

# ON CAMERA, SAG PUPPETEERS

by Lisa Aimee Sturz and Mark Bryan Wilson

Do you remember the Skeksis in *The Dark Crystal* ... Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back* ... Johnny 5 in *Short Circuit* ... Slimer in *Ghostbusters* ... E.T. ... or the Gremlins? More producers are including unusual and yet believable creatures in their films. Who makes them move? What skills do they need?

There is a unique group of character actors in the film and television industry who specialize in the art of puppetry for camera. Many of them are members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). Recently puppeteers within SAG have organized to address some of their specific needs.

## WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT PUPPETEERING FOR THE CAMERA?

It takes many people to make a movie happen. Film is a highly specialized industry with different Unions covering the various elements of production. Performance is one aspect in a multitude of technical, artistic, and monetary concerns. Puppeteers need to be patient and co-operative to the demands of the entire production. It can be frustrating for a puppeteer who is accustomed to designing, building, writing, and directing his or her own show to let go of the control and let other people do their jobs. SAG puppeteers are hired as specialists to perform a character to the best of their ability. There are appropriate people to focus the lights, move the monitors, touch up the puppets, and direct the show.

It is relatively recent that a category of freelance puppeteer has emerged who concentrates specifically on the performance of puppets. With the growth of special effects in film, television and commercials, many new methods of controlling puppets have been introduced including cable control, radio control, telemetry suits, pneumatics, hydraulics, and computer waldos. Puppet construction involves mechanical engineers, robotics, electronics, and prosthetic specialists. SAG puppeteers are expected to perform a puppet built by anyone in any style and be able to quickly adapt their skills to the new technologies.

Film puppetry requires a crisp exacting performance with very little rehearsal. All performers need to be adaptable to the ever-changing demands of the director and the unexpected shifts in the shooting schedule. Films are seldom shot in sequence, so puppeteers need to understand the range of their characters over the entire production. By breaking down the script according to emotional or visual magnitude; the puppet actor can perform scenes out of sequence with the appropriate intensity.

A film puppeteer performs with a video monitor instead of a live audience. With luck, the monitor will have a reverse scan switch which flips the image horizontally like a mirror. Otherwise, the puppeteer is moving in opposition to the monitor image in order to respond to other actions in the frame. Generally, the video image is coming directly from the film camera. The screen usually has lines indicating what portion of the image is actually in frame. (Film screens are wider than TV.) With the help of the monitor, puppeteers can guard against unwanted heads, arms, and rods, popping into frame and can adjust height, angle, and eye focus precisely. For long shots, one might prefer to have a close-up image on the puppet rather than a full-frame.

Position and precision are crucial in film. The camera crew needs to know exactly where the performer starts and stops so they can focus accordingly. Often there are tape marks on the floor for the performer and coinciding marks for the dolly and focus puller. Hitting such marks is difficult for a person holding a puppet over their head in open space. Tape marks on the monitor can help; but often, the puppeteer must rely on how a move feels and memorize the physical sensation of how far the arm extends or the elbow bends. Because of the lack of depth perception on a screen, an auxiliary camera can be placed at a 90 degree angle to the main camera so the puppeteer has a depth reference to locate difficult moves accurately.

Performing on camera is different than performing on stage. Without an audience reaction the puppeteer must rely on instinct, experience, and direction to find proper timing. Subtle shifts in angle, height, and eye focus are magnified

many times on a movie screen. The film puppeteer has more freedom to express the puppet's attitude with small precise gestures that are sometimes lost with a live audience. It is also possible to be so broad that the movements look jerky and uncontrolled on the screen. It takes a great deal of practical experience working with a monitor to attain that perfect balance between too much and too little.

Hiding the puppeteers from camera and choreographing the technical elements of a shot can be more challenging than the actual performance. Puppeteers often are placed in strange and contorted positions with their bodies inside a sofa, behind a wall with their arms sticking through a hole, under the floor of the sound stage, with their legs in a split, hanging from the lighting grid, cramped behind a prop, or flying on a crane. Then there is avoiding the microphones, staying out of the way of the camera moves, being conscious of where all the cables and electric wires are, not leaning against lights or set rigs, and not casting shadows on the carefully lit scene. The situation is further complicated when several puppeteers need to work in a small area with someone's head against another's butt, a rod in someone's eye, a nose in some's armpit, or one puppeteer sitting in another's lap. Add to this special effects like explosions, sprays of water, piercing gunshots, greasy slime, confetti, flocks of birds overhead, breakaway bottles, thick smoke, hot lights, and stage blood which require puppeteers to wear uncomfortable protective clothing and gear and one can imagine the chaos. Even with all these adversities, puppeteers are still expected to deliver a convincing and accurate performance.

Most films are shot at 24 frames per second (video at 30 FPS); but sometimes the camera speed is altered to achieve a specific result. A director might choose to slow down the movements of a small puppet to give it a look of more weight or speed up the actions of a puppet that was performed slowly in order to co-ordinate all the movements. Scenes are often shot at several different speeds to see which footage looks best. The puppeteers need to understand their movements precisely to be able to perform at



"GHOSTBUSTERS" Courtesy of Columbia Pictures. Actor, Mark Bryan Wilson inside the Slimer body suit from the original GHOSTBUSTERS feature. Mark's arms are inside of Slimer's foam hands and arms. Mark is looking out from the back of Slimer's throat and Mark's head is directly connected to Slimer's head on the inside of the suit, so when Mark twists his head and body, Slimer twists his, too.

different speeds and still maintain flow.

In many instances it takes several puppeteers to operate a single puppet. In the screen version of *Little Shop of Horrors*, there were over 50 people operating *Audrey II*. For such a complicated character puppeteers work a bit like chamber musicians listening and responding carefully to each other's moves. A strong sense of ensemble develops. Often the puppeteers break down their movements to a precise science of numbered parts (quite like a musical score).

Often the need to hide rods, strings, cables and other mechanisms requires the use of a blue screen. This technique involves shooting the puppet in front of a back-lit screen which is of a

certain wavelength of blue light. The strings, rods, and puppeteer's clothing are painted with this same quality of blue so that they disappear photographically. With the blue screen image, a matte of the puppet is created which is then used to composite the puppet with a background. Sometimes these shots are combined with other moving elements, in which case the puppeteer needs to act and react to something that isn't really there. In the new Disney production of *Little Mermaid's Island*, the puppeteers working in front of a blue screen were able to watch the composited scene on a video monitor as they performed. This allowed them to relate accurately to objects and scenery that was shot separately.

Rotoscoping is a technique in which an artist can look at a film frame by frame and paint over a certain portion. (It can also be done on a computerized paint-box program.) This is used to paint out unwanted rods or hands that might show for a brief moment. In this way, *Mr. Potato Head* is able to dance around freely in the recent McDonald's commercials, without showing the rods on his hands. Another type of application is in feature animation. In *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, puppeteers helped to establish the master shot by manipulating real objects which were then painted over in a cartoon style by the animation crew.

**THE SCREEN ACTORS GUILD**

The Screen Actors Guild was begun in Hollywood California in 1933 by a small group of film actors and actresses unhappy with the lack of regulation regarding their working conditions and salaries. By 1937, they were affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Associated Actors and Artistes of America (Four A's). With 98% of the major stars of the time threatening to strike, the producers agreed to the first SAG contract. Since then, there have been a series of collective bargaining agreements to establish rules for theatrical and television films, prime time television, commercials, industrial and educational films, and student and experimental films. The current contract defines regular and overtime hours, meal periods, pension and health plans, residual payments for reuse, safety standards and affirmative action.

SAG represents actors, singers, stunt performers, voice-over performers, puppeteers, models, and pilots. There are offices throughout the country with about half of its 73,000 members living in the Los Angeles area. Elsewhere, there are almost 25,000 members in New York, 3000 in Florida, 2500 in Chicago and about 2000 in San Francisco. SAG also maintains branches in Atlanta, Boston, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Honolulu, Houston, Las Vegas, Nashville, New Mexico, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Diego, Utah, and Washington D.C.

To become a member of SAG one needs to be cast in a production utilizing SAG performers. An experienced puppeteer who has the specific talents for a particular role can be cast. After a one time initiation fee, semi-annual dues are based on yearly earnings. All SAG members are bound not to appear in films under SAG's jurisdiction where producers have failed to sign a collective bargaining agreement.

**PUPPETEERS AND SAG**

Bob Baker joined SAG in the early years when puppeteers were covered only as specialty acts (with no set rate) for features if the puppeteer built and operated his or her own routine. He cited Bil Baird, Shari Lewis, and Edgar Bergen as examples. Bob remembered instances in which producers copied an established act and hired a non-union person to perform it.

He ran into difficulty when he placed a bid to build and perform several puppets for a new show. SAG told him that if he wasn't seen on camera, he needed to be in The International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE) which handles prop builders and special effects. IATSE responded that they were not interested in "wrist performers." Frustrated and confused, Bob lost the job.

It wasn't until Ronald Reagan's second term as president of SAG in the late 50's that things changed. After one of Bob's famous live birthday

shows for little Ronnie Reagan, he talked with Mr. Reagan about puppeteers and SAG. Mr. Reagan reasoned that since puppeteers take dramatic direction from the director; they must be considered the same as actors. The next time contracts were drawn; puppeteers were listed under SAG's jurisdiction. When Bob walked in to puppeteer for *GI Blues* in 1960; he was considered a principal performer, and for the first time, was given his own dressing room.

Still, in some instances, puppeteers were considered off-camera performers. Then, with the popularity of the characters in shows like *Sesame Street* in the 1970's, many more commercials began using puppets. The 1985 commercial contract reflected the changes in the industry by specifically including puppeteers as principal performers (on camera) with the same rights to residuals as actors have.

Early in 1989, after a puppet workshop at Tony Urbano's studio, a few puppeteers stayed late to discuss problems they were encountering on film sets since the advent of high-tech electronics. Everyone agreed that while the scope of puppetry had changed, SAG was still operating with the old information. One of the puppeteers, who had previously served on a puppeteers committee at SAG, suggested that it was time to bring the Union up to date. Within a week some of the puppeteers were meeting with the Executives of SAG and soon the word went out to all members



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"GREMLINS II" Courtesy, Warner Bros. Inc. Using the monitor as a visual aid, Mark Bryan Wilson operates the head and body of the oversize Daffy puppet during the filming of *Gremlins II*, the New Batch. This large scale puppet, used for close-ups is equipped for a full range of facial expressions and is operated by five puppeteers using cable and electronic joy sticks.

of the Guild inviting interested professional puppeteers to attend a special meeting.

The Caucus held its first meeting on May 24, 1989 at the Hollywood offices of the Guild with 48 puppeteers in attendance. This was one of the larger special interest group turn-outs in SAG's history. The Steering Committee was approved with Eren Ozker and Tony Urbano as Co-Chair, John Lovelady as Vice Chair, Tim Blaney as Recording Secretary, and Cheryl Blaylock, Tim Lawrence and Mark Bryan Wilson as Members at Large. Goals were discussed and sub-committees planned to focus on specific projects.

#### THE CAUCUS AT WORK

The Caucus has become a visible and vocal lobbying force for puppeteers within the Guild. It keeps SAG up to date with its changing needs and encourages puppeteers to participate more fully in Union activities. The main task has been to educate people within the Industry about puppeteering. This is to be achieved in several ways:

A committee is putting together a humorous and informative pamphlet to aid production staffs working with puppeteers. It is designed to minimize on-set problems and (unintentional) abuse.

A series of articles are underway explaining what contemporary puppeteering on camera involves. These will be published in Screen Actor Magazine and various trade publications.

The late Jim Henson generously provided the Caucus with an entertaining video tape illustrating the current techniques employed by puppeteers in film and television. This 12-minute tape is used within the Guild to educate its staff.

A paper on body puppets (full-suited character costumes) is being prepared for presentation. It will include recommendations for the establishment of safety guidelines to be followed when such characters are employed.

The Caucus pays close attention to contractual language and nomenclature regarding puppeteers. It prepares for negotiations by offering proposals to the official negotiating team of the Guild.

The Caucus is trying to establish a master list of puppeteers. In SAG's existing job skills bank, there are 1,432 members who checked puppetry as a special skill. Although it is estimated that less than 200 of these performers are professional puppeteers; there is currently no way to distinguish them from actors who have had some amateur experience. Recently SAG has approved the Caucus's recommendation to change the skill bank form to include *Puppeteer* as a recognized performance category along with *Actor*, *Stunt-person*, *Voice-over*, *Singer*, and *Dancer*. This way a performer will be able to choose his or her priority. The Caucus hopes to provide a reliable list of principal puppeteers which can be made available to signatory producers.

The Caucus eventually plans to sponsor workshops and seminars on such topics as mouth/voice synchronization, monitor use, audition techniques, and the effect of new technologies on puppeteering in film.

#### THE CAUCUS CONTINUES ...

The Caucus is continuing its effort to improve the status and working conditions of puppeteers in the film industry. Caucus meetings in both New York and Hollywood will be held in September of 1990. The caucus now has 87 members in Hollywood, 55 in New York, 4 in Chicago, 3 in San Francisco and 2 in Florida.

IF YOU ARE A MEMBER OF THE SCREEN ACTOR'S GUILD AND WOULD LIKE TO JOIN THE PUPPET CAUCUS, CALL THE COMMITTEE OFFICE

Hollywood (213) 856-6796

New York (212) 856-6796

IF ANYONE HAS FURTHER INFORMATION REGARDING THE HISTORY OF PUPPETEERS IN SAG OR AFTRA, PLEASE FORWARD THE INFORMATION TO THE COMMITTEE OFFICE c/o SCREEN ACTORS



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Lisa Aimee Sturz has been a member of the Puppeteers of America since 1975, and SAG since 1985. She studied puppetry with Rufus and Margo Rose, Frank Ballard, and Albrecht Roser. She has an MA in Experimental Theatre from the University of Connecticut and an MFA in Puppetry from UCLA. Her first film was with Bruce D. Schwartz on the Disney/Lucasfilm production of *Captain Eo and the Space Knights*. Since then she has puppeteered in *Howard the Duck*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *RoboCop II*, *The Absent-Minded Professor*, and the recent Disney/Henson production of *Muppetvision 3D*. She is currently co-producing a pilot in Canada entitled *Baba's House*.

Mark Bryan Wilson has been a member of the Puppeteers of America since 1978 and SAG since 1981. Mark has been performing and or building puppets for the feature film industry for over 10 years. *Ghostbusters*, *Date With An Angel*, *Muppetvision 3D*, *Beetlejuice*, *Poltergeist 2*, *My Science Project*, *Fright Night*, *Honey I Shrunk the Kids* and *Gremlins 2* are some of his credits. He has studied puppetry with Tony Urbano and Frank Paris.

The Journal Editors regret that we were not able to obtain the necessary permissions to use pictures of co-author Lisa Sturz working on the set of *Howard the Duck*.