

Puppet Souls

by David Lane and Peter Balkwill



The animation of a puppet is a mysterious occasion and creates questions that raise a myriad of possible answers. Of course there are the technical aspects of articulation that can be levied in support of an answer, things like *Breath*, *Focus*, *Manipulation* and a sense of a *Fixed Point*—all of these certainly help to move a puppet through the varying levels of tension connected to the dramatic action of a story. But what is it that compels us to believe that the puppet is actually alive? After all, isn't it just an assemblage of various corporeal materials, systematically gathered and fused to create a representation of a human or animal? Why then do we care so much about it as though it were an actual being, something with a spirit? These are the questions that have wrinkled our foreheads since the earliest moments when we banded crude effigies about the fire, casting shadows on damp cave walls: the dance of puppetry in its youngest moment.

In pursuit of the answer we embark on a journey with the most basic of stuff—cloth material, fabric, textiles, what mummies are wrapped in, what we clothe ourselves in and what we bundle our babies in as we tuck them down to slumber. And we apply this tackle in abstract physical movement exercises. We stretch our ponderings into the abyss,

not expecting an answer but more to cast a collective net into the waters of possibility, to see if we might gain an inkling of understanding within the immediate community of our group.

One of the directions in which we maneuver is the application of Suzuki's actor-training methodology. We have a particular interest in the investigation of our Ki energy—the individual's personal and physical relationship to this essential force, then stretched and shared with the group's collective energy. In some regard we look to find the individual in the ensemble while identifying the ensemble as a single entity, and then we begin to ask ourselves: How does a puppet fit into all of this?

As part of our integrated movement pedagogy, objects are introduced into participants' hands during Suzuki-inspired floor work. At times, limp-limbed-cloth dolls, bamboo sticks, mops, suitcases and umbrellas have been used. The approach has two objectives. One is to give the performer an added weight to feel—such weight is like a little push or resistance that reminds the puppeteer of their connection to their center, and helps them stay grounded with weight “underside.” The second is to explore a simple relationship to something with form, not to express with the object as though it were a pup-

pet but to experience how it changes the way we move, and how our energy begins to flow through this object. In most cases we begin to find the exercises more interesting as we become unified with the articles in hand.

Everyday objects serve their purpose, but at times, they are unwieldy and sometimes difficult to manage when walking in a clump, or soaring tightly in a group.

The solution has been to develop a specialized object that could fit this purpose, but also open up possibilities for other types of exploration within the context of our practice. Much of our early work stems from a desire to deconstruct our understanding of what a puppet is, and so we invest mostly with abstract shapes so that the puppet is discovered as opposed to known. In pursuit of a tool that would serve many functions we created a hybrid pillow of sorts, but with shapes that present larval-mask-like possibilities, at times with limbs and tails, so that they can be tied to sticks or attached to each other.

At the outset we didn't know what we were creating, but with the very first step in this exploration, we knew we were on to something with great potential—but what to call them? It is hard to say who uttered the words and perhaps it wasn't even spoken but just collectively and instantly understood. We had each created our own puppet soul.

The construction involves hand sewing by the participant—soft muslin, unbleached is ideal—and then hand stuffed with raw cotton batting, a dense filling with a palpable weight.

This action, the builder's touch, and the concentration and act of creation, seems to affect the very nature of the object itself—creating an intimate connection between the object and the 'maker, as their vital energy (Ki Energy) is extended into the very centre of the thing. The repeated pull of embroidery thread across the surface . . . the folding in of batting and then cinching up of the membrane . . . questions

of symmetry, lines of beauty, mass, negative space . . . and the tug, paw and maneuvering of the object as it forms in the builder's hands all contribute to a sense of parentage, where a direct line of pedigree is apparent from builder to thing.

It seems that for some of our workshop participants, the puppet soul was at very least a comfort item; often the would carry off their constructed object to meals, or when on a break . . . using them as a pillow, or as a kind of surrogate teddy bear, perhaps evoking memories of that childhood toy so brazenly sold off at a garage sale when the teen years hit.

The designer may add a single black dot if they desire. A thin micron pen works for this task or black stitching can be applied.

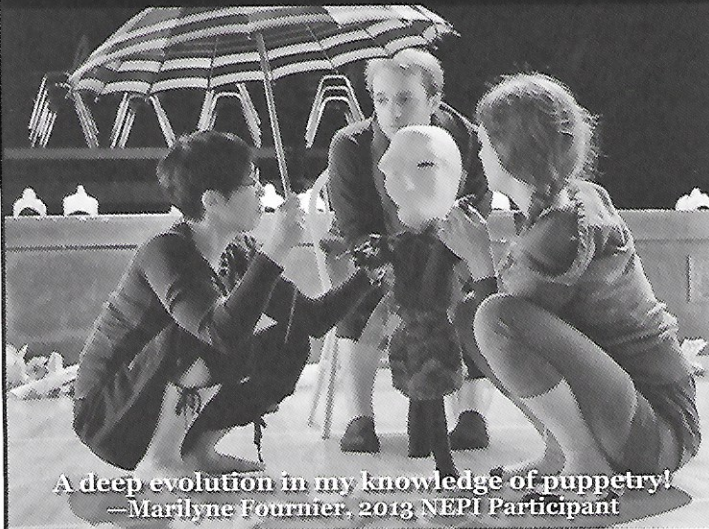
The construction of the puppet soul is itself an exploration, and serves to get the participants to work with their hands early in the process, breaking down the barriers and inhibitions that accompany the notion of building puppets. There are no patterns, so the participants must work with what they have in front of them. The braver ones will just use the scraps discarded by the other builders. Others decide to draw on the cloth to get an outline, then cut shapes that are assembled mostly by hand, resorting only to the sewing machine when edges require a smooth, elegant line.

A question arises: Should the facilitators let the participant know what they are building before they begin, or should they keep the object's identity a secret so that the participant's subconscious is at work in the forming of the shape? This is a tricky notion. When the builder discovers the implications of what the object is, they are then put into a direct relationship of whether or not they think it is a beautiful thing—they must allow the endearment of the puppet soul to grow over time, must use it in practice, feel its weight, become accustomed to its smell and appreciate its ugly appearance. The puppet soul's beauty is revealed in the course of these explorations,



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in which the creator develops a relationship with her object, imbuing its simple materials with her own life-force.

During our summer workshop, the purpose of the puppet soul was kept secret from the participants until they were well on their way to completing the task. If truth be told, the grizzly act of snipping, stuffing, and crude stitching gave us pause and cemented in these workshop leaders' minds the direction we would take in adding a theme to our group's investigations. As needles pierced the rough-hewed fabric shapes, and the still-seeded cotton (oatmeal colored and containing the DNA potential for life) was being forcefully packed into the textile sheaths, our imaginations were "pinged." Rag corners were tacked up and then stitched to the main mass. Others used embroidery thread across the surface to create patterns or to secure some strange appendage. Shapes like internal organs appeared—many evocative of kidneys, lungs and hearts, while others revealed an inferred eye, a nose, a crooked ear, a tongue. Looked at in a certain way, the hint of a face might be revealed for a moment, then disappear when repositioned—the way one sees a gnome or a sprite in the bark of a tree. It did appear to us, the workshop leaders, that the trusting participants had allowed us to cast them in the most curious of roles. The story being played out in front of us very much resembled the marvelous and fantastical tale of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, as imagined by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. The modern Prometheus myth was repeating itself before our very eyes.

Recently, the larval puppet souls have migrated their way out of the studio workshop and into performance. We have begun to explore a theatrical set that is made up of sewing machines and bins of fabric and stuffing. There is something calming about the massing up of textiles and puffs

of bedding like landlocked clouds—the hum and churn of the needles yum-yumming through the cloth. As a warm-up to the arrival of the audience, the puppeteers are busy fabricating strange lumps that will later come to life and then be sold in the lobby as caged creatures-cum-pets. In addition to the already potential puppet souls, we begin to steal little masks onto the shapes, heightening the possibility for characters to emerge.

But in all that they can accomplish and compel us to imagine, the greatest potential is in the willing participant of the workshop and the singular creation that springs from that occasion.

Is the puppet soul, then, in some way a mirror reflection of the builder's unconscious self? Their psychology? Their shadow world? Is it possible for the builder to draw up within the material fabric the intangible hopes and fears of their own second self? Is it merely projection, and therefore all within the mind of the builder? Or is there a mystical transference, as the puppet soul becomes the fetish object of our training ritual?

Those questions will have to wait until the next article, but will continue to burble and boil within us as we continue the journey of the puppet soul.

David and Peter are founding members of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop and are co-directors of the New England Puppet Intensive with Natalie Balkwill. This is a sister program to the Banff Puppet Intensive. David lives in North Adams, Massachusetts where he teaches performance and leather mask making at Siena College. Peter lives in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, and is also the Education Director of the Canadian Academy of Mask and Puppetry.

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