

The 2014 New England Puppet Intensive

by David Lane & Peter Balkwill

The New England Puppet Intensive is 15 days of vigorous training in puppetry and animated object performance led by members of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop. This latest edition took place in Williamstown, Massachusetts last August and participants took part in the development of original material based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic tale, *Young Goodman Brown*, which was presented at the end of the workshop at MASS MoCA. NEPI offers a unique residential experience, where colloquy, experimentation and collaborative development provide the framework for learning and personal growth. The Berkshire landscape, as well as two world class museums within minutes of the campus, provide an inspirational setting for the exploration of puppetry arts.

There are many arms to the art of puppetry, and the aspiring puppeteer must avail himself to all of them. Like some kind of mystic god from a distant and ancient culture, the puppet artist stretches these arms into the ethers of possibility to pull back all that is necessary to affect the art of first creating a puppet, and then manipulating it. And there are an infinite amount of these appendages – their numbers are as vast as the artist's ingenuity.

So where to begin?

First and foremost we at the New England Puppet Intensive, begin with the individual, that brave soul that willingly steps up to the task. In many ways this source already has all of the tools needed, the puppet has called them up, after all.

Toward The Art Of Manipulation:

It is true that there are many things that go into giving a puppet life and as many theories for what might be the foundation of animating and manipulation. Certain camps will expound the notion that breath is the underlying principle; others may suggest that focus is primary. Although everything is important, our posture is that it is the vital energy that flows through everything, and especially all living things that gives the puppet life.

In our pursuit of understanding how best to animate the inanimate we create a foundation class and utilize the theories and modalities of Tadashi Suzuki. We call it "training" and begin every day's work with this exploration. At the outset this may seem like a very abstract direction to invest in. But there



The masks are let loose in the rehearsal hall at MASS MoCA.

is often a deeper discovery that comes from the conjecture of juxtaposing two seemingly unrelated themes. So we stomp and walk and rise slowly from the ground, we stretch our Ki energy into each other and ask it in return. We posture ourselves to the possibility that we will find purchase with this energy and our application of the same to the art of puppetry.

To serve as a common language we call this vital energy Ki, as it is defined within some eastern cultures, and this is a founding principal within our exploration of Suzuki, or "training". Much like the student of Aikido we look for an efficient posture to align ourselves to better the flow of Ki, balance over the balls of the feet, a sense of weight underside and a strong focus to our bodies energetic centre just below the bellybutton—a fun place to find.



Young Goodman Brown bids adieu to his new wife Faith before heading into the darkened forest.

Through our exercises we study how this energy grows stronger from our collective gathering, we ask ourselves how this might be increased with the addition of an audience, we strive to work with this in mind elevating our efforts to this level of work. Then we add objects into the scheme to see how this energy and intensity moves through the possible puppet. In all of this exploration we begin to approach an idea of a strong, internal, emotional connection—we practice building a story that might be linked to the instincts or objectives of a character assigned to a puppet.

This is only the beginning of a long and interesting journey, groundwork carried forward into the arena of creation, of the play that we will affix, the theories that we will harness, to make a puppet live, suffer, succeed and ultimately draw forth our empathy.

Dirt on Paper: Drawing the Body in Motion

Before lunch, our custom is to take the open air with sketchbook and charcoal in hand. The first drawing sessions are about seeing and sensing: drawing the model from life, we are searching to feel mass and weight, and the poetic lines created in space when the human form assumes a gesture or shape.



Participants drawing one morning at the hill-side garden.

This sense of the figure in space is expressed through the charcoal and onto the page, but we aren't so concerned with likeness – our goal is to capture the essential energy the shape expresses, and to connect our senses to the dynamic qualities of a given gesture. Our drawings are swirls and long lines, charcoal dragged flat-side, sometimes skidding like a speedboat, sometimes taking the slow path, like a lover's hand. We seek the stoic line, the resting line, the essential gesture, and the line of infinite beauty, which together comprise the energetic substrate of a body in motion. We imagine ourselves in the position of the model and use our own sense of kinetics to try to feel mass and how the body is balanced. We ask ourselves how Ki energy is flowing through the gesture. We draw the model stationary and also in motion.

Puppet Laboratory

Following is an articulation lab. We again may find ourselves focussed inward on our own kinetics, before attempting a translation to puppet. A simple neutral-mask exercise is learned. Sleeping, the mask awakens and finds themselves in a dream, at the edge of a lake, mist and fog hovering just above the water. They stand and step toward the body of water . . . a consciousness deep and unexplored. The mask picks up a rock and throws it in the lake – simple actions performed without judgement in the Beginner's Mind. They follow the path of the rock in the air and listen for it to break the water's surface. Something changes, and the mask returns to the spot beside the water and falls back into a slumber.

Having performed the exercise, we now take a partner and apply the story to the puppets. We use "unstrung marionettes" – puppets with natural articulation, but no



Participants work in tandem on the stone-throwing exercise.

means to stand on their own. Without us, they lie in a heap ...we are to bring our Ki energy to them, and breath into them with life.

Naturally, the reverential tone of the neutral mask gives way to more frolicsome experiments. Can the puppet drink a beer, waddle across the table and pass out? How does the puppet fish in the lake? How does it sneak, hide, and jump out? But this is almost by design, or at least a welcome development, as we want to encourage a sense of play with the puppet, a return to the well of childhood wonder.

The next articulation lab involves a master-servant lazzi, and must remain unscripted. Participants follow their own instincts and improvise the course of the scene without rehearsal. What follows is fresh and unpredictable, and in some cases, unrepeatable. A movie theatre proposal and a puppet with wandering hands; the sneaky maid who steals the King's crown and imagines holding court for her adoring public; knock-about routines and hide-and-seek drawn directly from the manipulators' childhood memories. Emotional sounds are permitted, but no dialogue. Perhaps this is when puppets are at their best—when their manipulators forget what they know and react in the moment with vim, and spontaneity.

Winding Down

Dewey grass is underfoot as our day falls to a close. The group leaves the warmth of the painting studio and breathes in the cooler, mountain air. Appreciations end each day, and is a chance for reflection, both silent and spoken. A circle of silence gives way to one more group activity . . . this time singing . . . shoulder to shoulder . . . our voices carrying over the darkened landscape as stars poke out through the navy cloak of night.

www.newenglandpuppet.org

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Photos by David Lane