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Essays About My Life in Puppetry

My Life in Puppetry:

Who's in Control Here?

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Where Did It All Start?

Have you ever captioned out loud your pet's antics as if you could read his thought, or danced your whole fryer chicken into its roasting pan before putting it in the oven? Maybe, long ago, you played with paper dolls or had your toy puppet tell a joke. If you did, you were bringing inanimate—or at least nonverbal—things to life. You were puppeteering.

My interest in puppetry had its roots in a childhood fascination with puppet shows. Their stories, characters, stages, props, and sets fascinated me. Long before the 1969 premier of *Sesame Street*, Chicago-area children like me watched a bevy of puppets on local television. My favorite show created by Burr Tillstrom, the gentlest puppet master I've ever known, featured two puppets—a clown and a dragon—and a sweet woman vocalist; they were the mainstays of *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*. The show ran on NBC and ABC from 1947 to 1957; and I rarely missed a broadcast. They aired shortly before dinnertime, for a half-hour, later reduced to 15 minutes (a network decision causing audience outrage). Children and adults were great fans of that calm, intellectual, and inventive program. At the end of its run, the show still had loyalists who begged its return to no avail.

In the 1950's and 1960's, my siblings and I also followed the antics of various marionettes on the *Howdy Doody Show* and hand puppets on *Garfield Goose and Friends*. Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town* family-oriented variety show introduced Topo Gigio (a ten-inch foam mouse puppet worked by four animators) and "Johnny," a figure created by Señor Wences, who had a tradition-defying ventriloquist novelty act. Paul Winchell and Edgar Bergen were conventional ventriloquists also regularly seen on television. Their rapid repartee involved arguments or gags with their wise guy figures, Jerry Mahoney and Charlie McCarthy, respectively. In the early 60's *The Shari Lewis Show*, introducing three cuddly mouth puppets, Lamb Chop, Hush Puppy, and Charlie Horse, inspired me to attempt ventriloquism with my own socks.

Puppets on television and those featured in school programs were a given during my childhood and adolescence. Although puppeteers of the mid-twentieth century might have assumed their audience would be my generation, many adults enjoyed their acts. I remember my parents' tears of laughter during Señor Wences' bit on Ed Sullivan's show. Wences flourished a box he had stored on a tabletop. He tapped it and a voice came out of it. He had one- or two-word exchanges with the box until finally he asked it, "S'alright?" When he opened the box's lid, a head inside answered with a moving mouth, "S'alright." Every time Wences appeared on that show, my parents eagerly anticipated that bit. "S'alright" became a family catchword.

Emulating Wences, I worked on my own "Johnny" figure. I shaped a puppet head by drawing eyes on the back of my hand and tucking my rouged thumb under my equally rouged curled forefinger to make a mouth. Hinging my thumb up and down, I transformed the back of my fist into an animated vent figure's head. My lips moved, but—who cared?—so did Edgar Bergen's.

Today, audiences regard puppetry as both an entertainment for children and an art form, whether high-tech, like films or theater—*The Lion King*, for example—or traditional manipulation as on *Sesame Street*, with puppeteers animating their characters directly. Staged puppet performances, like those presented by Blair Thomas' annual Chicago International Puppet Festival enchant audiences of all ages with the immediacy of live performance, encouraging a suspension of disbelief as animated figures in fantastical settings spin out their stories or vignettes.

Ever the puppetry fan, especially after viewing the first seasons of *Sesame Street* with my toddler daughter, I turned to that discipline in my thirties as a way to channel my creative energies. I'd been moping and thinking I needed to have a job outside the home, but I did not want to abandon my children to a sitter we couldn't afford anyway. As always, my husband Stephen helped me dispel my funk. Paper and pen in hand he mock-interviewed me. In the course of our conversation, memories of all the short stories I'd written, the skits, shows, and choral groups in which I participated, the voice and dance lessons I took, and even the many paper dolls I animated on my bedcovers while recovering from childhood illnesses helped us identify puppetry as the remedy for my malaise. I would do it all: write scripts, make puppets, create scenery, and perform.

At first, I doubted I had any puppetry talent or skills. Where would I start? How would I make puppets? Would I perform anywhere beyond my living-room? Anticipating my doubts, Stephen said, “Well, I found a group of puppet show people (*we did not know the term ‘puppeteer’*), The Chicagoland Puppetry Guild. We’ll go to a meeting and find out if any of them teaches puppetry.” He made some calls, found the group’s location at Magic, Inc. near Lincoln Square, and arranged for us and our children to attend a gathering. There, I met a professional who coached aspiring puppeteers. I signed up for his classes and after weeks of lessons, at his urging, I decided to take my puppeteering to a professional level.

The Chicagoland Puppetry Guild offered fellowship and encouragement as I pursued the art of puppetry. The delightfully eccentric and lively members’ enthusiasm for my burgeoning efforts encouraged me to explore an ever-intriguing and enjoyable interarts discipline with endless possibilities. Moreover, many members were pros. They performed in variety show acts or took their productions to schools, small theaters, community centers and libraries, and some were regulars on local and national television. Eventually, after several years, my association with the guild led to my acquaintance with Burr Tillstrom and on his recommendation a prestigious booking for my original show about the last days of Pompeii at the Art Institute of Chicago. After becoming friends with so many members, not only did I feel my ambitions were validated. Participation in the group also established a link between me, my childhood puppet master idols like Tillstrom, and a great and varied tradition. I hadn’t arrived yet at mastery, but I was on my way.

“First Steps into the World of Puppetry”

Puppetry is an art form. My goal as a beginner was competency. I knew I needed coaching and never would dare perform in public unless I trained with a professional. I found that person, Hans Schmidt, who had a studio in Lincoln Park. A beloved performer, educator, and teacher, Hans offered small-group lessons. Over time, he taught me scripting, hand puppet movement, and business tips. Encouraged by his enthusiasm for my work, I studied with him for quite a while and became enamored of the practice. After months of lessons and experimenting with little shows for my children and their neighborhood friends, I decided to perform for a small fee. The puppet shows I created were for children’s birthday parties. I assumed younger children would be receptive to the fantasy world I would bring into their homes. Although I sometimes used a small, portable stage consisting of a playboard, a stand and curtains, often I let my young audience see me work puppets attached to my arms. I was comfortable performing directly in front of an audience like a storyteller.

My Bunny Puppet Bit was a good example. I had modified two plush rabbit toy puppets by putting a skirt on one and denim overalls on the other. After their skit, I had a conversation with the girl rabbit. I sat facing my audience with the stage behind me. I would ask the girl rabbit, “How are you today, Ms. Bunny?”

The puppet would answer and we'd carry on, joking and asking each other riddles. Although my puppet had no moving mouth, children watching our interplay believed the rabbit was talking to me. In a way, I was using the techniques of ventriloquism to produce that effect. Ventriloquism is all about illusion, misdirection, and sound substitution. I managed (usually) to speak for the puppet through slightly parted lips and I always looked at it while the puppet was 'speaking.' In the illusion business that technique is called 'misdirection.' During my turns to speak, I faced the audience. When Ms. Bunny 'spoke,' I looked at her. Visual cues created the illusion that we were engaged in repartee.

Many years later into my puppetry career, I often entertained at two or three birthday parties a weekend if I wasn't otherwise occupied. One afternoon I arrived at a Chicago suburban home with several sets of puppets and materials for a puppet-making workshop. A five-year-old boy was having a birthday party and his parents had hired me for an hour-long program. I spent some of that time setting up and answering children's questions about the show. When all my equipment was in place, I gathered my audience together and began the program. I started with my version of Little Red Riding Hood. The wolf was rather sympathetic, did not really eat Grandma, and everybody won in the end. Next, I brought out my rabbit friends who danced and did a comic little routine with blocks. When that ended, I carried Ms. Bunny from behind the stage, held her close to me, and began the voice-throwing bit.

The kindergarteners seated close to me were fascinated, and I thought how much fun it was to bring a little magic into their lives—directly, without the mediation of television. Suddenly, from the back of the group an older child's voice rang out. "I know how you do that!" he shouted. I spotted the child, a little boy somewhat bigger than the other birthday guests.

"Of course you know how I do this. I'm a puppeteer and I bring these puppets to life."

"No, no," he said. "That's not how you make Ms. Bunny talk."

"Ah-ha. You have discovered my secret. What's your name and how old are you?" He stood up and proudly declared he was Brian and six-and-a half, almost seven-years-old!

"And," he said, "you've got a radio strapped to your chest. That's what makes the puppet talk." He smiled and lifted his chin in triumph.

The other children stared at my chest. "Well, I'm happy you were watching so carefully. Let's see what else Ms. Bunny has to say." I shifted Ms. Bunny closer to me and continued my show. Happily, the boy's outburst had no effect on the other children's engagement with Ms. Bunny's antics. They applauded enthusiastically as she and I ended our conversation. We bowed and I moved into the puppet workshop segment of the engagement.

I have often thought about that day and the differences in children's development and perception of the world. My critic had been thinking deeply about the way I made Ms. Bunny talk. He was at a new stage of discovery in his life and needed to know how it all worked. The other, younger children were not at that point yet, or perhaps were not as willing as Brian to voice their doubts. I imagine they wanted to linger in the fantasy a little bit longer and I enjoyed bringing it to them.

Not All Puppetry is Sweetness and Bunnies

Classic puppetry can have a rough and disorderly side, too. Imagine the following scene: passersby gather near a pair of arguing men. With his sharp chin, one man in a silly, high-pitched voice taunts a roly-poly policeman, then hits him with a flat stick on top of his head and across his belly. As he sweeps the policeman out of sight, he squeaks, “That’s the way to do it, that’s the way to do it” and onlookers whoop and applaud.

This ruffian is Mr. Punch. He continues to do away with one annoyance after another throughout the early afternoon. With the same one-two whack of his slapstick, he tosses out of sight his wife Judy and their baby, a judge, Pretty Polly Peachum, a hangman, and even the Devil. As every challenger meets defeat, the crowd’s laughter and cheers accompany Mr. Punch’s eventually predictable, “That’s the way to do it!” until the end. I relished the crowd’s enthusiasm for they were watching my Punch and Judyshow. Punch and his antagonists were hand puppets. The onlookers were my audience.

After the show, I closed the puppet booth’s curtains, stowed my puppets, and folded my booth. I was happy to have won over another audience but tired from manipulating all those hand puppets above the playboard for nearly an hour. I had been working in the manner of Punch professors preceding me for hundreds of years. Traditional Punch and Judy shows have provoked shocked laughter since the 17th century, principally in England, but also wherever a Punchman (and in the last four or five decades Punchwoman) could set up a booth and gather an audience.

Originally, a Punch professor would perform at an intersection or on a beach and “busk” (i.e., perform in a public place for money), passing the hat for coins during and after the show. In the latter half of the 19th century, Punchmen became paid entertainment at birthday parties and other gatherings, an arrangement lasting well into the 21st Century. They still perform on the beach, famously so at Brighton, a holiday area on the south coast of England.

I learned to perform a Punch and Judy routine from a dear friend. Jay Marshall owned a shop in Chicago called Magic Inc. In the shop’s spacious back room, the Chicagoland Puppetry Guild gathered monthly. I joined the group and met Jay at the first Guild meeting I attended decades ago. He was a great solo performer, a magician and ventriloquist often appearing on the Ed Sullivan TV show with his wise-guy rabbit glove puppet, Lefty.

Jay loaned me a script and some books about Punch. He taught me how to make an easily portable stage from a music stand and coached me on the characters I’d need to perform an authentic P&J show. He also advised me to change the plot’s ending to reflect a common American revision of the script. He suggested the story would be more palatable to Midwestern audiences if I tinkered with the order of the characters who encountered Punch and finished with the alligator.

I liked the idea but I had no such puppet. Although I’d sculpted all the other characters I didn’t know where to start building the toothy beast. I was going to give it a try, but one of my good friends, also my collaborator at times, heard about my dilemma and built me a toothy wood and felt alligator whose mouth shut with a bang. A lovely gift and it worked perfectly.

Naughty Mr. Punch verbally and physically sparred with every antagonist he met, but he was no match for the alligator. My audiences gasped when the beast chased Punch up, down, and across the stage. They screamed, warning Punch it was sneaking up on him, until—whoosh!—the alligator gobbled Punch (below the playboard); then rising alone above the board, he said in a gruff reptilian voice, “That’s the way to do it. The end.”

The character Punch became popular in England when plays were banned by order of the “Long Parliament,” during the Commonwealth following civil war and the execution of the monarch Charles I. Puppetry was the exception to the ban and “motions” as they were called were commonplace.¹ Punch and Judy shows became a way to criticize Authority with impunity. They appealed to mass audiences because in their heyday the stories gave vent to popular resentments, bigotry, and endemic misogyny.

I had not considered the negative aspects of this lively entertainment because I felt mastering the routine would connect me to tradition and add to my authenticity, but I had to deal with it once when I performed Punch and Judy at a country club Christmas party. I was booked as one of several performers for the occasion. Although most of my audience—children and adults—responded with laughter and applause, one person, the parent of two tots, took me aside to criticize the story’s violence. She shook her head as she reminded me that battering one’s opponent was the wrong way to resolve conflicts. At that moment, I gently replied without rancor that I thought current television programming was worse.

Later, alone and after more consideration, I tinkered with the script again. I had Judy and the baby survive Punch’s tricks and team up with the alligator to vanquish Punch. My audiences applauded this new ending. Not exactly a negotiated peace, but it worked. That may not have been the way to do it, but soon afterward, my career took a different path and Mr. Punch and Co. never emerged again from their storage box.

Puppetry Can Be a Serious Business

¹ “Once again...the public playhouses were closed and the actors exiled; the drama was preserved in the puppet booths. Roughly hewn and barbarous though the puppets may have been, garbled and vulgar the drolls they presented, untaught and illiterate the showmen who performed them, yet here the divine spark of the theatre found a home, and for eighteen long years of English history the drama knew no other stage.” P.72. Speaight, George, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre*. John de Graff. New York