

## Generations

# A Puppeteer's Daughter



Producing "Lenz: A Puppet Play"  
by Manon Manavit

On my 7th birthday, I followed my mother through the snow to her nearby studio in anticipation of a 'big surprise.' I was elated to find I was being given my very own handmade kid-sized puppet stage, à la Punch and Judy.

I'm a puppeteer's daughter. Ever since I can remember, there have been puppets in my life. Puppets were my cherished dolls and toys—some were ornate figurines from far away places, others I had lovingly crafted with pipe cleaners and pom-poms. My mother's puppets, much finer than my own, would hang around the house in various stages of creation. On a few occasions, I was quite hurt to see that friends were scared or shocked by their presence at sleepovers.

"Make the puppets stop looking at me!" screamed one friend, memorably.

I was a staple at puppetry performances, workshops and festivals—momma's little sidekick. People would ask, "Who is that well-behaved, articulate little girl?" Some of my greatest childhood joy came from working silently on an



Manon and her brother, Theo, grew up in their mother's puppet workshop.

art project, sharing the studio with my mother as she designed, crafted, sculpted, sewed, and assembled her latest work. She would perform her shows for me as they were being developed, and as a young child I would critique her as honestly as I could. That was the fabric of our creative relationship. With her support, I started performing in community theatre, my first role being a munchkin in *Wizard of Oz*.

### AT ARM'S LENGTH

But—as I hit puberty, I started to disown puppetry.

I pretended to be embarrassed by it, and stopped participating as much. If my mom offered to pay me, I would help her in the studio when she had a big job, but more often than not I would be a nuisance and a bad worker, perhaps in a bid to avoid responsibility. I would joke that puppetry was 'lame' or 'weird' and she would graciously ignore my provocations. I never wondered if my mother's feelings were hurt.

In my willful teenage years, I became more pre-occupied with sex, drugs, rock n' roll, and my own theatre productions than with sharing in my mother's puppet world. Of course, I was proud of her and supportive to a degree, but I only wanted to be with puppets marginally. If strangers expressed interest, I would find myself bragging about my mother's many wonderful achievements in the field, which seemed to betray the nonchalance I displayed in her presence.

### COMING HOME AGAIN

As I grew up and out of the nest, I continued to develop my passion in theatre as an actress. My puppet-ambivalence was forgiven, forgotten.... When I started at Bard College in New York, the response to my mother's profession was enormous. Cute boys swooned when they found out my mother puppeteered *Howard the Duck* and Splinter in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III*.

My mother is a living relic of the '80s and '90s Hollywood puppetry hey-day. Her presence in movies became a form of social currency, a badge of eccentricity and creativity I was all too happy to claim despite my past reticence.

At Bard, I decided to major in Directing. My mind was being expanded, exploded, poked and prodded; among other youthful revelations, I saw that I had learned many skills by proxy. I realized I had been ungrateful to my loving, prolific, visionary mother. Almost overnight, my puppet-joy was restored. I became determined to make up for lost time.

Now, having made my way through four years of undergraduate theatre, I have accepted fully:

Puppets are cool. Puppets are in.

Being a puppetry 'insider,' I often find myself explaining and defending puppetry as an ancient, culturally relevant art form that goes beyond Muppets and *Avenue Q*. I find myself thinking "I was into puppets way before you were!"

In the theatre world today, puppetry is experiencing a surge in popularity. It is now seen as a multi-media tool, one that enhances theatre productions easily by adding whimsy and satire. (Side Note: As a puppetry insider I sometimes find myself wondering, 'why don't they hire professionals?') I decided to do my own puppet show. I wanted to tell a great story in a way that would challenge me, stand as an homage to my mother, and consequentially make amends to the puppetry profession. So that was why I wrote the puppet play, *Lenz*.

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Lenz II is tormented by the image of his parents.  
Show photographs by Jessica Fildes

### PRODUCING LENZ

*Lenz: A Puppet Play*, performed in Montreal in April 2012, is an original adaptation of a novella by German dramatist Georg Büchner. It tells the true story of a young 18th century sturm-und-drang poet suffering from an unknown madness and his search for relief at the household of renowned pastor Johann Freidrich Oberlin. Jakob Lenz spends two weeks with the pastor at his retreat in Alsace and suffers from extreme delusions, suicidal urges and psychotic breaks. Lenz attempts to revive a dying young girl whom he falsely believes is a woman who spurned him years earlier. With four puppeteers performing with over 30 puppets, the show paints the events with a visceral, humorous, and haunting treatment that only puppets can provide. Their small, slow, purposeful movements render the stage picture as poetic as its narrator, the troubled Lenz.

It was difficult to modify my directing methods to suit the puppeteer's needs and it was often tense in rehearsal. I began with the idea that many virtuosic words could be stuffed into puppet mouths. I struggled to identify that the puppets in my show were creatures of action, capable of nonverbal poetry far stronger than the existential declarations I had desired. Thanks to many interventions by the puppeteers and collaborators of Humble Treasure Productions, the text I initially presented was significantly reduced in favor of 'less is more.' An original score composed by local musician TaigaAcoustica accompanied the puppets.

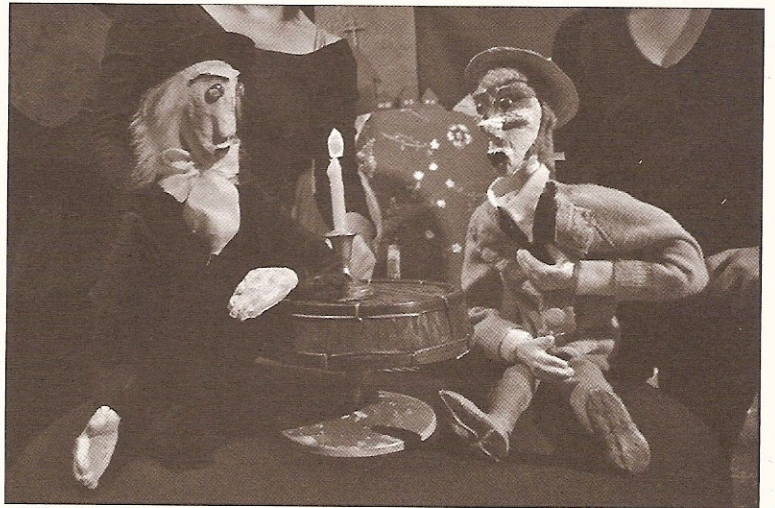
Our debut performance was surrounded by an aura of celebration as friends and family gathered to witness the play that took me three years to write and one year for the team to design, construct, and rehearse.

Finally, the moment of truth; my mother was in the audience.

I had kept her relatively shielded from the project as a whole. As she smiled and stood up from her seat to applaud, I froze. I was suddenly struck with the vivid remembrance of a time my mother sat for hours, peacefully untangling marionette strings. I could feel my own strings being lovingly untangled and I relaxed into receiving appreciation from the audience. As my mother and I embraced, I felt her familiar hand at the control, and no desire to shake it off.



Adjani Poirier as Lenz, Alice Kates as Narrator, and Morgan Nerenberg as Lenz



Oberlin (Zoe Roux) listens as Lenz describes a waking nightmare.



Manon Manavit with her Mother, Lisa Sturz