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THE SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE

PUPPETRY INTERVENTIONS

by Linda C. Ehrlich

Paperhand Puppet Intervention performances present the everyday and the unexpected, the familiar and strange. Now in its 18th year, PHPI uses stilt dancing, large masks, shadow puppets and a wide range of other objects made mostly from found materials to create "pageant-play-extravaganzas." Each summer production, for all ages, features an original story and musical score. Current years have drawn up to 16,000 audience members to productions in several (outdoor) venues in the Triangle and Triad areas. In 2017 they won a "Best of the Triangle" award.

Their studio is housed in the beautifully remote town of Saxapahaw, NC, 19 miles west of Chapel Hill, nestled in row after row of white pine trees. When you enter the area, you feel that magic is about to happen.

And indeed it does.

In their human-scale, but also larger-than-life, productions, the Paperhand stories move from an everyday focus to wide-scale wonder. As one of the directors, Jan Burger puts it: "We want the performances to not be too scary for a three-year-old but also engage a ninety-year-old."

At age nineteen, one of the PHPI founders, Donovan Zimmerman, saw a performance of Bread and Puppet Theatre in Vermont, and never looked back. Donovan describes himself as a "maximalist puppeteer and maker who believes in trying."

"We are all grandchildren of Bread and Puppet," the other founder, Jan Burger, reminds. He notes that many puppetry troupes (like Paperhand) are known locally but not nationally. Jan describes his work as that of an "activist/artist" to contribute to causes in a visually positive way. In his words: "Performing live for people is a form of activism." In addition to his work for Paperhand, Jan sometimes makes banners and puppets that he takes to the streets with activist groups around the country, such as the Peoples' Climate March in D.C., the NC Climate Justice Summit, or the 1999 Seattle puppet convergence protesting the World Trade Organization. He is interested in creating a show that deals with issues local to North Carolina, like those related to Duke Energy and climate justice.

In its first venture overseas, the troupe has also conducted workshops in the Virgin Islands, thanks to Department of Education support.

The name? A lot of the puppets are papier mâché and the emphasis is on the handmade rather than the mass-produced. And "Intervention"? This part of the name was inspired by San Francisco's Wise Fool Puppet Intervention troupe. It is a "heads up" that the puppet performance will be surprising and "intervene" between what is expected and something new. Donovan explains: "I thought of a giant papier-mâché hand reaching down from a cardboard cloud and tapping (or slapping) someone on the head and saying, wake up! Our work is a call to action not just an entertainment."

Paperhand productions focus on environmental protection, the corruption of politicians, and those stories are often told through the lens of ancient myths and legends. In PHPI productions, there doesn't tend to be any purely Evil character (although there are certainly ones depicted as buffoons and obstacles).

GOAT IN A BOAT ON A SEA OF INFORMATION FROM *ISLANDS UNKNOWN*, 2010 PHOTO: LEE CAPPS

PERFORMANCE SITES AND DATES

The Forest Theatre (an outdoor ampitheatre) on the University of North Carolina campus is what Donovan describes as "an elemental space" that connects the community of viewers. Donovan and Jan prefer to hold their performances outside to take advantage of the shadows during twilight and then as darkness descends. Utilizing the growing darkness, shadow puppets are often brought in near the end of the performance.

Each summer pageant involves about 30 performers (puppeteers and musicians) while 100-150 people help to build the shows. A group of children have grown up with the company, changing their roles as they grow larger. Rehearsals tend to start in mid-June in preparation for a launch of performances from August 1. As the 2009 documentary *A Puppet Intervention* (dir. Mark Barroso) reveals, a lot happens at the last minute!

To point out the "intervention" aspect, I'll highlight three PHPI productions:

Islands Unknown (2010)

Paperhand's 11th production offers the intriguing juxtaposition of a room full of books, a whimsical little girl with knee socks searching for her own story. and an elusive, bespectacled goat eating through the delicious paper. We sense the sheer magic of what it feels like to open the pages of a book and enter into a story. Hungry caterpillars, pirates, furies, and a series of islands populate this library stage. The little girl opens one book and figures from Picasso's recreation of the horrors of aerial bombing, the painting *Guernica,* explode onto the stage.

As the little girl and the goat journey (on stage) in their small boat, they encounter islands of wealthy politicians who fight off islands of pirates (stealing from each other). Fortunately they also come to more peaceful islands where leaves grow out of large mountains, lit from within with a soft golden glow.

Particularly inventive is Chapter 5 (this play has chapters like a book) entitled "The City with no Past" in which amoeba-like creatures inhabit a city with no history or memory. A Cyclops creature (reminiscent of "No Face" in Miyazaki Hayao's animated film *Spirited Away)* wanders the town, always isolated, desirous and hungry. In exasperation, the girl utters one word: "Enough!".

"Enough!" is a message that permeates all of the Paperhand productions over the years.

The little girl's (now solo) journey continues. In Chapter 6, gyres filled with plastic clog the suffering ocean that weeps black tears ("new continents made of trash"). But the magical ending of *Islands Unknown* shows "broken pieces of a fragmented world" coming together. Here's how Jan describes the process:

> Our amazing engineer Chris Carter built an icosahedron (a 20-sided object made of beveled wooden triangles stretched with fabric) that comes together with magnets. We painted it like the earth and had to rehearse over and over again (in gale force winds because the next day was opening night and we hadn't gotten it to work yet.) When it finally did come together it was a graceful dance that ended with the final piece snapping into place. That last piece triggered a contact switch that lit up the glowing earth from within, which we carried up through the audience in the darkness.

Witch from *City of Frogs,* 2012 photo: Lee Capps

The Beautiful Beast (2016)

At the beginning of *The Beautiful Beast*, the off-stage narrator asks "Who are the most frightening creatures?" The answer: not the slimy green-tentacle one under the bed nor the jelly-fish-like "Wumpaflump" made of discarded plastic bags. Rather, the most frightening creatures are the politicians with oversized head masks and one pointing finger who do harm to the world through their greed.

The second piece in *The Beautiful Beasts* reinvents the Gilgamesh legend as a plea for environmental protection. The fearsome Humbaba of the legend is reinterpreted as a positive force, a protector of the sacred cedar forest. (Humbaba is created as a large head puppet with two long extending fabric arms maneuvered by puppeteers behind trees.) Weary Humbaba's efforts are in vain as Gilgamesh and his friend, the beast-man Enkidu, sunder the trees from the earth and chop Humbaba into pieces on stage–a scene with a surprisingly visceral effect.

The coda of this play is also magical as a young girl decides to spend a night in the woods (projected as a silhouette landscape à la Lotte Reiniger). There she meets La Loba (Wolf Woman, akin to Baba Yaga) searching for wolf bones. As the elderly woman works through the night assembling bones, there is an impressive simulation on stage of the light and sounds of a fire. Particularly wonderful is the moment when the girl finds the last missing wolf bone and a skillful puppeteer makes the skeleton of a wolf move, morphing into a pack of wolves with shiny, hypnotic eyes. To even greater effect, a gigantic puppet of the Cosmic Mother (enormous head, two expressive hands, and a glowing core) moves majestically through the audience. The message of reverence for the environment is powerfully projected into the now pitch-black night. The offstage narrator tells us:

> Our stories help us find each other when we are lost...When we tell our stories, the world grows larger.

Of Wings and Feet (2017)

Of Wings and Feet is an exploration of "bird-ness," with delicately prancing flamingoes, small brown birds learning to fly, and two monumental turtles (each manipulated by two people) who caress each other's neck (constructed of stretchy cloth). Donovan explains: "The wings are symbols of freedom, but also possibly are weighted down and heavy." *Of Wings and Feet* has three main sections I would categorize as: (1) pageantry, (2) the carnivalesque, and (3) the transcendental.

On the cover of the program of *Of Wings and Feet*, there is a quotation by Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Rise like lions after slumber... ." The poetic phrase goes on to remind us that "We are many–they are few!"

Outrage at greedy environmenta destruction seeps through the seemingly light-hearted second part of *Of Wings and Feet*. A bloated Trump-masked mar marches petulantly across the stage muttering to himself. He acts as a foil messing up the joy of the circus. Self-important business people stamp arounc on stage with boxes on their heads "There were a few noisy departures ir the audience after the Trump puppe exited," intern Kelly Washtaka noted thinking back to the 2017 season. Ar older couple sitting next to me in the N.C. Museum of Art amphitheatre made a hasty departure when the Big Business puppet started to "buy out" the stilt-walking Statue of Liberty. (No words are spoken on stage in this second part, bu there are written words on cloth, which are read aloud by the audience.) One of the many traditions Paperhand draws or is the street theatre tradition of *cantastoria*, where a "story-singer" tells a story while gesturing to a series of images Sometimes the Paperhand performances include moments that remind me of the Japanese *kami-shibai* (where stories are told to changing pictures that slide in and out of a frame).

As the night deepens, the deep "exhalation" of the third part of the performance lingered most in my mind Giant puppets rise up and come out to the audience, in slow, dreamlike movements. Father Sky towers over the low-lying Ocean (reminiscent of Brancusi's sculpture "Sleeping Muse").

One reason Kelly Washatka decided to join as an intern with Paperhand was because it seemed a "politically poignant time," with the U.S. elections having just taken place. She knew the PHPI takes a strong stand for the protection of the environment and against the greed of narrow-minded politicians. "It did not disappoint." Kelly recalls rapturously being in the back of the giant glow-turtle in the final scene.

THE RAT FROM *THE PAINTED BIRD*, 2014 PHOTO: JOSH GIRA

STORYWRITING

Donovan and Jan start the scenario writing around January. In general, they stay away from depicting violence, cursing, and sex in their scenarios, but they don't hesitate to take on tough political/environmental themes or unresolved paradoxes. The two men toss ideas back and forth, talking over a sketchbook, writing and drawing at the same time. "Sometimes we never agree and one of us just gives up!" Donovan murmured, with a shrug.

MUSIC

The music "brings the puppets to life...almost as if the music were causing the puppets into being" (Donovan). Multi-instrumental, multi-vocal musicians also assume the voices of some of the puppets. These ever-busy musicians "change hats" with remarkable facility, and with an obvious enjoyment of the challenge. Many come back year after year.

"Why puppets?" I asked Jan when we met in the café in quiet Saxapahaw. "Their physicality, they are made by human hands," he replied. "The act of bringing something to life as a physical manifestation of our intentions...For a child, a puppet is no more surprising than a dog, but for an adult, it sets up a conundrum. A new space is created." Jan went on to comment: "The empathy viewers feel watching the animal-puppets goes beyond a Disneyesque anthropomorphizing of animals." In the documentary, we see a wondrous moment when scores of children reach up their hands to touch the head of a large cow-like beast puppet that is dipping down to them in the audience. As he was helping to manipulate that large puppet, Donovan recalls feeling tearful when one little Indian girl approached the beast with hands folded in prayer.

OWLS FROM *DROP IN THE BUCKET* 2015 PHOTO: LEE CAPPS

Since 1998, Paperhand Puppet Intervention has used giant puppets, stilts, painted flats, shadow and rod puppets to create works that (to me) offer a synergy of Brecht and the Marx Brothers, with considerable seriousness mixed with whimsy. Radical Puppetry for all ages.

Thanks to Donovan Zimmerman, Jan Burger, Kelly Washatka, Alan and Jill Goldman, and Ryan Chamberlain of the Chapel Hill Public Library. For more information, go to www.paperhand.org

LINDA C. EHRLICH is an independent scholar who has written extensively about Asian traditional theatre, puppetry, and cinema. Her collection of prose poetry on world cinema *Cinematic Reveries: Gestures, Stillness, Water* was published by Peter Lang (2013). Her commentary appears on the Criterion DVD of the Spanish film *The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena,* dir. Víctor Erice) and on the 25th anniversary Blu-ray of the Japanese film *Maborosi* (dir. KORE-EDA Hirokazu).

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