Puppetry in Performance

on Action for Children's Arts
Inspiration Day
looking at the use of puppetry in arts for children.

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Keynote Speech
Penny Francis

How has it happened that Britain‘s theatre for children – and that of a good part of the globe too – has become permeated with puppetry to the extent that most children’s work now includes it? I’ll define my terms: puppetry is the apparent endowment, transference, infusion of life, breath, spirit, into a material Thing, be it a figure or an object, natural or manufactured.

The belief, or half-belief, that life resides within things is common to every human being, [and some of the higher animals too].

But in children that belief is strongest. They play like puppeteers from infancy, giving life not just to teddies and dolls, but to everyday objects too, convinced of the spirit – sometimes a sinister and frightening spirit – enclosed in everything around them. Doesn‘t it follow that theatre-makers should want to harness this belief – to capture a naturally magnetic element of theatre for their artistic purposes, to attract and hold young spectators?

Until the 19th century children were regarded, after their babyhood, as nothing other than small adults. They were dressed like adults, they ate the food of adults, they were expected to work like adults. Among the aristocracy they frequently studied like adults, attending classes with personal tutors from the age of two or three, learning mathematics, Latin, Greek.

Nowadays things have changed, and the concepts of `the child’ and of ‘childhood‘ have emerged, bringing with them a different mentality and different needs. The way we teach them, the way we bring them up, must accord with these differences. They must dress differently, eat differently, be spoken to differently, be handled altogether differently.

With the spread of formal schooling for everyone since the middle of the nineteenth century, a whole industry dedicated to the understanding of the child mentality has sprung up: educational associations, educational conferences, child psychologists, books on the care of children by the thousand. Theories on parenthood, theories on teaching and learning are now commonplace in the countries of the ‘developed’ world, and any student of ‘the child’ could become either totally confused or indeed paralysed if they examined all of it, since much of it is contradictory. My mother frequently stated, when confronted with a dilemma about child-raising, ‘Act at once; whatever you do will be wrong’.

Through it all, the puppet, a universal presence, has spoken to the children as to kindred spirits. Children understand about spirit as most adults do not. Our rational western education teaches us to outgrow all that nonsense by the time we go to secondary school. So the phenomenon of the animated thing becomes something that is fashionable to scoff at, like fairy stories and ghosts and the creatures in the dark. But while they are young, children are the ideal audience for the kind of theatre puppetry helps to make.

Before the nineteenth century puppets played, broadly speaking, in two kinds of places: the streets and fairgrounds, and the royal court or aristocratic salon. In the streets the shows were based on broad satire, the bawdy, the slapstick, the scatological, the anti-authoritarian, the subversive in general. Politics, sexual intrigue, and violence were the staple fare of the comic heroes, such as Punch, and for the

court and the salons it was opera, parody or a gentler kind of satire. Children were simply there, alongside the adult spectators, as all the pictorial evidence shows. They understood, or not - it didn't matter.

The movers of the figures, the puppeteers – who didn't have a name until the twentieth century - were not important until the late eighteenth century days of the trick marionettes, the *fantoccini* with their myriad strings, when manipulative skills began to be demanded of them.

Only from the nineteen-fifties did these performers get formal training as 'actor/puppeteers', and their lowly status as mere dolly-waggler, simple agitator of the figures, was gradually changed forever. Nowadays a puppeteer is just as likely to be a he as a she; often a **creative** artist as well as an interpretative one, and as skilful as the actors who had hitherto looked down on all things puppet and who now found the skills of the puppeteer included in their professional training, a training which nowadays will probably also include the needs (in entertainment and education) of the child spectator, from babyhood to puberty.

I leave to other speakers the great mystery of the magnetic power of the puppet itself in performance. In a performer's mode of communication with a child, the adult performer can often I believe get it wrong, whereas the puppet usually gets it right, even if it is in fact the puppeteer who really gets it right. Offstage and on, the human personality often seems to be distrusted by, or at least disconnected from, a child, who is often relieved to engage with the uncomplicated characterisation of a puppet figure.

But in any discussion on the question of engagement: how can a puppeteer-producer best speak to a modern child, usually nurtured on the super-glossy, super-speedy, super-violent junk of TV, and the super-professional, super-scopic, super-exciting, supernatural and supra-terrestrial brain-storming of cinema and video games?

Live puppetry – live theatre – is one key answer. It has an advantage which those of us in the business all know about; it has a power which TV and cinema can never have - a direct, unexpected, unrepeatable, physical experience. The performances foster a sense of community which involves the spectators and the players and the puppet characters, not in little separate worlds watching a cold screen, but all together in a space, sharing each others' reactions to the show. Here is actuality, tactility, physicality - we call it LIVE theatre for good reason, and any good children's production brings these. The extra that puppetry brings lies in the things the performers may not bring: differences in scale, magic, no worries about gravity, no complications of – once again – human personalities that sometimes get in the way of an archetypal character.

The most successful puppet producers, like all the finest theatre practitioners, put their child and family audiences in close touch with the performance and with each other, through the telling of stories, through laughter, through poetry and music. I have seen an audience of one and two-year- olds almost breathless with the delight of self-recognition in a show by a Frenchman, Pascal Sanvic, about the behaviour of an archetypal (puppet) toddler and its *dou-dou* (dummy to us), told from the baby's point of view. I have seen three to five-year-olds spellbound before a slow, quiet story about a sad singing tree. They were responding to the poetry with their hearts. Most of the work today is a far cry from the relentlessly stimulating 'audience participation' shows of twenty years ago, now more or less unique to panto (and may panto never die!). I have seen older children shaking with laughter and pleasure, apprehension or

even fear at the sheer strangeness, the unexpectedness of puppetry. The dramaturgy includes adventure stories, folk tales, space fantasies, ghost shockers. It helps when the show has a great script, as in the Muppet Show, or Avenue Q, both of which were and are extremely funny.

It's natural for puppeteers to be visually and technologically inventive. The essence of a good production is the inspired imagination of a designer-puppeteer who is an artist able to turn his or her visions into exciting images in the staging of a scenario. Even the set can come to life, can be a sort of puppet. Transformation, metamorphosis add to the wonder of the animation. If anyone saw the recent Fantastic Mr. Fox designed by Peter O'Rourke here at the Little Angel, they will know what I mean. Unexpected traps and flaps and openings and closings, different levels for the puppets' playing areas, a unity of style in the design of set and characters AND movement of the figures – it was an amazing and moving performance. The production values were as high as they come. For children the text, the music, the design, the making, the manipulation and the direction must always be the best. They are sophisticated as never before in history and can be perceptive critics.

From the 2 to the 12 year-old, one has to communicate as with an adult, a tender, intelligent adult. Children's wants and needs are as varied as those of grown-ups, so no rules or generalities emerge, no immutable theories of performance. Some kids crave excitement and the reflection of life's conflicts; others welcome reassuring tranquillity.

There are arguably only three essentials for the producer of kids' work: artistry, inventiveness and an imagination as wide as the universe, to match the imagination of the children. Puppetry and puppeteers are naturally equipped to deliver all three.

Ronnie Le Drew, “A Tribute to John Wright.”

I don’t think we would be meeting here this morning if it weren’t for John Wright. Who spent the last 30 years of his life, establishing and directing this theatre? John was born in South Africa in 1906, tried his hand at farming, and gave it up to study at the school for Applied Art in Cape Town. When this was over he worked his passage to England, and became an assistant stage manager for the Ballet Rambert while studying at the Central School of Art and design. At this time he saw a puppet performance of Podrecca’s Piccoli, and was enthralled by it. However he thought it was an art handed down from father to son. So didn’t at that time think it a profession to practice himself.

He returned to South Africa, where he painted sets for ballet companies, but it wasn’t long before he returned to England. Looking for literature on puppets he came across Nina Efimova’s book “Adventures of a Russian Puppet Theatre”. This book influenced him immensely. And he began carving puppets. Back in South Africa, he continued carving his cast of characters, and began to give shows with a loosely formed company. They played at the central library, in Johannesburg and the Arts Centre, Pretoria.

He then set out to travel over land to England performing with his theatre on the way. He reached the British Isles in 1946 and set up a workshop and studio theatre in Hampstead Hill gardens, London. The repertoire consisted of fairy tales, including The Little Mermaid, a melodrama, Maria Martin or Murder in the Red Barn and an African legend The Honey Bird. The puppets were 18 inches tall. During this time, John’s puppets appeared in two films “Britannia Mews” and later “The Tales of Hoffman” In 1952, John began to enlarge his puppets to 27inches. He gave up the Hampstead studio theatre, and set out on a long series of tours, which took him throughout the British Isles, Germany, Holland, Denmark and Yugoslavia. And widely in Southern Africa where he covered 24,000 miles by road, playing at 144 centres.

In 1959, John was back in England, convinced he had to obtain a permanent theatre as a base for his work, if the artistic possibilities of the puppet were to be fully realized. So by 1960 John had found and bought this building, which opened its doors to the public in 1961. I joined the company in 1963 as an apprentice; I bagged the puppets, swept the auditorium floor, made the tea. And worked my way up from scene changing, to lighting operator, and eventually puppet manipulator.

John realised that I would be best concentrating on the performance side of the business, leaving the making and designing of the shows to the other members of the company. For the next 30 years John and Lyndie Wright produced about 40 shows using every type of puppet: string, shadow, rod and glove, and combinations of all four. Special mention must go to The Soldier’s Tale, by Stravinsky; Amahl and the Night visitors by Menotti; Angelo, story by Quentin Blake; and Stravinsky’s Renard the Fox all produced at the Little Angel for performances at the South Bank.

For the Barbican Centre: Philemon and Baucis by Haydn. There was great acclaim from the press and audiences alike. There are two books written by John Wright on puppetry. And in 1977 John was awarded the M.B.E. by Her Majesty the Queen in recognition of his work for the puppet theatre. Tours of Israel, China and the U.S.A. continued to show his art to more, and more people; Puppet Troops from all over the world have played at this theatre. As have the best of the British companies. John died in March 1991 at the age of 84. He was a master of marionette construction and manipulation, an artist of great sensitivity.

I know he would want wish the two new Little Angel apprentices all the best for there future in the wonderful world of puppetry.

Steve Tiplady, Indefinite Articles
reported by Julia Potts

Steve started in children's theatre 20 years ago. He remembered how very Marxist theatre and TIE were in his early days – a bit dry and humourless – and felt that there should be another way of communicating with children.

Initially, he felt very challenged by puppets intruding on his theatre company's performances (!), but decided that he liked objects – they were less alien than puppets. Puppetry has always been a marginal activity – it's strange and curious.

From this, Steve decided to make his own show – Pinocchio – making Pinocchio on stage. This led Steve to the knowledge of what he wanted to do – which is best summarised as transformation.

Stuck for ideas one night in a workshop, Steve put a couple of metal saws on a projector – first the image they projected was similar to the jaws of a fish, then when he shone the projection on the ceiling, we the audience were suddenly inside the fish looking through its open mouth. This was transformation. It was the notion of going into a school and transforming the space that they are so familiar with.

This then led Steve to thinking about materials and their uses – the notion of the ordinary being transformed into the extraordinary.

Children who are watching think they can do that too – or is the metaphor more pretentious and they have the potential to become extraordinary too?

This became the founding principle of what Indefinite Articles does – transforming materials into the extraordinary. We believe in a theatre that shows the mechanics, that lets them be involved, and using things they understand. Theatre is live and unrepeatable. We like to push that to become a dialogue between performers and audience. It should ask questions, and doesn't have to completely resolve things – why should it? It should tell stories in a fantastic way. Form is more important than content – if the form is exciting more people are inspired.

Luis Boy-The Work of the Norwich Puppet Theatre reported by Sue North

Luis began by saying the subject of the talk was to give his impressions of puppet theatre from an international perspective. He then continued by describing his background going back to 1979 when he was studying in Madrid for his law degree. He had gone to a puppet show which happened to originate from Argentina at a time when Madrid was a cultural desert, and found he was fascinated with the open space, the people and the theatre. These people were doing something completely different to anything he had previously experienced mainly because they needed to escape from the political situation, which prevailed at that time in Argentina. It was either psychoanalysis or creative involvement, and they chose creative involvement. So purely by accident he found himself saying “I won’t have a job in law I’ll spend some time wasting a few years in the puppet world”.

Luis continued by saying that he loved visiting different countries and different cultures. From 1979 to date he had spent 20 years in England and some of that time in Finland as Director of the Helsinki Puppet Theatre. He had worked at the Barcelona National Theatre and with Tatou in the Belgium Puppet Theatre. Luis worked on various productions in 2003 including Frankenstein.

He said he felt that the cultural language of puppets and the introduction of different techniques and different languages helped improve international communication. It was, he said, rare to see puppet theatre until the 1970’s and he was amazed by the Japanese whose artists were visible when performing. Luis said he found something very humane and basic within the puppet world which contrasted with the large degree of brutality which existed in human relations and the level of destruction which had taken place throughout the world for many generations - something which he found incredible and of which he had no understanding.

While travelling around the world he often stayed in hotels, watching television where he frequently witnessed destruction taking place worldwide, but working within the theatre environment the reverse was true. At this particular time he was directing the Oscar Wilde story of the Happy Prince. The theatre company as a whole was deeply affected by the brutality and they tried to find ways of dealing with it within the medium of puppetry; one technique which was used was image projection.

Another puppet theatre production was Frankenstein which had direct comparisons to the brutality of everyday life. Luis said that the classics such as Frankenstein continued to thrive because they related to modern day and the reality that modern civilized man encountered, the monster revealing itself in the shape of terrorism - a modern day metaphor engraved on our daily reality.

Luis continued his talk by mentioning he would be touring Mexico in April which would again open him to a whole new variety of experience. He said that he continued to search for a common language in which he could communicate to the audience. In a majority of shows he had started work with a language he didn't know and borrowed from that. He had taken Snow White to Finland which was very difficult but it was decided to substitute the given language for the language of the obvious. Sometimes this got him into serious trouble trying to put across what he actually wanted to say. Children were not the problem as they were open minded mostly problems came from the adults in the audience with more puritan ideas.

Luis went on to describe Norwich, where he is involved in the Norwich Puppet Theatre, as a city by the sea, pretty, provincial with a medieval church. In the 1970's Ray de Silva was offered the church to convert into a puppet theatre and Luis felt it was a real privilege to work in a medieval church surrounded by dead people! In terms of his work, the reaction of the children was very positive but again the adults presented the most problems. He said that many adults go to the theatre for a safe and conservative déjà vu experience but in live puppet theatre if children got bored he would change the performance to provide a stimulating experience. A few years ago during a production of Oscar Wilde's the Selfish Giant a classical harpist was employed throughout the production and the children were fascinated by the instrument, but he had many letters of complaint from adults in the audience wanting to know why should this be used in children's theatre. Extraordinary.

Luis said that he did not like children's TV. He found its vulgarity beyond belief. He emphasized that there is not a problem with children, it is the fact that we patronize children who have a wonderful capacity for fantasy.

A question from the audience - Roman
"Were people more open to a more stylized form of theatre?"
Luis replied that people said they didn't like change but still they came back for more! And that he didn't set out to try to convert anyone.

Roman *"W*as the reverse true?"
Luis Yes one day a parcel arrived from the Polka Theatre which contained a huge pile of letters of complaint. Luis recalled a production of Snow White when a beautifully classical marionette was used and it was totally boring, but he decided to stay with it and still there were complaints that she was topless!

He referred to the early 70's when Ray de Silva directed Paper Tiger, there were a number of letters complaining that the puppeteers could be seen in action on the stage. Luis said it wasn't the children who notice these things it was always the adults who created these problems. However there was also now substantial approval for puppet theatre production so things have definitely changed. However he concluded that although there was a more positive environment, nevertheless puppet theatres were closing down and more investment was necessary if puppet theatres were going to survive.

Oily Cart, Tim and Amanda Webb

report by Judith Strong

Oily Cart creates multi-sensory, intensely interactive theatrical experiences. They specialise in work for two audiences; the very young, including babies as young as 6 months; and young people with complex disabilities or an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Their work uses live performance, objects, light, sound, scent, projected video, colour and texture to stimulate responses and to communicate with young people who, for one reason or another, do not make much use of verbal language. Because the young people in both of their chosen audiences have such a variety of abilities and reactions, Oily Cart tends to work with small audience numbers, and frequently one-to-one, so that the performances can be readily adapted to the requirements of each audience member.

Tim and Amanda presented their work against a changing background of images: showing how Oily Cart was able to create magical and absorbing experiences in everyday surroundings (such as the hydro-therapy pool used regularly by young people with disabilities) or by turning rooms within other venues into enchanted spaces, or 'wonderlands, designed to stimulate, excite and enclose. They showed how they introduce children to the idea of ‘theatre’ by gently drawing them in through interactive play before leading them to the more intense experience of the special space and its ‘happenings’. Wherever possible Oily Cart loves to break through the assumed barrier between performer and participant, the so called Fourth Wall, and to draw their young audiences into the world of the play, becoming part of the event through touch and scent, as well as sight and sound.

The approach also appeals to older people with limited language but the Oily Cart already find it difficult to meet the demand.

The work of The Central School of Speech and Drama reported by David Wood

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Jessica Bowles and Cariad Astles, who teach at the Central School of Speech and Drama, told us about the puppetry programmes that are now a recognised feature of Central's portfolio, including the BA Hons (Theatre Practice) and the first specialist puppetry undergraduate degree programme in the UK (now incorporated into the Theatre Practice course). Jessica trained as a designer. Cariad trained in the theatre. Both have taught puppetry for some years.

Jessica explained how at Central, puppetry is one of the Performance Arts, which include design, lighting and sound, and work alongside Theatre Crafts, such as costume, props, scenic arts and construction, and Stage Management and Theatre Production. Students in all these areas, as well as student actors, find puppetry useful. It is important that young adults should develop their imagination and ability to play, to develop a sensitivity to people, other cultures and places, and to develop a responsibility to themselves and to others as part of a group. The development of confidence and independence leads to a freelance career, where decisions have to be made on one's own. Puppetry can be useful in these areas.

Jessica showed a picture of an old suitcase, showing how the use of objects can be inspiring. It can lead to imaginative thoughts about travel, the journeys the suitcase has made, the kind of person it might have belonged to, dependent on the style and material used in the making. It can have a sense of history, plus, if closed, a sense of potency - what is inside? Is something about to be revealed? As a contribution to storytelling, such imaginative investigation is valuable. Indeed sometimes interviews for prospective students use an object to encourage imaginative thought. Jessica pointed out that a stage manager needed to have this kind of approach when sourcing a prop that is required for a particular production.

Many young adults find it difficult to play. Play is seen as for small children. But students at Central are encouraged to use puppets to become more daring as actors. Through a puppet an actor can open up more.

Jessica told us that Nottingham Trent University and Royal Holloway College both do quite a lot using puppetry. It seems to be a growing craft within training.

Cariad prepares puppet projects for students to consider during their three year course. She sees it as the equivalent of a children's playground. She can includes all kinds of puppets - marionette, glove, shadow, rod etc. plus the use of movement, voice and masks. She also talks about audiences, storytelling, installation, model making, plus dance and film and communication and, on a practical level, funding. Cariad talked about the reclamation of childhood, encouraging students to play and do story-telling. She said that they were trained technically as puppeteers, but it was more

important to give them opportunities to discover, and the space to experiment.

Students regularly get placements and work experience with puppetry companies and are encouraged to arrange their own devised work and touring. Cariad is working towards a carnival project, including dance, and a possible foreign exchange. It was interesting and rewarding to find that a drama school took puppetry so seriously.

Workshop – Lee Threadgold reported by Neil Rathmell

Lee drew on his experience of running puppet-making workshops for children to demonstrate a variety of strategies and techniques. He had learned early on the importance of enabling children to make puppets which would last, having seen the frustration and disappointment caused by the loss of a leg, an arm or, even worse, a head. He had also learned to avoid techniques which needed sinks (no sink in the classroom), glue (too messy), paint (no brushes) or scissors (all blunt).

First, with the help of four volunteers, he showed how to make a puppet out of a single, metre square piece of fabric, simply by gathering the materials and knotting the corners to create arms, legs and head. This technique, he said, helped children to work together, both to make the puppet and to work it – good for team building, good for mutual respect and good for producing a shared sense of achievement. When working with a class of children, he always took the process one step at a time, working at the pace of the slowest, so that the class made progress together and had time to see each other's work. When all the puppets were ready, he would ask the children to make their puppets look round the room, wave at another puppet and give their puppet a name.

He went on to show how to make a puppet out of two lengths of cord, fastened together with tape or plastic ties, producing a simple but very effective 'stick' figure. He passed round several examples of puppets made by children using both of these techniques and, while workshop participants practised their puppetry skills, answered questions and offered practical advice on a wide range of topics, from the use of tin foil as a modelling material (all the properties of clay, without the mess) to animatronics and ICT at Key Stage 3.

He also talked about the importance of maintaining high levels of professionalism and artistic integrity when working with children. If the workshop doesn't leave children with a real understanding of what puppetry is, it wasn't worth doing. The combination of practical advice with this fundamental principle made Lee's workshop one of the highlights of the day.

Workshop - Nigel Plaskitt
Puppets in TV Animation and Avenue Q
reported by Julia Potts

Nigel demonstrated the technique used in Avenue Q with a puppet from the show. The actors are visible, and the actor and puppet work in synchronicity. This was work-shopped for a long while off Broadway, using the experience of Sesame Street.

Nigel outlined his career, working in TV with politicians, animals etc. on programmes like Spitting Image. He showed the group Monkey from the TV ads with Johnny Vegas, who is a simple, sock-like puppet. He emphasised that simplicity can be best. The animatronics in Dr Doolittle can be amazing but the simple pig puppet always stole the show.

Nigel highlighted the differences between playing puppets in theatre and on TV. Playing puppets in a theatre means you're always looking up/playing up. On TV you are totally intent on what's on the monitor. In terms of finding the voice, the puppet itself and the director help you do that.

Casting

For Dr Doolittle, they looked for puppeteers as no dialogue or song was needed. However, for Avenue Q, the performers have to be actors/singers as well. A lot of puppeteers applied but it was a very strong field. NP saw a short-list of 40 and only about 3 didn't have any ability as puppeteers. They ended up casting 4 actors which made NP's job both harder and more interesting.

Career

NP worked at the Little Angel in his holidays and at weekends, then trained as an actor. He worked as both for 10 years, although there was no real training in puppetry. He freely admits he had no real idea when he started the Pipkins and kept getting his head in shot!

Avenue Q represents a real success in as much as it has managed to get lots of young people coming into the West End to see a puppet show. It is amazing how the puppets pull the focus and you just stop looking at the actors.

Nigel then invited the group to participate in a simple exercise with a puppet and a monitor to highlight the challenges of working in this way.

Workshop - Roman Stefanski , Polka Theatre
reported by Judith Strong

Puppetry is regularly integrated into Polka's productions. It used to be a 50/50 divide of actor and puppet performances, but now is more unrestricted in its form and only called upon when the character is best served by being an object.

Roman explained the different types of puppet and some of the basic techniques which brought objects to life. The most important one was for the actor/manipulator to identify with and believe in the character which was being presented, focussing the audience's attention on to the puppet.

Eyes are important. They are the windows of the soul of the character and using focus help to give 'intent' to movement. Characters also need to 'breathe' – he demonstrated this with a small Tibetan lion, manipulated to give the impression of a deep intake of breath before letting out a huge roar.

Roman brought a fascinating selection of puppets to the workshop, a mixture of rod and glove puppets which participants were able to hold and try out the techniques which he had explained. ncluded were two rod puppets of Ariel which had been used in the Polka's production of *The Tempest* – identical except for the difference in size. Someone pointed out that there had been a third smaller version. It was a tennis ball wrapped in the same blue silk that Ariel's gown was made from and thrown across the stage – the audience's imagination had created the character flying through the air.

Forum

The speakers from the morning sessions were joined by Peter Glanville, Artistic Director at The Little Angel, and Natalie Querol, Director of the Puppet Centre Trust, to discuss questions posed by the audience.

The forum talked about such diverse subjects as the place of children's theatre and its relationship to adult theatre; the need to encourage more provision for children and older people with severe forms of sensory deprivation; the role of puppetry to overcome barriers of language; and whether puppetry would survive as an art form.

A final contribution from Penny Francis served to draw the disparate threads together. Puppetry, as such, was currently enjoying a revival with directors exploring ways in which objects can take any shape or form. Will this last? Words change but the need to express ideas, communicate beliefs, and tell stories by giving life to inanimate objects had been present in all cultures, drawing in both children and adults.

A performance of "Go Noah Go!"

The day closed with a special performance of the Little Angel's current production, John Agard's *Go Noah Go* a magical production combining puppetry, masks, stories and songs. In this Caribbean version of the Bible story, Mr and Mrs Noah were presented as 'real life' characters by two actors who also manipulated puppet versions of themselves – as well as building an ark on stage and filling it with 50 carved animals. The audience joined in – making waves, singing songs, and helping the animals get to the ark – a brilliant demonstration of the philosophies and techniques which had been discussed and explored throughout the rest of the day.

"Go Noah Go!"
Question and Answer Session with Director, Chris Leith
reported by Julia Potts

Chris Leith started off by giving the audience some background information on Go Noah Go:

- Written by John Agard, adapted from a book
- Everything was made in the workshop – puppets were carved.
- CL had a big wooden ark as a child – just wanted it to be the same!
- The rehearsal period was about 3 weeks
- They didn't cast puppeteers – needed actors and singers, but found people with an aptitude for puppetry. You can tell if people have a feeling for objects.

Questions:

Do kids want to storm the stage?

They do! But they can't – it's too much of a risk.

How did the idea of involving the audience in the waves come about?

Through rehearsals, as did passing the animals along etc. I love letting actors really make something of the piece.

Has anyone challenged the idea of a mother God and a father God?

No – they just accept it. Maybe they raise an eyebrow but no more than that. It's all sorts of opposites, so it fits with the theme as well.

What exercises might you do with actors who are new to puppets?

We might do exercises with simple everyday objects – keys etc. It's about your hand becoming sensitised to working with objects. This show allows you

to be both an actor and a puppeteer. When the performers feel ready, it begins to happen naturally.

The tendency is to use a script as the starting point – this is the Little Angel tradition. Puppetry is a visual point of view, and one is sensitive to that, but it's hard to say which comes first.

Why was Noah's friend an actor, and not a puppet?

Because she comes almost from another world. It just felt right to do it that way. Putting an actor in also balances some of the quirkiness of the puppetry.

Are there particular considerations when adapting for puppets?

Yes, lots and lots. Again, you get the feeling that John immediately 'got' puppets. Perhaps if you can strip the text back to a series of strong images, that could be an indication of its potential success.

Has the show changed since opening?

Yes – but it's not a matter if consciously watching the audience and changing things. It's a generous show and the text is generous too.