

IMAGINING FANTASTICA: THE DIRECTION AND PUPPET DESIGN OF  
THE NEVERENDING STORY

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To the Hamster and the Bearcub, you are my heart.  
To the Giraffe, you challenge me well.  
To the Boys, the Bullies, the Birds, the Empress, the Dragon and the Horse,  
you made me believe.  
To The Tribe, you make this possible.

## Abstract

In the *The Neverending Story*, a novel by Michael Ende adapted for the stage by David S. Craig, the child protagonist reads a fantastical world into existence. When directing and puppet designing a theatre production of *The Neverending Story* at the University of Lethbridge in February of 2013, I sought to populate that world using mundane objects and character situations from the real world, repurposed into object puppets and animated by actor-puppeteers. In this paper, I assess the conception, design and performance of puppets in my production of *The Neverending Story*.

## Preface

The University of Lethbridge Master of Fine Arts program requires a thesis composed of two parts: a substantive research project and an accompanying support paper. My foundational MFA coursework and artistic activities explored theatrical directing. For the project component of my thesis, I was challenged to direct a mainstage production within the season at the University of Lethbridge. After reading numerous plays and consulting with my supervisor Nicholas Hanson, I submitted five scripts that I was interested in directing to the Drama department's season selection committee. From this list it was determined that I would direct, as well as design puppets, for *The Neverending Story*. The production ran from February 12-16, 2013 in the University Theatre at the University of Lethbridge.

This document is a paper in support of my thesis project, the artistic direction and puppet design of a theatrical production of *The Neverending Story*. In accordance with the structure of the MFA program, the majority of my thesis was comprised of the creative project. Therefore, this text is not a research paper but rather a retrospective exploration of my work as a director and puppet designer. Moreover, instead of a general reflection of my artistic process, this paper focuses on puppetry, one specific aspect of my thesis production.

I would certainly not be alone in my love of Michael Ende's tale, *The Neverending Story*. I could not begin to count the number of times I would tell someone that I was directing the new David S. Craig adaptation as my thesis work, and I would be treated to a litany of childhood stories that eventually would give

way to shouts of “MOONCHILD!” and “ARTAX...NOOOOO!!!” The question that inevitably followed was: “So, how are you going to get the dragon to fly?” When I would say that I intended to use puppets I would generally be met with one of two responses: a gushing “Oh I love puppets! I can’t wait to see it,” or a skeptical: “Hmm, interesting...I can’t wait to see it.”

In the months that have followed since the closing night performance, I have reflected on the production as a whole and puppets specifically. The post-production feedback that I have received, in various forms, has echoed the earlier cheerleaders and skeptics: “I LOOOOVED it!!!” and “It was...interesting.” As I pore over my notes and production stills of *The Neverending Story* there are many moments that I, too, love but there are also many moments I pause and think: “Interesting...”. In this support paper, I will explore those moments by focusing on five specific puppets from my thesis production in order to answer the question: what makes a puppet come to life and what makes them so...interesting?

## Acknowledgements

There have been so many people involved with seeing this project come to fruition who deserve my thanks. Firstly, my wife Franziska, who at 8 and a half months pregnant with our son Felix was still adept at her duties as my artistic sounding board, commenting ruthlessly on what was working and what was missing in my production.

Nicholas Hanson, my supervisor, has been an invaluable guide for me, balancing my Dionysian roughshod with healthy doses of Apollonian consideration.

The word epiphany is not one I would use lightly but it is apt when I consider my first meeting with Peter Balkwill and Pityu Kenderes of *The Old Trout Puppet Workshop*. Their easy coffee table dialectic reshaped my thesis direction from superficial and heartless designs back to the central idea of a child's imagination.

In a production of this size the designers deserve huge kudos: Lauren Guindon for costumes, Vicki Moser for the set, Narda McCarroll who created the worlds of the play with light, and Kelly Roberts for his sound design.

A special thank you to Steve Benson and Patty Baun who worked tirelessly to build and modify the puppets, and then rebuild and re-modify the puppets some more.

To the Lads from Red Engine Coffee for providing the requisite amount of caffeine for me to complete my writing, cheers.

My heartfelt thanks to the cast for thoughtfully exploring simple objects, giving them life, and sharing them with the audience: Keiffer Davies, Jessica Engen, Benjamin Goodwin, Brayden Haidenger, Daniel Howard, Craig McCue, Becca

McDonald, Aimee McGurk, Andrew Merrigan, Keith Miller, Katie Musgrave, Jordan Payne, Samantha Richardson, Chlöe Sando, Alisha VanWieren, Chelsea Woolley.

Lastly, my gratitude to the audience, without whose presence, kept at the forefront of our creative minds, we are—in the words of the cast—simply “guys doin’ dumb stuff in a room somewhere”.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Imagining Fantastica

As the culmination of my Master of Fine Arts studies in directing, my thesis project involved the direction and puppet design of a theatrical production of *The Neverending Story*, adapted for the stage by David S. Craig from the novel by Michael Ende. Following the February 12-16, 2013 production run, I have shifted my focus to reflection on and assessment of the work. In directing this production I had not considered the Theatre with Puppets genre in much depth beyond the facts that I enjoy it and that it had been an integral part of my directorial approach. Revisiting the inclusion of puppets in my production has provided much grist for my aesthetic mill. In this support paper, therefore, I will assess the use of puppets in my production of *The Neverending Story* through conception, design and performance.

David S. Craig's stage adaptation was not written specifically as a script that includes puppets; my initial decision to do so was based on a few ideas. First, puppets work well artistically to create a fantastical world and to evoke the imagination. Secondly, I had used puppets and designed them in previous productions<sup>1</sup> and I had seen them work effectively for a range of audiences. Third, as a learning experience for myself I wanted to make use of the set and prop shops, dedicated builders, large cast, and full-scale theatre to realize production values that are difficult to attain outside of the resources of a university. Finally, the precedent had been set in both the Jim Henson-esque animatronics puppets of the 1984 film

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<sup>1</sup> *The Jungle Book* for New West Theatre, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Pinocchio* for Chemainus Theatre Festival, and *The Wise King William* for North Shore Theatre for Children

## CHAPTER TWO

### Starting Points

#### The Source Texts

Written as a children's novel and first published in 1979 in German by author Michael Ende, *Die Unendliche Geschichte* or *The Neverending Story* has enjoyed continued best-seller status as a book. However, it was the film version in 1984 that cemented its place in the North American cultural landscape. That *The Neverending Story* contains rich theatrical fodder is not surprising. Beyond being the creator of the book, Ende had attended drama school and worked variously as an actor, playwright, director, and film critic (Bentley 78).<sup>4</sup> The literary magazine *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt* had, perhaps, the greatest tribute, stating: "*The Neverending Story* replaces half a library" (79).

As my production of *The Neverending Story* used a theatrical adaptation, my focus has been primarily on the script created by adapter/playwright David S. Craig. In June 2013 I conducted a Skype interview with Craig that proved invaluable to retrospectively understand the playwright's intent in the work. As a Canadian theatre artist who specializes in playwrighting and directing for young audiences, Craig offered enlightening insights on the inclusion or exclusion of puppets. I

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<sup>4</sup> Ende was fiercely opposed to the film, so he provided his own script and fought legally to have the film changed (People Magazine 78). He sued and lost.

have come to understand upon reflection of that process, looking specifically at the question: What makes a puppet come to life? This paper will delve first into the overall concept of my puppet design and its growth, and then culminate in a retrospective assessment of five of the puppets from the production.

discussed several aspects of his directing approach as well as the growth of the adaptation in its three separate iterations.<sup>5</sup>

Specific to this paper I asked him two questions. First, had he considered the cross-casting of multiple characters with one performer as logistically functional or artistically layered? Second, what was the role of puppets in past productions and did they play a part in the re-writing process? As an answer to the first question: No. The casting was entirely functional, although some of the audience may have derived some meaning from his production where the character of the Father also played the villain, Gmork. While much has been made of the Mr. Darling/Captain Hook cross-casting of *Peter Pan*<sup>6</sup>, in the case of Craig's script, any message communicated by the same actor playing the father and the villain is coincidental rather than intended.

Craig's answer to my question pertaining to the use of puppets in past productions was very enlightening. Firstly, he makes a distinction between puppets—be they hand, rod, or marionette—and actors with appendages like stilts and prosthetics, which he calls “extreme characters.” The latter he was in favour of as long as the face of the performer was not obscured. As he explains:

“When I did it, perhaps because I had seen so many puppets, I made a very conscious choice to use *no puppets*. [emphasis added] No puppets at all... You have a play in which you have multiple scenes and you are moving from these scenes quickly, so the audience doesn't have a lot of time to create a relationship with

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<sup>5</sup> Productions including: The Seattle Children's Theatre, West Coast premier; the Maryland Imagination Stage, East Coast premier; and the Canadian premier at Roseneath Theatre, a production that he directed.

<sup>6</sup> Children's Literature writer Michael Egan engages in a Freudian analysis of this doubling in his article *The Neverland of Id: Barrie, Peter Pan and Freud*

version of *The Neverending Story*<sup>2</sup> and in the play script notes of past productions, which list a puppet designer.<sup>3</sup>

As I elected to be both director and puppet designer, my first task was linked to a division of labor consideration as to who would design what. I had to decide which characters would be puppets, which characters would be costumed, and which would be both, as well as considering the very question of what defines a puppet. The practicalities such as deciding between the costume shop and the props department who would do the designing and the building, which items would be shared, and whose budget it came from all influenced the final result considerably. Exploring this very practical delineation led me to some theoretical questions: Is a body extension a puppet? What is a mask? What is a costume? Where do the puppets I designed for *The Neverending Story* live in puppet taxonomy? In design and implementation I had some functional answers to these questions. However, after the completion of the run I started to revisit them and probe further into the more theoretical nature of puppets, asking: What is it about the process of puppetry that incarnates a simple object? What makes a puppet come to life? Having completed the production these are questions I am now able to consider.

My task for this support paper is to assess the use of puppets in *The Neverending Story* in conception, design and performance. I will describe the process I undertook in creating the puppets and the various theoretical aspects I

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that in the over 250 crew members listed in Wolfgang Peterson's film of *The Neverending Story*, known for its puppet creatures, there is only one person credited as a puppeteer; all others are defined otherwise. (IMDB)

<sup>3</sup> Speaking to the playwright David S. Craig about the use of the puppets in the West Coast and East Coast Premieres of the production and his subsequent choice not to use them in the production he directed was illuminating.

these characters. So I believed that it was very important to have a consistent style, and as soon as you have an actor manipulating a puppet, that is a different style. Because you've got an actor that is not playing a character you have and actor that is playing as a functionary, he's acting as a puppeteer. Suddenly in this world that we are wanting the audience to believe in we have a different style. We have a character on stage that is not a character...Perhaps I was put off watching actors who were not skilled as puppeteers being asked to become puppeteers. So [In my production] I wanted the actors to create these 'extreme characters'." (Craig 2013)

Much of what I learned from Craig I had suspected from preparatory text combing. He articulated what I had felt when I first considered the use of puppets: they need comprehensiveness to the design and rehearsal; they need a reason for being. That reason must be more than what a human actor alone can achieve, otherwise puppets will waste resources (human and monetary), and, most detrimentally, they will alienate the audience.

### **Initial Designs and Rediscovering Imagination**

Two productions that I mined for design inspiration were Disney's *The Lion King* and the National Theatre's *War Horse*, contemporary landmark works in the genre of Theatre with Puppets that I will describe in greater detail in the following chapter. I spent hours sifting through their archival images and interviews to create my initial puppet designs. My first designs reflected a very literal view of creating the puppets. The horse Artax was to be similar to the horse puppet Joey in *War Horse*—the shape and size of a horse, the body maneuvered by three people. The character of Falkor was to be based on similar specifications, and the unifying motif

was a series of Celtic knot patterns inspired from the Auryn and *Book of Kells*.<sup>7</sup>

Armed with those designs I met with Peter Balkwill and Pityu Kenderes, two members of the acclaimed Old Trout Puppet Workshop who were brought in to provide artistic mentorship to myself and puppet construction advice to our shops.

Balkwill and Kenderes reviewed my work and challenged my design concepts, resulting in a complete aesthetic about-face. My first consultation with Balkwill and Kenderes in the fall of 2012 led me to understand the faults of my designs. Firstly, the cost associated with realizing my puppet designs would not be possible financially, within the time frame, or accounting for the abilities of the students.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, they discussed the large scale of my puppet designs and cautioned that the further removed the puppeteer was due to the increased size of the puppet, the more alienated the audience becomes.<sup>9</sup> With puppets, I have observed there is an odd reversal of economy. A large pageant-size puppet takes more material and resource to build and rehearse and yet it is difficult to achieve the intimacy with an audience that is essential to being engaged. To underscore this point, the OTPW advised me to consider the size of the theatre that I was to direct in. "Puppetry lives and dies by intimacy. It is harder for an audience to care for a character when the set eclipses the puppet; there are too many other things competing for the attention of

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<sup>7</sup> Eager to channel Julie Taymor, I tried to explore the shape of the Auryn from the play, which, in the book, is described as two snakes interwoven and eating each other's tails, as an ideogram; a cool image with an alchemic twist on the ouroboros, denoting apocalypse. However, beyond the coolness factor I could not make any further use of it.

<sup>8</sup> "If you have a 15 thousand dollar horse puppet, what happens to the rest of the puppets?" OTPW's Pityu Kenderes.

<sup>9</sup> Again, they referred to *The Lion King*. Although in my mind the *LK* puppets were massive and much larger than human scale, the actual puppets do not obscure the bodies of the performers and are smaller than I had been envisioning them.

the puppet's readability" (Balkwill 2012).

Finally, and probably the most poignantly, Kenderes questioned what the play was essentially about; when I rattled off some key phrases from my proposal about 'evoking a child's imagination,' I had an epiphany regarding how literal my puppet designs had become. In a child's imagination the blanket fort becomes a cave to explore, the clothes in the closet are monsters that can come out at night, and an elementary school storage closet is the most magical place in the world. From that newly realized starting point, I reread the play text to see if there was a way to create each character from the vantage point of a child's imagination rather than literally. As this was a Theatre *with* Puppets project as opposed to a Puppet Theatre<sup>10</sup> piece, I was not intent on assigning a central puppet type to the overall design but rather to use various modes of puppetry to reinforce each different character. In total there were 24 puppets of different kinds including: Humanette, Shadow, Object, Hand Puppets, Rod Puppets, Pole, Full Body Puppets and 8 different Masks.

After meeting with the OTPW, I created a directing and design concept consisting of five ideas that would complement the text, create a framework to design the puppets, and promote the notion of a child's imagination. I included all of the concepts that I was familiar with either in practice or in my preliminary reading of puppet theory:

1. Endowed objects
2. Intentional cross-casting
3. Reveal the puppeteer

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<sup>10</sup> Theatre with Puppets refers to a production with live actors and puppets. Puppet Theatre refers to a production that uses puppets exclusively.

4. Open composition to engage the audience in active viewership
5. Reinforcing and Layering

### **Endowed Objects**

In the conception of my puppet design, I looked for objects referenced in the play that were associated with the characters. The OTPW suggested a play day. In November 2012, I booked a rehearsal space and filled it with objects that were referenced by—or could reasonably be—in the play. Enlisting the help of some students, we experimented with animating and combining objects to see what connections could be made. Morla's satchel-mouth and Falkor's toilet paper eyes and ears were spawned directly from this experimentation.

For the design of *The Neverending Story* I created a collection of object puppets to populate the imaginary world of Fantastica. The puppets were created from selected objects and then repurposed to be a two-fold embodiment of their original use, and their new, or altered, self in the fantastical world. As the play starts, the objects are first seen in their typical form, as characters pass by each other manipulating the object referents in a quotidian manner. For example, a garbage can is carried in its typical orientation with the lid on top by two garbage collectors. Bullies threaten to stuff the child protagonist, Bastion, into the garbage can and the inanimate object of the garbage can is then endowed with a reference of fear. After the transition to the fantastical world, the protagonist's projected self, Atreyu, confronts a troll he is afraid of, a troll created by the garbage can now turned upside down with the lid being used as a mouth. Three puppeteers in garbage collector

overalls form and manipulate the body, slinging two garbage bags as arms and moving the garbage can as a head (Figure 1).

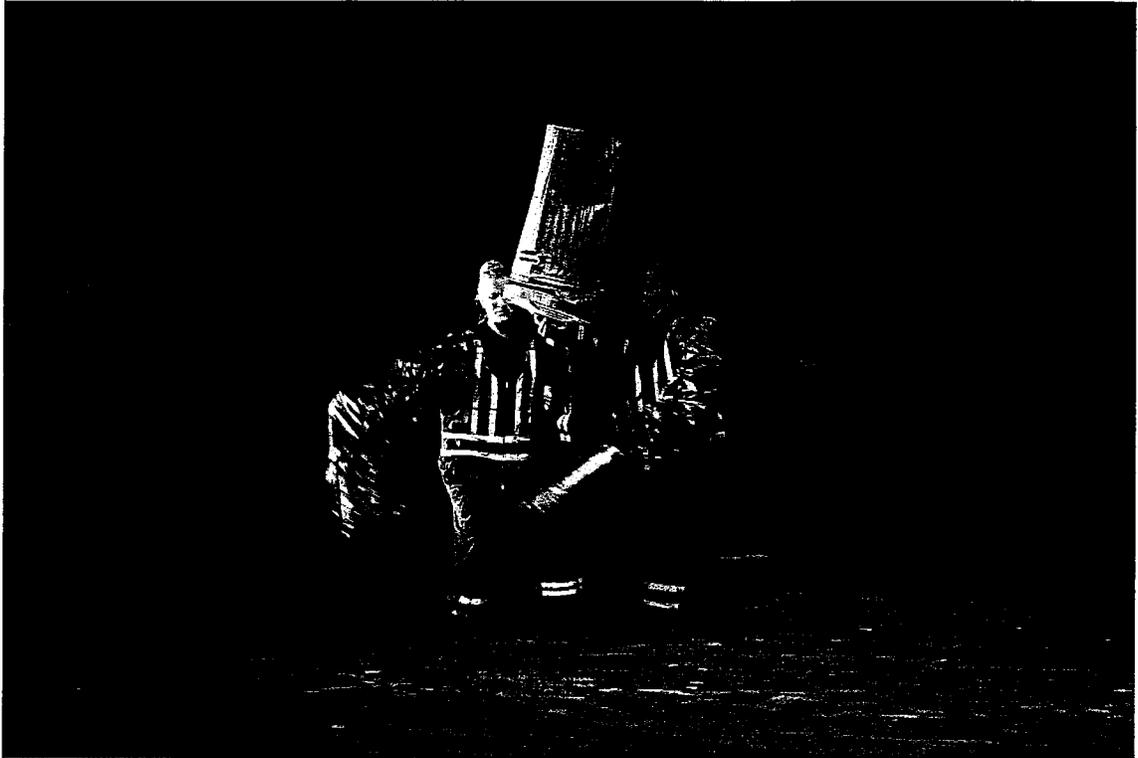


Fig. 1. Troll puppet. University of Lethbridge 2013

Some artists make puppets out of everyday objects; in contrast to my approach, these artists usually create new plays based on their unique characters, as opposed to using previously written plays. Further still, rooting the characters in artifacts from their real world counterpart, my decision of *which* objects to employ was far more determined than “found.” The core of my object puppet aesthetic was about provoking the imagination. In all theatre a certain suspension of disbelief is

required; with puppetry that suspension is requested further.

### **Intentional Cross-Casting**

When I reread the text for clues in design, I thought about the practicality of which actor(s) would manipulate which puppet(s). I then noticed parallels between characters at the beginning of the play in the 'real world' and counterparts in the world of *Fantastica*, which is Bastian's projected creation.<sup>11</sup> I recalled the trope of cross-casting to reinforce character traits in such works as *The Wizard of Oz* and then furthered my design idea to creating puppets from objects of the referenced character. The playwright had no written intention in cross-casting roles, beyond the functional, so I was fascinated to find that the intentional cross-casting worked in the text as well as it did in the production. The more the audience sees of a character, the greater the opportunity they have to know the character. Some characters required walk-ons so I extended the prologue to include a silent scene of the characters coming and going, to introduce the characters and increase the access points to the audience.

### **Revealing the Puppeteer and Open Composition**

In current practice of Theatre with Puppets, revealing the puppeteer—or rather making no attempt to hide the puppeteer—is common. My inspiration productions *The Lion King* and *War Horse* do this. In *The Lion King* performers' faces are fully visible as are the faces of the masks and/or body puppets they are wearing. In *War Horse* three puppeteers—dressed in period as WWI soldiers—are visible to

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<sup>11</sup> It could also be argued that *Fantastica* is a dream, or an alternate reality and that the degree to which Bastian believes in the world would account for any changes in it. However, as a directing choice, the limited agency over that world as a projected reality played more dynamically.

the audience, two in the body of the horse puppet and one out front manipulating the head piece. In my production the revealed puppeteer would serve to reinforce the intentional cross-casting. The Handspring Puppet Company, Taymor, and the OTPW all speak to the benefit of a revealed puppeteer to enhance the performance. My preference for revealing the puppeteer was partly due to the simplicity of not having to create hooded apparatuses or masking for the performers, and partly to evoke the imagination of the audience.

Puppet theorist Penny Francis articulates the idea of “open composition”. Creating puppets from mundane objects introduces a mystery to the audience as they wonder where they had seen an object before. This concept promotes a more active viewership. In rehearsal we called this “the game” of the play. I wanted the audience to make connections in the play from costumes and the set to the puppets and the objects.

### **Layering and Reinforcing**

As the final component of my directing and design concept I took another cue from Julie Taymor. Rather than have the worlds of the play living as two separate parts, they would start to reinforce each other, layering echoes of either world onto its counterpart. The idea of layering and reinforcing speaks to a continual restating of the central ideas of the play—in this case a child’s imagination. Although the specific types of puppets used in *The Neverending Story* were very broad, they all adhered to the endowed object premise. Something in the real world becomes an object, a symbol, and an emotion that is amplified in the Fantastican realm. Being aware of how each character is viewed by the protagonist feeds back

to the central idea of a child's imagination. All of the moments and characters in Fantastica are created by and for Bastian. Throughout the play the theme is restated whether an audience is aware of it or not and creates a unity to the work.

### **Rehearsal and Performance**

The final renderings of the puppet designs were discussed with the props department before the Christmas break, which allowed enough time to construct puppet models for the first day of rehearsal in January. After discussions with the OTPW, I insisted on having the puppets to work with early in the rehearsal process, in order to have adequate time to establish the limitations of the puppets. Furthermore, this gave much needed time to prevent possible breakage, which significantly impacts the audience's suspension of disbelief.<sup>12</sup>

Although it sounds fanciful, the puppets became like cast members and when considered as such by the human cast, were able to be more fully realized than would be the case if they were engaged merely as props. There was an alchemy that grew through the rehearsals as performers started making and discovering character choices and moved from individual work to interaction with others. Those interactions led to modifications to the puppets. For instance, the fight between Falkor and the multi-person Ygramul required modifications to the structure of the puppets in almost every day of rehearsal.

Throughout rehearsal the integrity of the directing and design concept was tested almost much as the puppets themselves. The concept was a useful filter with

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<sup>12</sup> Basil Jones describes the loss of the illusion when in a preview performance the *War Horse* puppet's foot broke a cable effectively making the puppet 'limp' for the rest of the performance.

which to make pragmatic decisions and still maintain an artistic through line. However, although rehearsal determines much about the integrity of the directing and design concepts, the production is the crucible. The production was well received and six months later still engenders positive comments. Nevertheless it has been enlightening to review the work from its conception to fruition.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Artists and Theorists

As the dust settled from my production of *The Neverending Story*, I shifted my focus to reflecting on the work, and specifically the use of puppets. I reviewed the writings of Julie Taymor, The Handspring Puppet Company, the Old Trout Puppet Workshop and several theorists in the field of puppetry to guide my assessment and aid me in answering the question: what makes a puppet come to life?

### ARTISTS

#### *The Lion King* and the work of Julie Taymor

In 1997, with over 30 years of innovative artistry, multiple award-winner Julie Taymor directed and designed the stage adaptation of the Disney film *The Lion King*. The production achieved critical success, including multiple Tony Awards, as well as financial success, as the highest grossing Broadway show of all time (Trueman). In the more than fifteen years that have followed, though she has continued to create in both stage and film, Taymor is arguably best known for her work on *The Lion King*. Contemporary theorist Steve Kaplin, when discussing puppetry in North America, establishes a binary with Jim Henson and *The Muppets* on one side and Peter Schumann and *The Bread and Puppet Theatre* on the other. He then refers to the work of Julie Taymor's *The Lion King* as the legitimate new face of puppetry with the seeds of her art derived from the tutelage of Peter Schumann and the commercial success of *The Muppets* (Kaplin 28). Her work has roots in mask and physical theatre from the Lecoq School, The Bread And Puppet Theater, Indonesian

Wayang shadow puppetry, and Japanese Bunraku-za as a performer, designer, builder, and director (28).

In a *TDR* feature titled "Puppets, Masks and Performing Objects -From Jacques Lecoq to *The Lion King: An Interview*," Taymor recounts her journey with puppets starting with exercises at the Lecoq School: "When Madame Citron would use a broom, you'd think about the shape of a broom and what it *does*, and you'd make it come alive. So we'd have dialogues between bottles and brooms and balloons. It was wonderful. You'd really start to see - to anthropomorphize these things" (Schechner 37).

Central to Taymor's work is the concept of an ideograph, a central metaphor that is physicalized and continually reinforced: "... over and over again, with the audience conscious of it or not, I'm reinforcing the idea..." I found this overall idea was helpful for the design process, but I found a rigid adherence to the ideograph confusing to add to my rehearsal process in any way that contributed, so I consequently abandoned it.

Another tactic Taymor uses is revelation. Speaking here in reference to a set piece: "...when you get rid of the masking, even though the mechanics are apparent, the whole effect is more magical" (Schechner 38). In *The Lion King* Taymor not only reveals set pieces but also the puppeteers.

SCHECHNER: ...OK, I'm going to watch him and not his puppet. But it was impossible. I kept slipping into watching the puppet.

TAYMOR: It's because he puts his energy into the puppet.

SCHECHNER: It was like the Bunraku master puppeteer who is so good he doesn't have to wear a black cloth over his face. A double magic: you see the puppet and the puppeteer together. In that universe, God is visible.

TAYMOR: I've been calling that the "double event" of *The Lion King*. It's not just the story that's being told. It's how it's being told.

(Schechner 1999 43)

With Taymor's "double event" I would argue that there is an augmentation of puppet theorist Steve Tillis' "double vision" that occurs when the puppeteer is not hidden. The revealed energy of the puppeteer further enhances the puppet's connection to an audience. Revealing the puppeteer has become much more accepted in current practice and was central to my directing concept.

Finally, simplicity is a recurrent theme in Taymor's work. Here speaking in reference to the bird-kites that she created for Act 2 of *The Lion King*: "...they have the power. In fact they have *more* power because they are so transparent, so simple. It is so pleasing to me to hear people say, 'My child went home and picked up some fabric and a stick instead of creating a bird on a computer...'" (Schechner 44). Although she had a massive budget from Disney, simplicity rather than expensive mechanics evoked the audience's imagination. The artists of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop refer to this as "the elegant solution" and continually challenged me towards it.

Taymor's work in *The Lion King* unearthed several key concepts for me. Firstly, reinforce the story whether the audience is conscious of it or not because layering the access points for an audience will deepen their experience. Secondly, rather than hiding inner workings, reveal them; unmask the gears. Third, simplicity. Finally, Taymor also uses juxtaposition to enhance a sense of play in her work. She

trusts the audience's innate drive for order and connection to make sense of the different pieces<sup>13</sup> (Schechner 52).

In addition to the production stills from *The Lion King*, I poured over archival images from her many other productions in the book *Playing With Fire*. However, in retrospect handpicking images that I was enamored with led to some misconceptions of scale and content in my early designs, as well as mimicry that was not aesthetically rooted in *The Neverending Story*.

### **The Handspring Puppet Company and *War Horse***

The National Theatre production of *War Horse* in London has drawn a great deal of attention to Theatre with Puppets in critical theatre discourse. The production is an adaptation of a novel that chronicles the experience of a horse in World War I from the perspective of the horse. For the production the Handspring Puppet Company was commissioned to create puppets of horses that were life-sized, manipulated by three puppeteers, and could be ridden. With much popularity comes much press, and Executive Producer Basil Jones and Artistic Director Adrian Kohler have left a good deal of their puppetry practice and philosophy available for the public.

In a series of interviews, they discuss their process and philosophy. Two interviews titled *Choreographing Thought* and *Choreographing Breath* speak to the nature of their process. For the HPC, having the performers distinguish between the

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<sup>13</sup> In my design process I uncovered a wonderful term: Pareidolia. It is the phenomenon of perceiving an unintended and coincidental image. Seeing images in clouds would be an example.

physical actions of the puppet and the mental thought process that a puppet's character would be experiencing is fundamental to their process of creating a puppet performance.

In considering what brings a puppet to life, two interviews accessed from the National Theatre website provide insight into their philosophy. From the interview titled *What is a Puppet?* on April 8, 2011 by the National Theatre:

JONES: The word puppet, to me, means an object that is manipulated in front of an audience in a performance. That object can be many different things but the most important thing is that it *is* an object and it's manipulated by a person.

KOHLER: A puppet is a figure that I animate with an audience in mind which enables me to disappear behind it and enables me to communicate through this third party, if you like. So the audience and myself meet in the puppet rather than meet in the character I'm playing as an actor. I was always far too shy to be an actor and the puppet was the perfect medium for me to do this kind of communication. So it's personal...I don't have a definition other than: A good puppet is something that has worked well with my performing skills to enable me to touch an audience.

JONES: Also it is a mechanical prosthesis- anything that you move that frees the actor... Kettle...tea cup... (Jones et al.)

In this interview we see that the connection of Kohler's comment of a "third party" reiterates puppet scholar John Bell's diagram:

performer → → → object ← ← ← spectators. Moreover Kohler as a "shy actor"

positions himself in line with Bell's first implication of the ontological shift away from the human. Their point of freeing the actor strongly resonates with me. A well-executed puppet performance does exactly that.

I have observed at first an actor getting to know the parameters of a puppet may feel more inhibited than free; following from Bell's first implication they feel a displacement to the puppet. However, once a performer has allowed the character of the puppet to speak, and accessed the action of the puppet, then the performance is freed. I witnessed this at work with the Ygramul puppet; only after the performers struggled to find what the elements of the puppet could do were they freed to create. This reminds me of the struggle to get 'off book' in text centric work; until it happens the performance is not freed to grow.

The second interview included below *What is Unique About Puppet Theatre?* provides insight into the difference that audiences perceive in a production with puppets.

KOHLER: What is unique about puppet theatre is: the puppet is nothing else but the character it was made to be. So it has an 'Itself-ness' about it. If the audience buys into its form then you can take them to a fantastical place, which is much more fantastical than, perhaps, an actor can...I think there would be lots of actors that dispute this. (laughter) Puppets are good at being animals, at flying, you can be a child...But I think another thing that a puppet does, that is not about animals and children, is that a puppet can reinvent the ordinary and can take the ordinary into something quite new and epic...The audience gains sympathy when a puppet succeeds.

(Jones and Kohler)

Although I may risk having my Equity membership revoked, I agree with their argument that puppets can push the fantastical further than with an actor alone, tying in from Kaplin's idea of growth of prosthesis as the character demands become more extreme. The final point that I draw from Kohler is the very premise on which *The Neverending Story* puppets were created: "a puppet can reinvent the

ordinary and can take the ordinary into something quite new and epic” (Jones and Kohler).

This idea became central to my concept of endowed objects. In repurposing the ordinary the audience is drawn into the work. The main question that I distill from the HPC and *War Horse* is this: Is the performer freed or hindered by the puppet?

### **The Work of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop**

As their website describes them, the Old Trout Puppet Workshop is: “...a motley gang of artists churning out ideas for a whole heap of unlikely things: puppet shows for adults and children, sculptures, films, music, books, plays, paintings, and pedagogy” (Balkwill et al). Founded in 1999 they have become leading experts in the field of puppetry and performance, and this year have become the 2013 winners of the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Distinguished Artists Award. They describe their aesthetic as “Alberta Style,” borrowing from various traditions to create their work and changing continually. As Balkwill said in a *Globe and Mail* interview: “Old Trout’ is always ready to reinvent itself and puppetry in the name of its next show ” (Taylor).

Revealing the puppeteer is central to their work: “It enhances the dynamic between the audience and the performer and the puppet. It’s nice not to hide what is apparent: this person is transferring their energy into an inanimate object...having the puppeteer visible has a sense of play”(Balkwill et al.). In their productions they will often costume puppeteers with reference to themes of the play.

OTPW members Peter Balkwill and Pityu Kenderes worked with me as consultants on my puppet designs, building, rehearsal and the final assessment of the production. Throughout my consultation with them I learned a great deal about puppets. They reinforced many ideas that I had come across in readings, particularly: revealing the puppeteer, simplicity, scale, suiting the tasks to the puppet in order to reveal character, and moving beyond literal descriptions to the essence of the character.

Expanding on the idea to create the right tasks for a puppet, in an early design meeting Kenderes said of puppets, "They fly well, they die well...they also have sex really well... you just need to be sure the task matches the puppet" (Kenderes). This ties into puppet theorist John Bell's fourth implication of the character revealed in the object and not superimposed. Considering this theory in light of its practice from a strictly puppet-centred performance as opposed to my Theatre *with* Puppets production, I believe my designs sought to connect the character as revealed in the text to the design of the puppet and then to be fleshed out by the performer.

Scale plays a large role in the use of puppets, an idea further reiterated by the Trouts. Contrasting size—larger or smaller than human scale—can be exploited to wonderful effect. Conversely, it can be problematic when the scale of the puppet is disproportionate to the intimacy needed. Even when they are well produced, large-scale puppets lose the ability to connect with an audience very quickly.

Regarding the puppets' design, the OTPW discussed the practicality of flapping mouths. If a puppet character was central they tended to do away with a

mouth that moved, because in their experience the audience would disengage after an extended period watching a flapping mouth. I suggest two reasons for this alienation: audiences become mesmerized by the most dominant onstage action, and it follows that the action of a puppet mouth, although more simple than the human referent, creates more movement. The audience then seeks to make sense of the mechanics of the puppet mouth and tunes out the spoken text.

Finally, the concept that had the deepest implication for my production was conceptual simplicity, getting to the essence of the design. As Balkwill discussed, “The *suggestion* of a horse is much more interesting than an *actual* horse, audiences not only will fill in the blanks but they enjoy filling in the blanks of the puppet creation mystery” (Balkwill 2012). As a visual example I was shown three incarnations of a bird puppet. The first was a stick with two feathers attached; the second stick had a bird head and body-sized stone attached, as well as two feathers; the third was a stick with a small beak shaped rock and a wire spring in the body of the second design. Although the design was increasingly taking on the shape of a bird, the most playful and interesting bird-idea was the first puppet. Similar to the idea of an emoticon, the first iteration being stripped to its essentials was the easiest to understand. Many of the concepts that were explained to me by the OTPW were reiterated over and over by the theorists. Even with vastly differing aesthetics, the principles are still consistent.

## THEORISTS

### **Penny Francis, Steve Kaplin, John Bell and Steve Tillis**

A brief survey of theoretical writing about puppetry in the last 20 years yields remarkably similar themes: it is ancient; the definitions are getting broader; and it is growing. The word renaissance occurs often. Puppets are coming of age “...where before most puppetry had allowed itself to denigrate into a ghettoized entertainment suitable only for the very undemanding” (Francis 12). We now see a rise of puppet theatre companies; as well, the scope of what they do is, if not expanding, certainly experiencing more critical thought. In this brief survey of the field I have chosen a few theorists to create a broad framework. Penny Francis speaks to directorial considerations in *Theatre with Puppets*, whereas John Bell and Steve Kaplin speak to the nature of puppets. Additionally, I have included Steve Tillis’ philosophical argument of the “double vision” that is foundational to any discussion of what makes a puppet come to life.

### **Penny Francis**

A key scholar in the field of puppetry, Penny Francis has compiled many of the diverse elements of puppetry into her 2012 text *Puppetry: A Reader in Theatre Practice*. For this paper I continually consulted her clear explanation of puppet types outlined in her book. In consideration of my thesis question however, I have been most influenced by her discussion of the concept of “open composition” that she argues is the contemporary mode of direction for puppets. In a lecture at the Homo Alibi Festival in 2008, she spoke on the recent growth in puppetry stating:

"Puppetry's rise to the mainstream in theatre can be mainly attributed to the rise or the return of the public's interest in a theatre that offers as much visual and musical enjoyment as verbal. It may be termed a 'Total Theatre' since it draws on a plurality of performance disciplines and resources.

'According to Mario Kotliar, an Israeli writer, theatre has reached the stage of "open composition", in which verbal communication no longer possesses the pre-eminence it had in the past. Words have lost their evocative power and precision, and the realistic and psychological conception of drama obtaining hitherto no longer suffices. The viewer's purely personal reaction is far more significant than formerly. He responds to "image", and the contemporary artist/director will aim to convey his meaning through form - that is to say, a way in which the piece's diverse elements are ordered and interact. The actor's traditional centrality has been superseded; he has become part of a general image composition - as a performer or manipulator or both. But this actual role is not greater than that of the objects he manipulates or with which he otherwise shares the stage... Nor can the result be judged by the usual standards of logic. In conventional drama, the spectator is in a recognizable world. Perhaps the content of the play is personal, but its dialectical laws are universal. In visual theatre, however, these rules are suspended and replaced by a private logic, based upon artistic associations; the viewer enters the creator's mind. If, therefore, the former cleaves to a preconceived set of ideas and expectations, the performance can be disconcerting. The visual, as stated above, is stressed over the verbal; objects and situations are dislocated from their customary contexts; and new combinations are essayed. The production, moreover, requires our participation, because visual theatre provokes the audience's own associations. (Francis 2008)

I am not about to step into the ring on a text and semiotics wrestling match. Whereas I disagree that: "Words have lost their evocative power and precision..." I will take away Francis' key points of: a) The order and interaction of the diverse elements, b) the private logic of the creator's mind, and c) a participatory audience, actively seeking associations in the production. The notion of open composition is central to my directing and design of *The Neverending Story* and reinforces the fifth point of my directing and design construct. As well, the OTPW forced me to consider

points “a” and “b” when they asked: “What is the play about?” In a post show talk back, several audience members described how they loved the game of figuring out the object each puppet had come from. Though Francis’s idea of open composition does not speak specifically to the incarnation of a puppet, as a directing concept I find it thrilling as it furthers audience engagement.

### **Steve Kaplin**

In an attempt to classify puppets, I refer to puppet theorist Steve Kaplin’s much-cited 2000 article “A Puppet Tree-A Model for the Field of the Puppet Theatre.” In this essay he moves beyond a traditional breakdown of styles, materials and ethnicity, and creates a classification system based on distance and ratio in order to delineate the different types of puppets hitherto referred interchangeably with *performing objects*. On the horizontal-X axis is the ratio of Performer to Object; on the Y-axis is the distance between the Performer and Object. The furthest extremes at the one end of his Y continuum being a person manipulating the Mars probe and at the other end its counter of a person wearing a mask. The X continuum involves one puppeteer in an Indonesian shadow play with 50 characters (Many: 1), and at its opposite end the God Head in the Bread and Puppet Theater which is one performing object facilitated by hundreds of people.

Kaplin does not impose a hierarchy of forms. Rather he describes the involvement of the performer(s) in relation to the object(s), the intervention of technology as the distance increases, and the physicalization of the object. He states:

At the point of intersection of the two axes—a zone of absolute contact—no displacement between performer and performed exists at all.

But once actors begin to represent themselves onstage (as do Spalding Gray or Annie Sprinkle) a gap begins to open up between the performer and what is being performed—their stage personae...It is this presence of others, the audience, which compels the first split in the unity between performer and performed. At first the displacement is merely a shift in mental calibration to “performance mode.” But the psychic distance widens as the performer’s role becomes more distinct from the performer. A character role in a play has an objective existence distinct from the actor. Hamlet or Medea is the “object” that becomes embodied in a set of gestures, moves, and utterances enacted by the actor. The role is or becomes autonomous... At some point, the increasing distance from the performing object means that the actor’s own body can no longer physically accommodate the role. Makeup and costume, prosthetic devices, wigs and body extensions help to a degree, but eventually the performing object reaches the limits of the human body’s anatomy and must begin to emerge with a physical presence of its own. This first happens with the mask. A mask is an object totally external to the performer, a sculptural expression imposed from without. To be effective onstage, it must appear to be articulated from within by the actor’s own impulses. It doesn’t alter the actor’s center of gravity, but it re-contours her surface, while remaining in intimate contact with the flesh beneath its shell. (32-33)

This continuum clarifies the interrelation of actors, masks,<sup>14</sup> and puppets. In Kaplin’s discussion of prosthetics he is able to articulate what David S. Craig terms ‘extreme characters’ and place them within a larger context from an objective vantage point, avoiding a semantic quandary, and providing a tool with which to place all performing objects. Although Kaplin does not make a value judgment on a form of puppet he does caution that the energy must be aligned with the use of a puppet that has multiple performers (34). I find the term “energy” cringe-worthy and problematic; however, the performers who operated the Ygramul puppet demonstrated this idea. In the evaluation of the puppets in *The Neverending Story*, Kaplin’s Puppet Tree provides a useful framework for the assessment. Kaplin’s isolation and distinction of the performer as separate from the character segues

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<sup>14</sup> Both the OTPW and Julie Taymor comment on the fact that puppets and masks play well together, a discussion that could take an entire paper itself.

effectively into John Bell's concept of the performer as both the mind of the character as well as an audience to the puppet.

### John Bell

Whereas Francis articulates a semiotics argument for the reemergence of interest in puppetry, scholar-practitioner John Bell articulates a materialist approach. Bell makes, arguably, the broadest reaching claims in his work *American Puppet Modernism*. Rather than speak to the whole of the world of puppetry, he explores a few historical events and contextualizes them in the contemporary milieu. In his opening chapter, "Playing with Stuff," Bell describes a three way dynamic in performance with objects that differs from a performance by humans:

...Dance, for example can be understood as the performance of the human body before an audience, and one could conceptualize the dynamics of vision and concentration thusly:

dancers ↔↔↔↔↔↔↔↔↔ spectators

In other words the dynamics of the dance performance involve some conscious bodies at rest—the spectators—who are regarding other conscious bodies in motion—the dancers.

How might text-based theatre—The Drama—be conceptualized in this fashion? ...Meyerhold diagrammed that relationship like this:

Author →→→→ Director →→→→ Actor ↔↔↔↔ Spectators

His schema marks the way that the conscious body of the spectator regards the performing body (the actor) and hears the text that the writer has written according to the designs of the author and director.

Object performance is a different kind of arrangement because it involves both performers and audience focusing on the dead matter—the object—at hand:

performer →→→→ object ←←←← spectators

This performance triad is essentially different from acting or dance because in object performance, performer and spectator are both focused on the object and not on each other. (Bell 5)

Working from this model Bell goes on to extrapolate "5 Implications of Object Performance" that I have paraphrased below:

1. An ontological shift from humans to the world of inanimate objects can be hard on the ego of an actor.
2. Animating dead things for a time before they come to rest and are dead again reminds us of our mortality and makes for a continually charged situation.
3. Object performance tends toward the uncanny, toward mysticism.
4. There is a necessity of letting the object determine performed action.
5. Object performance is capable of sophisticated communication even though the facial expression is static. Mask work in Japanese Noh has proved that by thoughtfully changing the angle of the face we can access every emotion.

Assessing the use of puppets in a theatrical production becomes clearer in the light of these implications. Points one, four, and five generate the following questions for me: Did the ego of the performer hinder the growth of the character? Did an assessment of the object inform the character or was it imposed upon the object? How effective were the facial expressions to create emotion? In deference to Bell's first implication—the shift from the ego of the actor—in this paper I will use the terms actor, performer, manipulator and puppeteer interchangeably. What appeals to me most in Bell's work is his duality of theorist and practitioner. The notion of the puppeteer as audience to the puppet had the deepest influences on my understanding of what makes a puppet come to life, and on the difference between a puppet performance and a live actor's performance.

## Steve Tillis

One final theory worth noting in my discussion of puppets is theorist Steve Tillis' concept of "double vision." In *Toward an Aesthetic of the Puppet*, he describes the audience's simultaneous experience of the puppet as both a physical object and alive, as a "double vision;" the tension between the two is the key pleasure of puppets to an audience. An audience, at once, perceives a puppet as an object, and imagines it to have life. To contrast the writing of Tillis, primarily a philosopher; with that of Taymor, a practitioner; is interesting. The "double vision" is artfully argued over 181 pages and is relevant to the degree that it covers a central idea that other theorists have not discussed; however, I find the views of practitioners much more applicable in their insights on puppetry. I can apply the ideas of the OTPW to a production; with the "double vision," I can only passively observe it at work.

## Concluding Thoughts on Artists and Theorists

In evaluating the puppets in *The Neverending Story*, there is much to consider and much to apply. Do we see the double vision at work? Is the mind of the designer available to the audience? To what extent does the performer complement the incarnation of the object or take away from it? Distilling the artist and theorist's work, I created a loose rubric to determine what gives life to the five puppets.

The assessment of the puppets fall into two categories: object assessment and performer assessment. Under object assessment, five points of consideration include:

1. Technical construction (and reconstruction): the physical integrity of the puppet design.
2. Congruity: how the puppet fits within the overall aesthetic design of the play.
3. Accessibility: the audience's ability to perceive the puppet in a combination of stage time and facial recognition.
4. Appropriate scale: the size of the puppet complements the character content of the puppet.
5. Simplicity: the puppet is free of extraneous detail.

Within performer assessment there are two categories: physical process and mental process. Under physical process four points of consideration are:

1. Voice and breath: articulation and character is present in the voice of the performer.
2. Proximity to the object: the performer is not impeded by—but works in concert with—the puppet.
3. Rhythm: a unity of voice and movement determined by the character of the puppet.
4. Puppet mouth control: manipulation of the puppet mouth with an awareness of timing.

The mental process is further broken down into two categories:

- Character: the thought process of the puppet
- As audience: an observer to the action of the puppet.

Every aspect of this rubric can be applied to some degree to each of the five puppets. In the second half of this paper I will focus on the specific successes or challenges unique to each puppet.

A century ago puppet theorist Edward Gordon Craig stated: "A puppet without an audience is a doll" (Francis 13). To that end, an object puppet without an audience is an object. At this point I could get tangential about falling trees, sounds and forests. Nevertheless, the unique nature of the performer in puppetry is her dual role of performer *and* audience. A puppeteer or object manipulator is solely in charge of incarnating the object. They are, however, physically separate to the extent of making the puppeteer an active spectator as well. In my production of *The Neverending Story* the dual task on the puppeteer as active spectator and performer created a different performance style in each actor. To this end my definition of a puppet and puppeteer are:

- Puppet - an object, manipulated by human control, which serves as a locus for a character presented for an audience.
- Puppeteer - a person who facilitates a character through an object, both as manipulator and audience.

In reference to Francis I wanted the reception of the puppets to be active, firstly in singular moment recognition, but further in reference to the rest of the play, embedding a proverbial trail of breadcrumbs or, as Francis would say, a "private logic" (3). This provokes the audience to question, "Where did I see that puppet or object before?" After reading Taymor's account of children making bird kites, I

wanted my audiences to not only be caught up in believing the lives and struggles of the characters, but to engage in object manipulation after the performance, to take a stick and sheet and create a Wind Giant. I wanted the audience of *The Neverending Story* to take their fork and spoon and have a conversation between the two.

Apart from a disinclination toward a particular puppetry style, audience alienation to a performance with puppets can come down to either the design being inconsistent or confusing, or to a deficit in a puppeteer's process. The audience will readily accept the fantastical world provided the director and performer understand the rules of the "new place" (Francis 3) so that it can be conveyed consciously or unconsciously to the audience. Incongruity with the created reality of the play will pull an audience out of the action; therefore, a comprehensive approach is vital to the audience's reception of a work.

As indicated in the introduction I will be assessing five of the puppets to round out the comparison and to consider the work as a whole. I have chosen the characters of Falkor, Morla, Artax, Ygramul, and Gmork as a cross section of design and direction. All of the characters are, to some degree, fantastical allowing for a broad range of interpretation. Applied to each puppet, I will consider the success and shortcomings of object and performer assessments in a formal, conceptual, and procedural evaluation.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Artax

In the script of *The Neverending Story*, Artax is described as an elderly, male, and talking horse that loyally serves the protagonist Atreyu in the world of Fantastica. Artax's central relationship is as the steward of his "Life-Rider" Atreyu (Craig 23). Atreyu calls Artax "brother horse," and Artax pledges that wherever he is led he will carry Atreyu (34). Artax's actions in the text include: riding down Purple Buffalo, acting as surrogate father to the protagonist, and dying onstage in the Swamps of Sadness. He is represented thereafter as the sound of distant hoof beats. The puppet of Artax was a horse body created from a wool blanket and a four-legged ironing board on castors that repurposed objects from the first scene with Bastian and his Father. The actor Craig McCue was cross-cast as the Father and Artax.

That the horse could be ridden was essential to me, for several reasons.<sup>15</sup> First, the text refers often to Artax as the supporter of Atreyu, and I sought to physicalize that relationship. The dynamic possibilities of the buffalo chase with the puppet on castors also excited me. Finally, Atreyu is called Artax's "life rider" (23). In an early scene, much is made of the fact that "The Hunters of the Grassy Ocean do not walk, they ride" (27). To have a puppet that could carry the hero was fundamental to me.

The ridden puppet of Artax was a wooden head frame with a movable jaw covered by a blanket attached to a back hinge resting on a solid frame of wood that

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<sup>15</sup> ...And later that *Falkor* could be ridden as he takes the place of *Artax*.





Fig. 3. *Bastian and Father*. University of Lethbridge 2013

When I explored the objects that were going to create the puppet of Artax, the ironing board was key as it looks like something a child could make into a horse. The ironing board also suggests both the calm domesticity of the home as well as being an artifact from Bastian's deceased mother. Finding a four-legged ironing board reflected the cross brace structure of the set as well as resembling horse legs. I experimented with the clothes iron to create a horse head but it was too abstract. As I cast about for a character metaphor for Artax I thought of an Irish mohair blanket: shaggy, warm, sometimes itchy, old and weathered, but strong and comforting.

Although the Father appears only briefly in the play, Bastian's attic monologues reveal a clear sense that his Father cares for him—the audience sees

treats in the lunch bag and Bastian's concern that his Father will be upset. However, the absence of the physical presence of the Father throughout the production did not reinforce the Artax-Father duality with the required emotional impact. Were I to mount this play again with the same directing concept I would include a moment where the audience sees the Father searching for Bastian.

When the first mock up of the puppet was made, it took a while for McCue to adjust his physical relation to it. If he stood downstage of the horse body he would become self-conscious, feeling that he was upstaging the puppet. Whenever I would observe McCue's thought process register concern, the vitality of the puppet would disappear. Finding a voice for Artax was a breakthrough. McCue adopted a quasi-British accent that had an epic sort of quality that enhanced the character. With that hurdle cleared, McCue's exploration reasserted itself. McCue is a very thoughtful actor who developed a clear mental process for the puppet. With his puppet actions coupled with clear facial expressions, I observed Taymor's "double event" at work as the puppeteer reinforced the action and expression of the puppet.

As with all puppets, technical changes to a design have immediate character implications. Skinning the puppet<sup>16</sup> was a turning point in the growth of the character. With the blanket-hide covering, the puppet head became more easily read, more accessible. Initially the castors were too small for the weight of the actor and movement was very difficult. This issue, compounded with a handle yet to be cut into the body, made it difficult to bring a dynamic pace to the scene. When the proper castors and handle arrived, they made a considerable difference to the

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<sup>16</sup> When it is a puppet, 'Skinning' refers to adding the fabric on the outside of the creature rather than the reversal with its live counterpart.

puppet's movement, fueling belief that the creature was alive.

The first scene is very short and the audience is still learning the language of the play and taking in all the images. For this scene of quiet domesticity, I encouraged McCue to play with some Artax-isms, such as making the sound of a horse whickering as a sigh. I am not sure that the Father was locked into the consciousness of the audience but, referring to Taymor, the layers can supplement one another even if the audience is unaware. In contrast, Artax clearly made connections to the audience in both stage-time—as he spends a quarter of the play with Atreyu—and also as an emotionally dense character protecting and dying for the hero.



Fig. 4 Artax is pulled down into the Swamps of Sadness. University of Lethbridge 2013



Fig. 5. *Artax gives hunting advice.* University of Lethbridge 2013

The scale of Artax was effective despite its large size because the audience was drawn into the intimacy of the mouth and eyes suggested with folds in the cloth. McCue thoughtfully articulated the mouth so the audience was drawn to the character rather than distracted by the mechanics of it. The puppet's simplicity was effective. Furthermore, the actor's facial expressions achieved layering and reinforcing in the emotion of the character. Both Taymor's "double event" and Tillis' "double vision" were at work as the audience heard the creaking of the ironing board and watched the back legs give way as the puppet was drawn into the swamp. The puppet of Artax was not created to hide the component parts but rather to reveal them and bolster the tension that Tillis describes as we witness dead objects come to life. In the case of Artax, the death scene reinforced the "life" of the puppet.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Morla - The Ancient One

In the script Morla is described as the oldest being in Fantastica, alive for thousands of years. She speaks in the third person, lives in the Swamps of Sadness, and claims to not care about anything. She is comically fatalistic and also serves as an oracle of sorts. The script indicates, contextually, that her shell is large enough for Atreyu to inadvertently step on it and later climb into it. Only after he catches her in a philosophical quandary does she concede to giving Atreyu directions revealing that the Childlike Empress needs a new name. David S. Craig was keen to point out that although directors generally think of Morla as a turtle, nowhere does the text specifically mention it.

The Morla puppet was created from a table on castors, and then covered by a fabric shell frame. The table was referenced from the bookseller scene. When the audience first encountered the bookstore in Act 1 Scene 3, the table was filled with books, ephemera, and a shell patterned tablecloth. A satchel that the bookstore owner carried (which contains the book prop of *The Neverending Story*) created the head of the puppet. The puppet's shell pattern was comprised of books that looked like they had partially fallen off of the table. Moss and paint were added to tie it visually to the Swamps of Sadness landscape.

Two actors, Alisha VanWieren and Jessica Engen, operated the puppet by riding under the table, pushing it with their feet. The satchel, turned upside down to create a face, was manipulated from both the front and back of the shell. The satchel face follows Bell's fifth implication in the range of expression it conveyed. By



were pulled back to reveal her. In rehearsal the head out of the side read oddly and I ditched the idea.



Fig. 7. *Morla is revealed*. University of Lethbridge 2013.

The physical challenge of crouching beneath a moving frame disconnected the puppeteers from the puppet. The placement of the satchel-head was difficult to assess from the viewpoint of the manipulator. She was physically unable to see the puppet's face; consequently, the feedback loop was inconsistent. Furthermore, due to the physical challenge and inconsistent sound equipment the range of emotion VanWieren is usually capable of was not as present in the voice.

Morla was cross-cast with the Bookseller who, like the caretaker, has limited omniscience. As Bastian races out of the store she says, "Good luck Bastian" (Craig 9), indicating that she knows he stole the book and will become enveloped into Fantastica. The Bookseller clutched the satchel tightly until the moment it was

turned upside down to reveal the book to seed the idea of the face and mouth of the puppet.

As the puppets in *The Neverending Story* were reflections of a real world counterpart, I felt the bookseller did not connect costume wise. Whereas the script calls for a heavily whiskered man smoking a pipe, I cast a 20-year-old woman in the role. This alternate age casting became conceptually problematic. Where I had wanted a costume that references the character of “the oldest being in Fantastica” the costume designer created a costume that, in her words, “...allowed the actor to be grumpy but still young and stylish.” The costume designer’s insistence on maintaining some youth in the actor underscored a misinterpretation of my directing concept. I liken this disconnect to Bell’s fourth implication—prescribing a character rather than letting the character emerge.



Fig. 8. *Bastian at the Bookseller's*. University of Lethbridge 2013.

In terms of the audience's connection to the puppet, I feel there could have been a clearer starting position in the character of the Bookseller at the inception of the idea. A different configuration for the body of the puppet might have better maintained the comic moments of the scene and increased the clarity of the plot information. Kieffer Davies, the actor playing Atreyu, had to constantly keep invigorating the dialogue, as the puppet reality would falter when Morla was left alone.

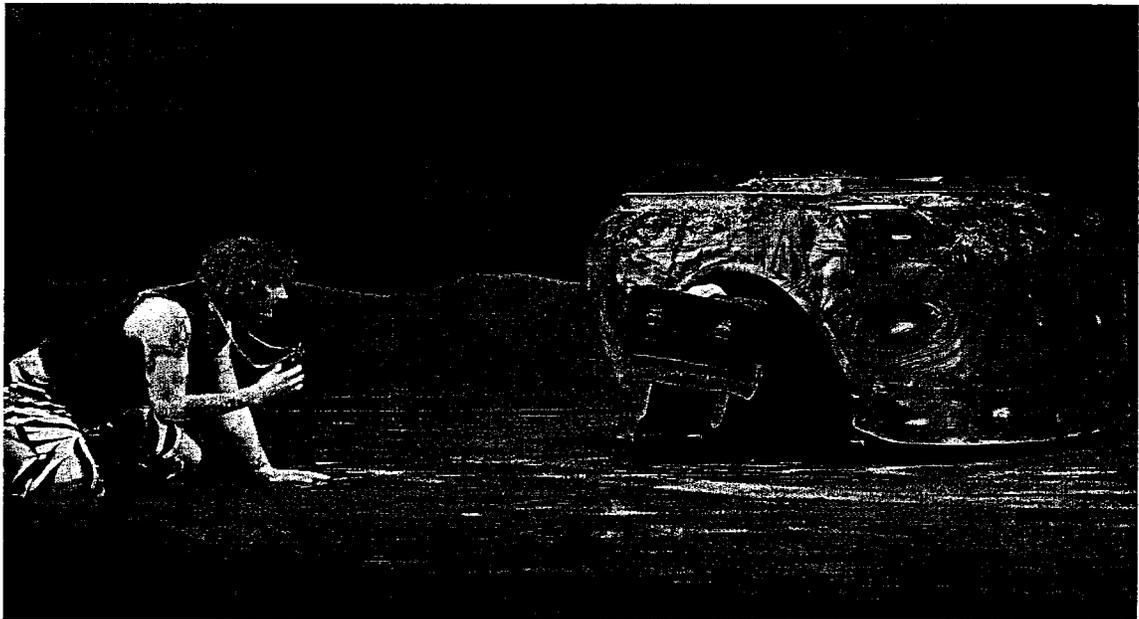


Fig. 9. *Atreyu speaks to Morla in the Swamps of Sadness*. University of Lethbridge 2013.

This puppet fumbled somewhat on the finish line. Of the two objects that comprised this puppet, the satchel worked but the table frame did not. The satchel-face is an exciting fulfillment of Bell's fifth implication—creating multiple facial expressions out of a static object. In contrast the table design did not exploit the scale that is unique to puppets; it could have been smaller or larger rather than

within the realm of human sized. Also I did not account for the amount for the number of puppeteers needed to create the puppet. Were I to design this puppet again, I would create the body with a series of umbrellas and incorporate two more actors. This would free the satchel-mouth to be manipulated more easily. The essential criteria for the success of a puppet, which the HPC describes is “freeing the performance” (Jones 2011), was missing in this design.

Finally, a consideration of scale is imperative to making a puppet performance read. The scale of Morla, although appropriate to the descriptions in the text, made it difficult to travel seamlessly across the stage; plus, the sight lines of the face in relation to the body were difficult to block, as the puppet would upstage itself. In my interview with David S. Craig, he highlighted this problem as he described the puppet that had been created for the character of Morla in the Seattle Children’s Theatre production. “It must have been about thirty thousand dollars...It had a closed circuit television inside the shell, eyelashes that moved, a head that rolled in and out, but, three minutes into watching that puppet, I knew everything that it did” (Craig 2013).

## CHAPTER SIX

### Falkor - The Luck Dragon

The puppet-creature of Falkor from the 1984 film version of *The Neverending Story* has become synonymous with that work and attained iconic status in North American culture. Falkor is a Luck Dragon who, following the death of Artax, assumes the role of Atreyu's confidante and friend. In the script, the audience first encounters Falkor caught in a web, attacked, and filled with poison by the creature Ygramul. When he escapes, with intercession from the hero Atreyu, Falkor pledges to live and die with him. Whereas Artax is like an uncle to Atreyu, Falkor relationship to the hero is that of an instant best friend.

The Falkor puppet in the University of Lethbridge production was created by a caretaker's cart with supplies still intact, with a vacuum hose attached to an eighteen-inch red dust mop, a curling iron hinge jaw, and two toilet paper rolls suspended to reference eyes and floppy ears. On the side of the cart were a pair of three-foot wing pieces that were spring loaded in order to be revealed and to be pumped up and down by way of a foot pedal. The wings were painted orange and red, and shaped like bat wings. The cart had two shelves for supplies and a lower base to hold a garbage can that served to carry the actor playing Atreyu. Of all of the puppets in this production of *The Neverending Story*, this one most closely resembled a Henson-type Muppet with the red shaggy dust mop mouth and large eyes. Yet with the utility cart body, this Falkor puppet remained firmly in the world of the repurposed object aesthetic. Getting the cart right was a challenge but when

we talked to the University's custodial staff, we received a cart that worked far better than the design called for.

The actor Andrew Merrigan performed to one side of the cart, manipulating the head with one hand and pulling the cart with the other; he interchanged hands and sides as the blocking dictated. Merrigan was costumed in blue caretaker's coveralls and wore green converse sneakers, as did Atreyu and Bastian. The wheels on the cart provided the capability for rapid movement. With a weight of forty pounds, the puppet could be lifted onto the six-foot observatory set piece.

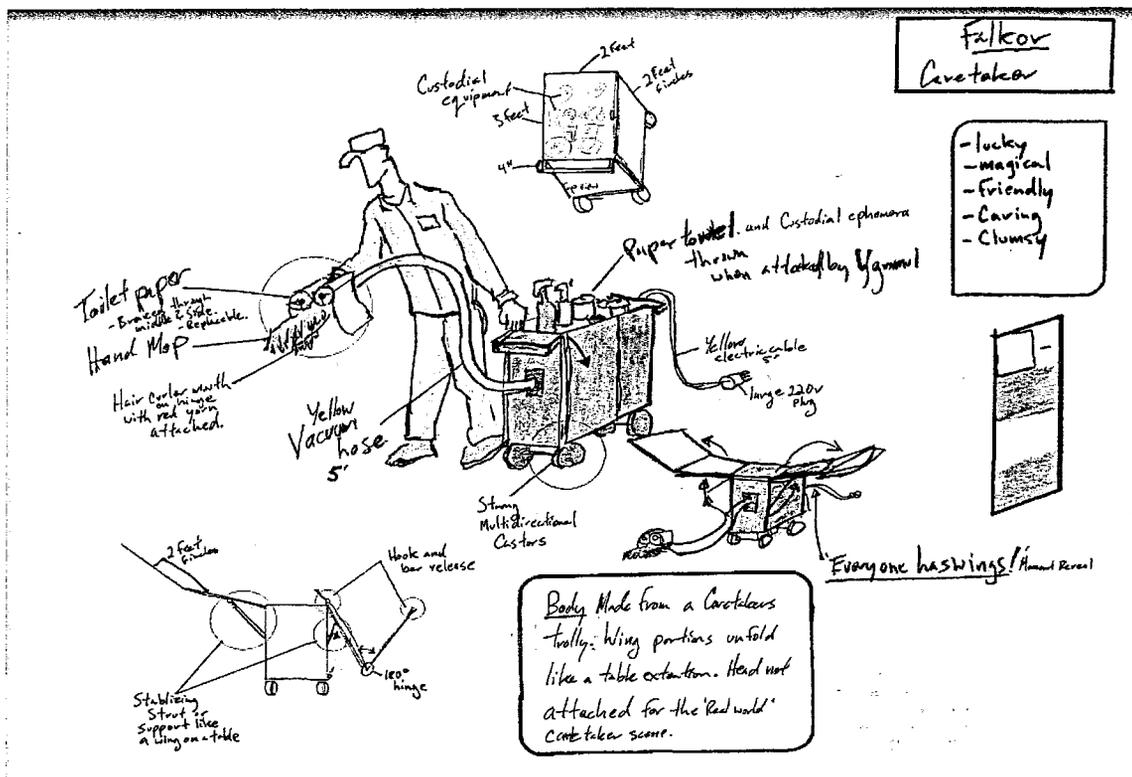


Fig. 10. Falkor puppet design

When looking for different design concepts, I found two scenes by the physical theatre company Mummenshanz, and I was taken with the simplicity of how they achieved recognition in their object manipulation work across all ages. In

one of the scenes an actor had an apparatus with two toilet paper rolls in place of eyes. Paper was pulled out to represent tears and then subsequently gathered and endowed as a bunch of flowers. In another scene, a costume consisted of a series of open-ended tubes; when the actor placed two of the tubes together so they looked like eyes or binoculars, the audience erupted with the laughter of recognition. These two images got me thinking about how I could create a dragon out of material that a custodian would have. With some experimentation I arrived at a pair of toilet paper rolls paired together and open ended to suggest eyes. As a bonus, the paper unfurled evoking an image of floppy ears or wings. Furthermore, as the rolls unwound unevenly it gave the eyes an affected look, as though the creature was tired or wounded.



Fig. 11 *The Caretaker saves Bastian from Gmork.* University of Lethbridge 2013

There is a blissfully guileless quality in Falkor that I directed back onto the Caretaker to reinforce the cross-casting. Luck is a strong motif reinforcing the *deus ex machina* element of both characters, as the Caretaker sweeps in and saves Bastian, and Falkor sweeps in and saves Atreyu. I may be laying it on a bit thick but the Caretaker as one-who-takes-care of Bastian piqued my interest. He is Bastian's advocate. As a directing choice I endowed the Caretaker with limited omniscience during his brief walk-across moment in the opening of Act 2, when he locks the door, fully aware that Bastian is hiding and reading.

In practice the puppet worked well. Merrigan, being a very physical performer, would not hesitate to run or fall with the puppet, exploring its parameters. This synergy created very palpable audience excitement. There was little doubt that this was a team effort between Merrigan and the puppet; they shared the stage. Whereas other puppet manipulators took a more behind-the-scenes approach, Merrigan spent weeks finding the voice of Falkor. Merrigan demonstrated Bell's fourth implication—letting the object speak—which added to the life of the puppet. As Bell points out: "You can't force it. You sit in front of a mirror and let the puppet tell *you* if it wants to talk" (Bell 7). Physically, Merrigan explored what the puppet *could* do to inform what it *would* do, and to have options he could incorporate. Consequently, he was able to create multiple emotions with the puppet, illustrating Bell's fifth notion that several emotions can be created with the static puppet's face by being cognizant of the facial angle.

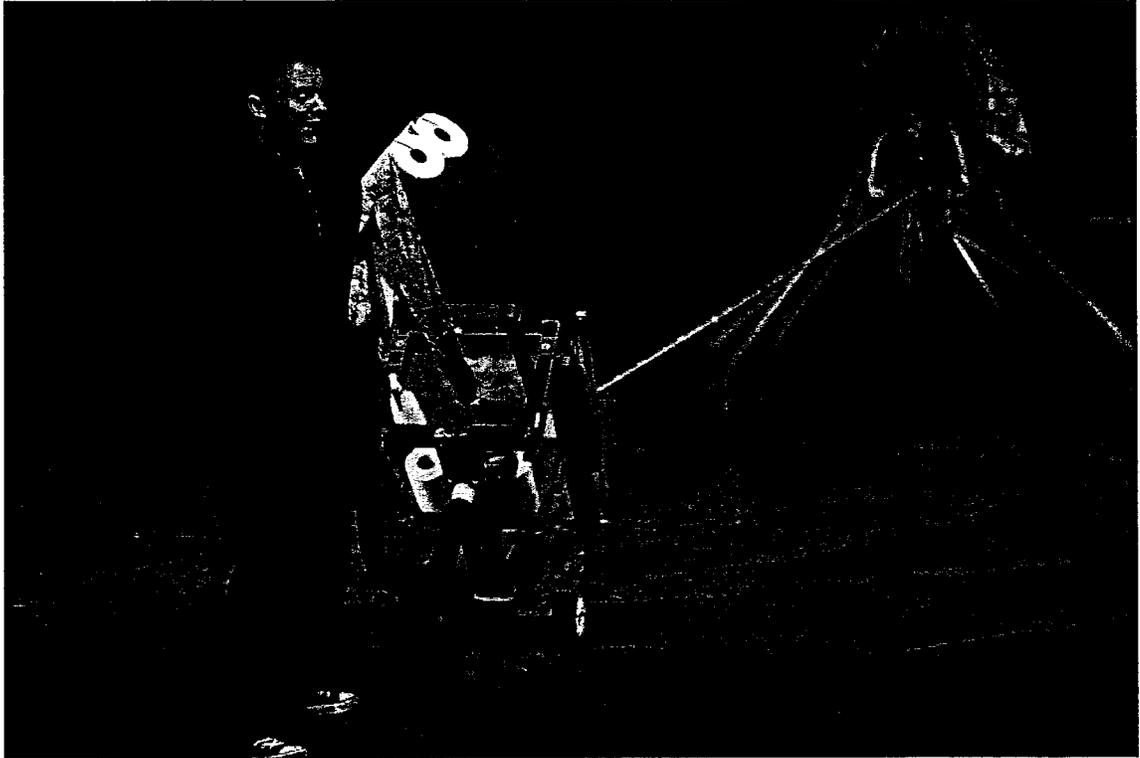


Fig. 12. *Falkor is pulled in by Ygramul.* (University of Lethbridge 2013)

The single criticism I would make of this puppet design is that the flying image was not as effective as it could have been. The climactic declaration “We all have wings!” was undercut by the reveal of an over the top sound effect and underwhelming wings. The wings were challenging, as they were inconsistent in popping out. Also, as a prime example of the problems of scale, the wings were too large to function effectively on the stage—Merrigan had to slow his actions to avoid the set and actors—yet too small to be considered seriously in the reveal. The wings simply looked cute rather than epic. Given the vastness of the stage, there was a titter of audience laughter at every reveal—some delighted perhaps—but I would suspect many were jarred by the absurdity of the moment.



Fig. 13. *Falkor talks with Urgl*. University of Lethbridge 2013

I feel *Falkor* was the most successful of the puppets. To fully establish the cross-casting, it had the most connection time. The actor's physical and mental integration was the most comprehensive. Bell's idea of the puppeteer's thought process as both audience and performer was evident during one of the performances, when the puppet head broke apart from the body, and, as the character was being helped onto a platform Merrigan improvised the comment, "Let's do this in two parts..." It displayed an awareness of the thought processes of the puppet and the manipulator in the same instant.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Ygramul - The Many

At the end of the first act, the audience encounters Ygramul the Many. Just as Morla the Ancient is not specifically named as a tortoise, Ygramul the Many is not a spider but is the essence of spider-ness. Ygramul speaks constantly of being hungry and attempts to eat Falkor. When Falkor eludes the Ygramul creature, she then breaks apart into smaller “children” who attack and sting Falkor. Atreyu intercedes and based on his possession of the Aurn asks Ygramul to give him advice and release Falkor. Ygramul tells Atreyu that he can journey to his destination only if she stings him with her magic venom that not only kills but also provides the power to teleport. Atreyu accepts and is transported to the edge of the world. Falkor, being poisoned himself, realizes the power of the poison and follows after Atreyu. In the final action of Act One, Ygramul fights Gmork after they both lose the same prey.

The puppet was a multi-person creation in what theorist Kaplin would classify as a 1(puppet) :5(performers) ratio in his Puppet Tree concept. The performers included Chlöe Sando as the voice and head, along with Benjamin Goodwin, Samantha Richardson, Chelsea Woolley, and Katie Musgrave as the body. The design consisted of a large spherical helmet piece worn on the head by Sando, and a backpack frame suspending a large yellow duffelbag-sized vessel that concealed Ygramul’s four children. The children wore gym class uniforms, helmets that were shifted to cover the face as masks, and a hockey stick in each hand. In the action of the play Ygramul, having captured Falkor in her web, first appears tethered to him by way of a 40-foot length of distressed white cord.

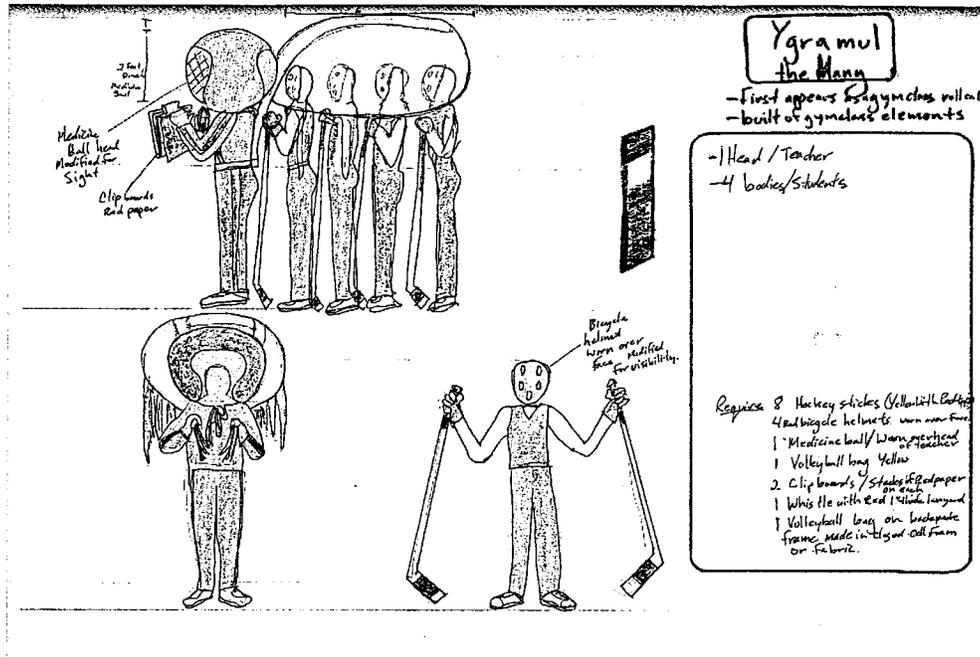


Fig. 14. Ygramul - The Many puppet design.

In the “real world” scene of Act 1 scene 3, the action was originally an offstage classroom roll call<sup>17</sup> but I moved it onstage to seed the elements of the spider creature Ygramul. At one point I was going to include a shadow play to evoke a spidery feeling, including a teacher hunched over a walker. Reading the novel version of *The Neverending Story* changed my mind. Ende makes a reference to Bastian hating gym class, specifically the idiocy of hauling around a medicine ball (Ende 59). As I considered the scene with the character of Ygramul tormenting Falkor and Atreyu, the spectre of the mob against the few emerged. Any unathletic kid in a gym class knows this viscerally. As I thought about the elements to create

<sup>17</sup> The scene also includes some lovely word play on the names of famous authors-Tolkien, Rowling etc.

the creature, hockey sticks and helmets seemed both Canadian and evocative, as they could become weapons very easily.



Fig. 15. Gym class of bullies. University of Lethbridge 2013.

A puppet in this configuration created several challenges in rehearsal and performance. The gym bag in the initial scene was too small but had to be used, as remaking it was not possible within the limited time. The pace and articulation in the gym class scene could have been clearer to sell the witty word play embedded in the text; the kids names are all famous authors. For logistic reasons, the cast had to take a set piece (a flat painted like a school) on and off stage; these actions proved cumbersome with the sports items in their hands. Although the anatomical referents as spider legs were not quite right, I traded off on the emotional cachet of hockey sticks to a Canadian audience. Shifting the helmets from the top of the head onto the

face was far more evocative, as they looked like equal parts hockey masks and amorphous insect faces. However, this engendered significant visibility impairment that we only overcame through hours of rehearsal. I had worked through an interaction where the Children attack Falkor and the toilet paper eyes and cleaning supplies in the body are torn apart and flung around the stage. I cut this moment because it felt too violent and because I had no easy way of cleaning up the stage, although it would have made for a wonderfully metatheatrical moment when actor Andrew Merrigan, having exited as Falkor, would reappear as the Caretaker and clean up the blood-ephemera from the altercation with the originally purposed objects.



Fig. 16 *The Children of Ygramul are revealed.* University of Lethbridge 2013.

When we transitioned from the rehearsal hall into the theatre, it became obvious that the interaction between Falkor and Ygramul needed more specificity

with the chase and capture moments, so we tethered them together with the distressed white rope. Preceding the entrance of Falkor and Ygramul, I had been experimenting with Taymor's notion of scale in the form of a shadow play where the audience sees Falkor get caught in a web; however, implementing the various shadow puppets, shadow screen and projector slowed the pace of the play too much and I cut it.

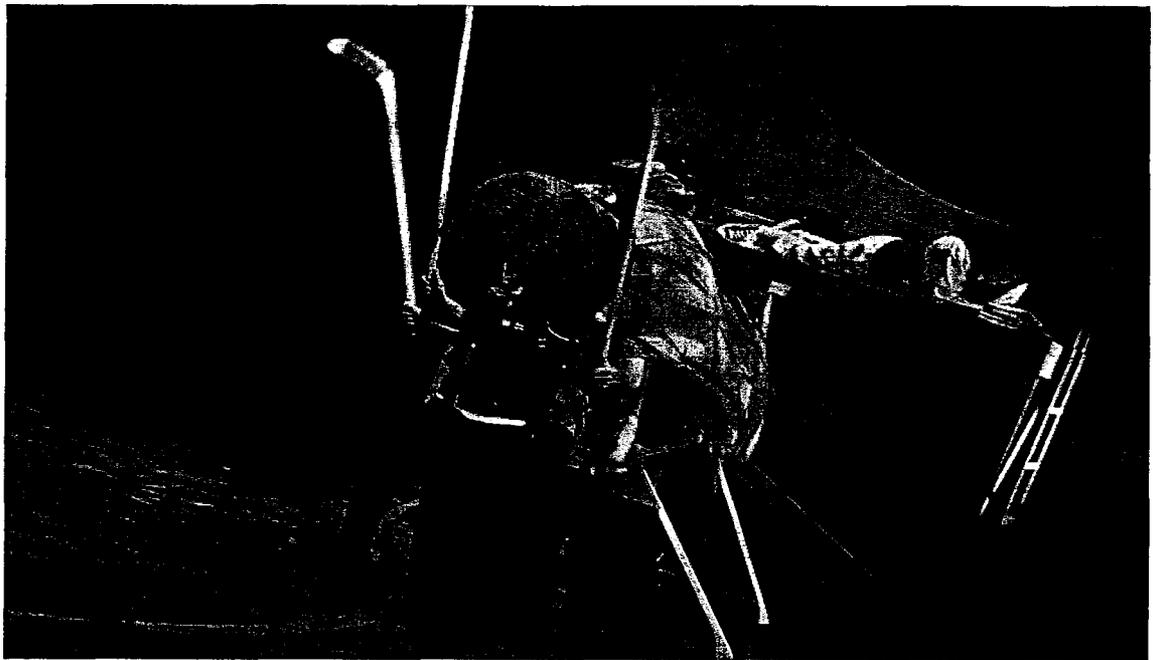


Fig. 17 *Ygramul is refused*. University of Lethbridge 2013.

In performance the Ygramul scene contained some key plot information that was not always clear. Several factors contributed to this, including: the spectacle of the scene, which distracted from the text; Sando struggled at times with diction and articulation; the Children lacked specificity in the chorus lines and action; and lastly,

the narrative notion of poison that kills and teleports but only if you are aware of it, is conceptually dense.

When the group of performers that created the Ygramul creature was working in concert, the puppet had a very unnerving spidery feel. Arachnophobia is one of the great human fears, rich with audience-connecting potential, and I think we tapped into this well. In rehearsal with the puppet, the actors had to work as a team to establish a rhythm for the creature. Following from Kaplin, they needed to focus the energy of the five of them through the conduit of the puppet to make it come to life. Balkwill suggested they take time in the hallway sitting in a circle and tapping out a rhythm. This technique served to create a unity in the creature's performance. When the actors were not working together the puppet did not read as dynamically. The character was a clear example of the power of focused energy. When the rhythm of the character was synchronized it was very sinister. When the rhythm was not, the character was distracting.

## CHAPTER 8

### Gmork – A Werewolf

Gmork is the villain, an ever-present threat to both protagonists, Atreyu and Bastian. Gmork is a werewolf and the character that most visibly crosses the real world into the world of Fantastica, blurring the idea of reality. In our production the character of Gmork had three separate iterations: first, the human-real world counterpart, secondly as a three-headed wolf shadow silhouette that appeared periodically above the mountain flats throughout the world of Fantastica, and lastly as a human-sized werewolf creature with a wolf head mask worn over the eyes and a wolf head hand puppet worn on each hand.

The real world costume design from the play text describes “...a trench coat...with a fedora pulled low over his eyes” (Craig 18). Costume designer Lauren Guindon designed the real world costume to include the trench coat but left the head revealed with slicked back hair and pronounced jaw length sideburns (Figure 18). In the world of Fantastica the trench coat was replaced by a fur-trimmed tailcoat with a fur tail and leather patches to indicate abdominal muscles, wolf-head hand puppets and the aforementioned fur head mask worn over the eyes.



Fig. 18. Gmork puppet design.

In the real world scenes Gmork, in human form, chases after Bastian to get the book of *The Neverending Story*. As Bastian opens the book to read and the world of Fantastica comes to life, the script calls for Gmork to enter the scene in human form and be revealed as a werewolf onstage. (Craig 20) Before the final confrontation, Gmork is heard howling in the distance at various points in the world of Fantastica and is also seen on stage hunting for Atreyu and engaging in an altercation with Ygramul the Many. Gmork actor Keith Miller, at a height of 6' 2", physically created a feeling of malevolence in the first scenes as he harassed Bastian.

The moment Gmork crosses into Fantastica provokes a question: Is this a revelation or a transformation? The vagueness with which I considered the moment

at the design stage eventually impacted implications for the audience's ability to access the Gmork character. The script indicates a revelation. However, we had a transformation. Having discussed a few options with the costume designer we agreed it would be the easiest to implement. My lack of clarity on this nature of this key moment clashes with Francis' idea of the "invitation to the creator's mind."



Fig. 19. *Gmork is transformed as Fantastica is revealed.* University of Lethbridge 2013.

The climactic confrontation explores the more existential aspects of the play. Gmork chides Atreyu, saying: "You are a made-up character in a made-up world going round and round in a neverending story" (Craig 70). This metatheatrical moment sets up Gmork's undoing, as it compels Bastian to intervene. With a child's

imagination Bastian reconciles the world of Fantastica, calling out “Everyone has wings!” (Craig 72) and saving Atreyu from Gmork.

When I first considered Gmork I thought about werewolves as a cross between human and wolf. I perused hundreds of pictures of wolves and thought about a distortion of a human into a wolf and vice-versa. In the character of Gmork I wanted to amplify wolf-ness. I considered that a wolf’s strength is in a pack, and set about to create a one-man three-headed wolf pack. On paper this is a compelling idea. However, it was outside of the created reality of the play and consequently was out of step. As the villain, Gmork does occupy a unique position and therefore could be the exception to the production aesthetic. Nevertheless, while Taymor touts the idea of reinforcing and layering, she emphasizes that all ideas must still contribute to the overall framework. Gmork did not.

Both the design and rehearsal posed several challenges. Initially the eyes on the head were located above the face but I wanted them integrated to the performer’s eyes to play as a facemask. We did not receive this headpiece until late in the rehearsal process, and that impacted the potential for a full exploration. Having previously built a head puppet that had to look like an animal, I am very aware of the technical specificity that needs to be in place to have a mask play effectively for an audience. I wanted a feeling of malevolence with the mask, and although certain features contribute to that—dark eye sockets and pronounced fangs—with the addition of fur it started to read as more bear-like.

This character design was not only labour intensive to create but also challenging to rehearse and perform. Miller rehearsed variously with masks and

hand puppet mockups, but it takes a particularly physically intuitive performer to work with a puppet and mask configuration such as called for in the designs. Karl Sine was hired as a fight choreographer and worked effectively to connect the action to the scene. Whereas Miller is very interested in fight choreography, which made him a good fit in the action of the role, in the text driven rehearsals he was prone to talk about the role more than doing the mental and physical exploration required. The lack of specificity in puppet thought combined with the pieces coming late to rehearsal process impacted the text delivery in the end performance.

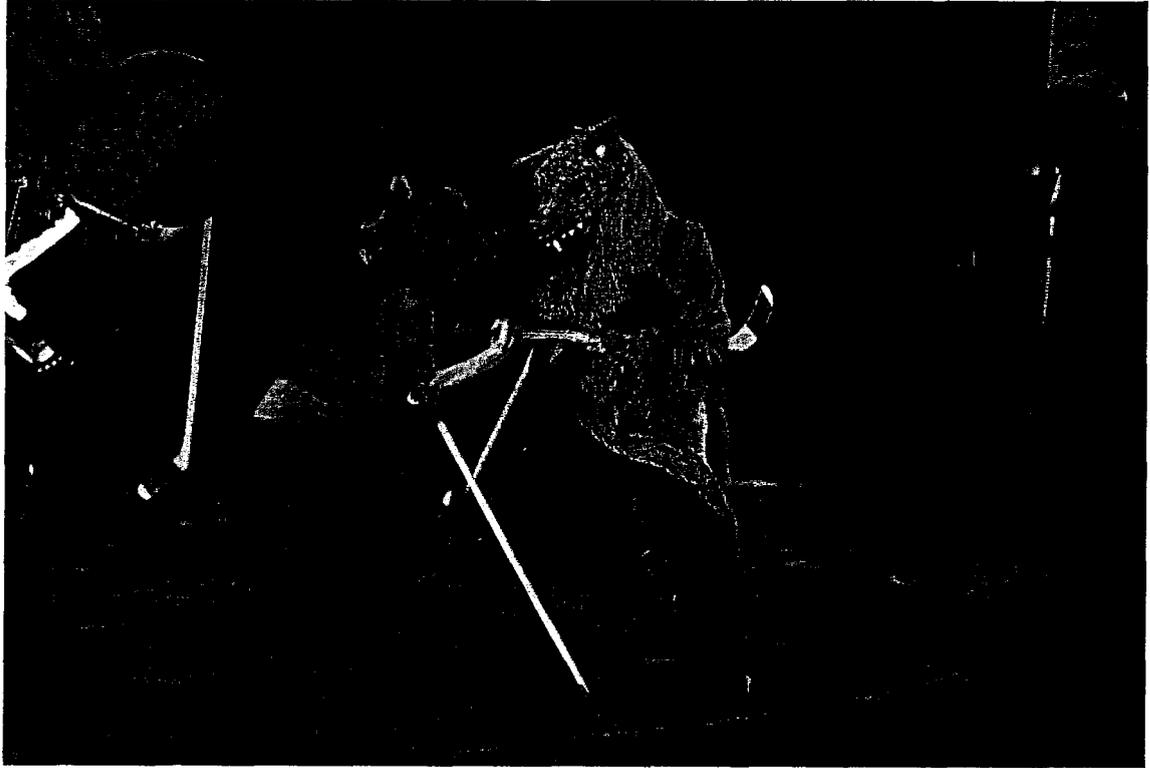


Fig. 20. *Gmork fights with Ygramul*. University of Lethbridge 2013.

In summation, the design of Gmork was the least successful of the five puppet designs. Firstly, the physical construction would have been difficult to rehearse for even a well-seasoned performer, and Miller lacked the rehearsal process to clarify

the physicality. Secondly, I did not allocate sufficient directing time to rehearse the action, leading to a generalized performance. I put the blame squarely on my design; to be candid, I was caught up in the coolness factor. The character trappings were not in keeping with the rest of the play. A single mask or a puppet would have sufficed; the three-way focus split led to confusion. Moreover, as a metaphor it was unclear, and on the design level it was out of step with the object puppet aesthetic of the rest of the play.

When I think of the layering that Taymor discusses, ignoring the seemingly insignificant difference of transformation versus revelation created a disconnect from the whole. The character of Gmork was added to, not stripped to its essentialness. In assessing a puppet the HPC asks: "Does the puppet free the actor?" In this case, the design inhibited the performance because the puppet design was laden with too much conflicting information and not tied to the character itself.

## CHAPTER 9

### Concluding Reflection

To bring a puppet to life requires a combination of a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of an audience, thoughtful performances, and unity of the design and direction. A great deal of time and effort is needed to put a puppet in a play—to make the investment worthwhile artistically—so it behooves a director to make that investment wisely. Directors, producers, designers, performers, and most of all the audience, must be considered in the equation. How to incorporate puppets well is not straightforward but the payoff is, dare I say, magical.

As I reflect on the overall production of *The Neverending Story*, I am pleased. The puppets pushed an aesthetic that reflects my design style clearly. I continually receive positive feedback from children and adults alike who relished the work. Although there are many things that I learned from and I would change in another production, on balance, I believe that the work was successful. The student performers grew in their field. The design collaborations, although not always seamless, were effective. Most of all, the puppets were integrated clearly and thoughtfully.

Many of the theories within puppetry I came to understand after the final curtain call. To mimic from the best productions on the planet is one thing, but it is something entirely different to be creating and finding my own voice. The script was not written for puppets, although their inclusion added another layer of energy and vibrancy and I cannot imagine the show without them. In retrospect I might have constructed the set to be more functional to the inclusion of actors and puppets. I

enjoy elevated levels in a set design as an idea, but at times they disallowed for the use of key parts of the stage. To exploit a higher level in the center and back of the set expanding the use of shadow puppets would have been interesting. Ultimately, when I reflect on theoretical improvements, I become aware that many of the things I would improve were, at the time, a trade off for something else.

In my experience, at a certain point an aesthetic saturation sets in. In the future I need to develop ways to remain fresh and not allow details to get overlooked. A small preview audience and feedback session for myself to understand which object puppets were reading clearly could be helpful to incorporate any last minute changes. Furthermore, as I grow as an artist I need to determine a useful method to collect feedback for myself after a production close. I have been impressed with the work of TYA scholar Matthew Reason and his process of having children draw pictures and answer questions about performances they have seen, in order to gauge their experience of a work. Three teachers gave me general feedback that their students really enjoyed the play. However, an articulated questionnaire with video responses from audience members might have yielded more specific feedback and aid me in my artistic growth.

If I was to consider what a different iteration of this script might look like, it would be interesting to portray Atreyu with a puppet, or contrarily, to forgo all of the puppets and use live actors instead. The first idea would benefit from a different version of the script to exploit the specific nature of Atreyu and Bastian's relationship as well as the physical challenges of a puppet protagonist. The latter would pose a challenge to realizing the requirements of the text because puppets

achieve fantasy so well and “extreme characters” require strong performers to create the characters in a meaningful way. If I was to restage this play with even more puppets, there would be benefits to having an extended workshop with the actors to explore the character further, and to having a team dedicated specifically to the design and building of puppets. Finally, although I enjoyed the challenge of directing on a large stage, in another production I would like to try a smaller stage to increase the intimacy of the show and exploit the benefit of scale for the puppets.

As a culmination of my studies I take away several profound experiences. Firstly, I was able to work with a large cast for a fully realized theatre with puppets production.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, I was able to use the resources of the University of Lethbridge, which were inestimable in the realization of this production. To see a Theatre for Families show in Lethbridge, staged with full-scale production values, was exciting. Also, working with a team allowed me to expand the size and scope of my work but also forced me to be organized, to be clearly focused and to delegate. I had to push for work to be completed and ensure that others were working to agreed upon deadlines. Finally, the mentorship of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop provided growth for me in both design and directing that would not have been achieved in a series of workshops.

If puppets are conceived and directed thoughtfully, their use in a theatre production can enhance an audience’s experience and reception. Due diligence and an understanding of puppetry fundamentals was needed to incorporate them into my production. Even within the style of endowed object puppets the process was

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<sup>18</sup> As an unexpected bonus the cast developed a sense of ensemble and togetherness that I have seldom witnessed in either an amateur or professional context.

not simple. To find the *right* object took hours of consideration and exploration. I would agree that puppetry is no longer just the province of “children and the undemanding” (Francis 4). What makes puppets live is their capacity to tap into the suspension of disbelief, the province of children. If the fundamental tenet of theatre is a willing suspension of disbelief, puppets ask an audience to extend that suspension of disbelief even further. In *The Neverending Story* I invited the audience to care when an ironing board with a blanket collapses behind a painted Masonite ground row, and they did.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Starting Points

#### The Source Texts

Written as a children's novel and first published in 1979 in German by author Michael Ende, *Die Unendliche Geschichte* or *The Neverending Story* has enjoyed continued best-seller status as a book. However, it was the film version in 1984 that cemented its place in the North American cultural landscape. That *The Neverending Story* contains rich theatrical fodder is not surprising. Beyond being the creator of the book, Ende had attended drama school and worked variously as an actor, playwright, director, and film critic (Bentley 78).<sup>4</sup> The literary magazine *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt* had, perhaps, the greatest tribute, stating: "*The Neverending Story* replaces half a library" (79).

As my production of *The Neverending Story* used a theatrical adaptation, my focus has been primarily on the script created by adapter/playwright David S. Craig. In June 2013 I conducted a Skype interview with Craig that proved invaluable to retrospectively understand the playwright's intent in the work. As a Canadian theatre artist who specializes in playwriting and directing for young audiences, Craig offered enlightening insights on the inclusion or exclusion of puppets. I

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<sup>4</sup> Ende was fiercely opposed to the film, so he provided his own script and fought legally to have the film changed (People Magazine 78). He sued and lost.

have come to understand upon reflection of that process, looking specifically at the question: What makes a puppet come to life? This paper will delve first into the overall concept of my puppet design and its growth, and then culminate in a retrospective assessment of five of the puppets from the production.