I THOUGHT I WOULD

Pat Lewis

Like most puppeteers, I looked forward to seeing *Warhorse*—the play, that is. I'd seen the YouTube clips of the incredibly lifelike horse puppets. I'd even been to a manipulation workshop provided for OPA members. I was psyched. I was pumped and ready to be awed.

During the first act of the play I admired the horses, then I admired all the clever staging tricks, then I noticed I wasn't engaged. And in theatre that's not really a good thing. I left the theatre feeling as though the story was a little like a doughnut—a lot happening around the edges, a curious big hole in the middle. The more I turned over the idea in my mind, the more that hole began to look like a Joey-shaped hole. Even though the story was named for the horse, it always felt to me that the horse was merely something to which the people were meant to react.

Curious, I decided that it was time to read the book (I'd been meaning to do this for ages but hadn't quite got to it). The problem smacked me in the face in the first paragraph. The whole story is one anthropomorphic, first-person odyssey of a narrative. It's not just Joey's story—Joey tells the story, in full sentences, with candour, compassion, and insight. Humans and animals enter and exit the story in quick succession.

The horse's observations and insights are what hold it all together. And the horse is the perfect outsider character to observe the idiocy that was the First World War. A British soldier caught behind the German lines, as Joey was, would simply languish in a prisoner of war camp, which would limit the scope of the story. A British soldier behind enemy lines who actually helped haul a German gun into position, as Joey did,

would not return home a hero. If caught at it, he'd likely be shot on sight as a traitor. And with a British soldier protagonist, both the German and the French experience would be told through his lens, not from the more neutral horse's point of view. The horse, having no political opinions, allows each person's narrative to speak for itself.

The other interesting thing about the structure of the book is that although Joey the horse narrates the story, within the context of the story he is just a horse. Unlike Mr. Ed he doesn't chat with humans in English. And this structure is probably what caused my sense that the play's story had a hole in the middle of it. The horses in the stage play have been manipulated to mimic real live horses brilliantly. But they have been given few, if any, anthropomorphic qualities. And more importantly they have no voice.

I can see clearly why the playwright chose not to grace the stage with a talking horse. Try Googling Mr. Ed or Quick Draw McGraw. A talking horse is funny or silly. WWI, not so much. But how do you put the horse in the centre of a story that's happening all around him? How do you make it his story?

I believe that the stage production did not fully exploit all the tricks of the puppet trade to do this. There are three main ways that puppeteers create the illusion of life with their puppets. The first is lifelike



Warhorse stage production
Photo by Brinkhoff / Mögenburg

manipulation. I cannot fault the puppet horses on this. They're brilliant. The second is the judicious use of breath. Again I cannot fault the puppet horses. The third is eye contact and a blithe disregard of the live actor's dreaded fourth wall. Check out the Muppets. I'm pretty sure Animal blew up their fourth wall years ago.

I remember my introduction to the fourth wall. My first performing experience as a teenager was as a folksinger. Conversations with my father went something like this—"Look at the audience more, smile!"—"But it's a ballad!"—"Look at the audience more, smile!"—lather, rinse, repeat. Did my father's advice sink in? Apparently yes, because after my very first improv in acting class with Eli Rill, I got a little polite praise—and then came the correction: "Don't look at the audience." I had found the fourth wall. Simply put, speakers and singers converse directly with their audience even if the conversation is a little one-sided. Actors, conversely, converse with one another and the audience hides behind the fourth wall conveniently located at the front of the stage, eavesdropping. Actors aren't supposed to eyeball the audience and ruin the illusion of a separate reality onstage.

Well, that's what actors may do, but puppets, they're a different breed. When I trained with puppeteer Nikki Tilroe, she taught us that puppets needed to look at the audience to maintain the illusion of life. Puppets look out at the audience to invite the audience to see what's going on in their little foam heads. It doesn't matter if the puppet is silently commenting on the silliness of another puppet's behaviour or looking for sympathy, the puppet looks at the audience. And this is what was missing in the performance of *Warhorse* that I watched. There were many moments when Joey could have secured his place at the centre of the story simply by looking out to the audience and inviting them to share a joke or witness his suffering. No over-the-top mugging was necessary, just the simple act of looking at the audience and including them in his feelings and thoughts. But it seemed to me that Joey was firmly tucked behind the actor's fourth wall. And this is all the more mysterious to me since the troubadour singing her way through scene changes on stage sang, as all good troubadours do, to us, the audience.

Having seen the stage play and read the book, I was now very curious to see how Spielberg dealt with the story. I suspected I wouldn't be hearing the Joey voice-over option, but I also suspected I'd be seeing a lot of that cinematic technique that live theatre simply cannot reproduce: the close-up. And I was not disappointed. From the shots of Joey and Tophorn nuzzling noses, to the reflection of Emily in Joey's eye the first time they see each other, to the long look Joey casts back to Tophorn as he goes to the back of the line after Joey has volunteered to pull in his place, the close-ups make it clear that this is mainly the horse's story.

My first performing experience as a teenager was as a folksinger. Conversations with my father went something like this—"Look at the audience more, smile!"—"But it's a ballad"—"Look at the audience more, smile!"—rinse, lather, and repeat. After my very first improv in acting class, I got a little polite praise and then the corrections—"Don't look at the audience." I had found the fourth wall.

And here I say *mainly* because the focus of the story shifts a bit from the book to the play to the movie. With Joey narrating the book, the story is about a horse's experiences and observations of the hardships and senselessness of war. He recounts the gruesome impact of war on everyone he meets. It is also about

his longing for home. And home isn't just Albert: it's Zoey, the other plough horse on the farm, it's the satisfying task of ploughing the field, it's about riding in the peaceful countryside. In short, it's about longing for the comfort and stability of peace. And for a book about a rather grim topic, it is curiously gentle in tone.

Both the play and the movie lose Joey's commentary and refashion the plot to be more about a horse and his boy—or, more anthropocentrically, a boy and his horse. This shifts the focus from the horse's experiences and observations of war to a story about war as a nasty backdrop to the important story of Albert and Joey reuniting. It's a subtle shift but an important one. When war is the challenge that must be overcome, especially by someone as young as Albert, it tends to subtly glorify war as a rite of passage. I would love to see the horse reclaim the story and place his perceptions of the misery and senselessness of war back at the story's centre.

Check out the Muppets. I'm pretty sure Animal blew up their fourth wall years ago.

I've always thought people who liked the book better were people who'd read the book first and become attached to it and just wouldn't see the movie or play as simply a different telling of the story. In this case, although I read the book second, I'm afraid that as much as I love the puppets for their brilliance and artistry, as much as I love the movie for its amazingly well-trained horses and the beautiful scenery, I love the book more for delivering in its gentle way the important message that War is Hell, straight from the horse's mouth.

Pat Lewis has been engaging young audiences with puppetry for over 30 years. Her TV and film credits include puppet performance in I Claudia and work with the Muppets. She currently performs her own original one-person shows and is a performing member of Lampoon Puppettheatre under the direction of Johan Vandergun.

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Hey everyone, now you can pay your OPA membership dues via PayPal and credit card! Also, we have introduced new membership rates for students, individuals, and groups. Want to be a member for life? No problem, lifetime memberships are available too. Visit www.onpuppet.ca!

Bonus: The first person to buy a lifetime membership will get a puppet event held in their name!

PUPPETRY RAISES SOME IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

Erin Armstrong, Program and Fundraising Director, The Concerned Kids



Important Questions at a Concerned Kids Puppet Show
Photo by Linamaria Aristizabal

Our organization, The Concerned Kids, presents interactive and educational puppet programs to children and youth ages 6 to 12 in elementary schools and community organizations in Toronto. Our presentations explore relevant social issues. We include interactive segments between each of the three skits during which the audience members can ask questions and share suggestions with the puppet characters. At a performance in April, one of our board members was in attendance for this situation with the audience:

"We were presenting a *Bullies* show to a group of students. There was a question that caused some concern. A student who had been determined to ask his question since the second act was called upon when he raised his hand yet again in the third act.

"What if your Daddy, at home, is the bully?" he asked. This is what we call a *red-flag issue*. I identified the question and the kid who posed it to the teachers present.

"I was told that the kid would sit down with his homeroom teacher and discuss the question he asked. By the way, Derek, one of volunteer-puppeteers, answered the question in a very sensitive and responsible manner. Derek then came up to me after the show to ensure that this kid and question were identified. This situation could be harmless, but then we could have intervened where a child was at risk."

These are important questions that need to be asked—and someone needs to be there to answer them. Through puppetry, we create a safe and open forum for discussion where children and youth can relate to the puppet characters who are just like them.

Erin Armstrong is the Program Director of The Concerned Kids Charity of Toronto. Although at first a reluctant puppeteer, through meeting dedicated puppeteers and world-changers she has learned the true magic that puppetry holds for people of all ages.

*Puppetry Praxis—Puppetry Theory, History, and Practice***JUST HOW LAZY ARE WE?**

James Beauregard Ashby, The Bricoteer Puppetry Project

“There are no fat puppeteers,” Bill Baird claims in *The Art of the Puppet*, perhaps still the most famous English-language book on puppetry yet published.

“The work is too strenuous” (24) he explains. Although his tone is too judgmental and his conclusion, I would argue, overgeneralized, surely many of us who have some performance experience must find ourselves nodding in agreement with his description of the “work” involved. Nonetheless, as the reader may recall from my article in the last issue of the *OPAL*, Peter D. Arnott finds “a certain laziness in the puppeteer,” which contributes to the “vicious circle” (40) that he identifies: “The percipient adult comes to realize that he can expect only a superficial entertainment...So the public expects to be able to bring children, and troupes who make their living from puppetry are forced to give the public what it wants. Inevitably, the entertainment cannot rise above a certain level” (40-41). So what are we to make of this seeming contradiction? In other words, how do we supposedly lazy puppet artists stay as trim as Baird believes we all are?

The reworded version of that question was largely rhetorical in nature, since we puppet artists, of course, come in many shapes and sizes, just like our puppets. That said, we might still wonder how we could be considered lazy, given how “strenuous” our responsibilities can be, at least physically. The reader might also recall from my most recent article how “fatally easy” Arnott thinks puppetry to be, due to “an irresistible attraction about these little moving figures” (40). This “fatal ease” has an upside, as Steve Tillis recognizes. He stresses that “almost regardless of the production values involved, the puppet will stimulate a certain amount of pleasure by challenging its audience to consider the ontology of an ‘object’ with ‘life’” (66). Tillis is relating what Arnott identifies as a problem inherent in puppetry to his own theory of the “double-vision created by the puppet”: “the audience sees the puppet, through perception and through imagination, as an object and as a life; that is,

it sees the puppet in two ways at once” (64). Although this process of perceiving and imagining is actually quite complex, the audience does not even need to be cognizant of it in order for it to function effectively. Even young children can appreciate “the pleasure of a profound and illuminating paradox provoked by an ‘object’ with ‘life’” (65), as Tillis notes, which, of course, leads us back to Arnott’s “vicious circle.” Tillis cautions, however, that any “laziness” of the type discerned by Arnott “and the mediocre puppetry that results from it, are the fault of particular artists, and not of puppetry itself” (66).

Tillis goes on to incorporate his theory of “double-vision” into the definition of *puppet* that he proposes. I bring this up partly in the hope of generating some discussion, as whatever our various connections to puppetry might be, we can become so preoccupied with our more routine tasks—whether they be associated with a position at a library, in a troupe, or in another context—that we lose sight of first principles. The way in which we chose to define the word that lies at the very heart of what we do is clearly going to affect how we do it. Although many definitions of *puppet* are available, the “[p]erfect definition eludes theorists, historians, puppeteers, [and] dictionary-makers,” as A. R. Philpott writes, undoubtedly with at least a hint of irony, in his *Dictionary of Puppetry*. Tillis strives to avoid the subjective, anecdotal, and oversimplified language that has plagued so many other sources.

One of the advantages of Tillis’s definition is that it emphasizes the importance of the audience: if they think something is a puppet, then it is a puppet. This is apparent in his definition of this elusive figure as “a theatrical figure, perceived by an audience to be an object, that is given design, movement, and frequently, speech, so that it fulfills the audience’s desire to imagine it as having life” (65). Thus, a human hand, if it is estranged from the rest of the body in such a way that it becomes objectified and yet also takes on a life of its own, can be a puppet, whether or not it is costumed. A puppet can, of course, also be wholly composed of inanimate material, or it can be created through some kind of phenomenological

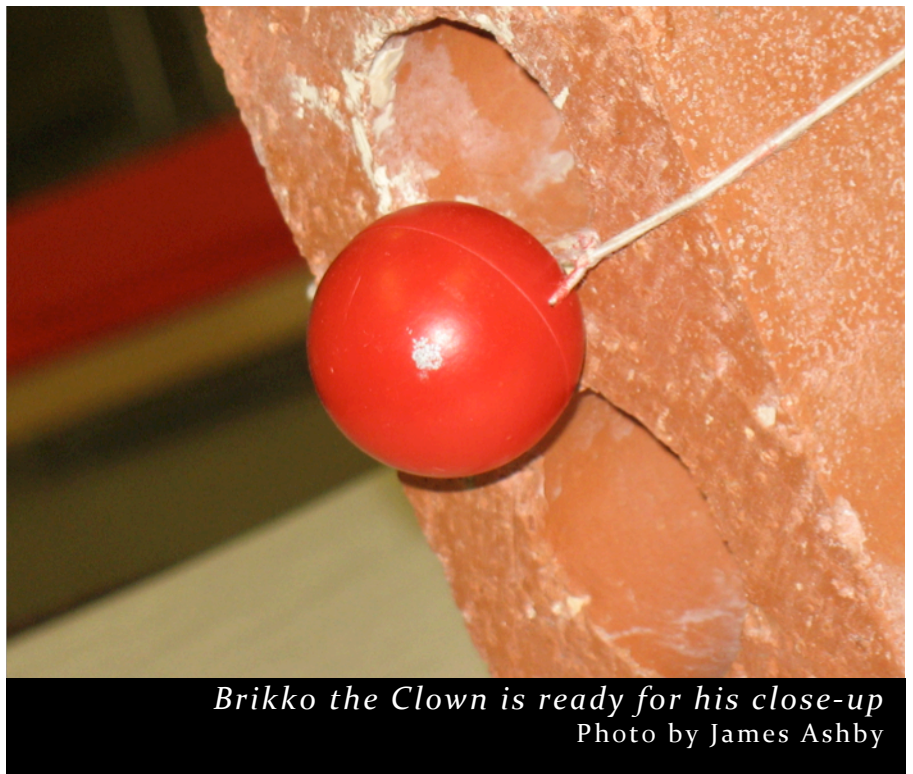
merging of the animate and the inanimate: a found object, for example, can be made to wave by placing a human hand right beside it.

Following up on this definition, one could put even more of a positive spin on the conditions unique to puppetry than Tillis does, and assert that skilled puppet artists can take advantage of how “fatally easy” it really is to trigger audiences’ double-vision. They can guide audiences through what Eileen Blumenthal refers to as the “high-wire act” of puppetry: “the gap between normal reality and stage truth” in the more conventional human theatre “becomes a chasm,” and so the performers must inspire the spectators to undertake “canyon-spanning feats of disbelief suspension” (71). One of her examples is the Puppetmongers Theatre production *The Brick Bros. Circus* (1978), for which the sister-and-brother team of Ann and David Powell must invest their cast of bricks with an impressive amount of energy, which would exhaust even a well-conditioned performer, in order to bring them to life—that is, in order to engage with the audience’s double-vision. Surely, this kind of puppet-theatre performance is “strenuous” in Baird’s sense, given the focus and, again, energy that object theatre requires. Indeed, describing a performance like this as “fatally easy” would seem to be incompatible with the demands it places on the performers in the first place.

And yet, Arnott has a point—in fact, in one respect, he does not go far enough, in that the Powells (and other object-theatre practitioners) are able to stimulate the audience’s imagination without the use of particularly “attractive” (Arnott 40) puppets. Certainly, the objects can be supplemented with a few props or suggestions of costumes, so as to differentiate the characters more effectively and generally help the audience to navigate the rather abstract world of object theatre. A brick wearing a red clown nose is still a far cry from the much more conventional types of puppets addressed by Arnott, however.

The fact that Puppetmongers is able to draw in audience members young and old with this kind of

highly formalized object theatre suggests that not only can puppet theatre for family audiences “rise above a certain level” (41), *pace* Arnott, but it can also be aggressively experimental in terms of form. This is complemented by the Powells’ refusal to stick with overly “safe” content when performing for young audiences. In the very first production that they devised as Puppetmongers, *The Miller* (1974), a cow is skinned and eviscerated, and the eponymous hero tricks an innocent passerby out of his goods and into dying in his place, for example. Consequently, companies like Puppetmongers are capable of breaking Arnott’s “vicious circle” in three distinct



Brikko the Clown is ready for his close-up
Photo by James Ashby

ways: through experimental form, strong (even at times shocking for some spectators) narrative choices, and a resolve to combine both of these in performances for the family audiences whom Arnott blames for the “vicious circle” that he posits.

Of course, the *envelopes* of form and content can be pushed to the point where allowing children to attend a given performance may no longer be appropriate. Object theatre is nothing more or less than one form of puppet theatre among many; thus, it can—*theoretically*, at least—be used in any performance context to shape any idea for a show. For example, I hope that my performance partner Grey Muldoon and I have successfully demonstrated that object theatre

can be a compelling choice when attempting to devise a show that is “adult” in every sense of the word. Since 2007, we have been tinkering with our show *Fill Me Up!*, a short cabaret piece in which the loneliness and sexiness of the souls in a club scene are explored through the manipulation of bar glasses. We have added, dropped, and changed characters and scenes over the years, and I would like to think that the show has gradually improved as a result. Glasses may not be as “strenuous” to manipulate as bricks, to echo Baird once more, but I have found that my skills in this regard have improved as a result of not only practice and repetition but also a more rigorous exercise regime. So while Baird’s language may be hyperbolic, there is no doubt that the improved focus, flexibility, and strength that come from exercise are useful in puppetry. For one thing, such physical conditioning can help us encourage the audience to believe in both the characters and the stories that we are presenting to them. We must take responsibility for this, so that we can “launch the audience into an imaginative leap of lunatic scale” (71), as Blumenthal puts it, thereby transcending the “certain level” that Arnott insists is holding us all back.

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- James Beauregard Ashby is the cofounder and co-artistic director of The Bricoteer Puppetry Project and the vice president of the Ontario Puppetry Association. He is also a PhD candidate at the Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies (University of Toronto). You can find out more about his work at: <http://web.me.com/jamesashby>.*



Glasses Mingle in a Scene from the Bricoteer Puppetry Project's Fill Me Up!
Photo by Dahlia Katz

Stop By and Check it Out – Jeff Essery's Punch & Judy!



On display now in the Front Window at Open Door Designs, 1597 Dupont Street in Toronto. Jeff Essery is a retired CBC graphic designer and lifelong puppeteer who performed Punch & Judy shows at summer festivals and parties throughout Ontario. Jeff was the president of the Ontario Puppetry Association twice, once from 1971 to 1975 and again from 1987 to 1988. Elisha Perry Franklin, a working artist in Toronto for over 30 years, created the puppets.

Window display by Mike Harding, photos by Joanne Bigham.



A PAYING AUDIENCE

Jay Wilson, Pandora's Sox

I had pretty much taken it for granted that there would be an audience. When there is a puppet show, there's always an audience. Besides, I hadn't really thought about it. I was too busy writing songs, editing dialogue, rehearsing. The show was coming along nicely and audiences would love it once they experienced it.

And they did. The performances were successful. "We'd love to have you back. We'll stay in touch. Great show."

OK, so I still had to work part-time at other jobs while building my puppet career. I was doing alright, things were picking up. Then, *the move*.

For family reasons we decided to move. The work I had done building contacts in the area would have to be abandoned. "Oh well," I said to myself, "Once I get established, I'll start selling the show again, make new contacts, and I'll be just as busy as ever." Or so I thought.

The move went smoothly, I got a part-time job, and now it was time to introduce my puppets to my new community. I contacted the local library, and *bam*, I booked a show right off the bat. This was going to be a breeze. I called another library in the area. "Sorry, we've booked our kids entertainment for the season." Understandable, bad timing. I called another. "No, sorry, we don't book puppet shows. Our children's librarian is a puppeteer herself so we don't book other puppet shows. "Uh-oh, that doesn't sound good. "Nope, sorry, no budget. Thanks, we'll think about it."

Events, festivals same thing. "No thanks, no thanks. No. No. No." Hmm, time for some creative marketing. But what to do?

"Why don't you see if you can be a vendor at the farmers' market?" a new friend from the area suggested. "It's a popular spot, lots of families go there, and booth space is dirt cheap." So I contacted the market. "That's a wonderful idea, we'd love to have you, in fact next Saturday is kid's day at the market. Could you come then?"

"Certainly," I replied. "Now, about compensation"

"Oh dear, no, we can't pay you. You'll have to book a vendor booth like everyone else, there's no budget for entertainment for kid's day. Why don't you just bring along your puppets and show the kids and I'm sure the people will love you and you'll get lots of future bookings."

"OK," I thought, "this is different. I'm going to pay them to advertise my show. Oh well, why not? It might pan out. I'll give it a try. Of course I can't do the entire show but I'll have to be entertaining. I can't just show people my puppets. I'll just do a teaser and explain to the audience that I'm new to the area and am looking forward to performing this show in its entirety at upcoming events."



Jay and Friend at the Farmer's Market

Kid's day came. Off to market I went. The weather was great, and while I had to be creative in rounding up an audience for each teaser performance with a puppet parade through the market, I did manage to collect lots of parents and kids for each showing. The kids enjoyed themselves, and I explained that in order to see the rest of the show, they'd have to attend a future performance—one for which I would be paid for a job well done. It made perfect sense to me. I distributed lots of business cards, and it appeared parents and kids were enjoying themselves. It was a good day. I could feel it. My show was going to be welcomed here. It was just a matter of time.

"Yes please, I'd like your business card. That's a great show you have. Did you write and build it yourself? My, what talent! You're certainly good with the kids too. They really seem to be enjoying themselves."

"Why thank you. Glad you like it. Thanks for stopping by."

Noon came. I packed up my stuff and headed for home. That night I checked my email. "Wow, look, someone has written me about my performance at the market today. Maybe I finally got a booking! I'm going to thank Rose for suggesting the market. This is great." But then I read on

"Dear Mr. Wilson, what a disappointment. An interactive puppet show was advertised for children's day at the Farmers Market and you used it (and the children's attention and excitement) solely as a pathetic attempt to drum up business for yourself."

Whoa, wait a second! Interactive puppet show? I never said I'd be doing a puppet show, this was never meant to be free entertainment. I was a vendor giving a sample of my product. A product you have to buy and pay for.

To make an already long story short, things were righted and fences mended, but one question still remained for me: When do you cross that line from amateur to professional, from community theatre to real theatre, from unpaid to paid work as an artist? When you're good enough, old enough, famous enough, worthy enough, popular enough? Do you give some away and charge for others? Do you charge varying rates for varying situations? Do you murder the other puppeteer who works for nothing because he earns a healthy wage at his *other* job while you use this work as a means to feed your family?

I'm reminded of a comment a musician made to me once: "When you throw a party and a doctor and a musician show up, you never think to ask the doctor to perform a medical examination on the spot, but you think nothing of asking the musician if he'd like to sit down and play the piano."

In Canada, we simply don't pay artists fairly for the work they do. We've accepted the idea that government subsidies and corporate sponsorship for the arts is not just OK, but necessary, pitting arts groups against hospitals, universities, and other charities for already scarce dollars. This means that we view the performing arts as charity work. So from the audience's perspective, the arts end up being a charity case. This state of affairs poses a real problem for the many artists who are struggling to make ends meet, since audiences expect so much for free. The big question is: How do we change this attitude? Because without artists in the community—and not just at the symphony hall—what kind of community would we even have?

Jay Wilson is director of Pandora's Sox Puppet Theatre. A member of the Canadian Actors' Equity Association, Jay was Company Manager with The National Tap Dance Co. of Canada and worked in marketing and development for The Gravenhurst Opera House, Theatre Collingwood, and the United Way. Jay founded ShowbizKidz and Act-Up!, drama training programs for children in Gravenhurst and Collingwood respectively. His career highlight up to now has been playing Bert McNabb in the Dan Needles play Fair Play last summer at Theatre Collingwood. Jay recently relocated to Guelph where he is continuing his puppet business, Pandora's Sox.

REPORT OF THE UNIMA NORTH AMERICAN COMMISSION MEETING FROM THE 10TH CUBAN INTERNATIONAL PUPPET FESTIVAL IN MATANZA CUBA, APRIL 19TH AND 20TH, 2012

David Smith, David Smith Marionettes

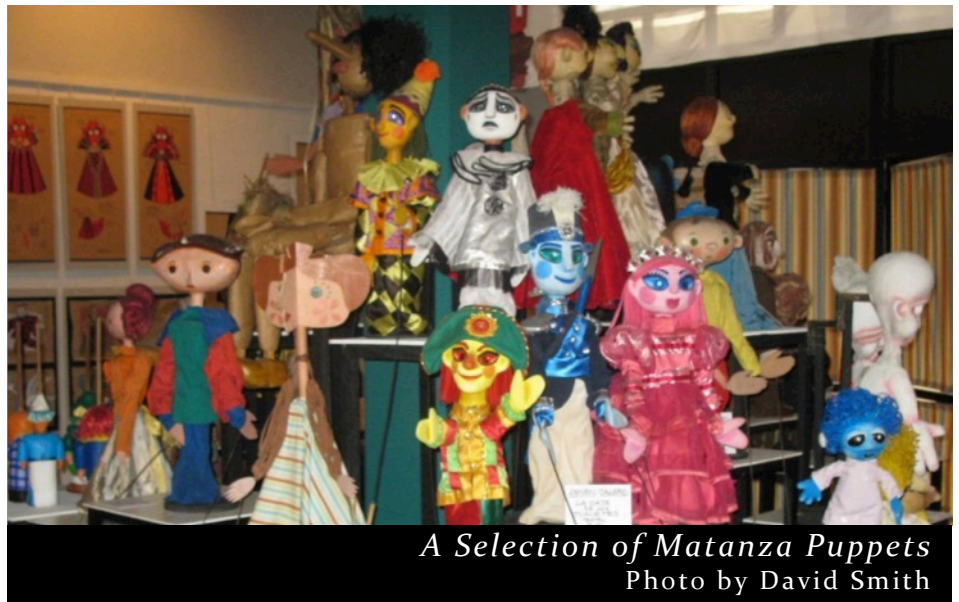
The eight-day Matanza Festival was held from April 15th to 22nd, 2012. It included workshops, theatre productions, displays and meetings. There were four principal theatre venues, all within walking distance of our hotel, Hotel Velasco. Matanza is a city far removed from the tourist region of Veradero about forty kilometers away. All of the events and productions were in Spanish, which presented a real challenge to Muriel and me, but thanks to the patience of the friendly and welcoming Cubans, and with additional help from other committee members, we struggled through.

The whole trip was an amazing adventure. The amount of artistic theatre and puppetry activity in Cuba is astounding. 248 theatre organizations are subsidized by the Cuban National Arts Council, as are 7,000 artists and 60 theatres. During our five days in Cuba we saw fifteen of the performances of puppet theatre by some very fine companies from Matanza, as well as companies from Cuba, Venezuela, France, Spain, Uruguay, Brazil, and Japan. Cubans are a resourceful, highly artistic people working under difficult conditions.

The North American Commission meetings were held on April 19th and 20th from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. in the beautiful Palacio de la Artesania. There were 19 UNIMA Cuba members and six UNIMA North America members in attendance.

The first day brought everyone present up to date through North America Commission minutes of our last meeting, reports by UNIMA General Secretary Jacques Trudeau and North America Commission President Manuel Moran. This was followed by reports and updates from UNIMA National centres in Cuba, Mexico, Canada, the Caribbean, and the USA.

The second day was an updating of the North American Commission work plan for online puppetry articles from the region with themes such as "Crossing Borders." Manuel Moran reported on *'Titeres' Puppetry In the Caribbean*, a film which he is producing and directing. During the days before our meetings he was working with a crew shooting additional footage for the Cuban portion of the film. There was also some initial discussion on a project to encourage and support interaction between Mexican, Canadian, American, and Caribbean centres through the exchange of reports and catalogues of projected festivals.



A Selection of Matanza Puppets
Photo by David Smith

The end of May was set as a deadline for information on the "Crossing Borders" project, and September for sending info to Claudia regarding themes, contacts, and basic outlines.

David Smith has been a member of the Ontario Puppetry Association's Board, on and off, since 1981. He is currently the Membership Convenor of UNIMA Canada (Ontario) and Vice President of UNIMA Canada. Along with his wife Muriel, he produces striking puppetry with The David Smith Marionettes. Visit www.dspuppet.com.

A Final Note—musings of an itinerant puppeteer

DAY-OLDS INTO FRESH IDEAS

Teddy Dong, Blue Ink Puppetry

Sometimes the things you do repeatedly become routine. You don't think much about what you do, it just seems right. In my puppet shows, I rarely go back to look at what I do. My skits work, and so be it!

But sometimes, someone comes in and make a good suggestion. Then I start to think...hmm!



A Workshop at Fresh Ideas
Photo by Dahlia Katz

Last month, I had the privilege of attending the Fresh Ideas in Puppetry conference at the University of Toronto where we were invited to watch, participate, and provide feedback. Wow!!! The new and different types of techniques in puppetry—including lighting, storylines, music, and overall creativity—were good examples of how reinventing the wheel can sometimes be a good thing!

However, some things don't need to be changed, but rather reiterated to reinforce an idea. The best idea at the Fresh Ideas conference wasn't fresh at all, but rather stale: Don't think too big, and stay within your comfort zone.

In other words, many aspiring puppeteers get too ambitious and apply for grants and funding from the various arts councils and funding bodies, only to find their proposals and applications rejected. As suggested by Ronnie Burkett, there is no shame in performing at birthday parties or on the street corner. It's your opportunity to show others your skills and talents. Stay small, develop a solid good show, and build upon your experiences.

As many of us hope, someday we will make it big... maybe even on to the big screen!

Teddy Dong is a bilingual puppeteer and puppet builder with more than 10 years of experience. His university background in Environmental Studies and in Primary/Junior Education is the foundation to his puppetry endeavours. With his environmentally themed skits, he has performed at Ontario Parks, in schools throughout the province, and at earth-minded venues. Teddy currently lives in Blackburn Hamlet, in Ottawa East. www.blueinkpuppetry.ca.



Monstrous Ideas at Fresh Ideas
Photo by Dahlia Katz

Puppets Up is right around the corner!

For the weekend of August 11th to 12th, Almonte will be transformed into a crazy puppet paradise! Make your plans to come for the weekend now, and check www.puppetsup.ca for the schedule of performances.

The OPA will have a booth at the festival. If you'd like to volunteer, please contact Teddy Dong at puppeteer@live.ca



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