

World-Class Puppeteers Make the Mountains Their Stage

by jonna rae bartges

photos by max poppers (silverspiritsphotography)

"Puppetry is the poetry of the theater."

Magic is afoot in the western Carolina mountains – a whimsical, transformational magic that's pulling invisible strings to simultaneously draw a troupe of world-class puppeteers to this area.

Here, in the shadow of the Smokies, this ancient art pulsates with renewed energy under the skillful fingers of women with very different life stories, united by their singular love of bringing inanimate objects to enchanting life.

The first to feel the pull was Lisa Sturz (redherringpuppets.com), who was initiated into the trade at the tender age of 17 when she met Howdy Doody's creator, Rufus Rose. At the time she was taking a college theater course, and she instantly realized she had discovered her mission. She went on to work with Jim Henson Productions, Walt Disney Imagineering, Lucasfilm, PBS, Ice Capades and puppeteer director Julie Taymor of Disney's Lion King before moving to the mountains from Southern California in 1996 with her family.

[See profile of Lisa Sturz in our July 04 issue which can be seen at wncwoman.com. Ed.]

"My husband Francois and I wanted to find a good environment



Susan VandeWeghe
(mountainmarionettes.com)

to raise our family," Lisa said, "and we're so glad we chose Asheville."

The next on the scene was Pamela O'Conner (poconnor-puppets.com), who also touched down in

1996. She had started her career as a theater actor, but her world changed when she was invited to tour Europe with Janie Geiser's Obie and UNIMA's (the world

Pamella O'Conner
(poconnor-puppets)



puppetry organization) award-winning Jottay Theatre.

"Puppetry is recognized as a theater art form for adults in Europe," Pamella said.

She spent a magical 6 years performing original puppet theater pieces for appreciative audiences in Europe and the States before resuming her own work. She was drawn to the mountains because she knew award-winning professional puppeteer Hobey Ford lived here, but she hadn't yet met him personally.

"I was actually decompressing from 20 years in Atlanta and trying to decide what I was going to do," Pamella said, "when a woman came knocking on the door of my isolated little cabin in the woods and said, 'Hi, I'm Lisa, and I'm a puppeteer.' We decided to form the Asheville Puppetry Alliance."

Three years later, master puppeteer Susan VandeWeghe (mountainmarionettes.com) felt the call. Susan pulled up stakes in Chicago, where she was creating and performing cabaret-style marionette shows, and relocated here to be closer to her family.

"My Dad and sister run a bed and breakfast in Cedar Mountain," she said. "It has 60 acres and a lake, and my Dad said he'd build a puppet workshop in the barn for me. I called Hobey Ford when I moved down here and asked if there was any puppet stuff going on. He suggested that I get in touch with Lisa. She invited me to the Asheville Puppetry meeting the next week, and the rest is history, as they say!"

The Asheville Puppetry Alliance has grown dramatically since it was just an idea Lisa and Pamella shared a dozen years ago. This year the Alliance is celebrating its 10th year as a non-profit organization, and continuing its work to celebrate puppetry through educating the public, creating original new work and nurturing artists throughout and beyond the western Carolina mountains.

An annual "Young Audience Series" at the Diana Wortham theater in downtown Asheville is one of the Alliance's big success stories, as are hosting two major festivals for Puppeteers of America, sponsoring Debra Brown, the choreographer for Cirque du Soleil, to lead a community based Creativity workshop, and co-sponsoring Pamella O'Connor's "Anatomy of Melancholy," an adult puppet performance.

In 2003 the Alliance linked up with the Southern Highlands Craft Guild's Folk Art Center and the Carolina Guild of Puppetry to sponsor a National Day of Puppetry to coincide with other puppetry celebrations across the country. The collaboration was a popular success, and this year marks the 6th program. A complete listing of events accompanies this article.

"Ultimately," said Lisa, "we'd love to see the Alliance evolve into a major league center for puppetry." An Asheville center wouldn't be competing with the existing Atlanta facility, Lisa explained. Rather, it would capitalize on this region's edgy, eclectic creative energy to create world-class original works that would debut in Asheville, then, ideally, tour the globe. It would be a fascinating tourist destination, and a school to nurture the next generation of puppeteers. The facility would be something of a state-of-the-art "puppetry incubator."

Their relocation to the area has already proven to be a bit of a creativity incubator for these three master puppeteers.

Since adopting the mountains as her home, Lisa has created grippingly realistic puppets on a grandiose scale for the Shedd Aquarium and Field Museum in Chicago, and also performed with the Chicago Lyric Opera. Her original show, "The Big Dipper: Calendar, Compass & Clock" debuts this month at the Diana Wortham Theater, and dramatically illustrates how different cultures through the ages have been fascinated by this constellation. Lisa's puppets will bring to life the scientific and mythological wisdom of The Big Dipper through stories from the ancient Chinese, Micmac Indians, Greeks and Afro-American slaves. The scale of the performance is huge, with stories springing to life from a 20-foot scroll, and 30" moccasins walking across the stage.

Next month, Lisa unveils her collaboration with the Asheville Symphony Orchestra – Petrushka, a Russian folktale about a love triangle. Through the magic of puppetry, Lisa will weave

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Lisa Sturz
(redherringpuppets.com)

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Symphony Conductor Daniel Meyer into the show, along with 8-foot-tall puppets and 20-foot-high shadow puppets.

Pamella, meanwhile, also has created several major works since taking up residence here. "The Anatomy of Melancholy" is based on an anthology of satirical writings of the same name written by Robert Burton in 1621. Utilizing four puppeteers who interact with their puppets, the work blends contemporary and universal images to explore the 'Causes' and 'Cures' of melancholy. It has been performed at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta.

In a totally different vein, Pamella's collaboration with Laura Facciponti, Associate Professor of Drama at UNCA, has produced "The Tempest," a magical, hour-long production of Shakespeare's fantastical romance. This version of the revered work intertwines puppetry and object theatre with UNCA actors to recreate Prospero's world. The show debuts April 9 at the Diana Wortham Theater.

"We completely reinvented the original Shakespearean script," Pamella said. She taught the students "Object Theater," a performance form popular in Europe that blends imagery, puppetry and choreography to create a new theatrical experience.

As part of their training, during "The Tempest" the students transform a huge piece of fabric "into a multitude of things," said Pamella.

As for Susan's recent projects, "Stories from Aunt Nelly's Mountain Home," an original show,

represents a creative departure for her.

"I've always done dancing trick marionette shows to music; big band, swing, rock 'n roll, or jazz," Susan said. "In this new performance, I get to talk. Aunt Nelly is sitting in her rocking chair commenting on quite a collection of characters."

Susan said she spends "a zillion" hours doing library research before tackling any script, and particularly for Aunt Nelly's adventure. "I'm well aware that the school kids who will be watching this show are currently studying North Carolina mountain life. Because they're going to know it, I better be accurate, and ready to answer their questions!"

The future for the art of puppetry is so bright all the marionettes ought to wear shades, said Susan, and kids, along with the Boomers who cut their teeth on Kukla, Fran and Ollie and Howdy Doody, are in for a treat.

"Puppets are universal, and with so many Broadway shows incorporating them, the field is just going to continue to bloom," said Susan. With all the creative talent that's ending up right here, Asheville might just turn out to be the newest hub for this ancient art.

To find out about performances in April, see ashevilledpuppetry.org.

Jonna Rae Bartges is a frequent contributor to WNC Woman magazine. She absolutely loved the brilliant puppetry work in "The Dark Crystal," "Team America," and The Lion King parade at Disneyland. You can contact her through her websites at happymedium.us and bartges.com.