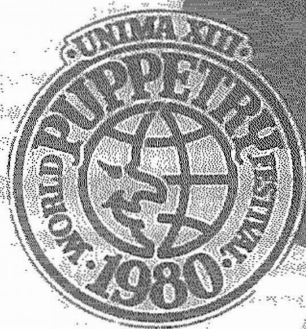


a magazine for
puppeteers
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Nº 4

*Greetings from
Washington*



The Death of a Theatre — Peter Wilson

It takes years to create a theatre company, and just minutes to destroy one. 1980 saw the death of the Tasmanian Puppet Theatre and the Pilgrim Puppet Theatre in Melbourne.

The Tasmanian Puppet Theatre had been badgered for three years with financial difficulties; that it had reached a peak and become almost a household name was something of which every member of the company can be proud. They worked under tremendous difficulty to achieve this. When the crunch came, they had been trying for three to four years to preserve the theatre — they just did not have the strength left to fight.

In 1976 the Board of the Tasmanian Puppet Theatre purchased number 81 Salamanca Place, an old Georgian warehouse, as the permanent home of the T.P.T. The previous six years had been spent in shared premises, in rented premises, and rehearsing in church halls. Continuous pleas to the State Government fell upon deaf ears.

The purchase of this building was done by mortgage, covered by a State Government guarantee. At the time of the purchase the Federal Department of Recreation was considering partial funding of the building. The change of government in Canberra saw this department axed, and the Tasmanian Puppet Theatre, like a lot of other institutions who were awaiting funds from the Department of Recreation, missed out. The next four years saw running costs, wages, production costs all rising; any profits the T.P.T. had shown prior to 1976 were now converted to quite substantial losses.

As we entered 1980 the State Government put forward a salvage plan. They would buy the building and rent it back

to the puppet theatre. That would at least save the theatre from paying out \$20,000 per annum in repayments on the building. So what happened?

The State Government, having worked out the plan, effectively renigged. The Board of the T.P.T. had no option but to close the theatre, sell up the building, equipment, etc., and wipe the slate clean. It died in 24 hours — and all it needed was \$40,000.

As with most disasters of this kind, all isn't completely lost — the saving thing is that all the company members have splintered in interesting directions.

Jenny Davidson, the company's designer, is staying in Tasmania to create a small Tasmanian Puppet Theatre for schools work. Three of the company are creating a new company in Melbourne and will be working on Momma's Little Horror Show at the Last Laugh. Yet another has joined forces with Handspan. And myself — I now have the opportunity of working in comparative freedom outside a company to develop myself as a performer again.

I've just returned from three months in Japan, completely refreshed and refurbished, and will be joining forces with Beverley Campbell-Jackson and Cathryn Robinson (a writer) to form 'SPARE PARTS', a puppetry arts resource team, available to groups who want us, or initiating projects ourselves. The first project will be "Faust" for the Western Australia Theatre Company. After that there'll be a solo show, and then some theatre in education work.

So what's been lost? Apart from the actual material wastage, very little. All the artists are continuing their work and extending themselves in diverse directions.

INTERVIEW

ANITA SINCLAIR - performer, teacher, and craftswoman, has been a respected figure in the Melbourne puppetry push for some years. In March, 1980 she and her daughter Andrea opened The Mask of Janus, a shop devoted to puppetry, mask and costume. You can find the shop at 62 Bridge Road, Richmond, or phone (03) 428 4550.



I was teaching at Melbourne State College, and for a long time it was an exciting job, and held lots of scope for me. Then the balance started to swing. I was creating exciting (I hope) experiences for other people, but I was gradually losing the ability to do my own work. Though I found such things as skills were being increased, and my concepts were being developed, my ability to follow through the design, the making and performing with puppets and masks was being neatly eliminated.

It was still tolerable until I saw what government cut-backs were doing to the College, and then my job became quite unbearable. Classes got too big. The time for which you could have a class became too short. I found I was looking ahead to a year where I wouldn't be doing my job properly - and I'm sufficient of an egotist not to be able to stand that, the idea of teaching what I thought was quite inadequately. When you're teaching your very best and still you know you're going to fail someone - that's something you live with all the time. But when you know you're going to ballsup 30 people every session, that's quite different.

So the shop, when it presented itself, looked like an alternative to all that.

The thing operates on two fronts. One is the retail side. We sell to anyone who walks in goods that we make because we like making them. We make a puppet, or a mask, or a costume, bung it in the window, and it sells to someone. Second, there's the orders. Someone rings up and asks for such and such, and we tell them how we think it should be made, what the materials will cost, what the labour will cost, and when do they want it? And being mostly theatre companies, there's varying degrees of sensitivity about that last one. It's either yesterday or six months away. There's no consistency about the size of the jobs. Three days is nothing for a huge project.

I still teach, but more on my own terms. I have small groups of 4 or 5 private students who come here once a week. I do sessional work, running workshops at different institutions. This year I've done terms of sessional work at the College of the Arts, at Footscray Institute, and the sculpture department at Melbourne State College. I'll continue this sort of work, I like it, and it keeps my income steady, but I won't be doing it full-time again. I want to do it in bites, so that my main energy is here.

Andrea and I are partners in the business, but structurally it's not limited to just us. Andrea is capable of making anything, even to millinery and jewellery, so theoretically we can make a hell of a lot of what's needed here. But then, that's where madness lies. I see this place as creating employment, because we can farm out work to other people, and we can act as an outlet for other people's work. That's already happening. Like B'Spell are making some masks to sell here. We work out with people what percentage we'll take, and if they use our materials, our machinery, our studio, we take a larger cut. So people are perfectly welcome, within reason, to come and work in the space. It keeps you alive, that sort of thing.

We have a certain standard for all the work that's sold through here. It's more to do with whether a puppet or mask has life, has movement, than whether it's got overlocking on its edges. The standard's a bit woolly, but people who understand puppetry will already appreciate its significance. We feel strongly that the public should look to us for something that's NOT mass-produced, something that's individual and unique. That's how we're going to make what money we do make. You sit for bloody hours, making something with a good deal of love - how do you get your money back? The only way you'll do it is by people appreciating that love. So anything that goes in here has to have that quality - that it's been made specially. I'm not saying you can't have 3 sets of commedia dell'arte masks - if they're stunning, what the hell - but they haven't been made in their thousands in plastic and put into Coles all over the country. So long as people can see that difference. I'm trying, if you like, to teach people that difference when they walk in here.

I also see the shop as being a resource centre. One might say there are plenty of those - the Guilds, the tertiary institutions, the Drama Resource Centre - well, they're there for the people who know about them. This place is something the general public can find and use. We drove around Richmond when we first had the idea, and saw this shop almost immediately. We argued a bit about Bridge Rd., and decided that for all its vices it had a lot of virtues. And it's proving to be right. People can get to us very easily. A lot of traffic goes past and they see the window and they do come in because of it. People wander in and say "I'd like to know ..." and "I'd like to get ..." and "I'd like to have ... made". So what this shop is doing is providing for people who don't have contacts. And giving them information. They walk in and ask how to string a marionette, and we tell them. No professional secrecy.

Casual visitors are important. If we're feeling a bit flat, wondering where the bloody telephone bill is coming from, and someone walks in and truly understands what this crazy place is about - that keeps us going.

People who haven't got a clue about what goes on in here don't come in. They press their noses to the window and hoot and giggle, but they don't come in. We had anticipated that children might tend to bowl in and handle everything and be a nuisance, but we've had only one pair in all the time we've been here who were destructive. No, the children have a good deal of respect. Sometimes they'll come in with an adult, wanting information on something. They'll come in very coyly, and they're not sure if they're going to get the information or be sold a puppet. They sometimes get sold a handbook.

We get requests for performances too. We do the occasional one, but we decided that for the first year we'd cool it with the performance, because we need time to establish this place. But we'd like to refer other performers, so anyone who does small performances, puppeteers, clowns, etc please send us your names.

We've been here since January '80. We spent a couple of months doing it up to get the atmosphere we wanted, and fixing the upstairs so one of us could live here. It was only the Christmas when we had the idea. I was going to

Review: THE MAGIC PUDDING.

Norman Lindsay's tale has long been regarded as a classic production in Australian puppetry. For many who were children in the late 50's and early 60's, it provided an introduction to puppets, and has subsequently been regarded with affection and status otherwise reserved for 'Punch and Judy'. It was also from the early Tintookie productions of this story that the Marionette Theatre of Australia, now Australia's largest and most heavily subsidised puppet company, was formed.

Richard Bradshaw's revival of "The Magic Pudding" can, however, be viewed with mixed feelings.

In technical terms, the 'puppetry' is excellent - manipulation is well-controlled, and clever; and the puppets themselves are made with care and precision, and a flexibility of movement that meets all requirements of the piece (a pre-requisite, one imagines, but one that is all too often neglected by puppet makers).

Apparently, when "The Magic Pudding" was first dramatised, the Lindsay family gave rights to the production only if the storyline and characterisations of the original were strictly adhered to. Presumably, these limitations still apply, because this production is largely a verbatim presentation of the book in terms of its dialogue and action. It is probably for this reason that the Marionette Theatre has presented us with a truly 'classic' piece. However, one that is today dramatically slow, wordy and peppered with dated language and expressions.

As an interested adult, I found the programme watchable but felt there was a restless response from the children who packed the Alexander Theatre. Partly, this may be due to the fact that the show runs to a prerecorded soundtrack - with the inevitable limitations that there is no direct contact with the audience and no room for spontaneous participation. It is difficult to ascertain whether the rationale of using the wide range of voices that is available for a taped soundtrack compensates for these disadvantages or not. Mostly, the synchronisation was at least believable, but the show contains many songs accompanied by musical backing which interrupt the flow of the action because of unbalanced sound quality. This, and the fact that the programme is staged in a proscenium set carefully delineated by an unadventurous wash of lights - created a detachment akin to that evoked by a giant TV screen. I wonder if packed houses are the result of parental nostalgia.

Peter Brook in "The Empty Space" formulated the notion of 'deadly theatre' - theatre that applies all the technical skills in measured quantities, but which disregards the highlights and forgets the audience. In presenting this 'classic' piece, in a 'classic' framework, the Marionette Theatre of Australia have come very close to categorizing themselves in this light.

I left "The Magic Pudding" performance feeling that I'd seen a neat professional piece of theatre that unfortunately explores few of the possibilities of the medium of puppetry and pays little attention to recent developments in children's theatre - surprising in a company that one would expect to have many resources at its disposal.

(Reprinted from VITAL)

WELYN RICKARDS

FRANKFURTER PUPPEN ZENTRUM

Dieter Brunner and Barbara Scheel from the Puppenzentrum, Frankfurt, will visit Australia during March and April 1981. They will perform two shows:

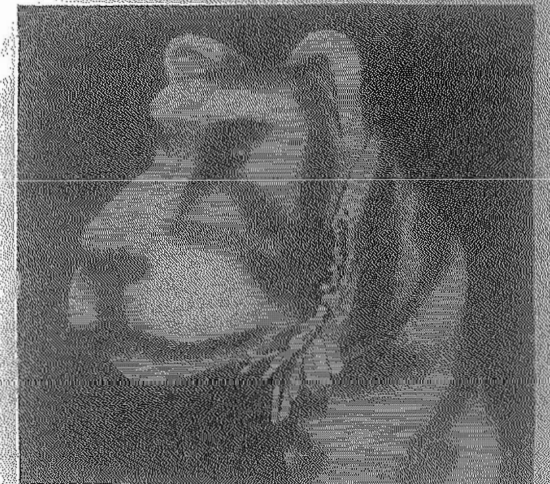
BILLY HECKELSTEIN (to be renamed for the English version) about the shyness of children on making first contacts with others; and TIGER DREAMS, about the fears of children and how they can overcome them.

They will also conduct workshops in various aspects of puppetry and mask work for the general public and professionals.

Dieter Brunner is secretary of the German Puppet Theatre Association. At the Washington Congress he was elected to the UNIMA Training Commission.

Barbara Scheel lectures at Goethe University in Frankfurt. She is specially interested in active theatre for the handicapped, and one of the workshops in Australia will be on this subject.

Further information from the Goethe Institute, 606 St. Kilda Rd. MELBOURNE. Phone: 518838 & 513214



teach at the College all this year, full time, while Andrea ran it. It was most provident that I decided not to, because it's been very demanding. We've already got all the work we can handle. We don't advertise much, because the business that's walking in is enough to keep us on our toes. Advertising could start to put the kind of pressure on us that makes us reduce the quality of our work, so we have to be careful. Andrea and I aren't business people in any high pressure sense. I don't see why two ordinary people can't open a shop and flog things to the public without zooming in at a rate they can't cope with.

The place is no flash in the pan. We'll struggle on with it until it damn well works financially. And philosophically, too, because there are all sorts of ways we could make it work just financially. Like mass production. You get your agent wanders in and says "I can put you into a hundred gift shops in Victoria." The opportunity is certainly there, but I have this image

manipulation

in my head that I refer to, and it's corny, but it's clean. I'm not an alternative lifestyle person in that I don't think the answer for me is to go to the country and start spinning and weaving. I'd go ape without the stimulus I get from the city. But I want this place to be supporting Andrea and me and providing us with a way of using our skills that's not compromising to our philosophies of life. A nice organic thing. And the image of that I refer to is a bootmaker. He has his little shop where he chugs along making and mending his boots, and people can come in and buy what he does. He'll never get rich, but he'll get by. Andrea and I are mother and daughter, and of course sometimes we get sick of the sight of each other. But we have a sound relationship and a comfortable way of working together, and we both love the shop. When we first thought of this place we said - that's crazy, there's no such thing! But then maybe that's the very reason why it's a good idea. And one year later, it's still a good idea.



WASHINGTON FESTIVAL

THE WASHINGTON INTERNATIONAL PUPPET FESTIVAL AND XIII UNIMA CONGRESS WERE HELD IN JUNE OF 1980. HERE ARE SOME COMMENTS FROM FOUR AUSTRALIANS WHO ATTENDED: ANITA SINCLAIR, AXEL AXELRAD, HELEN RICKARDS AND RICHARD BRADSHAW. ROSS BROWNING TOOK THE PHOTOGRAPHS AND ANITA DID THE DRAWING.

THE GALA PERFORMANCE was held on the first night, in the concert hall of the Kennedy Centre. It was a gigantic place, with 4 tiers of seats up to the ceiling. I don't know if you could see from the stalls, but you certainly couldn't see from anywhere else. It's not the right place to see puppets, a vast building where everyone is miles away from the stage. The Muppets, Shari Lewis, Bill Baird, and Burr Tilstrom were playing, but very little of their performances was adapted to the size of the stage - and most of these people are TV performers. You could sense them feeling incredibly intimidated by the situation. HR

In the gala performance they broke the first rule of theatre - they forgot their audience. It was a huge venue, but that's alright as long as you fill the stage. If you put a tiny dot of a performer like Shari Lewis with Lamb Chop inside a follow-spot and send her out onto a massive stage to stand in this intimate pool of light - of course you're going to alienate the audience. AS

OBRATZOV gave the performance about which he writes in "My Profession". In his time he has laid the groundwork for so many of the styles that are popular today, and in this show we saw: a body puppet (a lion) worked from inside; a mouth puppet quite similar to a Muppet; a puppet worn on the head with its hands those of the puppeteer (this was a woman, whose eyes and mouth moved when she tugged at the long string of beads around her neck). An interesting piece of history illustrating the many ways he has explored puppet manipulation. RB

THEATRE LE MANTEAU (France). The set for their show was a large man, an old puppeteer. Smaller puppets moved in and around, representing the beings of his own creation, who terrify and overwhelm him. The show takes a philosophical turn when he meets a Buddha figure who teaches him to make peace with himself. RB

The Muppets were everywhere. Young puppeteers I met said their aspiration was to work in the Muppet organization. HR

There was one official Australian display in the P.I.E. section. That was a puppetmaking item by the Hughes from State College, Brisbane. They also brought over a load of books to sell at the festival shop. HR

In the Corcoran Gallery they had a workshop section, with the walls lined with booths. Every second booth would have a workshop for 20 minutes, then they would switch over. You'd have 10 workshops going at a time, in subjects like making stages operating marionettes, and different types of junk puppet. AA

PERCY PRESS JNR, from London, was setting up his Punch & Judy booth in the elaborate JFK Centre. As he put the covers onto the frame, the audience stopped him, insisting he do the show visible. So he did.

THE RING OF THE NIBELUNG, by students of Connecticut University, was a recitation of the epic poem with Wagner's music and acted out by rod puppets. They had a spectacular set (one which most puppet companies can't afford) a huge back-projection screen with images of mountains falling down and fire burning up, with the puppets worked in front. It turned into a case of overkill, however, as the show lasted 3 hours and the storms, fires, floods and earthquakes were almost continuous. HR

BRUCE SCHWARTZ (USA) - definitely his technique is superb, every bit as good as Fukien.* In one piece there were two glove puppets playing reed pipes, and I thought, "Ah yes, very nice, lovely music ... hang on, that's no tape, they're really playing!" It was a medieval duet, and the pipes had 3 or 4 holes, and I presume a single tube down to Bruce's mouth, and his finger control was so good that his puppets were actually playing music. Then there were the Victorian dolls for which he's justifiably famous. He did a monologue with one - beautifully made and manipulated, but a live actor could have done it with more power, and you could have seen a live actor, instead of having to peer down into the gloom at this beautiful thing. Perhaps one piece of this in a show with other styles would have been OK, but there were six of these doll items, and it became purely a glorification of technique. HR

ARAGOUZ - Egyptian glove puppets. This was an eye-opener on a little-known tradition. The audience followed the puppeteer to the performance site. Some were given coins to throw at the beginning of the show (a hint?). A musician accompanied on a horn. Although related to the Turkish Karagoz, Aragoz is much closer to Punch in character. He wears the tall red hat of the Egyptian army, a little like Punch's cap. He beats his wife and throws his baby around, and does battle with various Authority figures, the doctor, the policeman, the cleric. RB

There was one Australian performance. HANDSPAN did The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek on the lawns. The audience seemed to like it, but I think it was too stereotypically Australian, and next time I'd like to do something with a more universal flavour. The Bunyip was to be our livelihood later as we travelled round Europe busking. HR

* The Chinese puppet company from Fukien province who visited Australia in 1979.



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BREAD AND PUPPETS did their St. Joan play. It was a succession of tableaux, flash-card images, all in black and white like a series of etchings. In the scene of the army "sweeping through the homeland", we see a figure in black pushing a broom through a crowd of puppet houses, demolishing them - and that was that tableau, finished. The people, confused, were running away from the army, and that was done with a group of masks held at ground level, about ten, but suggesting hundreds, and there was a furious race across the stage - and then it was gone. Transfixing. HR

I liked the way Bread and Puppets felt free to use any resource at all to get their message across. They took their material seriously, but not themselves. There were sophisticated devices and primitive ones. When a few feathers stuck on someone's back would do, that was all they used when a finely-executed black & white drawing was needed, they used it, but didn't feel obliged to keep on using it. So they didn't refine things further just for the sake of looking clever. It never became too careful, nor self-conscious. AS

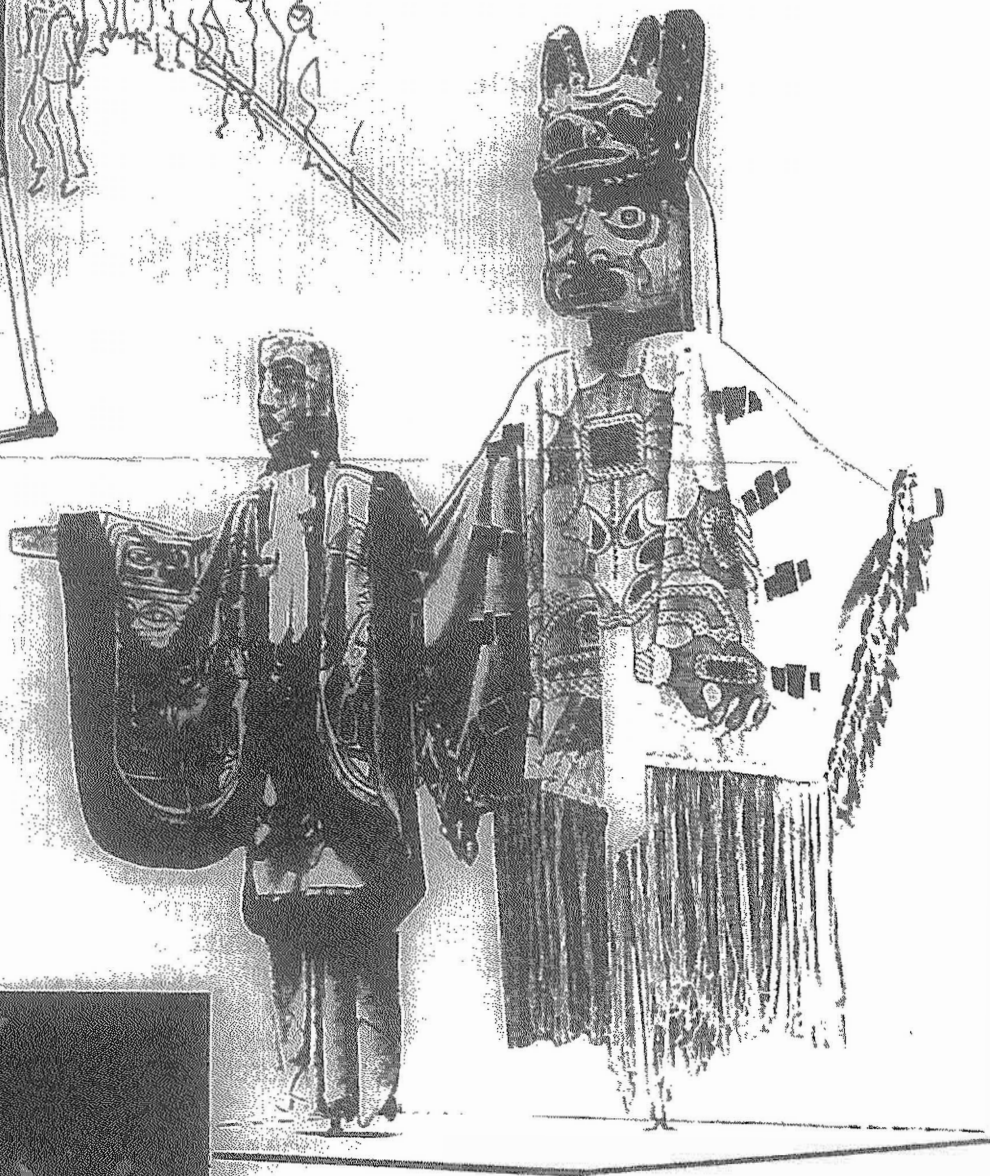
The Bread and Puppet Parade: there was Peter Schumann dancing the whole way on his stilts - really dancing - and there were the giant white birds and angels, a tall blue and silver warrior shouting KILL, Uncle Fatso (read Sam)...it's powerful anti-war, anti-draft message had an extra edge to it, because that week, in that city, Congress had just passed a new draft bill setting up the machinery for future conscription. RB

CIRCUS UNIKUM, by Drak from Czechoslovakia was a political play about the struggle for freedom as experienced by a small circus troupe. They used a mixture of puppets and actors. The puppets being manipulated to go through their acts brought home in a simple visual way the message that the circus performers were being exploited by the management. HR

You respond to a Bread and Puppets performance on a sub-rational level. Peter Schumann has stated that he wants to restore to puppetry qualities it has lost, the use of strong symbolism and ritual. RB

ANITA SINCLAIR gave a lecture on Australian puppetry with slides. I didn't feel she was very much in touch with a lot of troupes - but I was certainly glad someone was there to speak for us. HR

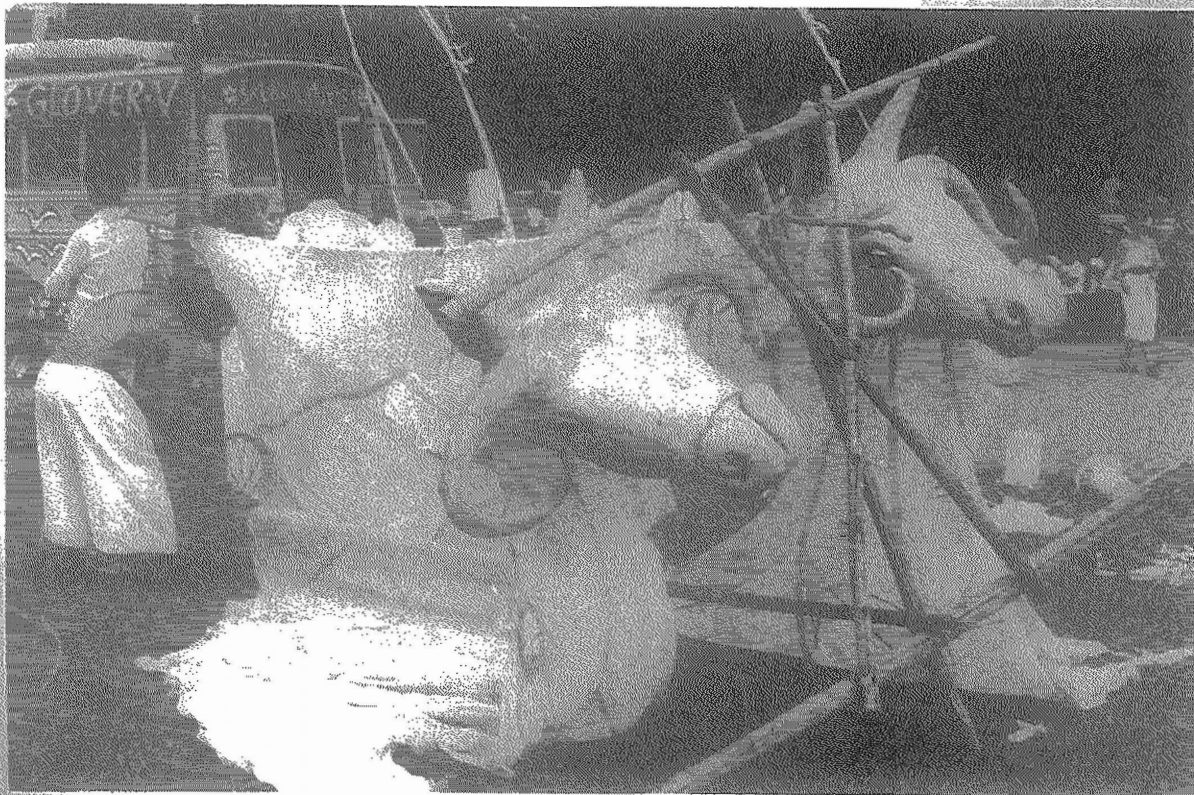
I'm certain people could shoot me down in flames over my knowledge of the history of puppetry in Australia, but I wasn't too worried about that. I made it my business to represent the different ways in which puppetry occurs in this country, rather than to promote who was doing it. I had slides of different people's work, not just the usual ones of the big companies. I showed people working in schools, in teachers' colleges, with migrant children - some alternative ways of performing in alternative spaces. I tried to represent the overall picture. AS



ABOVE: Large rod puppets by Theatre sans Fils, a Canadian group who perform Indian legends.

CENTRE: Peter Schumann, stilt-dancer

LEFT: A Bread and Puppets parade puppet. Note how the heads are loosely hung, to sway with the walking motion.



manipulation

HANDSPAN THEATRE are heading for the Mornington Peninsula during the January holidays, taking The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek and other beastly combinations, to share a little fun and frolic with the holidaying hordes... There appears to be little in the way of entertainment for the young and not so young (apart from the beach and the pinball parlours) so we felt there was a need to supply people with alternative entertainment. Tour dates are January 5 to 23 at all the major and minor resorts. Handspan is at : 110 Gertrude St., Fitzroy, VIC 3065. Phone: (03) 41 5978.

KOOKA have a new member, Mark Morrissey, lately a student at the National Theatre School. They'll continue to perform The Bunyip's Secret Treasure, and will be taking it on their first country tour, which is sponsored by the Ministry for Conservation. They're going to Phillip Island, San Remo, the Grampians, Hall's Gap and a couple of towns in North East Victoria. Tour dates: January 8 to 23. Kooka are at: 88 Walpole Street, Kew, VIC 3101. Phone: (03) 8621479.

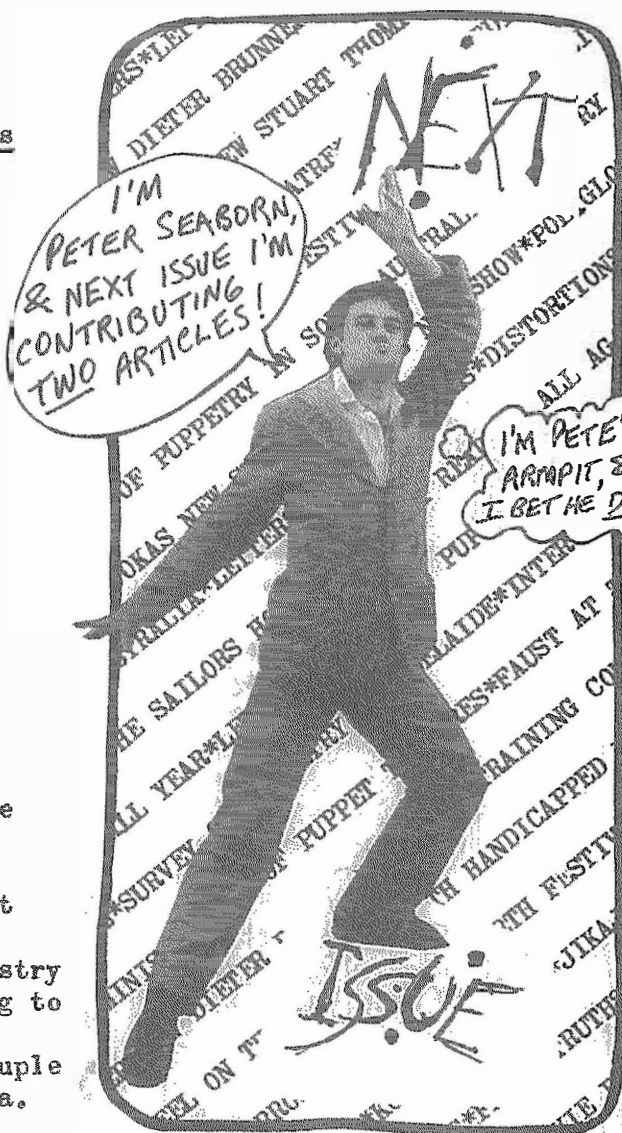
THE MARIONETTE THEATRE OF AUSTRALIA is moving house this month, to the old Sailors' Home in the Rocks, Sydney. They also have a new administrator, Phillip Rolf, taking over this month from Stuart Thompson. Stuart's going overseas to study and travel. The Magic Pudding will be touring to Adelaide in January, Perth in February and Canberra in March. Production begins soon on a new version of Roos.

There's a rumour that the DRAK Theatre from Czechoslovakia may visit Australia in 1982. From their handout: "our productions build on the Czech folk puppet theatre and at the same time expand on the explorations of the avant-garde between the wars."

Didja know that there is only ONE professional puppet theatre in Hungary? The State Puppet Theatre, which has eight ensembles, performs in two theatres of its own (one is also a training centre) and tours the provinces and internationally. Who'd be their administrator !

The last page would like to thank Jon Murray, for Everything; Axel Axelrad for Encouragement; Eion Abernathy for Graphic Ideas and everyone else who contributed to this issue. x x x (including MARTIN)

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BILLBAR PUPPET THEATRE are selling up. For sale are puppets, stage, performing rights to plays, and sound and light equipment. The stage is suitable for glove and rod puppets and is collapsible. The set-up, with curtains, sound and lighting, stands 8 feet high, 6 feet wide and 3 feet deep. All the gear fits into a station wagon. The owners would prefer to sell as a complete unit, but are willing to discuss alternatives. Contact : Bill and Barbara Turnbull, 66 McKenzie St., Toowoomba, QLD 4350 Phone : (076) 32 3097.

GREG JONES, Equity organizer and ex-puppeteer, has a 6 foot centre bridge marionette stage for sale, plus numerous marionettes. No reasonable offer refused. Contact at Actors' Equity, Melbourne Phone (03) 63 6689.

ANITA SINCLAIR has been asked by the Victorian Arts Centre to prepare an exhibition of puppetry and mask and other theatre artifacts, with an emphasis on street theatre. She would like to have the material all collected by the end of January. Contact at The Mask of Janus, 62 Bridge Road, Richmond VIC 3121, Phone (03) 428 4550.

ROY McNEILL is no longer with the Kooka Puppet Theatre. Anyone with work for an experienced puppeteer can contact him at : 35 Austin Street, Fairfield VIC 3078. Phone : (03) 481 2317.

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