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Schroeder Cherry and His Puppets: Playing with Puppets, from Childhood to Adulthood

by Schroeder Cherry, Ed.D.

Like many puppeteers, I played with puppets as a child. Hand puppets and marionettes were my favorite toys. By age ten, I was adept at untangling marionette strings. Television shows featuring puppets that I enjoyed included *Captain Kangaroo*, *Howdy Doody*, and *Fireball XL5*. I also remember the quirky Maxwell House Coffee commercials by Jim Henson.

In junior high school I stopped playing with puppets, but still liked seeing them. My senior year of high school was spent in Switzerland, where I came across work by European puppeteers such as Jiri Trnka and Josef Skupa from Czechoslovakia, and Sergei Obraztsov from Russia. It was not until college that I began to make puppets again.

Sculptor Martin Puryear was making elaborate kites during my freshman year of college at Fisk University. When I asked why he made these, he said he wanted to explore a childhood interest. The idea of exploring a childhood interest as an adult was intriguing. In my case it would be puppets, so I started making them again.

In my junior year, at The University of Michigan, a woman connected me with Gary Jones, a puppet artist in Chicago. I wrote a letter and requested an interview to study with him in the summer. At the time he was a solitary artist who had worked at Kungsholm Miniature Grand Opera. He made his own puppets in a warehouse loft. This was before warehouse lofts became chic residences in Chicago's Loop. We arranged for me to study with him in the evenings after my summer job at the Art Institute of Chicago.

For two summers, I taught museum classes during the day, and went to the warehouse district in the evenings to learn about puppets with Gary. After graduating from college, I moved to Chicago where I worked as a museum educator at the Art Institute, and joined Gary's newly formed puppet troupe. The eight-member troupe

comprised a group of Gary's friends from various backgrounds who committed to rehearsing with puppets and putting on Friday night shows at the loft. After two years in Chicago (including the worst blizzard in 100 years), I decided to return to Washington, DC to earn a master's degree in museum education at George Washington University.

While studying museum education, and afterwards working in museums, puppets always found a way into my work. At the Smithsonian Institution's Anacostia Museum, I developed a puppet theater in which youth learned to operate hand/rod puppets that told stories connected with the museum exhibits. I also designed a life-sized puppet in African garb who served as a narrator of African folk tales. When the Smithsonian Institution invited me to design a puppet who would introduce a travelling exhibition of 360 sheet-music covers, the hand/rod puppet Ragtime Richeaux was created. The idea was to make this potentially static exhibit interesting to museum visitors. Puppet Ragtime Richeaux was a veteran jazz musician who presented background stories about the musicians connected with the sheet-music covers.

The museum puppet theater idea continued in New York when I was Education Director at The Studio Museum in Harlem in the early 1980s. I developed shows, including *Rosa Parks Was a Heroine* and *Animals of the Lost Zoo* (based on a collection of poems by Countee Cullen), to accompany current exhibits. I also travelled around the city with a puppet trunk, performing shows at other museums. I became familiar with every NYC museum subway station and the number of steps required to move my sixty-pound trunk and boom box from street to track.

In the late 1980s I started travelling to Africa in search of African puppets. My first visit was to Dakar, Senegal. Later, I travelled to Ivory Coast, Ghana, Mali, Egypt, and South Africa. Typically, I would find a hotel in a major city, then travel into the country's interior, seeking puppets. Since puppets were not the usual items tourists were looking for, I had to negotiate creatively with people about "toys" or "poupées." I learned that African traditional puppets are an extension of sculpture in dance and musical performance. Puppets are usually carved in wood. Paint, fabric and other materials are added, such as cowrie shells, mirrors and raffia. Rope is often used to manipulate puppet parts. Most performances are held outdoors, and may have a combination of drummers, singers and storytellers. Sometimes the puppet is performed on top of the head, with the

performer fully clothed in fabric. In river villages in Mali, puppet performances were held on canoes in the water, with audiences standing on the river banks.

I have used African puppets in my own work to engage audiences with art museum exhibits. *Land of Primary Colors* is an original tale about a land where everything is painted a primary color daily before the sun comes up. Grass is blue. One day a young boy responsible for delivering the color pots juggles the pots and breaks them. As the pots break, colors mix, creating new colors. The only person who can help the boy is Color Wizard, who lives on Blue Mountain. Color Wizard is played by a Bambara puppet from Mali. Other characters in the story are played by African puppets, like the gazelle from Mali, or an African-inspired puppet that I created, using plastic wood and raffia (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1. African-inspired puppet from *Land of Primary Colors*. Photo courtesy Schroeder Cherry.

As Director of Education at The Baltimore Museum of Art, I wanted to allow adults to play in the galleries while learning about the art on exhibit. Puppet Docent Ms. Lily was created to conduct adult tours. Outfitted in a red skirt, white knit sweater, pearls, and black pumps, and sporting an upswept hairdo, Ms. Lily is performed with me in full view, dressed in black. She moves adult audiences from gallery to gallery, giving expert background on displayed objects. The best gallery comment received was from a woman who approached me after a tour of paintings by Monet. She said, "I am divorced. Today is the first day I truly laughed in ten years." Ms. Lily continues to give museum tours. Sometimes the objects are historically based, such as Harriet Tubman's shawl or Nat Turner's Bible at The National Museum of African American History and Culture. Ms. Lily was particularly honored to conduct a tour for the exhibition *Living Objects: African American Puppetry* at the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry: a puppet giving a museum tour of African American puppets, to adult puppeteers.

Although they were not designed as puppet docents, Puppet DiAndre and Puppet Tevin have also done museum work. As with Ms. Lily, the puppeteer is in full view, dressed in black. Tevin has performed at the National Air and Space Museum in conjunction with tributes to Tuskegee Airmen. Situated in the galleries with real-life airplanes all around, Tevin has a large sack filled with objects that he says can fly, like a gorilla and a boat. Children identify objects from the sack that can actually fly; then Tevin leads them through the galleries to look at planes. Puppet DiAndre has performed for family audiences in museums, libraries, and cultural centers. His current show, *How The Sun Came to the Sky*, explains how people in The Land of Dark witnessed something strange that changed their world. DiAndre narrates the story, engaging audience members in the storytelling while manipulating puppets and props on a table-top stage. DiAndre's other table-top story is *The Civil Rights Children's Crusade*. Here, too, DiAndre manipulates wooden cutouts while narrating the story about children who were confronted by police, attack dogs, and fire hoses during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement (see Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Puppet DiAndre, with flat cutout puppets from the *Civil Rights Children's Crusade*. Photo courtesy Schroeder Cherry.

Recently Puppet DiAndre has collaborated with a storytelling outfit in Washington, DC, Double Nickels. The collaboration requires the puppet to interact with audience members as we engage senior citizens in telling their own stories. Here the puppet magic takes place as veterans talk with the puppet about their war experiences, or what life was like “back in the day.” These performances are largely unscripted and improvisational.

Sometimes a puppet performance developed for a museum exhibit takes on a life that extends beyond the exhibit. *Can You Spell Harlem?* is about a young boy who gets caught rapping in school, but knows nothing about Harlem Renaissance artists. Through a series of call-ins to his father’s radio show, and conversations with family members, the boy learns about such writers and artists as Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, Langston Hughes, and James Van Der Zee. This show incorporates seven hand and rod puppets with props.

The Baltimore/Washington region has a lively puppet community, with periodic puppet slams at places like Baltimore’s Black Cherry Puppet Theater (no relation) and

DC's Wit's End. Slams allow puppeteers to explore new acts and present to appreciative audiences. I have performed along with a variety of puppeteers using a broad range of puppet styles: marionettes, rods, hands, objects, crankies, and shadows. African American puppeteers include Dirk Joseph and daughters Azaria and Sequoia, from Baltimore; and Baba Kuroji, from Silver Spring. Puppet slams have allowed my own puppets to try out new acts. Puppets Maya Opinion, Ms. Lily and Africa Brown have done jazz songs; Curtis Entrepreneur and Dallas Dan sing blues; and Mr. Zeke and Smooth Earl have done a tribute to Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.

A puppet show that I currently perform in cultural centers and schools nationally was inspired by a 1988 conversation with New York City teenagers. When I asked a group of teens if they knew about the Underground Railroad, one young man responded with great attitude, "Yeah, man. That was the subway that took slaves to freedom." The show that was developed was in conjunction with a museum exhibit; it was meant to last a couple of months. Thirty years later, *Underground Railroad, Not A Subway* is featured by Young Audiences Maryland, and performed at schools throughout the state. I run into adults who can recite the chant they learned as kids:

Underground Railroad, Not a Subway,
People traveled far the Northway
Walk, run, swim, travel far,
Follow that Drinking Gourd.

Puppet magic and a chant. That's long lasting. I'm still playing with puppets. Meeting creative people who bring objects to life, and learning techniques.