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Paulette Richards

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Wear the Story Like a Jacket: Akbar Imhotep

by Paulette Richards

“Play is real serious. Play helps you discover what you want to be serious about.”

—Akbar Imhotep

Akbar Imhotep had always wanted to be an actor, but he came to Atlanta to do a graduate degree in mathematics at Georgia Tech. Once he was in the city, however, he got more involved in theater. He met Vince Anthony, who gave him a job with the Vagabond Marionettes. “The first time I held a marionette, I realized that I was acting through the puppet,” he says. For Akbar, performing puppets is therefore a matter of mastering the instrument. Whether he picks up a stick, a stuffed animal, or a puppet, he says you animate it by the energy you send through it. For example, he used stuffed animals as puppets in his show “Anansi Learns a Lesson.”



Fig. 1. Backstage view of Akbar's suitcase stage. Photo courtesy of Paulette Richards.

Starting in 1979, Akbar worked at the Center for Puppetry Arts for six years. From 1986 to 2001 he worked steadily in schools and libraries, presenting independent shows. While he was never part of “Young Audiences,” he developed new shows every five years or so. He typically stored the puppets and props from his shows in suitcases. By attaching legs to the bottom of three sturdy Samsonite suitcases, he created a handy traveling stage (see Figure 1). The legs fit inside the cases so that they pack easily. He used to find suitcases readily in thrift stores and has replaced his novel stage about three times over his thirty-year career, but these days, vulcanized fiber valises are harder to come by.

Indeed, one ongoing challenge of Akbar’s art has been to figure out what he could do with the resources available to him. He loves the work of Alabama folk artist Thornton Dial, and describes his own puppets as folk art, noting, “They don’t have to be beautiful to be functional.” For Akbar, if it works in performance, it’s a good puppet, so “These simple puppets I got here, they say everything I want to say.”

Once he has assembled his stage, he uses different fabrics to set the scene. At the beginning of his show an African print cloth covers the whole stage. Two rainbow umbrellas balance the tableau on either side. After presenting a series of short tales, he would ask the audience, “Are you ready to go to the deep end of the pool?” Then he would pull back the cloth to reveal more (see Figures 2 and 3).

Akbar found inspiration for many of his shows in books of folktales. Once he found a book called *Wisdom Tales* (probably Heather Forest’s *Wisdom Tales from Around the World*. Atlanta: August House, 1996) in a library while he was between performances. He read a story that moved him so much he tried to tell it at a storytelling meeting that evening after only reading it twice. One of the other storytellers said, “It was so good to see you struggle.”

Normally, Akbar’s delivery was so polished that people were not aware of the preparation involved. He would read a story fifteen to twenty times and make an outline before telling it. A past president of the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc., Akbar has also been active in the Southern Order of Storytellers, the Kuumba Storytellers, and Puppeteers of America. In his workshops he would tell students, “the

story is the actions, not the words.” When preparing a story, his goal was to “wear the story like a jacket,” to know it so well that he wouldn’t have to worry about the words.



Fig. 2. Silverio from *The Golden Gourd*. Photo courtesy of Paulette Richards.



Fig. 3. Crowd from *The Sky God's Daughter*. Photo courtesy of Paulette Richards.

For Akbar, puppets not only add a visual element to storytelling, they add a spiritual dimension as well: “They are not just objects we’re looking at. They are characters that have a life, vision, and spirit of their own” (see Figure 4). Once Akbar was posing for a photograph with puppets arrayed all around his head as he lay on the floor. “Are the puppets looking at me?” he asked the photographer. He was concerned not just that their faces be turned in his direction but that the photograph showed them focused on

his face. “That’s the world I live in,” he said. “The puppets look and speak to me just like people. I know they are made from cloth and Styrofoam but when you put them together, they have a life of their own” (see Figure 5). In Akbar’s mind this is what makes a puppetry performance different from storytelling.



Fig. 4. Baba Chango/Owner of Wisdom from *Zomo Seeks Wisdom*. Photo courtesy of Paulette Richards.



Fig. 5. Manuel and Maria from *The Golden Gourd*. Photo courtesy of Paulette Richards.