

specific a viewer could swear they're watching a mouth in motion. And I learned that even when a puppet's operator is not tucked away out of sight, it's the puppet who remains in focus; the audience easily dismisses the manipulator's existence.

At *Mermaid* we used masks, full-size sculptures, hand puppets, rod puppets, toys and objects, shadow puppets, and bright foam forms brought to a glow by fluorescent tubes in a sea of black velvet. I worked beneath, behind and above the stage while out of sight, and I also shared the stage with my puppets, in full view of the audience, actively serving my characters as a sort of brother, or guide. In all instances, audiences remained enthralled and I experienced firsthand the spell that a puppet can cast.

Sometimes the manipulator supplies the puppet's will; its thoughts, its feelings, its speech. Other times quite the opposite is true; the puppeteer is merely the slave bending to the will of the creature beside him, a creature whose very presence is already demanding the audience's attention.

Puppets have the fantastic capacity to provide a visual metaphor that drives a concept home. A madman can lose his head. A hero can move a mountain. A potato can sit on a couch. It's in the collective mind of the audience that they become living, articulated visual symbols. What I find fascinating is the fact that, most of the time, the audience is not consciously aware that their imagination is being so deeply engaged and that they're processing the images before them on a metaphorical level. What they're seeing during a puppet performance seems, at first glance, to be completely reasonable. It's a cat. It's a child. It's a tree that talks. Puppets and the concepts they convey are both universal and specific, abstract and literal, at precisely the same time. Puppet theatre is the very essence of heightened theatricality, and yet at exactly the same time, it's so obvious and simple.

It's this phenomenon, this capacity for puppets to appeal to the eye and the imagination simultaneously, that leads me to believe we have only begun to scratch the surface of puppetry's potential in theatre and storytelling.

Suggested Wikipedia Searches

"Puppeteer"
 "Muppet"
 "Bread and Puppet Theatre"
 "Bunraku"

Suggested Google Searches

"Felix Mirbt"
 "Robert More"
 "Old Trout Puppet Workshop"

Suggested Reading

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What Exactly Is Live Animation?

The Art of Live Animation: How It's Done and How to Do It

For me, performing with a puppet is obvious and simple, but for someone who's never tried it, especially in front of an audience, it can be utterly bewildering. There are plenty of books about stringing a marionette or giving Pinocchio leather knees, and lots of pamphlets and websites have step-by-step instructions for sculpting a head or sewing a green felt alligator, but most of these books hardly ever mention puppetry in actual performance — advice for the actor, if you will.

Only David Currell in his fine book *The Complete Book of Puppetry* (Pitman Publishing, 1974), addresses the issue:

“To convey character through movement the puppeteer must study human beings. People at rest and people in motion, people when happy, when sad, when bold, when shy, when weary. Will he walk slowly with a stoop? Will he have a brisk walk or a weary shuffle? Will he glide across the floor? The process that concerns the puppeteer is simplification, selection of the movements that best convey the required character.”

Well, that's a start, but in my opinion there's a little more to it. I learned my stuff on the fly over a period of years, with each production, each director, and each close encounter with another designer bringing new insights into what can be an intricate performance art.

I knew I was a puppeteer by the time I was eight years old. Even by then I had years of sock puppet epics under my belt. My practice began when I started watching Bugs and Mickey and Superman and Popeye, whose animators were, with pencil and paper, solving the same problems that all performers face: how can we make a character who is not real, real? How should it speak? How can we make it appear to be to thinking actual thoughts? And most importantly: how can this unreal being attract us and make us care?

An animator of cartoons sits at his desk and solves these problems by applying a sort of instinct, yes, but also by employing formulas and techniques that have evolved over decades of trial and error; the animator knows that it takes 24 incremental frames to fill a single second of screen time. He knows that if his character turns the corners of his mouth downwards the character will appear to be sad, curve the mouth up and he will appear to smile, twist the mouth sideways and the character will sneer, and draw big bug-eyes on him and he'll suddenly explode with a certain ineffable va-va-va-voom! If a drawn person shakes its head from side to side it is, in effect, saying “no”, while nodding up and down is a gesture we all recognize as “yes.” The animator knows that when a coyote's legs become a blur the character will appear to be running at supersonic speed. He also knows that a ball must squash when it hits the floor and stretch when it bounces upwards again. Animators even adhere to a set of accepted rules when it comes to making a mouth form words; pucker forward for “ooo” and open big for “aaa” and spread wide for “eee” and so forth.

But what does an animator do when a character has no mouth that moves? No brows that squinch, or eyes that blink? What does the animator do when the character is not a drawing on the page but rather an object in their hands, and there's a real, live breathing audience sitting in front of them waiting to care? Are there accepted techniques for the performing animator to employ?

Yup, there sure are. I've known how to do it for most of my life. For me it's natural. For others it doesn't come naturally at all. But even the casual observer will know true animation when he sees it. Merely moving the puppet around or wiggling it when it speaks certainly will not adequately animate it, as noted by puppeteer Martin Stevens in his comprehensive guide *Stevens' Course in Puppetry* (Charlemagne Press, 1997):

“Motion isn't enough ... puppetry is showmanship. It is not doll-play, which is an individual doing a 'let's pretend' between himself and a toy. Nor is puppetry merely a matter of sculpture. Puppets are only incidental works of art; being an ornament isn't their prime function. Nor should they be a means to a 'jiggle show.' One of the best things a puppet can do is stop stock-still and give a good think. But notice that by the action of stopping and thinking, he is DOING something.”

I've been working as a puppeteer for over twenty years. I started as a background Muppeteer on *Fraggle Rock*, then spent several years performing in various multi-media productions with *Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia*, where I experimented with styles as far removed from cute Muppets as one could imagine. I learned quickly that characters who have no moving mouths or blinking eyes can nonetheless speak, and look at things. I learned that puppets can convey almost anything you'd want them to convey, by their body language and by what I call “the language of the head”, where head movements are so

life of the mask. Any tension, any doubt or judgment, hesitation or lack of clarity, will rob the puppet of life. The first duty of the artist is to maintain clear pathways for the self so that the inner voice may be heard. The manipulator is the living representative of the “space between”. He is an open channel for thought and a puppet is thought manifested in his hands.

The Current Canadian Puppet Landscape

The most prominent Canadian puppet artists today are Luman Coad of *Coad Canada Puppets* in Vancouver, Ronnie Burkett in Toronto, and the revolving team of performers employed by *Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia*. But there are many other theatre companies across the country that make use of masks and puppets, and there are also several notable solo acts and duos who have garnered followings of their own.

Ronnie Burkett

Ronnie Burkett’s marionettes are remarkable examples of old world art being resurrected and thrust into the present. The traditional marionette theatre has, of course, been a mainstay of European culture for a couple of centuries. Burkett is doing nothing new. But the fact that somebody, anybody, is doing it at all is to be applauded. And applauded it is. The detail that Burkett achieves in each of the characters he performs — he typically switches back and forth between several personalities and voices over the course of a single performance — is unrivaled. Burkett is a Canadian puppeteer par excellence, and Toronto audiences should take every opportunity to seek him out.

Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia

Mermaid Theatre’s mandate of presenting fantastical stories old and new has not changed much since the company’s inception in 1972, but the staff does change frequently, as does the stable of touring performers. Jim Morrow is currently the company’s artistic director, and has also picked up where Tom Miller left off as resident designer. Much of Mermaid’s work is still in the Bunraku, Mirbt and Miller style of having puppets and their manipulators visible together, but Morrow seems to have simplified things, working in a relatively new discipline called “Table Top Puppetry,” where characters cavort on a playing surface roughly the height of a table while the puppeteers stand behind the action, in full view.

Puppetmongers Theatre

Another practitioner of Table Top Puppetry is Toronto’s *Puppetmongers Theatre*, a company that was created as the artistic vehicle for the sister and brother team of Ann Powell and David Powell. Ann and David started playing with marionettes at the ages of eight and seven respectively, and have turned their childhood interest into a lifelong artistic pursuit. One trademark of their work is the intense attention to detail. Another is the on-stage presence of the puppeteers themselves, alternately interacting with one another, the audience and with the puppets, and then withdrawing so that only the puppets are observed. Each production is visually and conceptually different and has been from 1974 to the present. Ann and David founded *The Toronto School of Puppetry* in 1996 as a vehicle for disseminating their vision of puppetry as a theatre form. The school draws on the skills of many puppeteers and theatre artists for its instructors and they now run classes and courses through the year.

Some Other Puppet / Mask Companies

The W.P. Puppet Theatre Society in Calgary, Alberta, is a company committed to producing professional Canadian puppet theatre and delivering enjoyable yet socially responsible learning experiences through the art of puppetry, encouraging audiences to enjoy the complexity and wonder of the universe, and to question the human place within the universe.

Also in Calgary is the *Old Trout Puppet Workshop*, a company that is as offbeat and weird as the *W.P. Society* is cuddly and responsible. Where *W.P.* delivers merriment and mirth, *Old Trout* presents irreverent grotesqueries of the most entertaining sort. They’re dedicated to making professional puppet productions that blur the distinction between adult and children’s theatre, launching forth to explore the outer edges of the puppet medium and to create original, unique, and exuberant art. An *Old Trout* show strives for delightful allegory, joyful tragedy, and purity of spirit.

And there’s even an annual puppetry festival in Almonte, Ontario called *Puppets Up!*, the brainchild of veteran Canadian puppeteer Noreen Young.

So while the Canadian puppet scene is thriving, and new companies and artists seem to be popping up almost every year, the question remains: what exactly is puppetry, and why do audiences find it so infinitely attractive?

Tom Miller

Tom Miller immigrated to Canada from the USA in the late 1960s and eventually settled in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, where, together with Evelyn Garbary and Sarah Lee Lewis, he founded *Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia*, which is today one of North America's busiest live animation companies. After touring for several years around the Maritimes with modern adaptations of Mic Mac Indian stories using oversized foam puppets and masks designed to resemble the traditional masks and totems of Atlantic Canada's aboriginal people, the company started producing other historical plays, and eventually segued into their current mandate: tales of the fantastic, sometimes drawn from literature, sometimes created by the company. That's when Tom Miller took Mirbt's theatre of object and shape and made it "kid friendly" for Mermaid's audience of school-age children. Where Mirbt's characters were ghostly and abstract, Miller's were bright, colorful and friendly. The cat in *Peter and the Wolf* (1984) for example, had a fat cat body that was carved from a solid block of styrofoam and painted like pink cotton candy. Its arms were dangling dryer hoses with rounded pink paws, and the entire creature, which stood about stomach height next to its manipulator, sat on a pair of tricycle wheels. The puppeteer had only to push the cat around to make it "walk." Talk about willing suspension of disbelief! Not one child ever wondered why the cat was pink, or why it was on wheels, and any of the drawings that the company received as a "thank you" from a class never showed a manipulator. Miller had succeeded in educating an audience of young people how to respond to image theatre and see the characters, not the mechanisms, and he kept this work alive through several productions, from the wicker basket elephant and the camel made of rope in *Just So Stories* (1983) to the butter yellow duck and rose pink sheep in *Flights of Fancy* (1985).

The technique of using ordinary objects (or parts thereof) and giving those objects the puppeteer's touch is usually called "Found Object Puppetry." Found objects, be they buckets, hairbrushes, shovels, vacuum cleaners or bed sheets, can be used to suggest characters or settings. How common it seems, for example, for a troupe of players to hold up a blue cloth and tell their audience that it's an ocean. In Miller's work whole worlds were created: woven mats as jungles, dishrags as flowers, and a complicated combination of pails, hoses, garden gloves and a spade that formed an ornery country gardener.

Robert More

The other Mirbt protégé to carry on the tradition, although not quite so radically, is Robert More, who directed Joy Coghill's production of *Song of This Place* at the University of British Columbia in February 2004. Puppets and masks were featured throughout that production, and More described his work in the program notes:

I vividly remember my introduction to puppet animation. At the time I was a young actor who had done quite a bit of work with neutral mask and clown, and this led to working with the brilliant Felix Mirbt on a production of Büchner's *Woyzeck*. He called his wonderful puppet creations "animated masks" and was looking for actors who he felt would be responsive to the inner techniques of puppet manipulation. None of the actors had ever worked with puppets before and during the first few weeks we struggled mightily. Learning to support the puppets with an open, relaxed energy, learning the art of moving the mask from fixed point to fixed point in a way that had effortless flow, and learning to put the mask first, was an exhilarating but highly challenging process.

Puppet manipulation in this Bunraku style demands certain things. The animators or puppeteers are visible with nothing to hide their faces or bodies and yet they must appear invisible to the audience so that the mask and puppets can be dominant. The puppets are the characters; they must take the focus since their passions are the play. The manipulator must feel the emotions of the puppet characters without acting out these emotions himself. His face can reflect the action but he cannot release into the face or the eyes because if he does, he will draw focus from the puppet.

At first, this duality seemed impossible to solve. For many weeks, being a puppet manipulator felt like being required to be a "split personality", a walking contradiction, a performance conundrum. However, by the time we opened *Woyzeck*, it started to make sense. Three years later, when we did Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, again at the National Arts Center with Felix Mirbt, the intensive training had taken hold and we realized that the answer to this duality lies in finding the right state of mind and learning to inhabit the "space between."

For the manipulator to function effectively, it is absolutely necessary that he becomes an "empathetic connector" whose primary job is to provide a steady link between actor and puppet, text and mask, the audience and the inner life of the play. When the manipulator learns to function as a creative conduit for his own inner creative impulse, and then allows this impulse, sparked by imagination and belief, to flow directly from the solar plexus (the abdominal brain) through the body, into the arms, to the hands, through the fingertips, and into the mask, only then will the puppet become fully alive.

The manipulator's primary job is first and foremost to get out of the way and become an open channel for creative energy. Any diminishment of this energy will result immediately in diminishing the

standing next to it, and ask for help. The human would then oblige the puppet and move its arm or scratch its nose. In other words, the manipulators were not only visible, they were active members of the unfolding story. And the images Mirbt created were unusual yet simultaneously iconic; ghostly shapes would float in a sea of black and eventually coalesce into a form, a face, a figure, with heads and hands and suggestions of bodies put together partly by the puppeteers who moved the sculpted shapes, but mostly, and quite miraculously, being completed in the collective imagination of the audience, who took in the partial visual clues and filled in the blanks in their heads without even realizing that that's what they were doing. The artists on stage were nudging their minds.

"Why puppets?" Mirbt once asked himself. "I perceive it as a problem that the audience identifies with the actor and the actor identifies with the character. Therefore the audience can only identify with the actor, not with the role. If the puppet projects its invested energy, then the tension created can sustain the action of allowing the audience to step in and complete the whole in their own image."

Mirbt reminisced about his career and tried to articulate some of his theories in an article that appeared in *Canadian Theatre Review* during the summer of 1998:

"An old traveling puppeteer once sat down with me and I never forgot: 'The strings on my puppets are black and fat. If my audience doesn't see the strings, they wonder how I do it and not how my story goes.' Sicilian puppeteers walk on loose planks behind their stage. So do their eighty-pound puppets on stage. I asked the puppeteers about the noise level: 'Make noises, it indicates purpose and energy - stomp on the planks: that is the space I walk, here is my stage!' So! There!"

"I start with a marionette
too small
make it larger
get bored with legs
off with them
and use cloth instead
I realize I don't need hands either
off with them
my own hand is even stronger
when I go back to the marionettes
I grab the arm from the outside with my own hand
visibly
the 'invisible' string becomes a distraction."

"In *Happy End* we only had three manipulators: How will we deal with the scene with the entire cast of sixteen puppets on stage? Simple! Only one manipulator will do the entire scene, while the other two clock him. This decision demanded freestanding, self-supporting figures which in turn influenced the entire production."

Other Canadians and Their Work

Traditional puppetry continued to flourish even during the reign of Mirbt's radical experiments, most notable examples being the work of Arlyn and Luman Coad and Leo and Dora Velleman.

The Coads were a husband and wife team who worked principally as marionettists in North Vancouver as *Coad Canada Puppets*. Both were active members of UNIMA (Union Internationale de la Marionnette). Luman Coad is still quite active. His talents were recently tapped by the producers of *Being John Malkovich*; the puppetry on display in that film is the work of Canadian puppeteer Luman Coad himself!

Leo and Dora Velleman ran the *Leading Wind Theatre* in Chester, Nova Scotia in what is now the Chester Playhouse, and managed the Canadian Puppet Festivals there from 1975 until 1983. The Velleman's puppets were an aesthetic opposite to Mirbt's; cute, harmless, sometimes plush and usually quite cartoon-like. Kiddie fare through and through.

When Felix Mirbt died in 2002 an era of exploratory image theatre in Canada ended. Luckily, at least two of his protégés went on to expand on his approach: visual artist Tom Miller, and theatre director Robert More.

The Muppet style is distinct. Puppets have had moving mouths and big round eyes before, but it wasn't until Jim Henson's Muppets that television puppets became so finely rendered. The medium itself necessitated this; a Muppet has fuzzy "skin" made of a particular fleece that reflects studio lighting perfectly and amplifies color and texture, and the stitching on a Muppet is completely invisible. It has to be: unlike the traditional theatrical setting where any roughness of construction can be forgiven because the audience is looking at things from a distance, the television audience is mere inches away. Everything is in close-up. And puppets had been speaking with big flapping mouths for years and years already — such as Burr Tillstrom's one-toothed dragon on *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie* — but it was Jim Henson and his performers who started the practice of accurate, finely detailed "lip sync" where words and the syllables in those words were now mouthed very specifically, movements matching sounds, maintaining the illusion that the character is actually speaking. And of course puppets had appeared on television before (puppets like Howdy Doody, Sheri Lewis' Lambchops, and Edgar Bergen's Charlie McCarthy had been on for years already) but they were really no more than stage performances with a camera aimed at them. Jim Henson carefully designed his puppets and the studio world they inhabited, he shaped the scenes his puppets enacted, and he planned the settings and camera angles that finally packaged it all, and he did it all very specifically to fit within a rectangular window. The puppeteers controlling their characters from below were hidden because the camera was aimed above their heads, and those puppeteers, now freed from any curtain or booth or stage, could walk easily amongst themselves and weave their characters in and out of the set with a grace that almost mimicked human choreography. In other words: Jim Henson re-invented Puppetry for Television.

But the most important thing that Jim Henson, Frank Oz and the other Muppeteers brought to their work was their well-honed sense of comedy. With the Muppets, puppets were funny again. Henson's performers knew how to build a character into a quirky yet believable personality, and they could time a joke, stage a gag, and deliver witty banter with the brilliance of the best comedians, human, puppet, or otherwise. So, puppets were no longer just for kids. Unfortunately, the mass popularity that the Muppets achieved also provided yet another instant connotation of what, in the mass public's mind, a puppet was. Now a puppet, where previously just a glove on someone's hand acting out funny little stories from behind a curtain, was a fuzzy creature with a moving mouth and a pair of round white eyes that told sophisticated jokes on television. And in both cases, still, the puppeteer was completely hidden from view.

Puppetry on the Modern Stage

The art of puppetry eventually reclaimed its roots as a live theatrical medium, but puppet artists had to work hard to win their audiences back. They had an uphill climb fighting the *Punch & Judy* and *Muppet* connotations, and they also had to re-educate their audiences how to willingly suspend their disbelief. Two theatre artists emerged during the 1960s who would fight the good fight and give puppets their due as a means of artistic expression, American Peter Schumann and Canadian Felix Mirbt.

Peter Schumann's Bread & Puppet

Peter Schumann created and still heads the *Bread & Puppet Theatre*, in Vermont, USA. *Bread & Puppet* is known for its sprawling outdoor "pageants" featuring gigantic puppets — sometimes ten to fifteen feet tall — in symbolic demonstrations that may require several athletic manipulators; large heads are hoisted on poles, while the arms of the character may stretch out several yards and are also lifted by poles held by puppeteers; animals puppets might cover the entire length of a field. *Bread & Puppet* first became known during the Vietnam War protests of the late 60s, and to this day their puppet displays strive to be relevant, satirizing political figures, for example, or tackling current events with giant, symbolic forms that sweep out over a large outdoor audience. It is Peter Schumann's philosophy that art and theatre are as essential to life as bread ... which is why the puppeteers bake fresh loaves and hand them out to the audience as a sort of communion before each performance. Hence the name: *Bread & Puppet*. Schumann's audiences have long since become familiar with the convention of having a puppet's manipulators in full view. They'd have to: there's just no way to hide someone who's running over the grass with a five-fingered hand the size of a station wagon on the end of a long black pole!

Felix Mirbt

The other remarkable artist to push to boundaries of puppetry, and indeed to spawn a style of object manipulation that is still prevalent in Canadian theatre today, was German-born theatre-maker Felix Mirbt. Felix pioneered a technique that he refused to give a name to, saying only that his work was "theatre and masks, puppets and objects." A critic once tried to pigeonhole Felix's experiments as being in the style of the Japanese Bunraku, but Felix would not allow that definition, either. "In Bunraku," he said, "the puppeteers try to be invisible by remaining neutral and giving their focus entirely to the puppet. In my theatre, the puppets and performers share the stage." It was not unusual in a Felix Mirbt production — *The Dream Play* (1977) or *Happy End* (1981) at Tarragon Theatre, for example — for a puppet to look at the human who was

China has perhaps the oldest puppet tradition on record, a form of shadow puppetry known today as *Theatre of the Lantern Shadows*. Shadow puppetry flourished throughout Europe and Asia, where cut-outs casting shadows would depict popular myths and legends. This tradition carried over into Indonesia, where a shadow theatre called *Wayang Kulit* still performs today.

Puppetry arrived in Europe and Britain in the 14th to 15th centuries, and probably started on the streets as the ribald comedies of the *Commedia Dell'arte* troupes, who performed as stock characters in familiar storylines for hundreds of years. These “low comedies” were the popular fare of the day and usually featured crass humor of the burping and farting variety, where men played women wearing pillows for boobs, and boys played men with a stuffed stocking dangling from their belts. The actors used half-masks and sometimes puppets, and the crowd loved it.

The Irreverence Theory

One theory as to the origins of puppetry on the streets of medieval Europe has to do with the personalities of the puppeteers themselves, and it's a theory that I wholeheartedly agree with. The story goes: acolytes in the early churches who performed the annual nativity and other religious plays sometimes used figurines to help in the portrayal, thus becoming, for all intents and purposes, puppeteers, before they even knew what a puppeteer was. As time went on, these servants of the church began to enjoy not only performing their ritualistic puppet shows, but also rehearsing and preparing them. They relished the playfulness that went into inventing new versions of a popular tale, working with different figures, and experimenting with the wide variety of characteristics that the figures could embody. In short: they started to improvise. Anyone who's spent any time with a group of puppeteers can tell you that improvisation with puppets tends to — for whatever reason — unleash a unique sort of irreverence. Legend has it the puppeteers began to curse, crack wise, and force their puppets into all manner of obscene positions while spouting a litany of jokes and innuendos. The puppeteers were then evicted from the church, literally kicked out onto the cobblestone streets, where their irreverent puppet shows evolved into political plays that railed against the establishment.

Drop into a local puppet theatre near you and ask if you can sit and watch the performers as they do their work. Notice how, in very short order, a puppet will pick its nose, or fart, or start humping your leg. Then you'll agree that the above “myth” must surely have some basis in fact.

Punch & Judy & Politics

Political puppet theatre morphed over the decades until a new type of puppet theatre arrived in Britain and slowly became a tradition all its own: the traveling *Punch & Judy* Show. Punch is a grotesque, rebellious hand puppet who beats his wife with a stick, outruns the law, and even outwits the devil himself, all while cackling merrily with a trademark buzzing laugh provided by his puppeteer. He has his origins in the Italian *Commedia Dell'arte* comedies, specifically as the clown Punchinello. A traditional *Punch & Judy* show, now a mainstay of British carnivals and birthday parties, is performed by a single puppeteer from inside a curtained booth; the puppeteer plays each character, changing his voice and switching the puppets on his hands. The plots are simple and somewhat stereotypical: Punch hits people and gets away with it, and children have been giggling with glee for almost two hundred years as a result.

Art vs. Connotations and Assumptions

Puppetry was highly respected as an elaborate art in European opera circles during the 19th and early 20th centuries, thanks to the intricate marionette productions staged by Pietro Radillo, who specialized in detailed puppets that were lavishly costumed and rigged with several strings and joints. Unfortunately, the true “art” of puppetry was almost lost for several decades, as it seemed that only the crass *Punch & Judy* show, the gentle cloth puppet shows performed by storytellers and librarians, and maybe the occasional ventriloquist dummy, were the images that popped into people's minds whenever they heard the word “puppet.” Add to that the invention of television and the sudden mass exposure of a simplistic, freckle-faced marionette who dangled and jiggled in front of an audience of screaming children, and it's little wonder that puppets were regarded for many generations as simple kid stuff. All that was to change however, when a new type of puppet character hit primetime television, big time, and changed the popular face of puppetry forever.

Jim Henson and Puppetry for the Masses

Jim Henson's Muppets made their first appearance on American television on *Sam and Friends* in 1955, and they later gained wider recognition through a series of specials such as *The Frog Prince* and the *Muppet Musicians of Bremen* in the early 1970s. Then, once *Sesame Street* and *The Muppet Show* became mainstream fixtures on North American television, the “Muppet style” of puppet became as iconic and instantly recognizable as *Punch & Judy*, the ventriloquist dummy, and *Howdy Doody* had been before them.

Live Animation for the Stage

An overview of the history and theory of puppetry

by Mike Petersen

What Is A Puppet?

“A puppet is an inanimate figure that is made to move by human effort before an audience. It is not an automated toy inside a store window display, and it is not a doll.”

- Bill Baird, *The Art of the Puppet*, 1965

I agree with Mr. Baird. A puppet is any inanimate object that is given the illusion of life. But for a puppet to live and breathe and think and speak, the human touch is required, and indeed, without an audience a puppet is little more than an ornament, or a doll. Puppets are used as storytelling devices in theatre, film or television, as they can portray unique characters. A puppet can be made from anything — cloth, clay, wood, plastic, rubber, styrofoam, paper, even a tree branch from your own backyard — as long as it is animated by a puppeteer.

Types of Puppets

Hand Puppets

Some puppets fit onto the puppeteer’s hand and may be no larger than a glove, as with the classical *Punch & Judy* puppets or, more recently, characters like Casey and Finnegan on CBC’s long-running television show *Mr. Dress-Up*. These are called hand puppets or glove puppets.

Marionettes

Other puppets hang from strings and are called marionettes. The most famous marionette in history is probably Howdy-Doody, from the 1950’s children’s television show *It’s Howdy-Doody Time*. Currently, the most famous practitioner of the classic marionette style is Canadian puppeteer Ronnie Burkett.

And the Rest

Other puppets may contain hydraulic cables that are connected to intricate electronic mechanisms, a style most often used for films such as *Jurassic Park* and *Bride of Chucky*, and some puppets are flat cut-outs that cast shadows on a screen.

There are also some puppets that make no attempt to hide the technique that goes into animating them; the manipulators remain in plain sight with their hands clearly grasping the character. Sometimes several puppeteers will collaborate on a single character: one of them will control the head and facial mechanisms while the others gather around him to control the feet and the hands, coordinating their actions to make the puppet move. In Japan this technique is known as Bunraku. Here in Canada we’ve come to call it Table Top Puppetry, and it’s a favorite technique of David and Ann Powell of Toronto’s *Puppetmonger’s Theatre*.

The variations are endless. Some puppets are no more than limp dolls held in the hands while actors make them move and speak. Others have moving mouths and beautiful costumes and funny, floppy feathers for hair, and their manipulators are kept completely invisible so as to create the illusion that the character is a real living being, like the muppets on *Sesame Street*, *The Muppet Show*, and *Fraggle Rock*. But regardless of how a puppet is made, what it looks like and what it is meant to represent, it is nothing more than a sculpture without the puppeteer’s guiding hand.

A Brief History of Puppetry

Puppet historians differ on exactly where and how puppetry sprang into use, but the fact is that puppets can be found in all corners of this planet. Every culture has its own style, often dating back to antiquity. It is likely that the first puppets were made from animal skins, bones and skulls, used by prehistoric hunters to tell the story of the great hunt. From there, the children of the tribe might have picked up smaller rocks or bones and used them to copy the story in their own miniature version. Presto! The art of puppetry was born.