Pulling Strings

November 2023
$1.50

Muppet Odyssey

How Jim Henson Journeyed from Commercials to Primetime!

Inside Jabba the Hutt

Discover the incredible artistry that brought Jabba the Hutt to life in a galaxy far, far away.

Paper Mache and Protest

Explore How Bread and Puppet Theater Became a Unwavering Symbol of Artistic Resistance for Decades.

Pulling Strings

NO. 1 November 2023

Pulling Strings is dedicated to inspiring and engaging in puppetry, with the goal of encouraging future puppeteers and rekindling the interest of those who grew up watching puppets. Our mission is to revive puppetry in the mainstream and to explore various puppetry styles, their history, and their future. We are committed to changing the misconception that puppetry is solely for children. Our mission promotes a world of laughter, imagination, education, and progress. Puppetry enriches lives and fosters discussions on important and challenging topics.

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Why Puppets (and Puppeteers) Are Still Important

Written by Kat Eschner

Though in these jaded times, puppets are often seen in the public eye as children's entertainment, people of all ages have used and loved puppets for literally thousands of years. "All objects have a story to tell, but puppets are objects with rare power," writes puppet expert Steve Abrams. They are objects made specifically to perform, he writes, like masks. So when we see them being still, in museums or elsewhere, questions arise, he writes: "How did they move? What did they say? Why was this kind of puppet crafted and what role did it play?"

The person who knows those answers is the puppeteer, the person who performs with the puppet. Without a puppeteer, those questions go unanswered and puppets become a bit creepy. But doing puppetry can be a hard sell in this day and age, writes Elizabeth Blair for NPR. Just ask Basil Twist, whose modern puppet shows bring puppetry into the present, she writes.

"It's not of this time," Twist told her. "It's not of the world we live in now." He's encountered so many problems explaining puppetry to people that he carries around his main puppet in a tenor saxophone case. When people ask about the case, he says, "I just tell them it's a tenor saxophone or a clarinet, just because the puppet conversation is too involved in those moments."

Twist is a third-generation puppeteer who has performed on stages across the country. But his unusual story isn't the only way puppets are still important. Broadway shows like The Lion King make extensive use of puppets, while film and television have used puppets practically since their inception, although in some cases puppets are replaced today by computer generated images.

Puppetry itself is a complicated field that combines performance and technical skill with craftsmanship and humor, master puppeteer and puppet maker Bob Flanagan told Playbill. Flanagan worked with Jim Henson during the modern glory days of puppeteering with the Muppets. A puppet's movements are a kind of expressive shorthand, he said; "even the slightest hand gesture, or a tilt of the head can speak volumes that actors or lines can't always get across."

Puppet performance is a discipline that puppeteers are laboring to preserve, like the Malaysian puppet show style that one puppeteer recently used to create a retelling of Star Wars. Pak Daing, a master of the Malaysian puppet tradition wayang kulit, told Lauren Young for Atlas Obscura that he translated the famous film for his style of puppetry in order to preserve the art and share it with a wider audience. And puppets are also being explored as a way to help children: the charitable arm of Sesame Street is currently aiming to help refugee children use puppets to deal with trauma.

Puppet (SIVANIBANDARU/UNSPLASH)

Jim Henson's MUPPET ODYSSEY

Written by Lauren Emanuel **With contributions from** Marie Ladino and Eric Atkisson

From Commercials to Primetime

Jim Henson made his first puppet while still in high school and landed a spot on television because of it. Over the next 36 years, he used his knack for puppeteering, along with his strong ability to collaborate and unique sense of humor, to create a cast of unforgettable characters, leaving a legacy that is still entertaining audiences.

Cast of "Sam and Friends" (SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY)

Most of us know who the Muppets are. We're familiar with Kermit the Frog and his tempestuous relationship with Miss Piggy. We have visited Sesame Street and spent many hours laughing with Elmo and sympathizing with Cookie Monster. These puppets are as alive to us now as they were when we first met them, and we have Jim Henson's whimsical imagination and determined creativity to thank.

Henson was born in 1936 in Mississippi but moved to Maryland in the fifth grade. He developed an early interest in art and the television, a recent invention that was quickly gaining popularity by 1950. Enamored with the new device, he immediately saw its unique value. According to Henson, he "loved the idea that what you saw was taking place somewhere else at the same time. It was one of those absolutely wonderful things."

Pierre and Friend of The Junior Morning Show (THE JIM HENSON COMPANY)

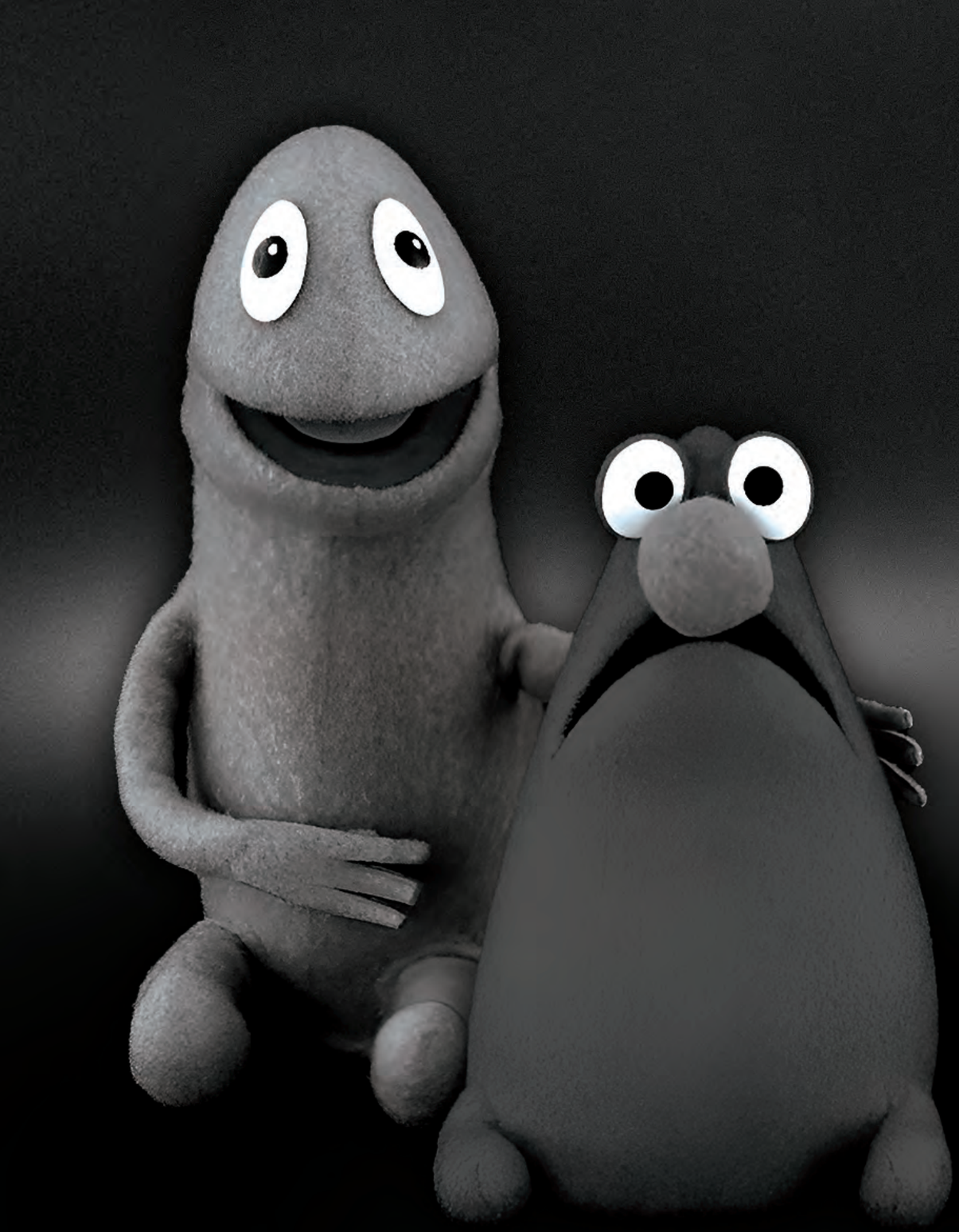
This extreme fascination shaped his early career. He knew without a doubt that he wanted to work in the television industry, and he didn't have to wait long. Shortly before graduating from high school in 1954, Henson heard that "The Junior Morning Show," an upcoming program on Washington, D.C.'s WTOP-TV, was looking for kid puppeteers. Inexperienced with puppets but inherently creative, he and a classmate researched how to make puppets, auditioned with their own homemade designs, and were hired. While the show lasted less than a month, it jump started Henson's career by introducing him to those who would help him break into the business. At that time, Henson did not intend to work with puppets for the rest of his career.

"It was interesting and kind of fun to do, but I wasn't really interested in puppetry then," Henson said. However, while enrolled in a puppetry course at the University of Maryland, Henson received an offer to create and perform in "Sam and Friends," a five-minute puppet show that would air twice per day on WRC-TV (NBC4 Washington).

Also enrolled in that puppetry course was Jane Nebel, Henson's future business partner and wife. A talented artist and performer in her own right, Jane agreed to help Jim create and perform in "Sam and Friends." What began as a fun project turned into a strong partnership with lasting effects: "Sam and Friends" ran from 1955-1961, during which Jim and Jane founded Muppets Inc. and got married. He may not have been interested in a career in puppeteering right away, but the puppets were clearly instrumental in shaping the course of Henson's life.

For "Sam and Friends," Jim and Jane invented a new puppet performance technique: instead of placing the puppets on a stage in front of the camera, they used the four sides of the television screen as the puppet stage. This meant there were no barriers between the puppets and the camera. If the puppet needed to exit stage left, the puppeteer simply moved it to the left out of the camera's view and out of view to the audience. While performing, the puppeteers could adjust their performances in real-time by watching their actions on monitors that Jim and Jane placed throughout the studio. This method brought a remarkably personal touch to their puppet shows. As Jane put it, "You'd perform but you'd also be the audience ... that's a big difference,because the people at home watching are seeing a very intimate, internal thing that's happening with [the] performer."

Jerry Juhl, Jim Henson, and Jane Henson with the cast of Sam and Friends. (THE JIM HENSON COMPANY)



Kermit is one of the best-known Muppets. He debuted as part of the “Sam and Friends” cast in 1955. Using half of a ping-pong ball for each eye, Henson resourcefully sewed the first Kermit together from his mother’s coat and an old pair of blue jeans. Because Kermit is a Muppet classic, you might think he would have garnered Jim and Jane their first patent. Surprisingly, however, their first patent was for a different puppet known as Wilkins, who was part of the puppet duo they created to advertise Wilkins Coffee from 1957-1961.

Wilkins and Wontkins are distinctive puppet characters created by Jim and Jane in 1959. Wilkins exhibits a cheerful demeanor and unique features such as a broad smile and separated fingers. Kermit and Wilkins share similar features, including the same happy grin and separated fingers, but Wilkins is still distinctly unique. Meanwhile, Wontkins, introduced through a companion puppet design, projects a more troubled and gloomy expression. These puppets, featured in the Wilkins Coffee commercials by Henson, perfectly embody their namesake personas – Wilkins, the coffee enthusiast, and Wontkins, the coffee skeptic.

Wilkens and Wontkins (MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE)

In addition to performing on "Sam and Friends" and in commercials, Henson and his puppets started appearing as regular guests on national television shows, including the "Today" show. In 1963, Jim and Jane moved to New York City and continued to expand their business. Over the next few years, they hired additional puppeteers, puppet builders, and writers. Henson also ventured into filmmaking without the Muppets, producing short films such as "Time Piece," which was nominated for an Academy Award in 1966. Around the same time, Henson successfully launched Rowlf the Dog, a Muppet, to stardom as a regular on "The Jimmy Dean Show." By the time the Children's Television Workshop needed a puppet creator for their upcoming show—eventually named "Sesame Street"—it was only natural they would ask Henson.

"Sesame Street," where many of the most recognizable Muppets came to be, first aired in 1969. Henson's puppets were integral in making "Sesame Street" a relatable and engaging television program designed to educate children, with an emphasis on diversity, tolerance, and kindness. "Kids are going to watch television anyhow," said Henson. "Why not put something on television that's good for them?" This show is also packed with fascinating characters, and each one has a special place in our hearts. Henson's famous puppet creations, like Big Bird, Cookie Monster, and Oscar the Grouch, are cherished by fans around the world.

Cast of "Sesame Street" (SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY)

Despite the ongoing success of "Sesame Street"—which had won three Emmys by 1973—and the steadily increasing popularity of the Muppets, Henson had a lingering aspiration that was only growing stronger. His long journey to "The Muppet Show" perhaps best represents his persistent dedication to promoting his ideas and seeing them succeed. Believing they could do more than entertain children, Henson wanted the Muppets to regularly host their own prime time variety show. He knew this would make for interesting and entertaining television. The problem? Finding a network that agreed.

Though he first started pitching this idea in 1968, it did not gain traction until 1973, when ABC agreed to air "The Muppet Valentine Show," a Valentine's Day special that starred Mia Farrow as its celebrity guest. Airing on January 30, 1974, the special was considered a success, and it led to the production of a pilot for "The Muppet Show," which aired on ABC in early 1975. That program also received positive feedback, but ABC chose not to pick up the show. Undeterred, Henson soon pitched the idea to CBS by having Kermit host a humorous reel filled with footage of successful Muppet moments, including interactions with celebrities such as Julie Andrews, Cher, and Mia Farrow. The reel mimicked what Henson hoped the format of "The Muppet Show" would be. Still, CBS declined.

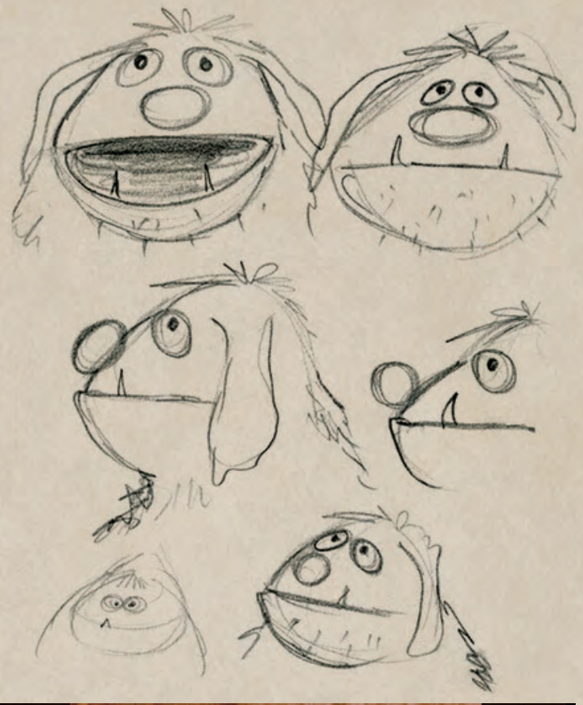
Fortunately, Henson had traveled to London and been a guest on celebrity Tom Jones's variety show in 1971. There, Henson met producers from ITC, Lord Lew Grade's television company, performed his strongest bits, and made a lasting impression. When the major American networks passed on "The Muppet Show" four years later, Grade did not. Filmed and produced in England, the first episode of "The Muppet Show" premiered in New York in the fall of 1976. The show ran for five seasons and led to the production of multiple Muppet movies.

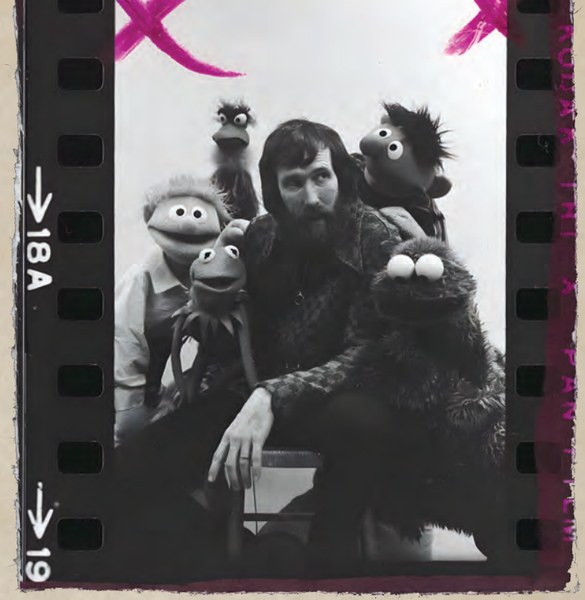
Puppets of The Muppet Show (SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY)

For the rest of his life, Henson continued to create and broaden his entertainment scope. In addition to producing multiple television shows featuring Muppets, including “Fraggle Rock,” Henson was also a pioneer in animatronics. In 1979, he founded Jim Henson’s Creature Shop, a company devoted to creating unique characters by infusing puppetry with technology. The company’s creations are still made and used regularly in the entertainment industry, from television and film to live events. From 1979-1982, Henson designed animatronic characters for “The Dark Crystal,” a fantasy movie that he also wrote and co-directed. Not long after, he developed creatures for his fantasy film called “Labyrinth,” which was produced by George Lucas and premiered in 1986, with David Bowie in the lead role.

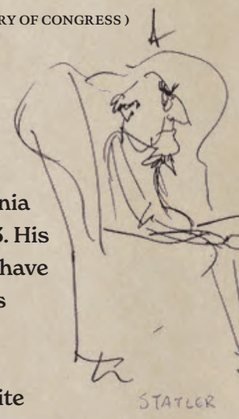
Jim and Jane Henson performing (THE JIM HENSON COMPANY)

Various Character Sketches (THE JIM HENSON COMPANY)





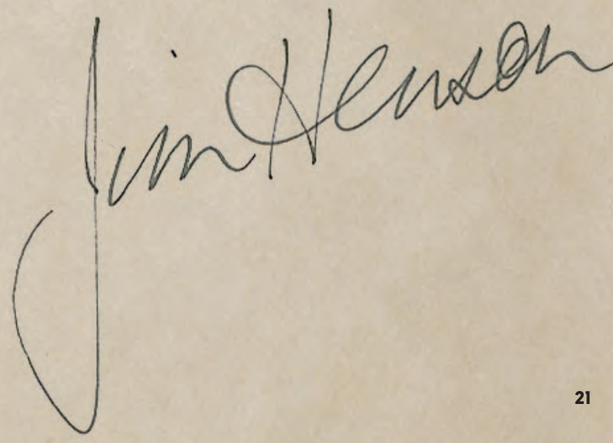
Jim Henson with his muppet characters (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)



Jim Henson & Jane Nebel with the cast of their show, “Sam and Friends” (THE JIM HENSON COMPANY)

Jim Henson with some Muppet characters from “Fraggle Rock” (HULTON ARCHIVE)

Henson worked until his death from a sudden case of pneumonia on May 16, 1990, at the age of 53. His Muppets and other characters have proven to be timeless additions to the entertainment business, creating lasting memories for children and adults alike. Despite his unexpectedly short career, we still enjoy Henson’s impactful work today because of his dedication to his art and his perseverance in bringing his imagination to life.



How Puppetry Has Put on a Spectacular Show for Centuries and Continues to Shine

Written by
KELLY RICHMAN-ABDOU

No performing art is quite as fascinating as puppetry. Blending all kinds of crafts—from acting and animating to design and doll-making—this unique practice holds a special role in the theater tradition. Since making their grand debut thousands of years ago, puppet productions have popped up in art and culture scenes around the world, making them among the oldest—and most widely celebrated—theatrical renditions in history.

Want to learn all about puppetry's story? Here, we shine a spotlight on this enchanting form of entertainment, tracing its evolution from ancient religious dramas to modern spectacles.

What is Puppetry?

Puppetry is a genre of theater. Rather than rely on actors to perform as characters, puppetry revolves around the use of **puppets**—objects that are controlled by people called **puppeteers**. Puppeteers manipulate the movements, gestures, and even expressions of the puppets with a variety of methods, including pulling strings (marionettes), propping them up with rods (rod puppets), or simply placing their hands (hand puppets) or fingers (finger puppets) inside the objects.

Much like theatrical performances starring human actors, today's puppet shows often feature props, sets,lighting, and sound. While modern productions are mostly put on to entertain, puppet shows of the past often served more solemn purposes like telling religious stories, teaching moral lessons, and preserving heritage.

Guignol Puppet (EDEL_S/SHUTTERSTOCK)

Setting the Stage

Before the emergence of the puppets we know and love today, primitive precursors emerged in **ancient Egypt.**

During the **Middle Kingdom (ca. 2030–1650 BCE)**, evidence suggests that Egyptians crafted automatons made out of wood. Operated by strings, these puppet prototypes simulated everyday activities, like the act of preparing dough for bread. Over the coming centuries, jointed clay and ivory puppets controlled by wires were found in tombs, while "walking statues"—figurines used to represent protagonists in religious dramas—were referenced in hieroglyphics.

In **Ancient Greece, 5th-century-BCE** historians Herodotus and Xenophon mention puppets in their writings. Their allusions to nevrospastos, which literally translates to "drawn by strings" or "string-pulling," serve as the earliest known written record of the practice, which Herodotus describes in the context of a religious procession. "They invented the use of puppets two feet high moved by strings…" he wrote in The Persian Wars. "A flute-player goes ahead, the women follow behind singing of Dionysus."

Ancient Greek Marionettes (WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

Theatrical Traditions

Over the course of centuries, puppets made appearances in cultures around the world. During the **Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127)** in **China**, Shadow Theater—a spectacle in which light is cast on translucent or opaque rod puppets so that they emit colorful shadows or black silhouettes, respectively—made its dazzling debut.

In medieval France, stringed puppets were given the name marionette ("little Mary"), as the Virgin Mary emerged as a favored character in puppet shows put on by the Catholic church. This practice would play a particularly large role in Italy, where the Sicilian L'Opera deî Pupi ("Opera of the puppets") adapted the commedia dell' arte—the Italian theater tradition—as whimsical productions starring the stringed figurines.

In the **17th century**, puppeteers in **Great Britain** borrowed the look and feel of Italy's commedia dell' arte to create "Punch and Judy," a slapstick show revolving around the comical—and violent—antics of a married couple. Though Punch (adapted from commedia dell' arte character Pulcinella) and Judy were originally marionettes, the stringed figures were later swapped out for hand puppets in order to better accommodate their aggressive movements without fear of tangling.

Chinese Shadow Puppets (PHOTOBANK/SHUTTERSTOCK)

Guignol Puppet (EDEL_S/SHUTTERSTOCK)

In **18th-century France**, dentist-turned-puppeteer Laurent Mourguet followed in Britain's footsteps and turned to Italian models for inspiration. While his concept for Guignol, a witty working-class character, is modeled after Pulcinella, it mostly derives from Mourguet's own experiences with poverty—a relatable approach that has made Guignol popular across generations.

During the **Edo Period (1603-1868)** in **Japan**, Bunraku emerged as a popular yet serious form of entertainment. Native to Osaka, it flourished with the rise of Kabuki, a genre of Japanese theater that blended contemporary music, impressive acrobatics, and stylized make-up and costume design. Due to the strikingly realistic movements and expressions of Bunraku's hand-crafted, stringless, and relatively large (about half life-size) wooden puppets, it has since been cherished as an important Japanese art form.

From **1835** until the **middle of the 20th century**, the Compañía Rosete Aranda, a marionette troupe, stole the show in **Mexico**. The company is celebrated for its troupe of 5,000 string-operated puppets. Originally made of papier-mâché and later crafted from mahogany, these colorful marionettes remain a major form of folk art in Mexico City. Today, many of these figures have adopted new roles as museum objects.

Contemporary Puppetry

Today, puppetry remains a beloved performing art form. In order to preserve their traditional productions, many countries and cultures around the world continue to put on a show. In Japan, for example, the National Bunraku Theater is sponsored by the government; in England and France, Punch, Judy, and Guignol dazzle new generations at parks, beaches, and other public sites; and, in the United States, Sesame Street's fuzzy residents still delight children and adults alike after over 50 years.

Puppetry today, however, comprises more than just spotlighting past renditions. Contemporary puppeteers continue to reimagine the craft, creating productions that pair age-old approaches with forward-thinking ideas—many of which are even taught and presented in an academic context. "Today's puppet artists are usually educated in conservatories and universities specializing in puppetry," the International Association of Theater Critics explains. "They are encouraged to work with literature and with other art forms and make puppetry melt into the performing arts."

Whether keeping time honored traditions alive, starring in mainstream media, or "melting" into the avant-garde, puppets still remain center stage in contemporary theater.

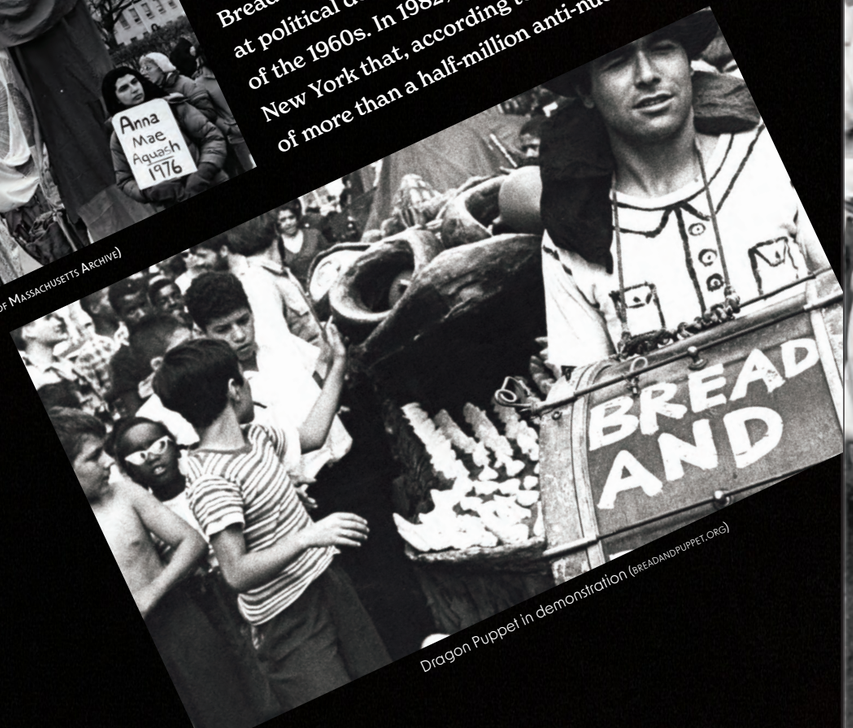
Contemporary Bunraku Puppet (COWARDLION/ADOBE STOCK)

BREAD AND PUPPET:

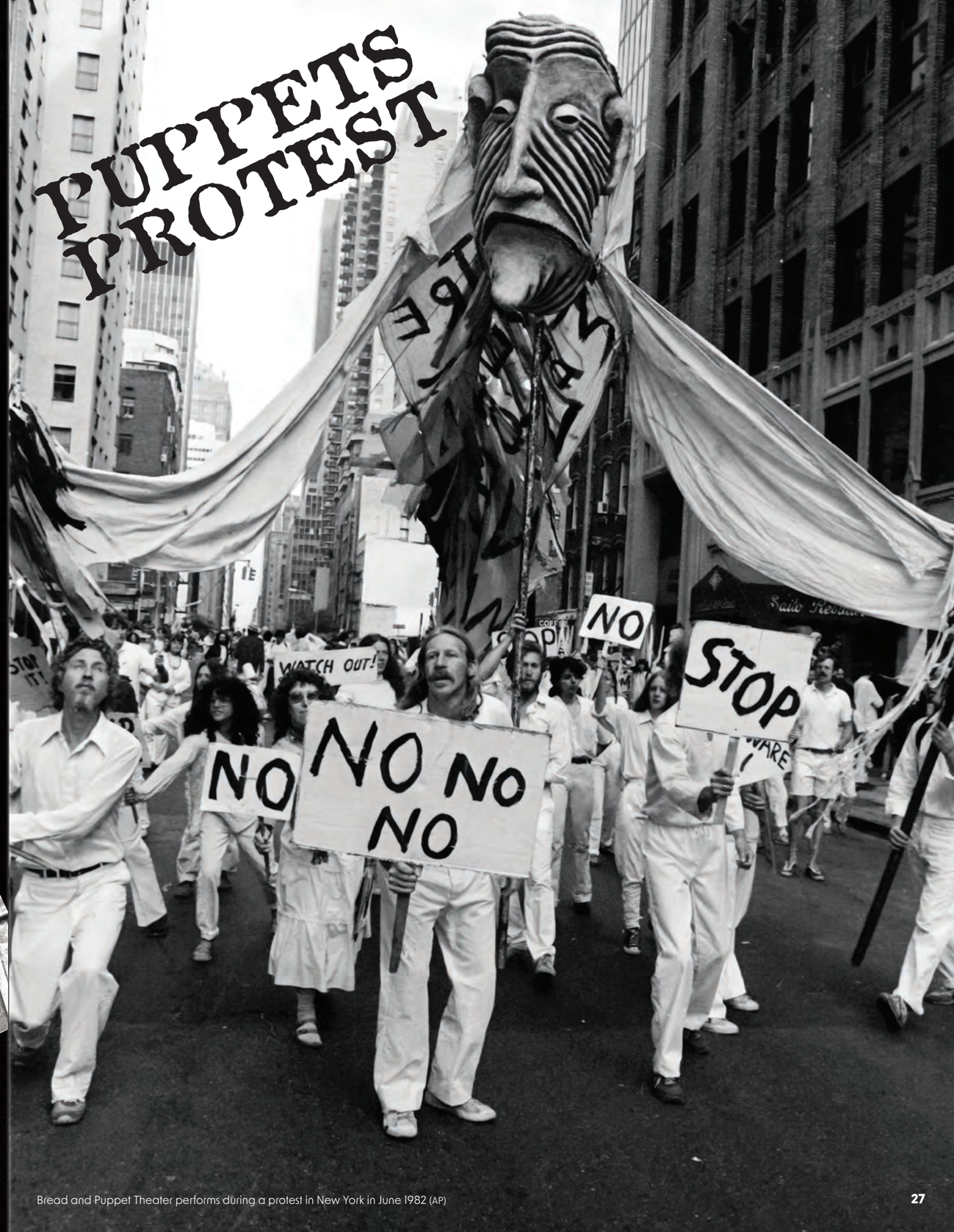
Written by Jon Kalish

Bread and Puppet Theater has been a familiar presence at political demonstrations since the anti-war protests of the 1960s. In 1982, Bread and Puppet led a parade in New York that, according to police estimates, consisted of more than a half-million anti-nuclear protesters.

Puppets in demonstration at Pentagon (Diana Mara Henry/ University of Massachusetts Archive)



Dragon Puppet in demonstration (breadandpuppet.org)



Bread and Puppet Theater performs during a protest in New York in June 1982 (AP)

Bread and Puppet Theater protest of the Vietnam War in Washington (Fred W. McDarrah)

Domestic Resurrection Circus 1988 (Clarke Mackey)

Domestic Resurrection Circus 1988(Clarke Mackey)

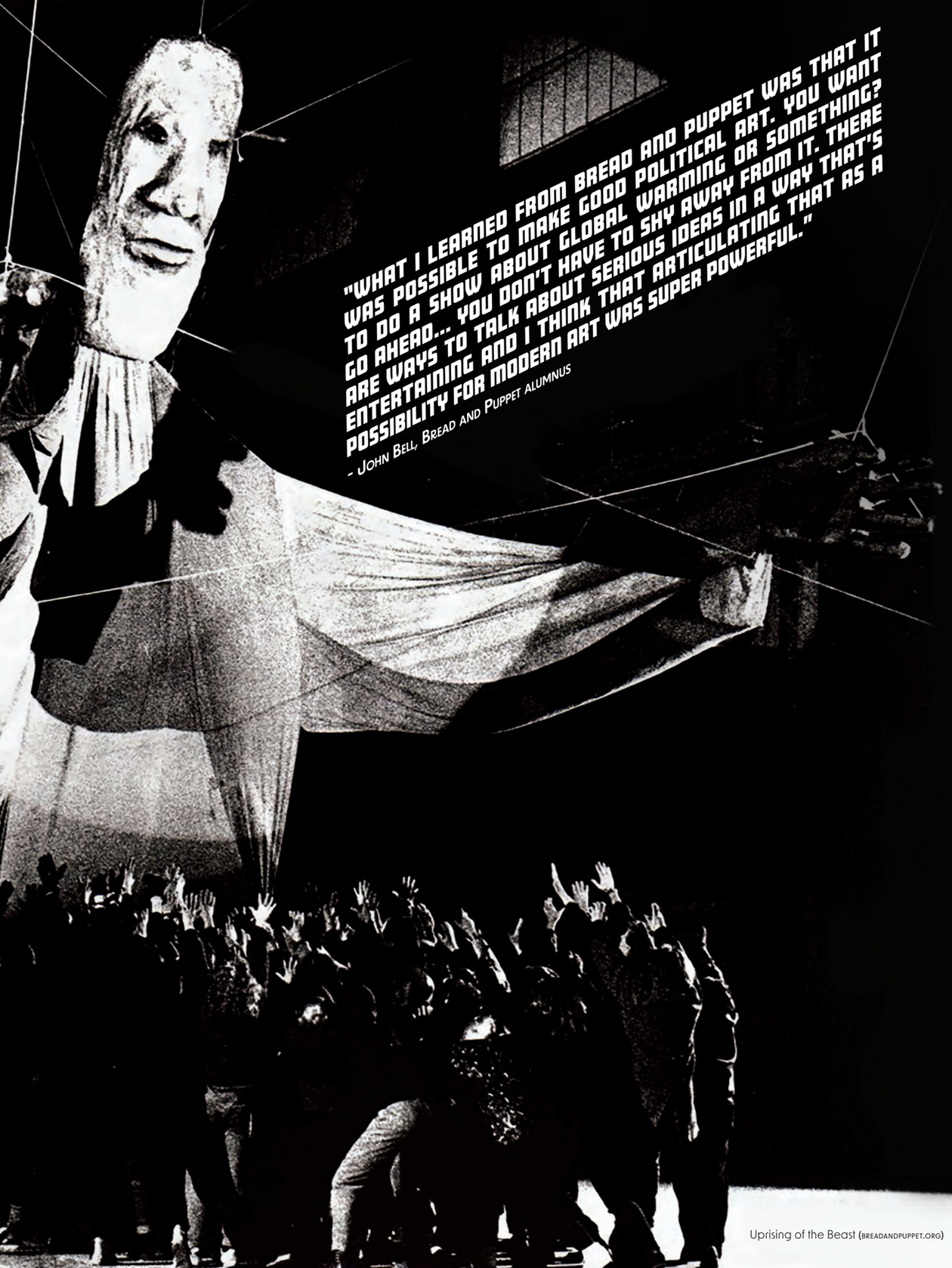
The theater is based on a farm in northern Vermont, about 25 miles from the Canadian border. There's a pine forest on the property with small, colorful huts that memorialize puppeteers who have passed, and a huge barn jammed with the company's puppets, some of them nearly 20 feet tall.

The barn is used as a rehearsal space on a rainy summer afternoon. Outside there are old bathtubs full of clay dug from a nearby river. Bread and Puppet's founder Peter Schumann uses it to sculpt his puppets and masks, then covers them with paper mache made from discarded cardboard.

"It's the freedom that you get when you can do things because of America's garbage and the freedom of doing gigantic things for almost nothing, with just collaboration, with just people power," he says.

Schumann brought people power to New York's Lower East Side when he founded the theater in 1963. He grew up in Germany as a refugee of World War II. His company's name comes from the peasant bread his mother baked to survive. Schumann's low-tech, home-made puppetry became part of New York's thriving avant garde art scene, and early on Bread and Puppet put on free shows with inner city kids, including one called Chicken Little in Harlem.

The company eventually moved to Goddard College in Vermont where it was theater in residence for four years before getting its own farm. It was there that Paul Zaloom joined the company. He went on to an Obie Award-winning career of his own and to star in the children's TV show Beakman's World.



Uprising of the Beast (BREADANDPUPPET.ORG)

"Being a member of the Bread and Puppet Theater was really the coolest and best thing that ever happened to me," Zaloom says. "I loved being in puppet shows. I loved the politics of the theater, the aesthetics, the camaraderie we all had, the relationship we had to the community. I feel very lucky and very privileged I was a member of the company."

On 20 acres of its pastoral landscape, Bread and Puppet still stages morality plays in which good eventually triumphs over evil. Giant puppets of seagulls or soldiers make dramatic entrances over a hilly meadow. Bread and Puppet's shows have featured a host of political bad guys, but they've also celebrated garbage men and washerwomen as they go about their daily tasks.

"Bread and Puppet also makes shows about celebrating the tiny moments in daily life that are full of joy and need to be celebrated in the face of all the horrible things we have to deal with," explains Claire Dolan, who joined Bread and Puppet after college and now serves on the troupe's board of directors. "I think it's easy for people to sort of dismiss Bread and Puppet in some way by saying political theater is a quaint throwback to the '60s and not really relevant to art making today and sort of naive, and perhaps also pedantic and boring."

John Bell is a Bread and Puppet alumnus who directs the University of Connecticut's Ballard Institute of Puppetry. "What I learned from Bread and Puppet was that it was possible to make good political art," Bell says. "You want to do a show about global warming or something? Go ahead. You want to do a show about stop and frisk in the streets of New York? It's OK. You don't have to shy away from it. There are ways to talk about serious ideas in a way that's entertaining and I think that articulating that as a possibility for modern art was super powerful."

Puppet masks from the Bread and Puppet Theater (CAROL M. HIGHSMITH/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

Total This and That Circus 2013 (MARK DANNENHAUER)

The company also has a powerful do it yourself ethic. Founder Peter Schumann says that with two exceptions, the company has never accepted outside funding. "From the beginning, even in New York, we have said 'Let's not have a theater that is dependent on private or government money. Let's make only theater with money we can make with theater."

That money comes from ticket sales when the company performs in professional theaters and from visitors who make donations at its farm in Vermont, where the troupe performs every weekend this summer. At age 89, Schumann still bakes the coarse sourdough rye bread that he learned from his mother and that Bread and Puppet gives away at every performance.

Brian Henson presents...

PUPPET UP!

WRITTEN BY SCOTT FEINBLATT

How a show inspired by Jim Henson infuses personality into puppetry using adult improv!

The name Henson has been synonymous with puppets for around 50 years. Many of Jim Henson's popular franchises and co-productions, such as "Fraggle Rock," "The Muppet Show" and "Labyrinth," have played key roles for generations in children's education and entertainment. However, Henson was evidently frustrated with being principally regarded as a kids' entertainer.

From some of his early TV work — including the "Land of Gorch" sketches on "Saturday Night Live "— he attempted to shake the typecasting. But despite several efforts, the label generally stuck with him. After Jim Henson's death in 1990 at age 53, his son Brian was named president of Jim Henson Productions Inc. In 2005, after the Henson family had sold and reacquired the company, the Henson Alternative brand was launched; since then, this label has served as an umbrella for more mature content.

The first show to emerge under the new banner was "Jim Henson's Puppet Improv," which is now known, internationally, as "Puppet Up! — Uncensored." On the eve of tickets going on sale for a series of Los Angeles-based dates in July for the popular adult puppet show, The Times spoke with creators Brian Henson and Patrick Bristow about the show's origin, the unique hybrid of puppetry and improv comedy, and its L.A. roots.

Brian Henson on the stage of Puppu! Up! - Uncensored (PUPPETUP.COM)

The idea to fuse improv with puppeteering originated from training exercises meant to ween puppeteers from their dependence on scripts.

"One thing that I had become increasingly aware of was the puppeteers had become script-bound, literally to the point that if the performer before them missed one word in their line, the next performer wouldn't know what to do," Henson recalled. "And they didn't have to memorize their dialogue because they were sticking up all of their lines around the monitors and stuff like that. ... We were trying to find some other really funny tones for puppetry that sort of differentiated from the Muppet tone and sensibility [led us to try new things.]"

Henson started trying new techniques with comedy writers, but nothing clicked right away, partly because the writers weren't fully aware of what puppets can and can't do, Henson said.

"So then I thought, 'We'll get together a core bunch of puppeteers, and we'll start just discovering a new tone of comedy.' When my dad was alive, we used to say we would get about one or two performers out of every 40 that we trained that could — [a] magic word to my father — 'ad-lib,'" Henson said. "My dad was a great ad-libber; Frank Oz is a great ad-libber, and that always pluses up the comedy."

Various puppets of Puppet Up! - Uncensored (PUPPETUP.COM)

The next piece of the puzzle came from actor Mia Sara ("Birds of Prey," "Ferris Bueller's Day Off")—now married to Henson— who advised him that the style of comedy he was looking for was improv — only he'd never actually seen an improv comedy show

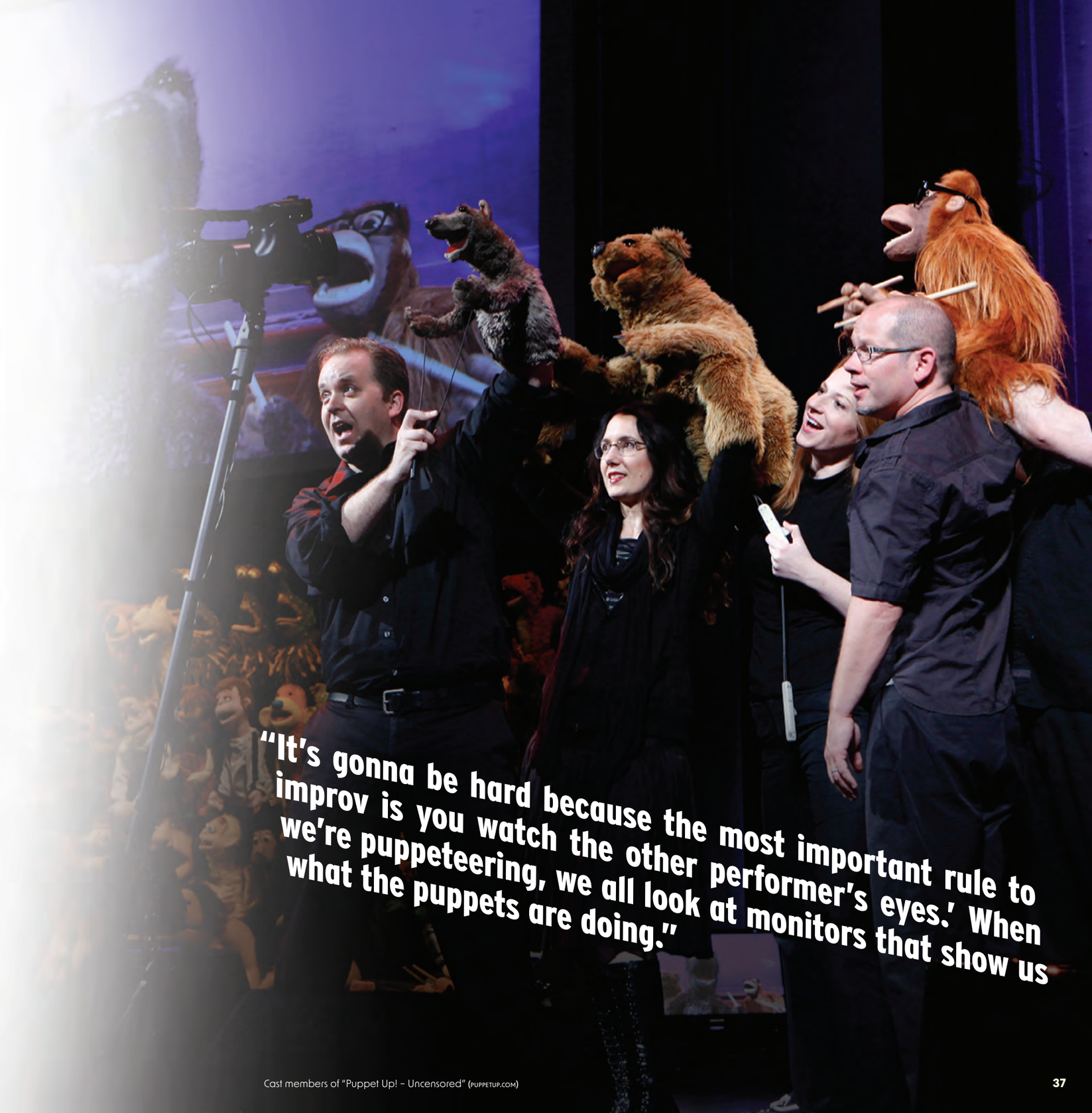
She took him to a Groundlings show, and suddenly everything clicked for Henson. "Wouldn't it be great if we could teach the puppeteers to do the magic ad-libbing that my father never thought was teachable?" he said. The next step was Sara introducing Henson to actor, comedian and improv expert Patrick Bristow to help Henson with his show.

For those who haven't experienced any of L.A.'s improv theaters (such as the Groundlings, Upright Citizens Brigade, Improv LA), the ensemble performers take audience suggestions of character relationships, situations and occupations, and improvise thoughtful scenes or even multi-act stories based on the occasionally tasteless offerings.

Integrating this performance style into puppeteering had its own challenges. Henson recalled, "Patrick got together with me; we talked about [a collaboration]; and he said, 'It's gonna be hard because the most important rule to improv is you watch the other performer's eyes.' When we're puppeteering, we all look at monitors that show us what the puppets are doing." The pair put together a workshop and met once or twice a week for three hours with a team of puppeteers, set up a camera and monitors in the studio, where Bristow taught Henson about improv. Before long, the success of the workshops evolved into the show.

"[It turned out that] puppeteers could watch each other's puppets and read what the puppeteer is thinking almost as well as watching another actor's eyes," Henson said. "I started inviting writers to listen in on what we were doing, so they could kind of get this different sort of tempo and energy, and then Patrick said, 'Let's put it all up in front of an audience; let's just do a show.'" Henson was reluctant at first; after all, a longstanding tradition in most of puppetry involves obscuring the puppeteers from the audience's view. But the two eventually decided that it would be great entertainment for audiences to see the screens, which showcase the puppets, as well as the puppeteers.

"The first show was just for friends and family on the lot; we did it in our L.A. studio, and it was great," Henson recalled. "The reaction was really fantastic. And Patrick was right that as soon as you added a live audience, it sort of upped the stress level of the performers and sharpened up the comedy and sharpened up the entertainment value."



Cast members of "Puppet Up! – Uncensored" (PUPPETUP.COM)

"With a human improv performer, they're going to hold you responsible for what you just said, in character or not, they may or may not forgive you. The puppets, by virtue of just being these rascals – and it being heightened and one or two degrees away from reality – they get away with murder, literally. They can murder a likable character, and the audience laughs."

The show immediately began to catch on. "One of our staff invited the producers of the Aspen Comedy Festival," Henson said. "And they invited us to Aspen; I think that was in 2006. That was the very first time we went onstage for a public audience, and I think it had the auspicious title of 'The Jim Henson Company's Experimental Improv Puppetry Show.'"After the troupe was invited to Edinburgh's Fringe Festival, Henson and company arrived at the title "Puppet Up! — Uncensored."

"Puppet Up! — Uncensored" went on to tour multiple countries and has also gained the attention of SoCal audiences through its residencies at Knott's Scary Farm, which Bristow referred to as the abbreviated "chamber version" of the show. Henson pointed out that the full show includes additional types of puppetry, such as digital puppets (animated in real time), additional video layering performances, and reenactments of classic Jim Henson puppet scenes.

Given that improv comedy can elicit lowbrow and risqué suggestions from audiences, we asked Bristow, who is the show's director, the extent to which puppets affected the relationship between performers and audience members. "Because it's puppets and it's uncensored, the audience is definitely more uncensored themselves," he said. "Also, regarding a lot of the risqué or the edgier humor that happens, the puppets get away with much more."

"With a human improv performer, they're going to hold you responsible for what you just said, in character or not, they may or may not forgive you," Bristow continued . "The puppets, by virtue of just being these rascals — and it being heightened and one or two degrees away from reality — they get away with murder, literally. They can murder a likable character, and the audience laughs."

Over 60 puppets of Pupput Up! - Uncensored (PUPPETUP.COM)

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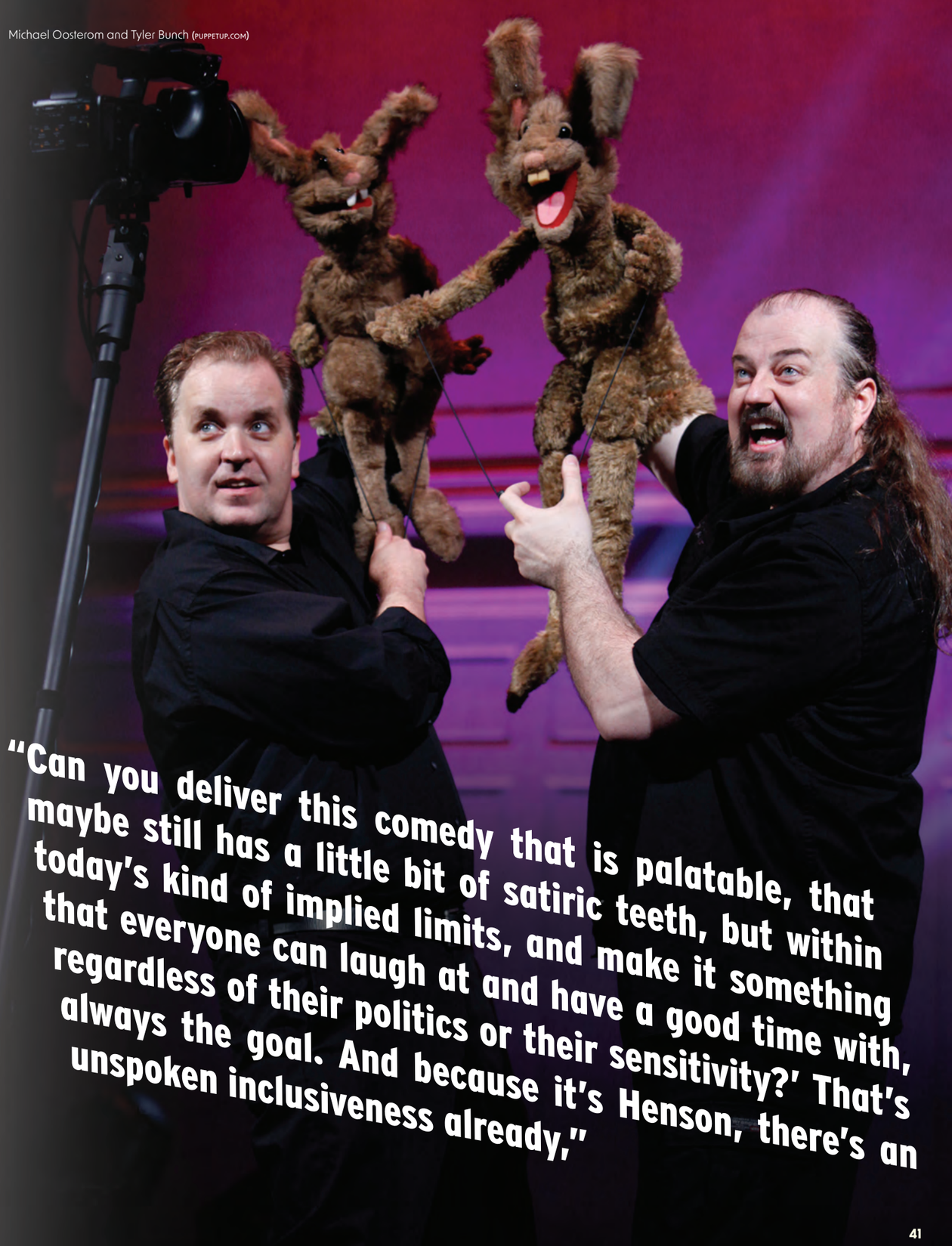
Notwithstanding the puppet forgivability factor, the solicitation of uncensored comments from a crowd in a #MeToo world — and within an era of "cancel" culture — this invitation poses a risk to performers whose core sensibility routinely relies on their fearlessness to tackle any and all topics.

Bristow addressed the challenges of this age. "The landscape has definitely changed over the decades that I've been doing this, but I just look at it as almost another improv suggestion," he explained.

"Like, 'Can you deliver this comedy that is palatable, that maybe still has a little bit of satiric teeth, but within today's kind of implied limits, and make it something that everyone can laugh at and have a good time with, regardless of their politics or their sensitivity?' That's always the goal. And because it's Henson, there's an unspoken inclusiveness already,"

Michael Oosterom and Tyler Bunch (PUPPETUP.COM)



How the Life of Pi Puppeteers Bring a Zoo to Life on Broadway

Written by TALAURA HARMS

Backstage, in the rehearsal room, the animal puppets for Life of Pi hang on rolling racks. They are impressive to look at. The interior is a skeleton made from wood and aluminum, with joints made out of bungee cords to allow movement, and trigger mechanisms to manipulate ears or mouths.The exterior is crafted from a type of foam that is light, easy to carve, and able to take paint without melting. These puppets, co-designed by Nick Barnes and Finn Caldwell, are works of art.

Rowan Ian Seamus Magee as the Turtle(Heather Gershonowitz)

Life of Pi, first a 2001 novel by Yann Martel, then a 2012 Ang Lee film, was adapted for the stage by Lolita Chakrabarti. It's the story of an Indian boy, Pi, who, after a shipwreck, is trapped on a boat with a tiger named Richard Parker. Life of Pi the play made its world premiere in 2019 at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield and transferred to the West End, winning five 2022 Olivier Awards, including Best New Play. The production also garnered awards for Best Supporting Actor, for its team of seven tiger puppeteers, and Best Set Design, awarded to set designer Tim Hatley and to Barnes and Caldwell for the puppet design. After a pre-Broadway run at American Repertory Theater, the show is now playing Broadway's Schoenfeld Theatre, where it opened March 31.

"You get to tell the impossible stories."

- Finn Caldwell

In Life of Pi, Pi's family owns a zoo, filled with all kinds of exotic animals. On stage, the animals—a tiger, zebra, monkey, turtle, and more—are dramatized using puppetry. The materials used to make the puppets stems from the idea that Pi is retelling his story after having been rescued from a shipwreck. That means the characters in his memory are created from the flotsam and jetsam from his time at sea. Pieces of a shattered wooden ship become the stacked sections of a tiger's tail. Frayed ropes are the mane of a hyena. Bits of fabric sails are butterflies.

In addition to the design, Caldwell serves as the puppet and movement director for the show, helming the team responsible for turning those foam animals into living, breathing characters. He himself started as an actor but he felt that there was something missing. He wanted to tell stories using objects.

"I was really keen to bring some of the rigor that I learned as an actor...to the art form of puppetry," says Caldwell. In Life of Pi, Richard Parker isn't just a puppet, a lifeless doll hanging on a rack. He's a character with motivations. He doesn't just jump from one place to another. He has a reason for making that leap. That tiger is real. Even when you see the three puppeteers working Richard Parker.

"What I love about puppetry is we're showing you on stage how we're doing it. Yet, you still believe it's alive. I think that's the magic, because then there's no trickery."

- Finn Caldwell

What the audience sees as magic, though, is actually skilled artists working from the principles Caldwell uses to bring something to life, the three most important being: existence, thought, and presence. Existence begins with breath. The puppeteer inside Richard Parker lifts and lowers the back of the tiger, indicating that the tiger is breathing. Done quickly, with the mouth ajar, the tiger is panting, showing fear or excitement.

Next is thought, which Caldwell says is best suggested by eyeline. "What the puppet is looking at is what the puppet is thinking about. It's that simple," he says. From that thought is born motivation and intention.

Andrew Wilson and Betsy Rosen as the Hyena (Heather Gershonowitz)

The third of the big principles, presence, comes into play when the puppet takes action on thought. The tiger can't just look at a rock and then float over to it. The puppeteers must create the tiger's sense of presence. "We have to give it two counteracting forces," explains Caldwell. "Muscularity to make it move around, and a sense of gravity affecting it as if it's a heavy object." So, the tiger will jump to the rock by going down into its muscles, then springing out of those muscles, and finally, landing on the ground and recovering back into its muscles.

Three puppeteers usually work Richard Parker together, but a team of eight puppeteers rotate in and out of the role—primarily to give their bodies a chance to recover from its physical demands.

When Caldwell is casting for the roles, he looks for skill, but he also looks for joy and the ability to listen—clues that the puppeteers will be able to create the synergy required to work together. "When the puppeteers are breathing together, their psychology and their emotion starts to align. And if you spend enough time doing that, eventually they get to the place where they can act, move, think and feel without planning it. And that's where it starts to get really magical," he says. "I can get them to give cues to each other on stage as to when the tiger is going to roar, and when it's going to look around. But if I don't, if I encourage them not to use cues, but instead just listen really, really carefully to each other—then there's a kind of energy created by that unknowingness. That fragility, that tension in the air, is electrifying to watch."

Caldwell also has a philosophy on what makes puppetry so special: "Puppetry does what Hamlet talks about: It holds the mirror up to life... It holds the mirror up to the miracle of the fact that you are alive and the fragility of that and the improbability of that. The audience knows that if the puppeteers let go of that thing, it'll just drop to the floor. So, they're showing you how fragile and how miraculous it is that this thing is here and alive. And they're reminding you that you are also in that position."

Rowan Ian Seamus Magee, Betsy Rosen, and Nikki Calonge as Richard Parker (Heather Gershonowitz)

Inside Jabba the Hutt

Written by Brandon Wainerdi

How Puppeteer Brought the Vile Creature to Life.

Decades before computer technology would enable filmmakers to render incredible creatures and aliens in photorealistic detail, a much more nuts-and-bolts approach was the order of the day. Beneath the 2,000 pounds of latex, wires, fiberglass, and gaffer tape that were required to make Jabba the Hutt a living, breathing, drooling screen presence in Star Wars: Return of the Jedi, there were three talented performers who spent many hours twisting themselves into impossible angles in the cramped, sweaty guts of the crime lord.

Brandon Wainerdi sits down with Toby Philpott, who operated Jabba's left arm and head, along with his slimy tongue; chief puppeteer David Barclay, who operated Jabba's right arm and jaw, relaying the Hutt's dialogue in English during filming; and Mike Edmonds — who also portrayed Logray the Ewok in the film — was tasked with flicking the gangster's tail.

Jabba Puppet Model (Mighty Jabba's Collection/Youtube)

Jabba Concept Art (Ralph McQuarrie)

What were your first experiences with puppetry?

David Barclay: I grew up with performance and puppetry in my life. My parents were actors who met in London at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Wanting to work together, they decided to create a traveling puppet company, which they named "Pex Puppets."

Between the two of them, they performed every aspect of the business. My father made all the scenery and props. He sculpted the puppet heads, my mother dressed the costumes, and they both wrote original plays and managed bookings and accounts.

So, it was at age four that I received my first string puppet, which I instantly took to, and I started performing in my parents' shows at age six. Puppetry became a daily part of my life, and then I started making my own puppets.

Mike Edmonds: My first experience with puppeteering actually came during The Dark Crystal (1982). I worked for Jim Henson on that film, playing the part of Aughra in all her mobile shots. I was also assistant puppeteer to Dave Goelz (who performed Gonzo for The Muppets) on one of the Skeksis.

Toby Philpott: Just like Dave, I grew up around puppets. They were my dad's passion: not only did he perform in his own solo show as "Pantopuck the Puppetman," but he also taught workshops and wrote several books.

Like him, I eventually developed a solo show, but mine focused on juggling, magic, acrobatics, and clowning, while only occasionally working for puppet companies. I spent much of the early 1970s training in all kinds of performance skills, including mime and working with masks.

How did you become involved with Stuart Freeborn and his team at Elstree Studios?

David Barclay: In 1978, I had heard that there was a summer job in Hamleys, the famous toy store in London, demonstrating Pelham Puppets. This was a no-brainer for me: I had been puppeteering with those kinds of marionettes for most of my young life.

One day, out of the blue, Mark Hamill came into that very store to purchase some Pelham Puppets for his collection. Mark commissioned me to build an 18-inch-high, custom-made Darth Vader marionette, which I did, and then he invited me to Elstree Studios to present the marionette and have a tour. Being a huge fan of the original Star Wars, I could not believe my luck.

During a break in filming, Mark took me to meet Stuart Freeborn and I showed him photos of some of my work. A week later, Stuart offered me a job on Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back (1980), to assist Frank Oz with a creature named Yoda.

After Empire, I was working on promotion for The Dark Crystal, when I received a call from Stuart. He had started work on the next Star Wars film and there was a new character, and he asked whether I could supervise the build. But because I was under contract to Jim Henson, I had to turn down Stuart. I was devastated.

But a couple of months later, Stuart called again. He told me that he had a brilliant teamcrafting Jabba (many of whom had worked on The Dark Crystal), so the build was covered, but this time he wanted to know if I would like to be chief puppeteer for Jabba. I was flabbergasted! That was something I couldn't refuse!

I asked Jim Henson if I could perform Jabba, as I was already lined up to work on Yoda again with Frank. Jim said as long as I completed the work for The Dark Crystal, then he would release me for the filming of Jabba. He was an amazing guy. Talk about having your cake and eating it too!

Return of the Jedi Concept Art (Ralph McQuarrie)

Mike Edmonds: Robert Watts liked my work on The Empire Strikes Back, where I had played one of the Ugnaughts in the carbon- freezing chamber scene. Because of that, they'd kept me in mind for any parts that might come up in the next movie, and I was eventually offered two parts: Logray, the Ewok medicine man, and Jabba's Tail.

Toby Philpott: My mime teacher suggested that I answer an ad in the trade paper, calling for people to operate big creatures for The Dark Crystal. They needed very fit, very creative people to operate in uncomfortable positions. Getting that job reintroduced me to the puppet world, and a fabulous crew, which included Dave Barclay, who was a friend of my dad's. When he was offered the role of chief puppeteer for Jabba, he requested me as his "co-pilot."

Jabba the Hutt Puppeteers On Set (StarWars.com)

What was a typical day of shooting for the Jabba team?

understood what he was saying.

Mike Edmonds: I could only really communicate with Dave and Toby, inside the body of Jabba, and that was simply because we were working so closely next to each other. But we all had earpieces on, as well as monitors that showed us the view through a camera.

David Barclay: Every day, Toby and I were inside Jabba's chest (his "cockpit," as we called it). We could not see out or hear anything, but I had a microphone, which was connected to speakers, so what I said could be heard by everyone on the set.

Tony Dawe (the production sound supervisor) had the unenviable task of listening to our rambling conversations inside Jabba throughout the day, and then had to fade up my mic when Jabba spoke and fade it down when we were planning our next move (or just telling a joke between takes). The director, Richard Marquand, had a mic that he used to talk to Jabba, who he regarded as just another actor on set, and we used gestures to physically show that we

Toby Philpott: We each had those headsets, which were on a loop linking just the Jabba team, so that the guys outside (operating the animatronic eyes by remote control) could relay instructions to us, update us on what was happening, and give us feedback on the effectiveness of our moves.

Dave and I simply had tiny, grainy monitors hanging around our necks—nothing like modern phone screens—which showed a black and white image from a CCTV camera, up in the roof of the studio. Mike actually had room for a full-size TV monitor. We had been spoiled on

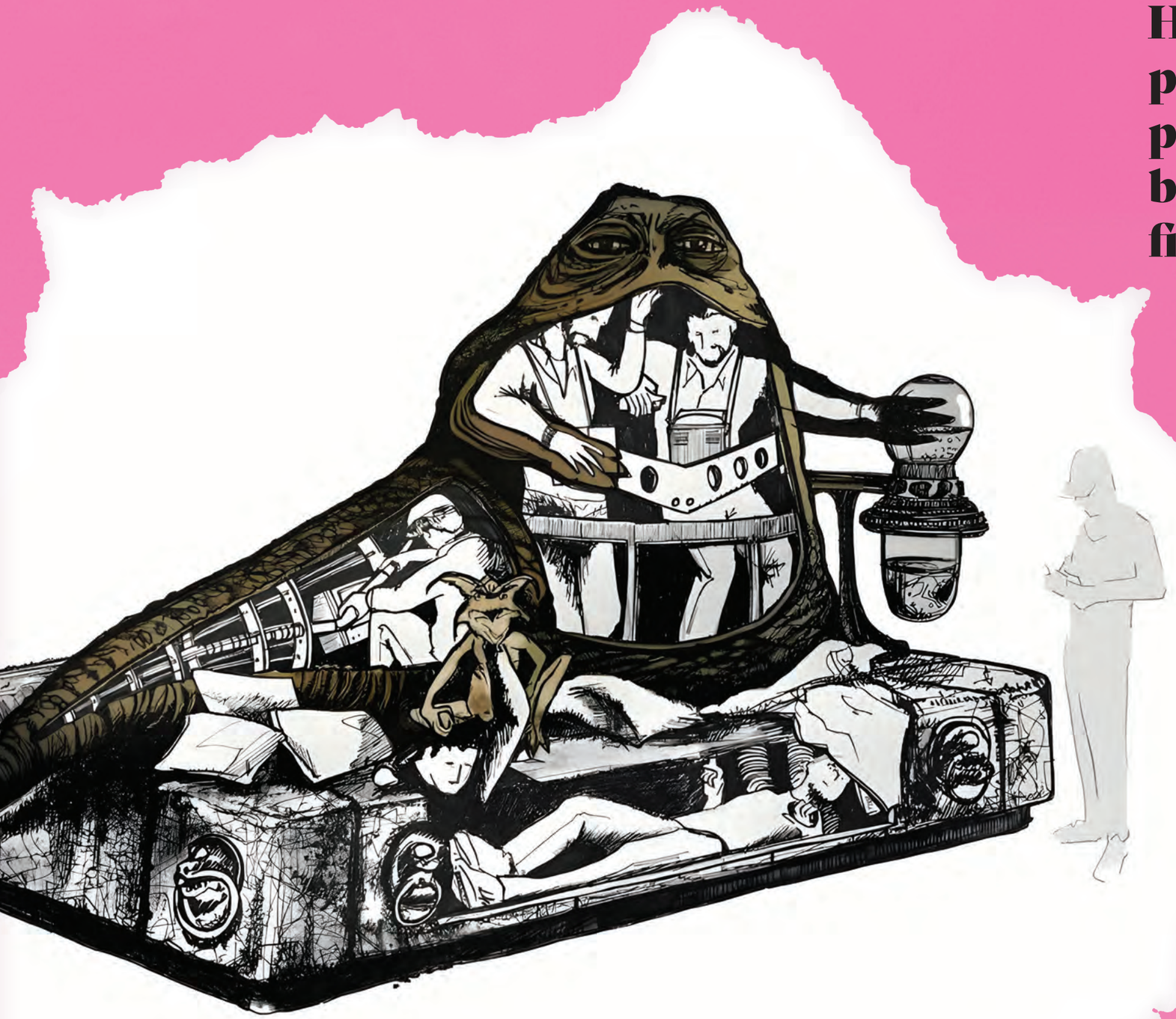
The Dark Crystal, with access to monitors showing the actual throughthe-lens image, so you knew where you were in the frame, and we were able to see the rushes at the end of each day, so we had some idea of what worked best. We never got to see rushes for Jabba. It was all just trusting each other.

We checked in at 8:00 AM, began the shoot at 8:30, and then worked until 6:00 PM, Monday to Friday. I would guess that we spent about a week in the throne room, a few days on the sail barge, plus second unit pick-ups.

It was easy enough, since we had no costumes or makeup to deal with. When we were ready, we would just climb up, because the palace set was built off the ground, to allow for both the puppeteers and for the rancor pit.

From then on, we were alone and cut off from the mayhem, only able to hear the instructions from the director, Richard Marquand.

We always worked Jabba as a unified being, which meant we were continuously practicing our coordination and expressiveness. We were the main character in the scenes, so there was quite an intense pressure to get it right.



How did you prepare and practice to be ready for filming?

Toby Philpott: We had fittings, of course, but not lot of actual practice inside the Jabba puppet, since he wasn't completed until the last minute. So, our challenge became how to coordinate this team of puppeteers and builders, live, during shooting

David Barclay: Like so many puppets and animatronics, those first few hours of bringing the character to life seem almost impossible. But with rehearsal and watching back the video tapes of the movements, our bodies got used to the unique physical requirements of the role. We suddenly began to feel at home inside Jabba, which is just as well, as we spent nearly 10 hours a day inside of him!

Do you have any other favorite moments from set?

Mike Edmonds: I used to be able to read the newspaper between shots while we were inside Jabba because, surprisingly, there was enough light! I also supplied sweets and candies to the other two guys.

David Barclay: While we were inside Jabba, I was able to watch Harrison Ford on my TV monitor awaken from carbonite. It was stunning. He was so good and so consistent in every take. A truly great actor.

In fact, all the actors, performers, and crew were at the top of their profession during that entire shoot. It was just an honor to be there with everyone.

Jabba Puppet Diagram (Pete Starlings Jabba Drawing)

MAKE-A-PUPPET

BASED ON INSTRUCTIONS BY ABBY LARSON

In the midst of all the gizmos and gadgets that your young whippersnappers and budding scientists tinker with, isn't it often more entertaining to take a trip back to the fundamentals of experimentation? To concoct, construct, and innovate. To fabricate cherished memories with your junior colleagues, armed with just a smidgen of adhesive and a heaping helping of affection? Crafting your very own contraptions instills in your offspring an appreciation for the uncomplicated, a reverence for the handcrafted, and a fondness for the creative journey. And the best part?

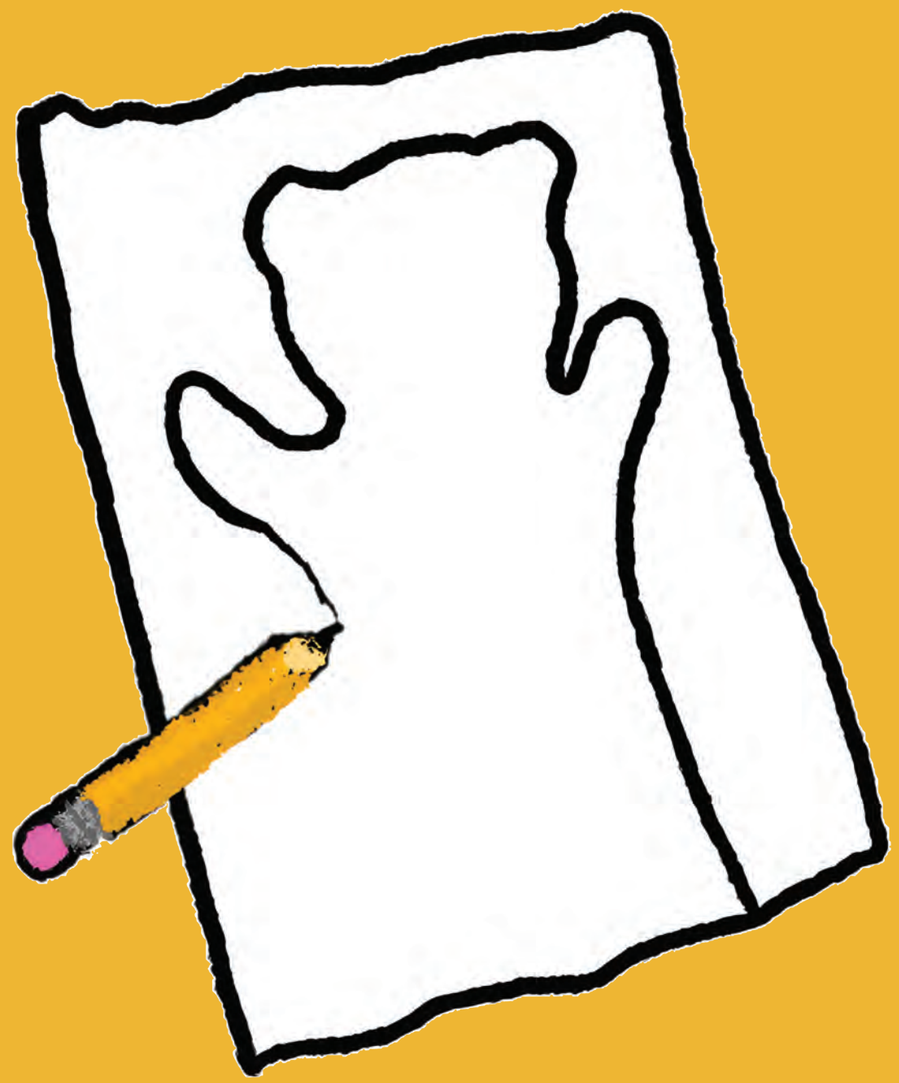
No need for batteries, my friends!

NECESSARY SUPPLIES:

When embarking on a creative endeavor, it's crucial to have the right tools at your disposal. For this particular project, here's what you'll need:

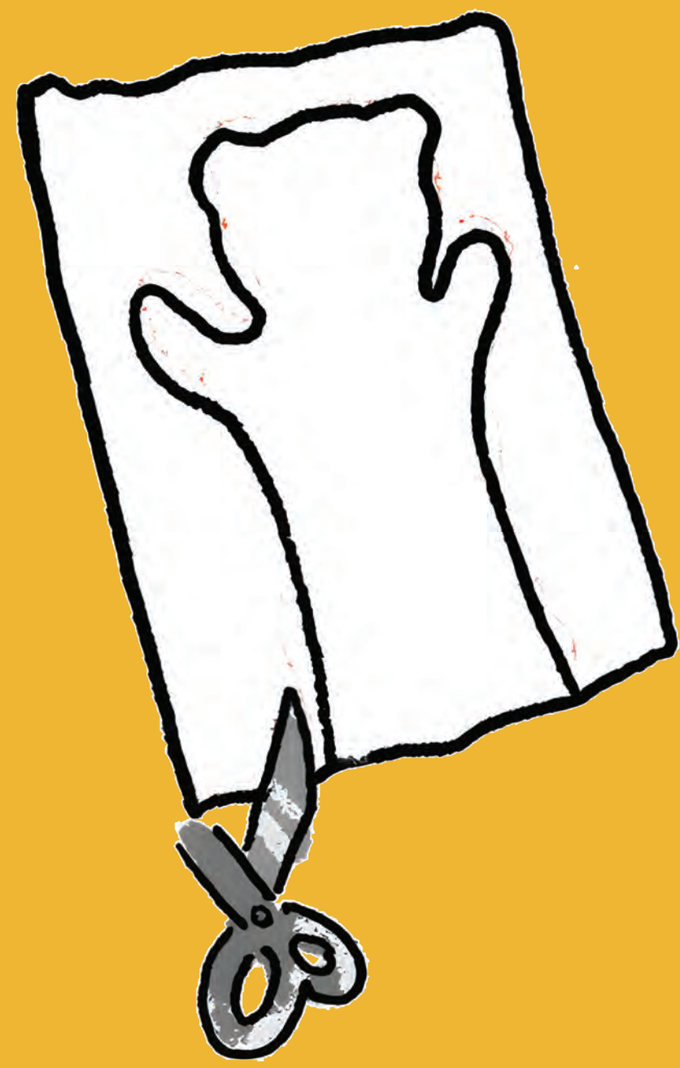
- Assorted pieces of felt in a vibrant array of colors.
- An assortment of threads in various shades to add that artistic touch.
- A trusty pair of scissors to cut and shape your materials with precision.
- Some trusty pins to keep everything in place while you work your magic.
- Pencils for sketching out your imaginative designs.
- Good old paper for jotting down ideas or templates.
- A sewing needle, a handy companion in bringing your vision to life.

STEP 1:



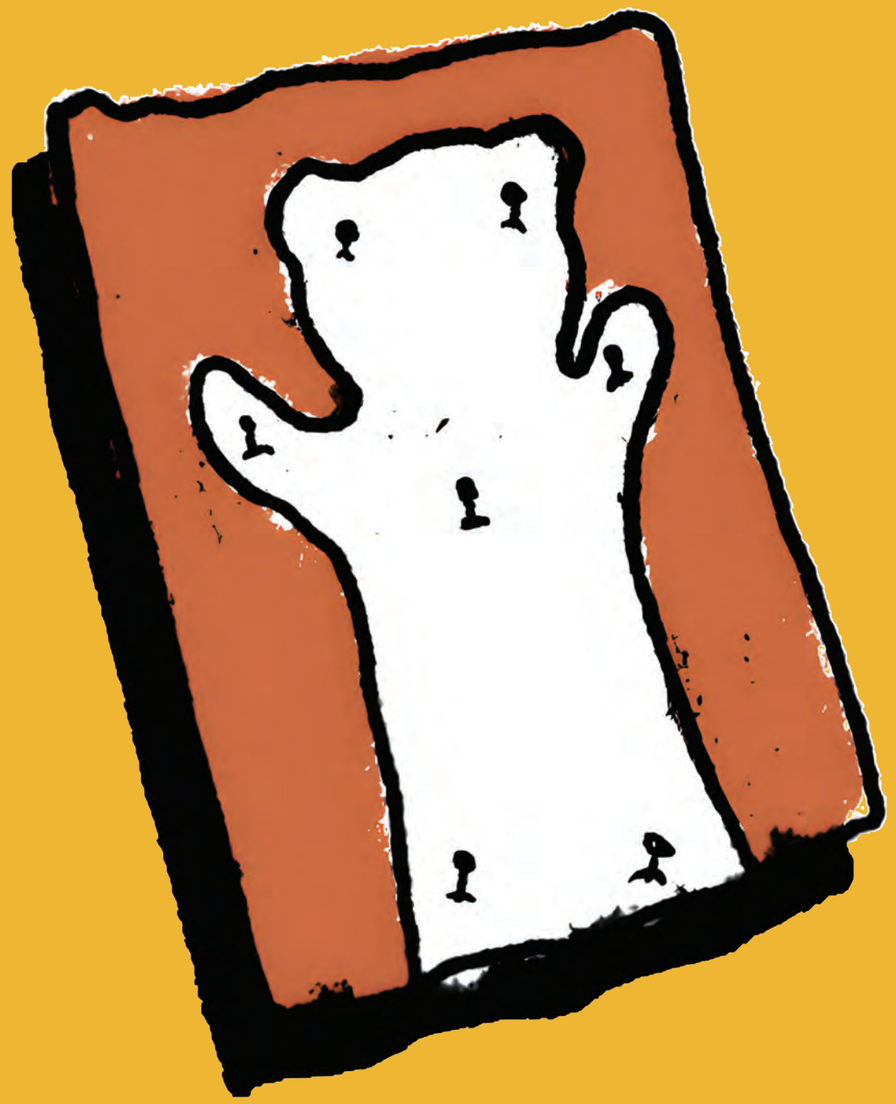
Prepare your template for the hand puppet in a few different ways. You can acquire pre-made templates from craft stores, find downloadable options online, or channel your inner inventor and craft your own from scratch.

STEP 2:



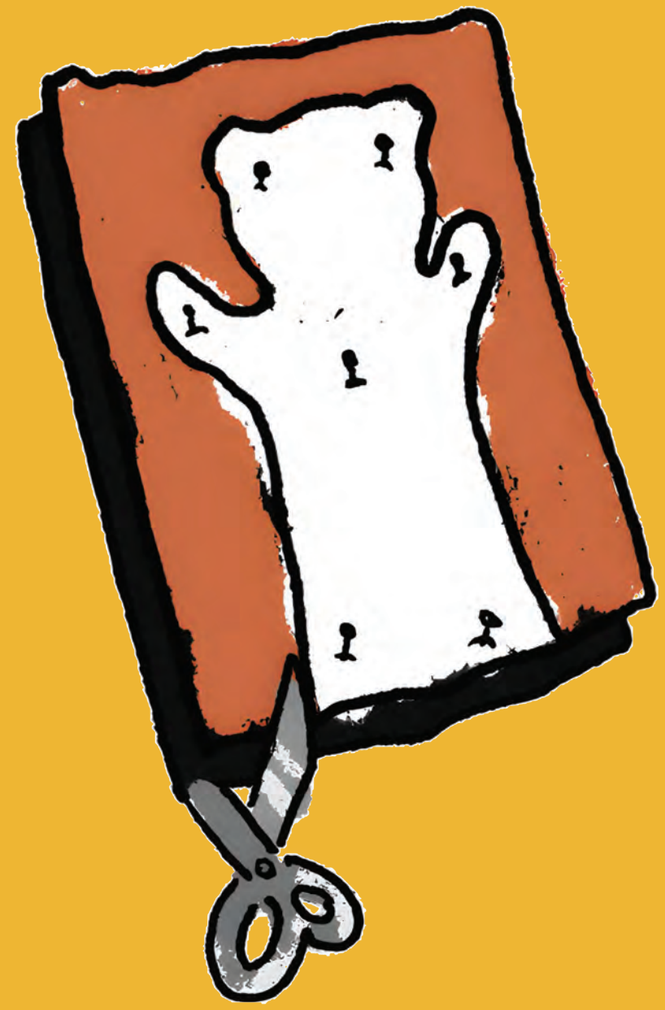
Now, take your template and carefully cut it out. Precision is key as you shape the foundation for your puppetry masterpiece.

STEP 3:



Gather two fabric pieces and layer them neatly, then secure your template on top by pinning it down.

STEP 4:



With your template securely in place, carefully cut around its outline to create the main components of your puppet. Precision is your puppetry friend!

STEP 5:

Sew or glue on any details you desire for both the front and back pieces you've cut out. Add a charming mouth, expressive eyes, a perky nose, or perhaps a touch of belly fur to give your puppet its unique character. Let your imagination run wild as you breathe life into your puppet!

STEP 6:

With your puppet's features in place, it's time to bring it to life. Carefully sew the two fabric pieces together, leaving the bottom unsewn to allow for easy hand insertion

STEP 7:

IT'S ALIVE!!! Now that your puppet is complete, let your creativity flow freely as you bring it to life. Hold the unsewn bottom with one hand and slip your other hand inside to operate your puppet. Time to put on a show and let the puppetry magic unfold!

So, as we wrap up our puppet-making adventure, remember that crafting with your children is not only a fun and educational activity but also a great way to nurture their creativity and bond with them. Enjoy the imaginative journey, and who knows, you might just inspire the next generation of inventors and puppeteers. ***Happy creating!***

Dear Reader,

As we close the curtain on the first issue of "Pulling Strings," I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude for joining us on this puppetry journey. Your support and interest mean the world to us.

In this issue, we've explored the enduring importance of puppets and puppeteers through insightful articles from talented contributors. You've delved into the Muppet Odyssey, ventured backstage with the Life of Pi puppeteers, and uncovered the secrets of Jabba the Hutt. We've even shown you how to create your very own puppet.

Our mission to inspire and engage in puppetry has taken center stage, as we've strived to kindle the puppetry enthusiast within you. We've celebrated the art's history, showcased its contemporary brilliance, and planted the seeds for a puppetry renaissance.

We've strived to break the stereotype that puppetry is exclusively for children by demonstrating the depth and richness of this art form, which transcends age and continues to be a source of laughter, imagination, education, and progress.

Puppetry enriches our lives and serves as a catalyst for discussions on significant and thought-provoking topics. It's an art that touches the hearts of many and connects us through shared experiences.

Thank you for being part of the inaugural issue of "Pulling Strings." Your readership and support empower us to continue our mission of celebrating puppetry and making it accessible to all.

Stay tuned for more captivating stories, insights, and creative puppetry adventures in our future issues.

With heartfelt appreciation,

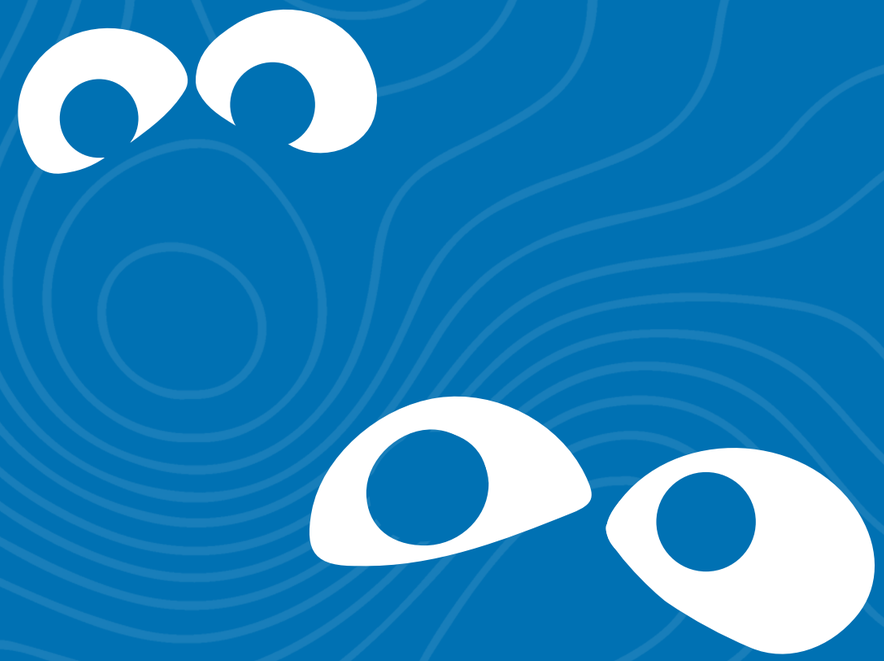
Kevin Sobotka

DON'T LET DRUGS PULL STRINGS IN YOUR LIFE.

STAY DRUG-FREE!

Thank you for reading “Pulling Strings.”

Your support fuels our mission to promote puppetry as a source of laughter, imagination, education, and progress. For more puppetry delights, connect with us on Instagram ***@pullingstrings*** and explore our website at ***www.pullingstrings.com.***



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“Pulling Strings” welcomes collaborative opportunities with like-minded puppetry enthusiasts, artists, and organizations. If you have partnership ideas or special projects in mind, please reach out to us at ***partner@pullingstrings.com***

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