

Revealing the Magic:

Puppeteers Offer Advice, Thoughts, and Inspiration

By Johanna Smith

Puppetry is a wonderful component of the world of Theatre for Young Audiences. However, dynamic and effective puppetry can be a complex and multi-step process, and articulating the needs of puppetry to a production team can be tricky sometimes. In an effort to encourage the use of puppetry and address some of the fears around jumping in (or stringing up), *TYA Today* talked with several professional puppeteers about their thoughts on puppetry, the child audience, and the unique aspects of creating new puppetry works for children.

Moving Beyond Realism

Puppets have a multitude of abilities that extend beyond the limits of human actors, and can add a quality of imagination unlike anything else. For Gina Pavlova, a puppeteer, director, and professor based in Los Angeles, CA, and longtime teacher of puppetry at Bulgaria's National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, puppets are about moving beyond realism. "Puppetry is mostly metaphors and images," she says. "You don't need to use words to get in touch with your audience and communicate your ideas. To me, action creating images and leading to metaphorical ideas is much more important than words."

Pavlova is also drawn to puppetry's ability to portray things in ways that the theatre cannot. "If they are made out of paper, [puppets] could literally burn out of love," she says. "In real life, the wolf eats the rabbit. On the puppetry stage if the wolf is made out of yarn, the rabbit could

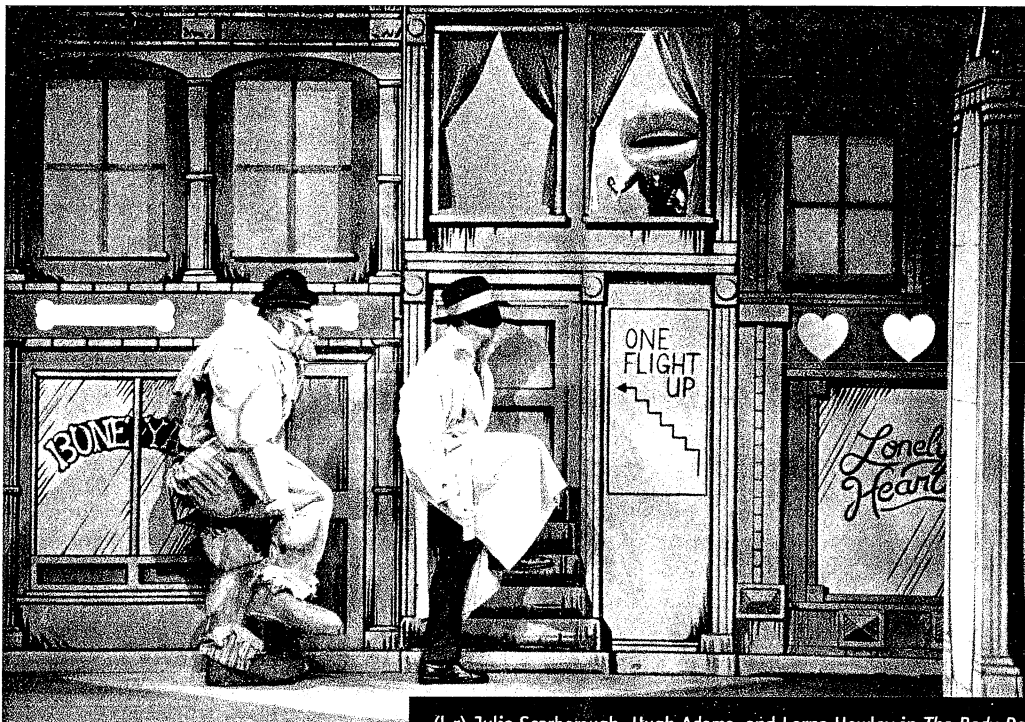
unravel the wolf. A puppet could be dissembled into its parts – broken or broken heart – and it could then get back together," Pavlova shares. "All these metaphors. There is a real border between the one theatre and the other."

Jon Ludwig, artistic director of the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, GA, finds that puppetry can require more from audiences. "Without the audience participating it doesn't work. It's not like an actor pretending to be somebody on stage," Ludwig shares. "The puppet IS that character ... It's not real, but if it's done right it seems like it's real. They believe that the puppets, the characters, are alive."

Puppets can create illusions of scale, use space on the stage in completely new ways, defy the laws of physics, and literally embody a metaphor. Ludwig says he loves how puppets create their own worlds onstage. "It's not like we're trying to create real people, in fact usually 'real' puppets aren't as interesting as the more abstract and fantastic ones," he adds.

Many puppeteers focus on how puppets can function on stage, and whether or not a production will ultimately benefit from employing puppetry. "I think you have to ask if you really need the puppet, or are you just doing it for a gimmick," Ludwig advises. "When you add a puppet, you're adding this other element that's fantasy. The puppets always take focus."

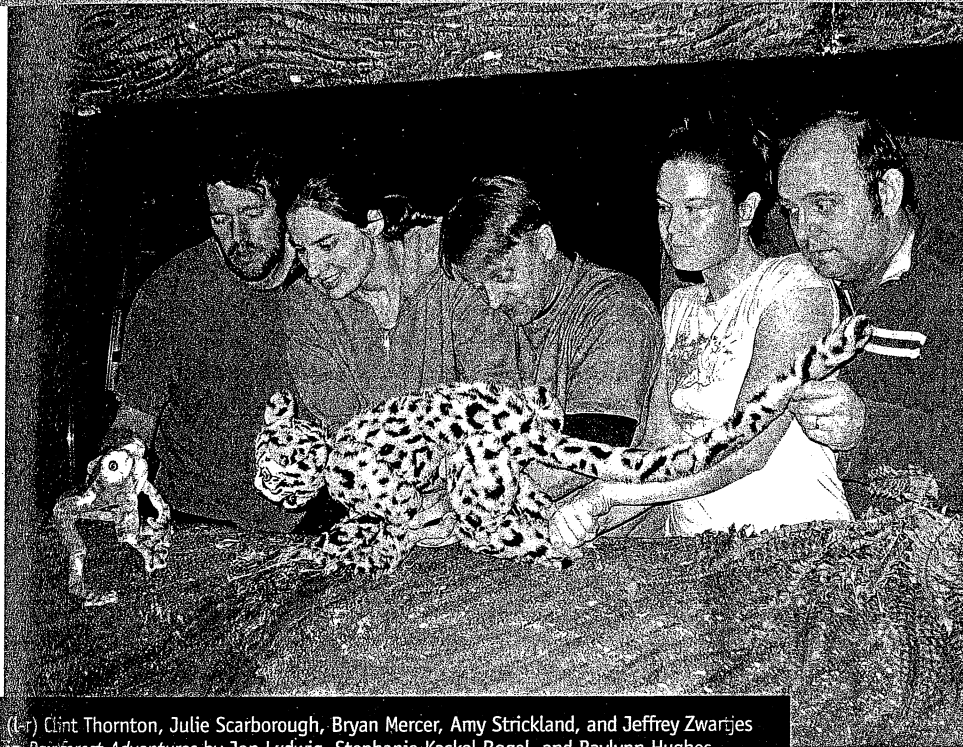
Alan Louis, director of museum and education programs at the Center for Puppetry Arts, believes that while puppets have become trendy in theatre, we might be better served to examine the demands of a specific script. "If a person could do it better or just as well, you'd better think about that," he says. "Puppets are good at flying, magical things, and things that people can't do. A magical show like *Peter Pan* makes a good puppet show because the script calls for the characters to fly out the bedroom window and across London, and you can do that!"



(l-r) Julie Scarborough, Hugh Adams, and Lorna Howley in *The Body Detective* by Jon Ludwig. The Center for Puppetry Arts, Atlanta, GA.
Photo by Kathryn Kolb.

“... It's the playfulness and the simplicity that work.”

Jon Ludwig



(l-r) Clint Thornton, Julie Scarborough, Bryan Mercer, Amy Strickland, and Jeffrey Zwartjes in *Rainforest Adventures* by Jon Ludwig, Stephanie Kaskel Bogel, and Raylynn Hughes. The Center for Puppetry Arts, Atlanta, GA. Photo by Bill Jones.

“If you do a puppet show of Cinderella, you can have one puppet dressed in rags and the other in a ball gown and you can do a quick change with those objects, and you can make that transformation happen,” Louis says, pointing out that puppets can also be magnificent problem solvers in a production, depending on the demands of the script.

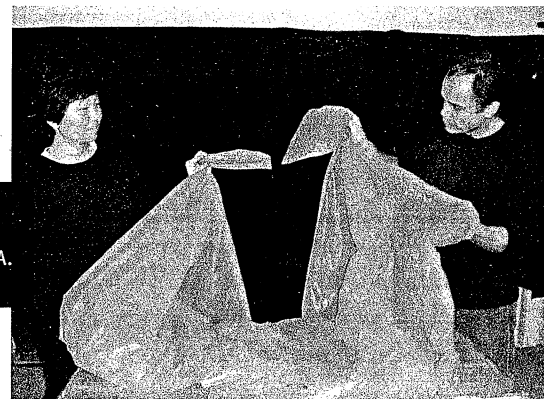
However, Louis quickly notes that puppets are not always the best choice for large amounts of dialogue. “Standing there and talking is boring. It doesn't hold [the audience's] attention,” he warns. “Why create puppets and this whole magical theatre form and just have them standing there talking?”

Ludwig agrees. “A lot of time we get scripts and we think, gosh, that's really talky,” he says. “Well, actors could do this beautifully. They do monologues really well – puppets don't. You need actions, you need movement.”

This need for action, Ludwig suggests, often leads to overcomplicated puppetry that compromises its magic. “What the puppets do best is run around and move and be totally free themselves,” he says, worrying that puppeteers are often expected to serve as the special effects department. Instead, he says, “It's done with very simple stuff. It's strings and wires and rods and your hand. And it's the playfulness and the simplicity that work.”

For many puppeteers, the simplest puppets turn out to be the audience's favorite. Louis was delighted with a puppet that the Center for Puppetry Art's designers created for a production of *Stellaluna*, which presents many production challenges in that its main characters are bats and birds who remain almost entirely in trees and in flight. “The Stellaluna puppet was very simple,” recalls Louis. “It was just built on a plastic balloon rod. You waved it and you got the wings to flap. It was beautiful movement – and that's all it needed to be.”

After many years of directing puppetry, Pavlova is still captivated by the simple things. “The richness of the relationships between the puppeteer and the puppet, the audience and the puppet, the puppeteer and the audience – this is unique to puppetry,” she says. Pavlova plays with these relationships in her original work, and her puppeteers, who are visible to the audience and very much a part of the story, manipulate ordinary objects into magical characters. In *The Model Show*, which she directed for a project for the National Endowment for the Arts at California State University, San Bernardino in 2007, puppeteers collaborated to transform a few pairs of jeans into a cowboy, some umbrellas into a seaside, and some jump ropes into a strutting bird. In another piece, one puppeteer held the audience spellbound while he told a fairy tale and manipulated a folding ruler into every single character. The playfulness and simplicity of these pieces, Pavlova shares, were appealing to not only the children in the audience, but also to their parents, many of whom expressed disbelief that something so simple could be so entertaining.



(l-r) Leslie Grey and Nikola Ivanov in *Classical Story* by Gina Pavlova. Bulgarian Minimalist Puppetry Workshop with Trumvirate Pi Theatre, Los Angeles, CA. Photo by Gina Pavlova.

Puppetry 101: Six Tips

- #1: Think of the potential of the puppet, ask why you are using it, and then use it to its full potential.
- #2: Watch out for overcomplicating things. Simple puppets are often the most effective.
- #3: Bring in a puppet designer or a “puppeturg” (someone who can facilitate communication between the design team members and provide expertise about a puppet style).
- #4: Get your puppets made as early as possible.
- #5: Give your puppeteers some time to “noodle” during rehearsals.
- #6: Reveal your “secrets”; it’s part of the educational process.

Embracing the Topsy-turvy Production Process

For people new to puppetry, the production process might offer some surprises. Many puppeteers not only build their puppets, but they create original scripts to go with them. As a result, puppeteers often develop a concept, build everything, start rehearsing with additional puppeteers, and then create or adapt the final script. Heidi Rugg, the founder and director of Barefoot Puppets in Richmond, VA, is currently developing a new piece with a grant from the Henson foundation. For *Little by Little*, she’s working from an outline and lots of original research. “Once I feel the order of events and characters is correct and I have a sense of the relationships between characters, then I can start building puppets,” reveals Rugg. “I tend to build puppets after I design my stage. Once those things are nailed down I can start building the characters. Your staging determines what kind of puppets you’re using.”

Rugg also performs most of the characters, which makes her relationship to the creation process unique. “Usually while I’m building the puppets I’m trying to figure out what the voice sounds like. Oftentimes when I find the voice, it helps me write the dialogue for that puppet,” she says. Creating the perfect characters for her stories, Rugg believes, in turn influences the story that is told.

The rehearsal process can also be used to develop new work. For Pavlova, the puppeteers become essential to her devising process, which centers on the action of the puppets. “Usually I will have only one [3 hour] rehearsal at the table so everyone knows the conflict and the main ideas and the characters. Then the play would go directly on the stage,” she says. “I wouldn’t allow the actors to learn their words beforehand. So the actors themselves will start adapting the play. They will know which words of the play fit the action and which are not necessary.”

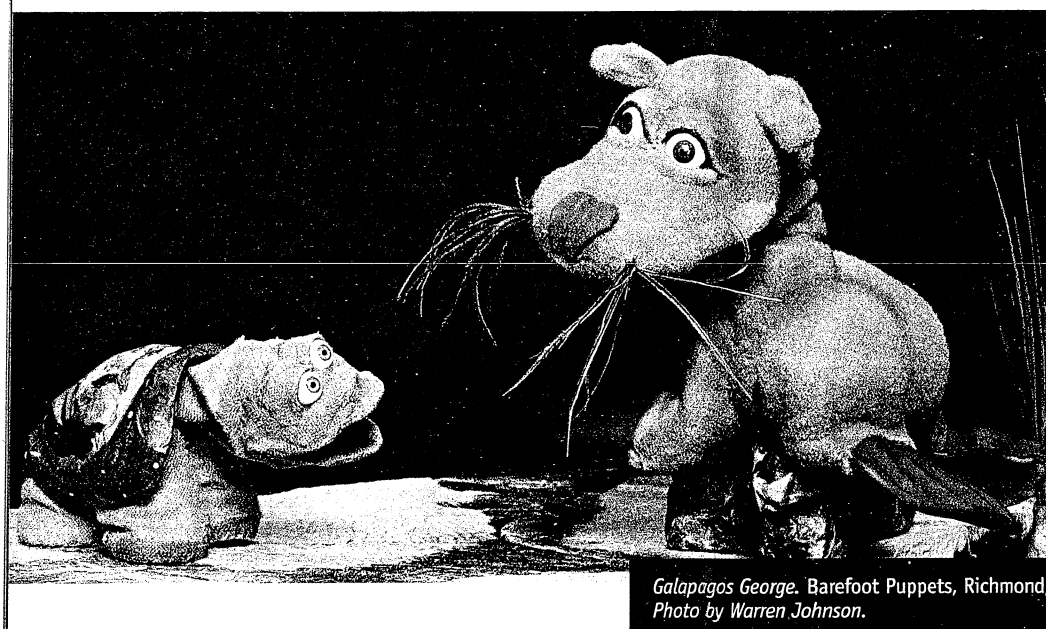
For many puppetry directors, it becomes important to have leeway to make sure puppets

are used to their full potential. Time to play, improvise, create, and revise is essential. Performers, too, benefit from what Ludwig calls “noodle time.” “[Puppeteers] want to go off with a video camera or a mirror and do what we need to do,” Ludwig says. “Then we’ll come back and we’ll be more likely to fit in – we’re not floundering.” Ludwig considers this kind of problem solving part of the job, and says that he gives his puppeteers plenty of time to figure out how things work, what they are doing, and how to get various puppeteers in sync.

The realities of puppetry, and offering artists this kind of “noodle time,” often require shifting design and build schedules in order to integrate puppets into the rehearsal process early. “You have to have everything all ready, because that IS the show,” Ludwig says. For him, every day is a technical rehearsal.

In addition, the style of puppets chosen can affect the entire design process, and Ludwig says this requires a lot of communication in the early stages. “I just finished up an adaptation and the hardest part was figuring out, ‘what kind of style is it?’ The style really dictates the look, the feel, what they can do, what the audience is seeing, what world I’m creating,” he says. “You’re not only designing the world for the puppet, but [determining where the puppeteers are]. Are they visible? Do you want to see them? Not want to see them?” Articulating these decisions early in the process, Ludwig believes, is essential to the use of puppets in theatre.

Ludwig says he finds it challenging to articulate what he looks for in the audition process, but like many puppetry directors he can clearly see when a performer “gets” puppetry. “You have to be able to project your spirit or energy into the puppet and commingle with the



Galapagos George. Barefoot Puppets, Richmond, VA.
Photo by Warren Johnson.

puppet's energy as well," Ludwig shares. "[A good puppeteer] really focuses on the puppet, not him or herself." Rugg adds that she can tell right away if a puppeteer will be successful. "Some people really get into it, and they'll explore things right away and play with the movement," she says, emphasizing that skills in improvisation, voice, and movement are essential to her work.

Puppetry in Education

Education and outreach in puppetry, just as in TYA, often caters to the curricular needs of schools. In addition to providing study guides and activities to support curriculum, puppetry educators tap into the educational power of puppet-making. Louis has been creating puppetry activities for the Center for Puppetry Arts for about a decade. "We spend a lot of time and energy coming up with simple but functional puppet designs, and we put together step-by-step instruction sheets ... so you can take it home and do it at home if you like," he says.

Another highly effective way to engage children, Louis believes, is to share the "secrets" behind a puppet show. "After every performance [at the Center for Puppetry Arts], the puppeteers do a demonstration. If there are multiple styles of puppets, they demonstrate each one, and they talk about how they did it."

Children are often amazed when the work of the puppeteers is revealed. In particular, Louis appreciates revealing the process behind "Czech black" puppetry, where puppeteers are hidden in full black outfits and dim lighting. After these shows, the puppeteers replay a sequence with the lights up. "It's like a twister game back there," he says enthusiastically. "They're on top of each other, they're getting in each others' ways,



(L-r) Lorna Howley, Spencer Stephens, and Clint Thornton in *Weather Rocks!* by Jon Ludwig. The Center for Puppetry Arts, Atlanta, GA. Photo by Kathryn Kolb.

like one puppet jumped up and the other slid underneath it. So they recreate that with the lights up ... so the audience can see the teamwork. It helps them appreciate it."

On the other hand, sometimes you may want to reveal puppets to children carefully. Louis described a show about dinosaurs that the Center for Puppetry Arts did with very realistic dinosaur puppets. At the end, a puppeteer in a Tyrannosaurus body puppet came out to take a bow with the cast and was helped out of the puppet. "After the show, [a mother] said 'we really loved the show ... but my son got nervous. He thought that the T-rex gave birth to a person!' All [children] know is that a dinosaur just walked out on stage."

Pavlova says that she loves creating puppetry for children. "You find the initial purity of the human being exactly there in the children's audience," she says, describing the playfulness and imagination behind the work of the puppeteer.

Pavlova particularly appreciates how children have no problem accepting a puppet as a "real" part of a story on stage. "The joy, the love, the spontaneity, the special sense of humor that children have, is different from the one that adults have," she says, although she adds that their parents are often just as enchanted.

Perhaps puppetry seems like magic because it reveals the childlike imagination that exists in everyone, adults and children alike. Whatever motives the magic, it's powerful indeed. ■

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