



# CREATING NEW WORKS FOR ADULT AUDIENCES

by Lisa Aimee Sturz and Michael Davis

**The Los Angeles Puppet Artists Collective (LAPAC) is dedicated to developing new works that will advance the art of puppetry. Members are puppeteers, actors, musicians, technicians, animators, designers, producers, directors and writers working together to explore puppetry as a means of communication and artistic expression.**

As the hub of the film and television industry, Los Angeles is a great place to advance one's skills in craftsmanship and technology. It's an exciting opportunity to learn about new foams and plastics and state of the art eye mechanisms. Working on camera and watching carefully on video monitors is an incredible lesson in puppet posture and manipulation. But the air is thick; the pace is vast; the cost of living is high; and the atmosphere is often cold and competitive. It's easy to get sucked into the filmmaking vortex and lose touch with what it is exactly that brought you here.

It's difficult to find the time and energy for ideas . . . for experimentation, and inner growth. Creating an original puppet piece is a mammoth task and bringing it to an audience is another. It takes a lot of courage to put yourself out there in a town that runs

on superlatives. But somewhere inside that artistic vision keeps hovering and pushing you into action.

LAPAC was founded by Lisa Sturz in the summer of 1992 to address the isolation that many were feeling as independent puppet artists. It was a little scary at first because most of us know each other from auditioning for the same job. But from the first meeting it was apparent that we were inspiring one another to attempt projects that had previously seemed overwhelming. The concept of collaboration was liberating. Members could perform in each other's pieces, share production costs, pool resources, and give support and assistance.

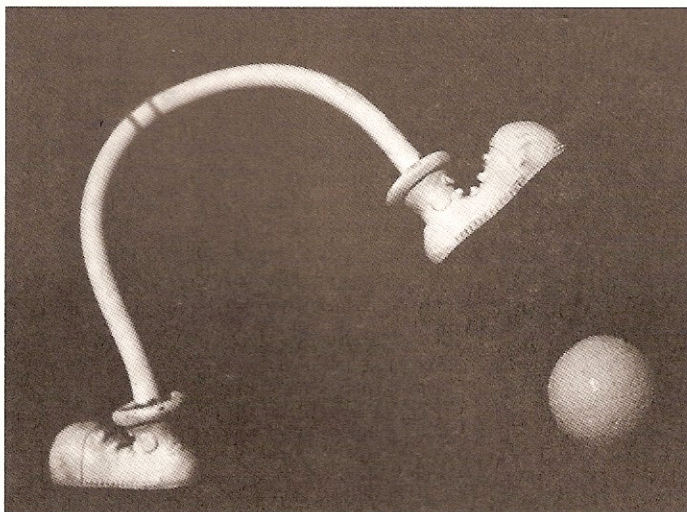
LAPAC began meeting once a month. Half the meeting was devoted to the business of finding a theatre, raising money, developing an audience, and solving the technical requirements of the overall production. The other half of the meeting was a forum for ideas. We discussed what we wanted to do. Although individual artistic freedom is always emphasized, not all concepts pass the group's test questions: "Why puppets?" (as opposed to actors), "What are you trying to say and is it worth saying?" "What do you want the audience to experience?" and our least favorite,

but vitally important question, "Is it possible to achieve your vision in this particular venue with this amount of time and resources?" Some pieces are rethought or replaced by one idea after another until each creator is confident.

In the winter of 1992, LAPAC, in association with L.A. Theatre Artists, a non-profit producing organization who managed a small theatre, produced an original evening of puppet vignettes for adult audiences entitled "ICONS and OTHER STRANGERS."

Opening weekend we were rewarded by a great review in the L.A. Times with the headline "Icons" a Challenging Adult Puppet World which went on to say . . . "a joyous, comical, dramatically pointed pleasure" Other papers started responding to our press releases and by the fourth week we were selling out. The Los Angeles Reader wrote, "It's the most fascinating and creative show in Los Angeles today."

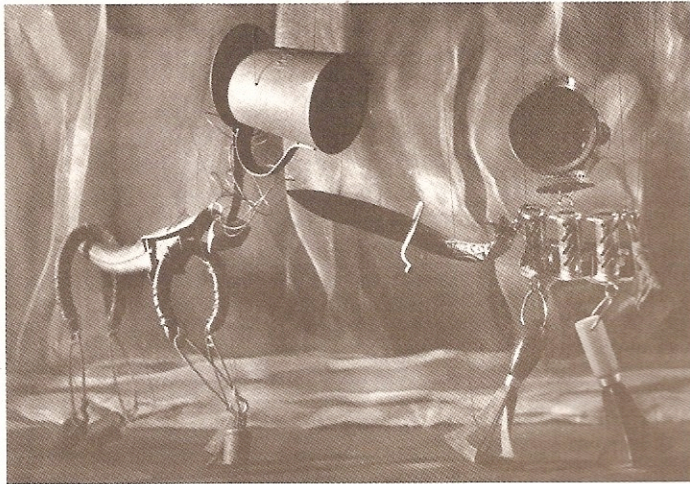
Fueled by the excitement of a successful and supportive experience, LAPAC resumed meeting to produce another evening. We attracted several new participants and decided to try a bigger venue and allow for more ambitious pieces. To do that we needed



(Left) FEETS OF FREIGHT by Rob Secrest. (Right) Blind Man & Dog from DOGS by François Manavit. Both from "Icons and Other Strangers" 1992.

Photos: Charles Edwards





(Left) *AMATERASU* by Christine Papalexis. (Right) *The Virgin, Mother and Crone* from *FACING BOTH WAYS* by Lisa Sturz. Both from *ICONS REVISITED*, 1994. Photos: Charles Edwards

more money. We were able to raise over two thousand dollars with a private funding letter. This money was joined by grants from the Puppeteers of America, The Henson Foundation, and the Los Angeles Performing Arts Commission. This allowed us to pay for the theatre, a lighting/technical designer, and some publicity.

This past Fall, LAPAC completed its second production of collected works entitled *ICONS REVISITED*. It ran for four weeks at The Complex in Hollywood. It was produced by Lisa Sturz, Melissa Sagarian and Christine Papalexis. Stephan Haves acted as artistic consultant and Amy Halpern was the lighting and technical supervisor.



*CLOSETQUAKE* by Jeff Karsner from *Icons Revisited* 1994. Photo: Charles Edwards

The evening consisted of:

#### CLOSETQUAKE

The wildly imaginative marionettes of Jeff Karsner creatively assembled from household objects show you what might go on in a closet during an earthquake.

*MISS POTTS* performed by Thom Fountain adds stand-up humour with this aging comedian.

#### AMATERASU

In staging the story of this Japanese sun goddess, Amaterasu, and the creation of the seasons, master storyteller Ms. Papalexis displays a fantastical use of delicate metal and bones to create other worldly characters in a unique interpretation of this classic myth.

#### INNOCENCE LOST/A DOG AND A FEATHER/ARE YOU SURE?

Renowned puppeteer, Michael Earl presented a trilogy of enchanting pieces, entertaining us with his mastery, inimitable style, and comic flair.

*FACING BOTH WAYS* by Lisa Aimee Sturz is a haunting spectacle of mystery, magic, and music exploring the Celtic Otherworld. The ensemble cast included ten puppeteers, original music, and a combination of rod, hand and shadow puppets. Text by Andrew Campbell, musical direction by Michael Eagan, harp accompaniment by Dinah LeHoven and Rod Basler, choreography by Carol Guidry.

Other performers included Don Lewis, Graeme McKenna, Amy McKenna, Laura Levy, Kristin Charney, Heather Barr, Kevin Hammond and Melissa Sagarian.

This time the Los Angeles Reader wrote, "The magic of puppetry comes to life in *Icons Revisited*, a poetic celebration of ritual and myth. In this triumphant return to the ancient art of simple storytelling, the primitive rites containing the seeds of theatre are renewed using masks, puppetry, music, dance and costumes. It is a

**dramatic presentation that transcends time and cultural limitations and persists to be a vibrant form of theatrical entertainment."**

We believe that LAPAC can serve as a model for other communities wishing to create this kind of event. We are learning as we go and as we expand the growing pains are there. As we review and evaluate our work thus far; we have put together some thoughts and guidelines for ourselves and for others wanting to follow this example:

- Start planning early. Sometimes a year can elapse between grant deadlines and when those funds are available. You need to know in advance what kind of theatre you can afford.
- Set up a clear schedule for the different stages of pre-production such as script, designs, puppet construction, rehearsal, etc. Every artist works differently; but in order to gain from the expertise of the group, it is important to show progress at each meeting. The group needs to know the technical requirements early enough to find an appropriate theatre.
- Find someone outside to act as an artistic consultant. With a collective, it helps to have an objective eye to give the group focus.
- Choose a venue with adequate storage space. The choreography between pieces can be as complex as the pieces themselves. Make sure everyone's stages can be broken down or easily stored during the other vignettes. Share staging elements when possible.
- Bring in a stage manager to co-ordinate a group rehearsal schedule,





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supervise the technical run throughs and keep everyone on schedule.

- Have a rough-through a month prior to opening. This allows for the designers to plan the lights and sound and decide what alterations need to be done in the theatre to accommodate the entire production. It is also a good opportunity to decide the order of the show and begin planning the backstage movements. When functioning in a group, last minute changes can be stressful for everyone involved.
- If at all possible, hire an experienced publicist. They have the connections to bring in the press and get articles published before opening. When it gets close to production, members are too busy with rehearsals and production needs to be sending out press kits and making phone calls.
- Don't underestimate the task. Try to be realistic about what you can achieve and listen to the other members' suggestions. Often in the heat of production it is hard to make the compromises necessary for the production as a whole.
- Keep documentation. Make sure to take good photos and a video. These are needed to raise money and expand the credibility of the group.
- Have a guest book at the performance to create a mailing list for future events.

LAPAC has proven to be a rich tapestry of artistic expression. With continued media and audience support, LAPAC will continue to experiment with and challenge traditional boundaries of this ancient and alternative art form.