

MANIPULATION

OCTOBER 1981

GOLLY GOSH!

STRINGS PULLED IN ADELAIDE
MACARTHUR RETURNS - MTA RESURRECTS
MOMMAS CONQUERS EUROPE (ALMOST)
IRON-LADY CLOUTS PUNCH
DAY OF THE SWEETTT FOR HANDSPAN
...the ...

for sale

Tay-Lav Puppets have a set of Punch & Judy puppets and assorted latex glove puppets for sale. Phone 465 1520.

Ann Davis Puppets wish to sell two sets of marionettes and various pieces of stage equipment: a PA system, eight small visers (four fold, and four are fixed), and a one-man marionette stage suitable for beginners. 64 Point Rd, Mooney Mooney NSW 2254
Phone 455 2004.

sits.wanted

Evelyn Vynhal, puppeteer and screen printer.
16 Madden St, Maidstone VIC Phone 318 3157.

blank pages in last issue?

Several copies of last August's MANIPULATION had two blank pages. This was not a clever graphic illustration of a shortage of news, but a barefaced mistake. If you received one of these please write to 28 Macarthur Place, Carlton 3053 and a complete copy will be sent to you immediately.

next issue deadline nov.25

To avoid Christmas delays and to leave the editor free to celebrate, next issue of MANIPULATION will be published early in December. Please send news, classifieds and what's on listings by the above date.

WHAT'S ON

Melbourne

M.T.A. - GENERAL MACARTHUR IN AUSTRALIA

Playbox Theatre, 55 Exhibition St. Melbourne
Till 8th November ; Tues - Fri 8.30pm
Sat 5.00pm & 8.30pm
Sun 5.30pm

Admission : Tues - Thurs + matinees \$8.00
concessions \$5.00
Fri + Sat \$9.00 (no cona.)

Bookings : 63 4888

Handspan - JANDY MALONE & THE 9 O'CLOCK TIGER

Anthill Theatre, 199 Napier St. Sth. Melbourne
7th - 11th December ; Mon - Fri 1.30pm
Wed - Fri 7.30pm

Admission : \$2.50 kids, \$3.50 adults
For ages 7 to 12 years
Bookings : 699 3253

Monique Bernard - OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Anthill Theatre, 199 Napier St. Sth. Melbourne
Every Sat. from 14th November - 5th December
Admission : \$2.50 kids, \$3.50 adults
Bookings : 699 3253

Jika Jika - THE FOUR CHINESE BROTHERS

Lygon Street Festa, Carlton
7th & 8th November, 5.00pm
Fitzroy Gardens, Melbourne
8th November, 3.00pm

RUSDEN and MELBOURNE STATE COLLEGES

Processional puppets
Lygon Street Festa, Carlton
7th November, 12.00 noon

Sydney

OUTLANDYSHE PUPPET THEATRE

Wayside Chapel, 29 Hughes St. Potts Point
TV COMES TO THE JUNGLE - Every Sat. from
28th November, at 2.00pm
PUPPETRY FILM EVENING - 15th December
Bookings : 358 6577 or 358 6148



PUPPET COMPANIES APPEARING AT THE WE'RE ON FESTIVAL :

KOOKA, HANDSPAN, B'SPELL, GARDNER PUPPET THEATRE,

JIKA JIKA, DREAMTIME PUPPETS, POLYGLOT. THE VICTORIAN

STATE OPERA will perform a show with several puppets

in it. Enquiries : Sue Galley, 347 4602.

Adelaide

EXHIBITION OF S.A. PUPPETRY

Torrens College of Advanced Education, 28th November.

PAPER BAG THEATRE PUPPET CENTRE

76 Edmund St. Unley, Phone 798 030

Every 4th Sunday : Friends of Puppetry Film Screenings

Puppet Festival 1983

MANIPULATION again invites readers' reactions and comments on the next International Puppet Festival. Below appear a copy of the rationale and proposals to be submitted to funding organizations by the Youth Performing Arts Council of South Australia, and some responses from readers. The speed of the YPAC in framing concrete proposals and arranging approaches to funding bodies was astounding, and augurs well for the Festival's success.

An International Puppet Festival was held in Hobart in January 1979, with puppeteers from all over Australia and visiting companies and puppeteers from China, Japan and the UK. At the end of this festival, a unanimous resolution was passed that such festivals be held every four years, the next to be held in Adelaide in 1983.

In August 1981, Carclew was approached by Melbourne puppeteers Helen Rickards and Maevé Vella to see if the Youth Performing Arts Council would be interested in hosting such an event. The YPAC agreed to this proposal at a meeting on September 21, 1981.

It is proposed that this festival be held in Adelaide from January 21 - 30, 1983. It will be both a conference for puppetry practitioners and a public festival of puppetry performance. Three major themes have been identified:

- (a) Puppetry in theatres
- (b) Puppetry out-of-doors
- (c) Puppetry in the media

It is proposed to invite three major international companies to perform in Adelaide and attend the festival. These companies (two from Asia, one from Europe) would be selected on the basis of artistic excellence, traditional styles and skills which provide the roots for current practice, and new adventurous works which will influence future directions. Two individuals from overseas will also be invited. In addition to the international component, four major Australian companies will be brought to Adelaide. Venues being considered for performances include The Space Theatre, the Playhouse, Theatre 62, the Arts Theatre, the Scott Theatre, the Parks Community Centre and the Royalty Theatre. Workshops, seminars and discussions would be held at Carclew, and ten guest lecturers, tutors, etc., would be brought to Adelaide to conduct these.

Public performances would also be taken into the streets and parks, both to develop various outdoor performance forms and to create public awareness of the festival.

Suggestions and opinions of puppeteers and puppetry organizations throughout Australia are currently being sought to help shape the festival in a way which would provide most benefit to the art-form in Australia.

The Youth Performing Arts Council would be the body responsible for administration of the festival, through the Director of Carclew, and an Artistic Co-ordinator would be appointed for a twelve-month period to mount the event in consultation with the Director.

A budget of \$180,000 is proposed, with income from State and Federal governments, UNESCO, private sector sponsorship and box office receipts. It is envisaged that entrepreneurial ventures initiated by the festival can be sold to other Australian managements to recoup costs and generate a national touring programme of performances at other festivals and in other cities.

ANDREW BIEBY
October 1981

I would like to see a commissioned production mounted especially for the festival, drawing on the cream of Australia's puppeteers, writers, directors, designers, etc. This production could possibly tour after the festival to recoup some of its costs.

Visiting overseas companies I would recommend would be DRAC, from Czechoslovakia, FIGURENTHEATER TRIANGEL from the Netherlands, COMPANIA COATIMUNDI from Brazil, and a shadow troupe from Japan.

Michael Meschke from Sweden and Jim Henson or Frank Oz from the US would be valuable individual visitors, and perhaps they could stay on to work with Australian companies for a while after the festival.

Workshops could cover:

Puppet-making; script writing (and here I would suggest Cathryn Robinson from Spare Parts and Richard Tulloch from Toe Truck); directing; theatre technology; street puppetry; processional puppetry; puppetry in film and television; puppetry in education; puppetry in therapy; and general related workshops in dance, mime, voice, movement, clowning, and improvisation techniques.

Seminars could be held on:

Running small puppet companies; training; puppeteers and Actors Equity; reviews and critics.

I would also suggest that an Australian UNIMA conference be held in conjunction with the festival.

I think it is particularly important that the small touring companies have the chance to perform. The 1979 festival confined these mostly to the "pot pourri" sessions, and these should continue, especially for the opportunity they offer for spontaneous performance, but I also think that as many companies as possible should be officially timetabled. It might be feasible to have daily lunchtime performances in Elder Park and in the Festival Centre foyers, and perhaps a couple of nights at, say, The Warehouse, for small adult cabaret performances.

HELEN RICKARDS

MANIPULATION asked the British Puppet Centre what they had learned from their festival in 1979.....

Organizational methods are, I'm sure, the same the world over. Try and get money, preferably commercial money through sponsorship, then book some topflight companies, then a superb publicity officer, and carry on into lunacy from there. I confess I would rather not organize another festival, though I'd be happy to sit in a comfy chair and give advice. I think most of the theatres that took part last time would do so again, as houses were so very good. But our festival was very much NOT for puppeteers, but for the general public - very different from most festivals. However next time I'd certainly arrange a central meeting/eating/cabaret area for those who want to be clubby. And naturally, I'd exclude all but the very best companies, so that the accent of the festival was on quality rather than quantity.

PENNY FRANCIS

IS LONDON PUPPET CENTRE TO CLOSE?

THE BRITISH PUPPET CENTRE is in trouble. It was founded as a trust seven years ago with the aim of promoting puppetry. It performs many essential tasks, such as building an excellent and freely accessible library, producing directories of puppeteers, promoting training schemes, lobbying for grants to puppetry, presenting new performances, providing workshops, tuition, materials and space. Other branches of theatre in Britain have many service organizations, puppetry has only this one.

However, the British Arts Council has decided, under the general economic pressures of Mrs. Thatcher, to cut aid to "support bodies". This means that the puppetry centre's grant of £5,000 will be lost; which in turn means that they can no longer pay their administrator, Sue Martin, and will have to close.

Manipulation sent a letter of protest to the Arts Council, and received a rather waffly reply to the effect that that they're sticking to their policy of cutting support to "service organizations". However, as they are by no means certain of the amount of money they will have to grant in '82 ("floundering around in the dark" according to ANIMATIONS editor Penny Francis) there is some hope: as the situation is fluid, lobbying could help to save the puppet centre.

JM.

You can write to protest the possible closure of the Puppet Centre to:
Sir Roy Shaw, Secretary General of the Arts Council of Great Britain,
105 Piccadilly, London W1V 0AU, United Kingdom.

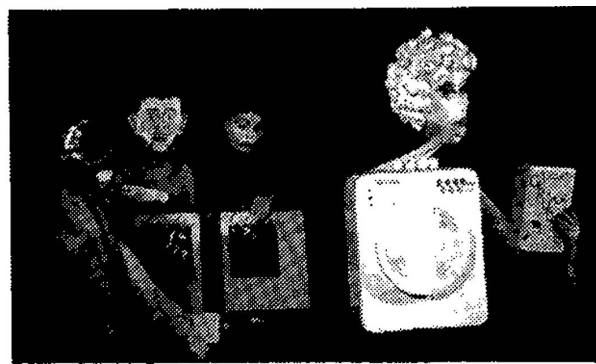
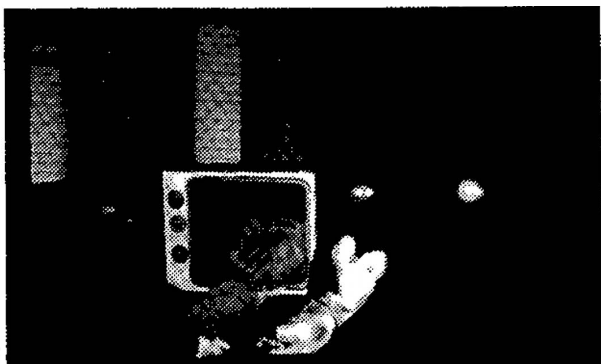
KOOKA PUPPET COMPANY: Switch Over



This show is a terrific indication of the potential for imaginative puppetry currently developing in Australia. It features an enormous superhero, a self-destructing television set, a (literally) transparent howdy-hidy TV compere complete with a light inside his hollow head, and a number of other puppets which are well-made and well-manipulated. The show is a delight to watch, but unfortunately falls down on two counts. One is simply a technical compromise - while designed to be a magical piece of black theatre with puppeteers in black against a black background, the lighting used at the performance seen by this reviewer enabled the audience to see clearly all the black machinations causing the magic to happen - hence the real magic of black theatre was lost. With specific 'curtain of light' effects or even ultra-violet light it would have been quite a trip. The other flaw is quite basic - the script is a fairly trite expose of the garbage spewed out by our TV sets, and a plea to switch over, switch off, or in some way escape from this morass of electronic molasses in order to exercise our imaginations in more creative ways. Certainly some of us need to be reminded of the TV trap of crap and claptrap, but this seems about as useful as bringing a speaker from the Temperance Union to speak at a hotelier's convention. Apart from sudden denial there is no solution offered, no analysis proffered, although it does show us what we all know with delightful insanity, right down to Mrs. Washalot's spin-dry, lemon-scented stomach.

Reprinted from LOWDOWN

DAN BREWBLY



General Macarthur IN AUSTRALIA.

MARIONETTE THEATRE of AUSTRALIA

GENERAL MACARTHUR IN AUSTRALIA takes a cynical, satirical look at the self-styled hero who "came to save Australia from the Japanese" and the less-than-cordial relations that existed between Australian and American servicemen in this country during World War II. Written by Roger Pulvers, directed by Richard Bradshaw, "Macarthur" is a highly polished and sophisticated production that represents a tremendous breakthrough in the MTA's development of adult puppet theatre. When last year their first adult show, "Captain Lazar's Earthbound Circus" met with an unenthusiastic response the company could have been excused for being discouraged; to their credit, they have regrouped their resources, taken what was good from Lazar, notably the distinctive puppet style that developed from the collaboration between cartoonist Patrick Cook and puppet maker Ross Hill, and married it to a tight, witty script and an elegant, functional set.

The puppets are operated bunraku style on low tabletops. With full leg movement and moving mouths, they are walking, talking cartoons, superb caricatures of Macarthur, Curtin and Blamey, and wry archetypal soldiers. Heads and hands are modelled in smooth shiny latex, reinforced inside with celastic, and coloured in solid primaries, racial exaggerations in fact: full white for anglosaxons, deep black for aborigines, bright yellow for japanese, orange for mexicans and red for filipinos. There's lots of built-in humour in the puppets: two japanese soldiers with zip stomachs for neat and tidy ritual suicide; a dancing mexican soldier with a body as anarchic as a pillow case in a high wind; Macarthur's mad pinpoint eyes briefly revealed from behind the sunglasses; miniaturised japanese planes dropping tiny bombs on Darwin; australian and american glove puppet soldiers who literally lose their heads and hands in a brawl ("Get that arm into line, soldier!" commands Macarthur).

The puppeteers - John Black on Macarthur and Ross Browning, Ben Franklin and Peter Cowan on several puppets each - work in view dressed in dark green army fatigues (Join the puppeteer's army?) that are both costume to the play and foil to the bright puppets in proper bunraku tradition. Manipulation is generally very good, considering the demands the script makes on the performers to keep the puppets looking interesting through long speech passages. John Black is to be commended on the depth of concentration he applies to the operation of Macarthur. There are several moments when the manipulation rises above the simply competent, notably when Macarthur sings and dances his final song, which is a skilful piece of bunraku teamwork between three puppeteers; the passing of Macarthur from one puppeteer to another and into the plane; the startling entrance of the two mexican soldiers in their frantic dance; the precise pat-a-cake rhythms of the two japanese soldiers.

Staging "Macarthur" was a gamble for the MTA; a bet each way on several counts: though Roger Pulvers is an accomplished playwright, this was his first for puppets; with the exception of Ross Browning, the actors had little experience of performing with puppets; the company's administration and workshop were under pressure from commitments to other new productions and projects; the schools touring programme and the restoration of their newly acquired building. The gambles have paid off, the MTA has come through the pressure with a production to be very proud of and a new sheen on their reputation. At the premiere of "Macarthur", in Macarthur-esque tones, Richard Bradshaw commented "We met a challenge". So you have. Congratulations.

MAEVE VELLA

MANY HAPPY
RETURNS TO
ME!



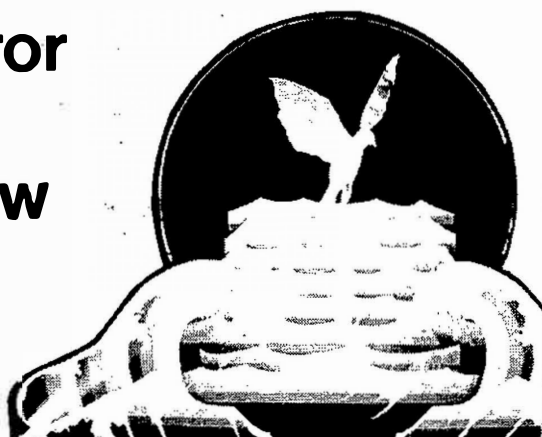
WHAT THE BUNGFOL FALDIDDLE...?



Momma's Little

Horror

Show



Hello from MOMMA on tour.

Well, we are in our 10th week of the initial 11 - week stage of our European tour. We finish this part of the tour on October 16th, then, rather unfortunately, we have a 4 - week break. This will place a great financial burden on most of us, as it means no money for a month. The tour has been going well - very hard work, sometimes totally exhausting. We have played 11 theatres in 10 cities, and given 32 performances to a total audience of about 6,100.

As we have been playing out of the theatre season until very recently, many of our performances have been rather poorly attended. (Although, Circus Oz last year suffered the same fate early in their tour). However, audience response has been enthusiastic, and numerous standing ovations have greeted the company during curtain calls. A couple of highlights: in Pfalzlan, West Germany, we were the opening performance of the 1981/82 theatre season, and the audience of 1,000 gave us 10 curtain calss and a standing ovation; in Leeuwarden, Holland, 500 people, a capacity house, gave us a standing ovation.

Our very first review was really awful - the guy thought the show 'deadly boring'. However, since then we have received some excellent notices, and lots of interesting interpretations of the show.

We have performed 7 one-night stands - 4 of them as 2x2 one-nights stands on consecutive nights - i.e. one day bump-in, performance, pack-up, then drive during the night, a few hours sleep, then do it all again. Surviving such an itinerary is really quite a feat - and having done it now, there's quite a satisfaction.

The show has been looking fantastic. The humour has grown a great deal. We've had quite a few technical problems from time to time, but generally the facilities at theatres have been very good.

We can now put the show into a theatre in 6 hours, fully lit and ready to go. We can now pack up the show in 1½ hours (in the truck too!). Living together under pressure has been difficult at times, but I feel we are surviving it reasonably well. God knows how many miles we have travelled - it's probably quite a lot.

Shall send more info around the time of the Paris season.

FRED WALLACE



Outlandyshe

Dennis Murphy has taken up the job of Puppeteer at the Life Education Centre, Wayside Chapel, in Sydney. He will be incorporating puppetry into the Centre's programme for preventing the abuse of drugs by children in the future.

The OUTLANDYSHE Puppet Theatre is one project of the L.E.C. It will be presenting shows each Saturday at 2 pm, at reasonable prices, within the means of most children.

The Theatre will have a seating capacity of about 80 and will have full black-out facilities. The technical equipment of the Wayside Chapel, including a full sound studio, will be at its disposal.

The Theatre opens on 28 November with "TV Comes to the Jungle", which will play through December. In January, as part of the 1982 Festival of Sydney, "DEEP SPACE BUNGL", a simulated space trip, will be presented twice daily for three weeks. (See Festival schedule for times) Programmes will change monthly.

The Theatre is organizing a puppetry film evening for 15 December, featuring films from Europe and Asia (Consulates permitting). Anyone interested is welcome to attend. For further info, ring Dennis Murphy on 358 6148. In February, a weekend workshop in puppet making is planned.

The OUTLANDYSHE Puppet Theatre is composed of puppeteers Brendan Doyle, Richard Hart, Rosemary Livingstone, Dennis and Jan Murphy and sound technician, Mark Don. The Wayside Chapel is providing the venue.

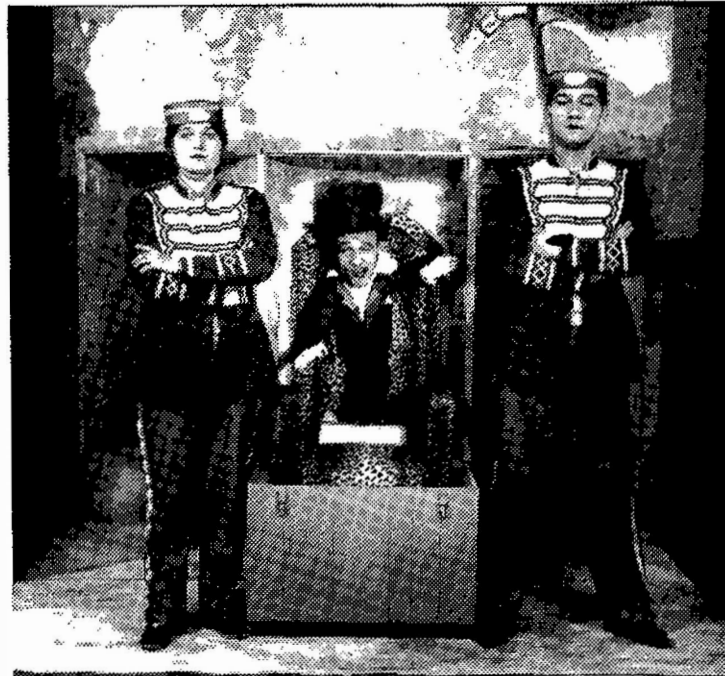
"The shows won't be about drugs, nor will they have religious content. Those are two major misunderstandings I anticipate. We'll be presenting shows with substance and meaning, as does most good theatre. If this is done with puppets, then people assume it is 'educational'. We are most definitely not 'educational'. It will be fun, entertaining and meaning-full. Even the kids'll like it. And with six people can you imagine?" says Dennis.

GRANTED!

The Australia Council has awarded MANIPULATION a grant of \$1,000 to assist with photographic and layout costs in 1982.

Handspan — Triffitt

Handspan Theatre has been granted \$10,000 to produce a new show to be devised and directed by Nigel Triffitt.



LES FRÈRES CONFETTIS

Paper Bag

We are having a very busy year (as usual) with touring schools from Monday to Thursday and weekend activities at the Puppet Centre. Every Friday one or two classes of children with parents and teachers come to Unley for a talk about the history of puppet theatre around the world. We show them our puppets, books, masks, slides, black theatre, paper bag costumes for about 90 minutes, and then they jump and run on the village green, climb the environmental sculpture, fall into the puddle (if there is one around), have their lunches and return for another walk through the cottage before going back to school. Every Saturday we are at the Centre for parents, Matric. students doing puppetry as part of their Art exams, teachers, etc., and every fourth Sunday, Friends of Puppetry meet for a puppet movie showing. Last time we had a shadow show by one of the puppetry students from Torrens C.A.E., and on 28th November there will be an Open Day of the whole complex, where we hope to have an exhibition of South Australian Puppetry.

We ran a few puppet workshops this year, for the Community Theatres Association and SAADIE (South Australian Drama Teachers Association); and also during the holidays a few days of puppet making in our local library, which is part of the arrangement with Unley Council - to repay part of the rent of our premises by community work.

Our funding is now secure until June 1982, with the rent already paid in advance and money received for weekend activities in January to June. Most of the Fridays are already booked for 1982. Our personal plans are still vague: with the cuts in education spending we have no idea whether or not we will get our subsidy in 1982. As it would be the 10th year of our existence as a professional puppet theatre in South Australia, we wanted to mount a special production for the May holidays of 1982. However, as the Australia Council has turned us down there will be no new production and also no country touring beyond a 100km radius from the metropolitan area. We will have two new schools productions for 1982: one Japanese and one Polish story.

Gail Pilgrim

Gail Pilgrim left Australia for Holland in May, 1980, with the aim of establishing an international agency for cabaret and festival performers. She has worked as an arts administrator since 1976, with the Melbourne Free Entertainment in the Parks program, Eltham Living and Learning Centre, the first Melbourne Community Arts Festival, the Mushroom Troupe, and the Williamstown Community Festival. A partiality for being self-employed led her to conceive the idea of being a theatrical agent in Europe, promoting European and Australian performers.

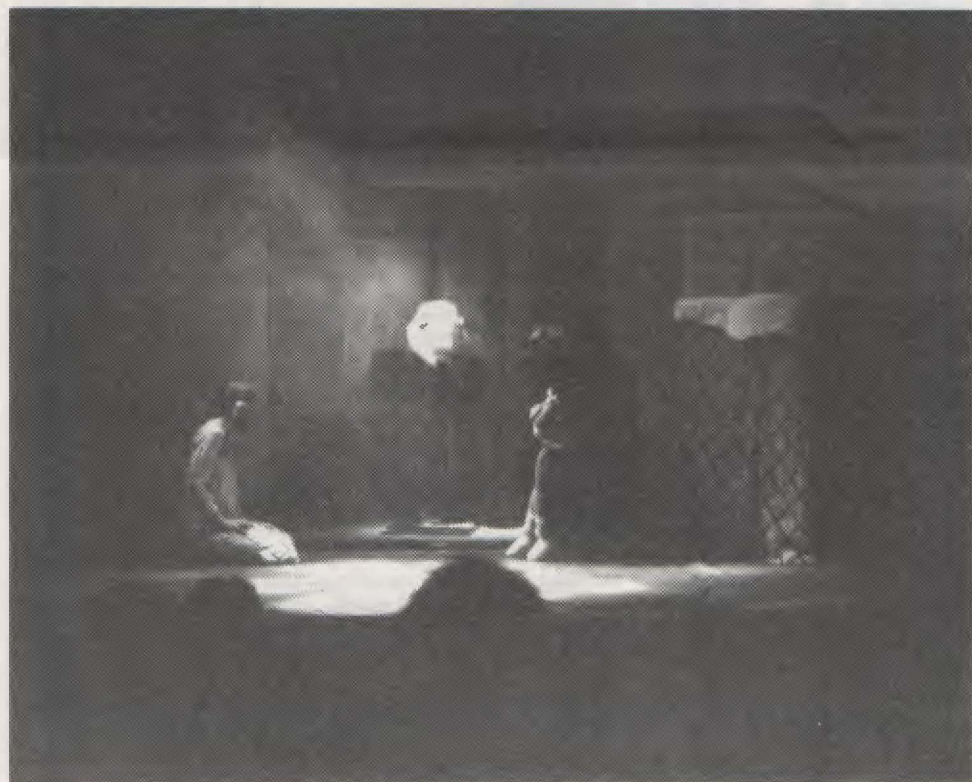
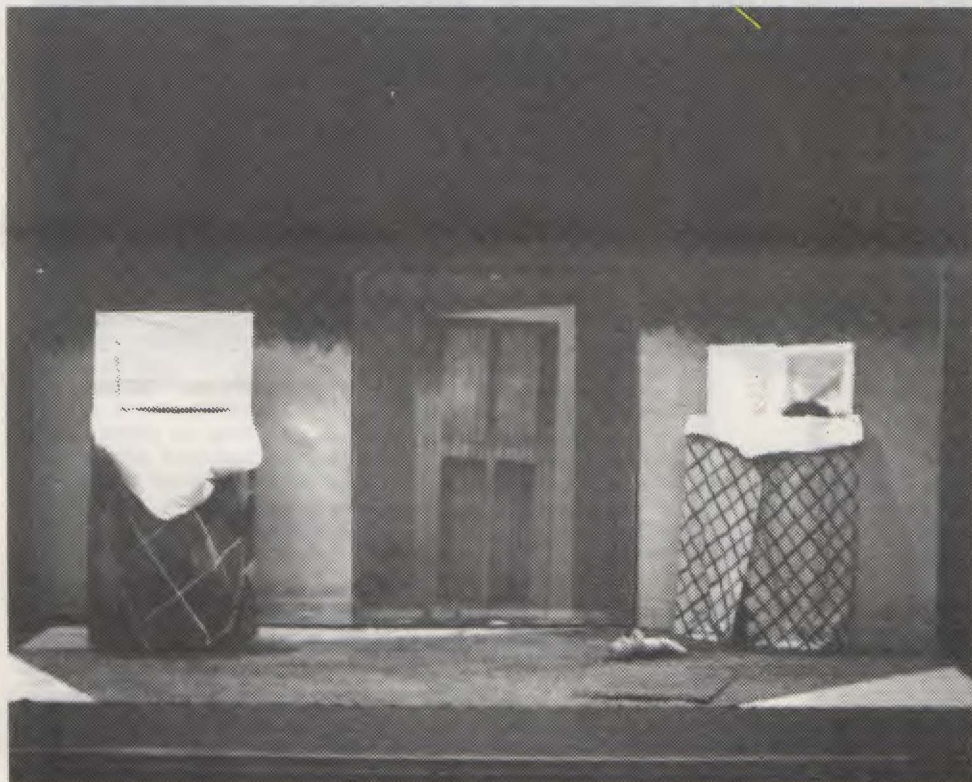
Her first attempt, Bizzartists, in partnership with another woman, was not a success - despite the charming name. Relations with her partner were difficult, and Gail's confidence and finances suffered a severe setback. Now, several months and a few waitressing jobs later, she is back on her feet and running, alone this time. Her new agency is called KINESIS, and currently on the books are two groups from Italy; two from England, one from Holland and one from Paris. The Paris group (pictured above) is called LES FRÈRES CONFETTI, and Gail describes them thus:

They deliver what they jokingly call 'post-new-wave humour'. The scene is set by a plastic palm tree, a background screen luminously coloured hot pink and green, and lit by neons. In the centre is a drum kit used to create excitement and punctuate the various segments. Two boxes roll out, to reveal miniature worlds of wonderful bad taste. Each one is inhabited by a rather rude little puppet person. The front-man has a creative genius for ad-libbing, and a hilarious energy is generated by the interaction between him, his two puppet antagonists and the public. With great gusto the Brothers Confetti satirise and abuse themselves and the audience. You enjoy being shocked by them, shouting back and having a laugh. Pent-up energies are released, and the pace is kept constantly fast by the drumming. All summer this group has been touring Germany, France and Italy.

Australian groups requiring management in Europe can contact KINESIS at Haarlemstraat 103,
1013 EM Amsterdam.
Telephone 020 - 27 74 66

Jandy Malone and the 9 O'Clock Tiger

Handspan Theatre



JANDY MALONE AND THE 9 O'CLOCK TIGER was adapted by Handspan from the book of the same name published last year by Melbourne author, Barbara Bolton. Producing Jandy was quite a challenge for Handspan. Though "The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek" had given them experience in adapting children's literature for the stage, the very serious psychological themes of JANDY presented them with an area they had never explored in four years of fulfilled shows. JANDY is heavy stuff. It deals with the fears of children, the things they imagine lurk in darkness, and the insecurities that feed these fears. Jandy is a ten-year-old girl who makes up stories for her younger brother Peter, but things have got out of hand, the story about the tasmanian tiger who comes out at 9 every night to prowl in their hallway has become too real. Peter urges Jandy to go down the hall and prove that the tiger isn't really there. As she struggles with her fear of the bogie she has created, we become acquainted with a deeper, harder problem for Jandy - the loss of her father. "I'm a lot like my dad, he tells stories too, and he plays the

piano, and once he made up a song about me. But he's gone to Queensland now." And isn't coming back.

Handspan has tackled this story with sensitivity and a great deal of dramatic ingenuity. The script relies on the actress playing Jandy to deliver long speeches that create and shift the mood of scenes and fill in the background to the narrative, while remaining convincingly ten years old. It is a very demanding role that Helen Rickards fulfils with strength and a devotion to fine detail. There are times when her best moments of depicting Jandy anxious would benefit by corresponding moments of relaxation to balance them, if Jandy is not to be seen as neurotic. Her problems and her ability to cope with them are the same as many ordinary kids and should not come over too extreme to be of personal relevance to children in the audience.

If the role of Jandy could be toned down a shade, the staging, on the other hand, could be augmented in one or two spots. What is there is superb, often startling. Ken Evans has created a set that can do a lot of things, and adapt easily to different moods. Jandy's vertical bed turns to become a puppet booth for a fairy tale; the hall door dissolves to reveal a black theatre image of Jandy's father, two hands playing phantom keyboards in the darkness; later the same dissolve reveals the face of the tiger, a larger than life silhouette with light shining through the eyes and snarling mouth; in the final scene the set opens and Jandy walks down the dark hallway, which is simple bare stage with cutout pieces of furniture floating into place - there is a feeling of danger, but also a wonderful sense of space and release. One scene lacks this kind of visual impact, and this is when Jandy and Peter take one of their many flights into fantasy and imagine a world made of jewels and sweets: it's all done with words - since their other imaginings are supported by props and sets, this scene falls flat in comparison. The visions of the tiger, while visually strong, could perhaps be given more power by the addition of sound - not necessarily music, but a sound effect, such as a gong or a piercing tone.

Peter Wilson manipulates Jandy's brother Peter, a child - life-size puppet, in black hood and costume. The introduction of the Japanese technique of the puppeteer moving about the stage sitting on a small, silent trolley has proved very successful in increasing his mobility while diminishing visual distraction from the puppet. Peter's manipulation is deft and believable throughout, and the scene in which Peter flies through the air on an umbrella is delightful puppetry.

It is in the interaction between Jandy the live actress and Peter the puppet that Handspan's skill with puppets shows itself to be considerable and solid. There is not a moment that the credibility fails, that Jandy and Peter cease to believe in each other, or the audience to accept their existence in the same world.

"It's funny, but when you look a tiger in the face, it isn't scary anymore" are Jandy's last words as she snuggles down in her bed to sleep. After the climax of the walk down the hall, the story's message is delivered quietly and neatly in a relaxing denouement. Her father won't be back, but Jandy will be strong enough to go on without him.

MAEVE VELLA



QUEENSLAND THEATRE OF PUPPETRY

—★—
This year marks their 10th anniversary.

In 1952 Mrs. Kay Littler began making puppets when living on a Great Barrier Reef island. What started as a hobby was soon to become a profession.

In 1958 she made the figures of "Gulliver's Travels" for the first of many fairy-tale windows commissioned by large Brisbane department stores. She also created the puppet character "Professor Daschund" for ABC TV. After moving to the Gold Coast, she approached the then Queensland Director of Cultural Activities, Mr. Arthur Creedy, to find a good use for her puppets. Mr. Creedy suggested she call a public meeting to form a puppet theatre.

At that meeting, in March 1971, chaired by Gerda Pinter, a live-theatre producer, various representatives of theatre, arts and craft groups promised their support. The Queensland Theatre of Puppetry, affectionately known as Q'TOP, was born.

Since then Q'TOP has become a well-established theatre and teaching centre. Its performances and workshops are popular with residents and holiday-makers alike.

The Gold Coast City Council helped to foster the progress of Q'TOP when, in 1976, it incorporated a puppet theatre into the construction of a Bandshell in attractive Macintosh Island Park. This building, seating 110 people, has now become the permanent venue for Q'TOP's "Puppets in the Park". A small entrance fee is charged to defray expenses.

Kay Littler, president and puppetmaker, and Gerda Pinter, producer and director, are the mainstays of Q'TOP. Under their dedicated leadership, Q'TOP has attracted a good number of active members. The most reliable and enthusiastic are those who can spare some hours during the daytime for rehearsals and performances. These are mainly people who have already made a contribution to the life of the community in a variety of professional and other fields. Q'TOP gives them a new and absorbing interest, challenging their imagination and manual skills. They learn to make and manipulate puppets, give them voices, make props, suggest ideas for presentation, write scripts, and have the pleasure of presenting their work to a receptive audience.

Q'TOP works mainly with glove and rod puppets. Sculpting in soft fabrics, Kay Littler has her own original method of creating strong and colourful characters, easily manageable and extremely durable. The puppets stand between 15 and 20 inches high, unless of course they represent ogres, giants, or such like characters.

Gerda Pinter's production methods vary. Puppets may appear in a traditional frame theatre, or they may perform across a simple screen. But Q'TOP's most characteristic presentation is a modified Bunraku style, which gives great freedom of movement. Hooded puppeteers, dressed in black, manipulate their puppets against a black background. Main action takes place on a chest-high open play-board, frequently complemented by a variety of black screens further back, which can be re-positioned during performance.

Thanks to Gwenda West, Q'TOP's well-organized and diplomatic stage manager, and her assistants, things run smoothly backstage.

Q'TOP is a properly constituted organization. Its affairs are handled by two elected committees - a General and a Production Committee.

All members work in a voluntary capacity, but as Richard Bradshaw says, "Make no mistake, this is a well-disciplined, sincere and talented group, and a model for other groups which might develop elsewhere."

FILM: A Puppet Pudding

Puppetry is in many ways an ideal medium for films - something Jim Henson and Frank Oz of the Muppets discovered years ago. Despite this, very few puppet films seem to be made, particularly in Australia. But now, Michael Creighton has brought us A PUPPET PUDDING, Australia's first big-budget puppet film. After several years performing with the Marionette Theatre of Australia, Michael took up the position of Special Projects Officer for the company and devised and directed this 20 minute documentary as his first project.

A PUPPET PUDDING outlines the historical context in which Norman Lindsay wrote the book, "The Magic Pudding" and examines the process of its adaptation into a puppet play.

"The Magic Pudding" has been in the Marionette Theatre's repertoire since the company's inception, as a string production and most recently with rod puppets. You could say it was as much a part of our national tradition as Lindsay's book. The story itself, written in 1911, is today somewhat old-fashioned - it's all fighting, chasing and eating - but during the film Richard Bradshaw, the company's director, explains the rationale for its presentation: "It's not much fun to live in a country unless you understand some of its traditions and stories."

In A PUPPET PUDDING Lindsay's drawings merge with puppet representations of themselves - from illustrated sequences in the book to action sequences in the play. Delightful scenes showing the Pudding being chased through real countryside by the Pudding Owners were shot on location at Springwood, in Sydney's Blue Mountains, at the Lindsay family estate. Similarly, the puppets appear around arm-chairs and through windows during the interview segments. These moments of puppets interacting with a 'live' environment were the highlights of the film for me, but I also gained interesting insights into the background of the story and the play from the interviews with Helen Glad, Lindsay's granddaughter, and with Eleanor Witcombe, who dramatized the story for the recent rod puppet version.

Scenes in the workshop where puppet-maker Ross Hill carefully recreates Lindsay's drawings as puppets, and segments showing the puppeteers in rehearsal lead to the conclusion of the film, in which "The Magic Pudding" is 'on stage' at the Sydney Opera House.

A PUPPET PUDDING is a film about the creation of a puppet play from a story. It is also an example of what can be done with puppets on film. I hope it reaches a wide audience, not only for its own sake, but for the impetus it might give to the puppet film industry.

The film is currently available for sale or rental on 16mm film or videocassette, and is distributed through the Tasmanian Film Corporation.

Michael Creighton is now working on a new puppet film, RUBBISH, in which a child makes puppets from the stuff he finds in the streets. It should be completed by early 1982.

HELEN RICKARDS

A French Festival

There was a festival of puppet theatre in Cergy-Pontoise, a little west of Paris, last March. The festival was chiefly of French companies, with two guest companies from Sweden and Holland. The occasion was useful for an outsider to get a perspective on the state and direction of French puppetry and to compare it with the situation in Britain.

I don't know an equivalent French word for 'puppetry' - they certainly never talk about 'marionettisme' and looked blankly when I used the word. If 'puppetry' means "the skills relating to puppet making and operating, and the appropriate use, in performance, of the puppet" which I believe it does, more or less, then there was little of it in the festival. The members of the Dutch company 'Triangel' are world masters of puppetry and their show, seen in Britain in 1979, was the undoubted triumph of the festival, as it was in Cergy-Pontoise. But to most of the French companies the title 'theatre of animation' applies more closely than does 'theatre of puppets'.

For example there was 'Antigone' by Sophocles: music by George Aperghis, director Hubert Jappelle: the piece consisted of live music, text intoned (there is no other word for it) by live actors, backed by large two dimensional oblong shapes, each with a mask above it and two enormous foam heads (rather like the playing cards in 'Alice in Wonderland'). The scenery was a rail hung with large white tapestries with patterned borders in black. The 'puppets' had no movement except that each mask could swivel from side to side and the whole 'playing card' could walk a few steps downstage, or sideways, or upstage again. The operators stood invisibly behind these 'figures' which were about eight feet high. The audience sat in stunned silence, many of us slept, but not too deeply or we risked falling off the benches on which we sat. I have to admit, though, that the applause at the end was enthusiastic, or perhaps it was just a manifestation of intense relief that it was all over. If there's a theatre of masochism, this was it.

'Ce Soir Je Sors' (This evening I'm going out) consisted of three performers with life-size puppets attached to body, hands and feet. The performers sang and danced so of course the cloth figures danced too. The music was loud, all of the twenties and thirties, and very lively. The songs were indifferently sung, the dances indifferently choreographed and the figures ugly. It was the kind of show which delayed for many years my interest in puppetry, i.e. aesthetically unpleasing characters jiggling about to recorded music - and as there appeared to be no hope of any plot development or indeed any variation whatsoever in the entertainment, I left early.

'L'Epopée de Grallon' by the company Les Termajies, an epic poem about a certain King Grallon of Brittany, was set in the 5th century when Christianity warred against the old Celtic religion. Here there was a certain atmosphere and a certain splendour in the performance, but the figures were large sculptures with no movement beyond those of chess figures. The performers were merely required to pick them up and move them around the set. Theatrically this would have been perfectly valid had there been more tension and action in the unfolding of the story. But, although there was certainly the movement of inanimate objects, it wasn't 'puppetry'. But it was undoubtedly theatre.

Michael Meschke's visiting company, Marionettearten, from Sweden, presented a version of 'The Threepenny Opera'. The visual style recalled his 'Ubu Roi', many of the figures being body masks and large cartoon cutouts. There were not more than two figures which were articulated and which gave the opportunity for skilled manipulation, although one life-size plywood figure showed an astonishing range of movement and was brilliantly handled. Otherwise the show was all recorded music, live actors and a live pianist, well executed, interesting theatre, but almost entirely without puppetry.

"So what?" you may ask. "Are you trying to limit the definition of what is and what is not puppet theatre? Just because some figures are more like playing cards or sculptures than articulated objects on strings or rods should the plays in which they appear be banned from a puppet festival?" If I hesitate in replying it's not because I wish to exclude anything or anyone from anything: theatre is theatre, and the horizons of theatre are limitless and theatre is constantly changing and evolving. The problem lies in the words 'puppet' and 'puppetry' which I think impose their own limits. We christened our journal "Animations" for the very reason that we, the Puppet Centre, did not wish to impose arbitrary limits on our subject matter. We believe this must help the puppet theatre to emerge from a ghetto in which, a few years ago, it seemed to be disappearing up its own specialisation.

It may be helpful to compare the evolution in modern puppet theatre to that in dance: where once, quite recently, our ballet companies presented almost nothing but classical ballet, based on the Russian tradition of training and choreography, now there is 'dance theatre' and 'contemporary dance' based on a whole new language of movement which, I dare say, would give Petipa the horrors. "Call that ballet?" he might say. "No, call it dance, or theatre of movement" Merce Cunningham would reply.

So why not 'theatre of animation', rather than 'puppet theatre', just to keep pace with evolution? Or would we rather call it all 'puppetry', to include the solid sculptures, the body masks, the playing cards? But then, when we see an exquisitely manipulated 'Mermaid' at the Little Angel or a show by Triangel, are we debasing their coinage? Do the classical ballet exponents hate to hear the word 'ballet' applied to modern dance?

The debate will continue. But the French festival was a triumphant proof of the vitality of their modern 'puppet theatre'. Many young adventurous minds are applied to it; though I saw few wholly satisfactory productions. Standards were generally higher than Britain, certainly as far as ideas and theatre craft were concerned. It was also proof that more money was available for productions there than on this side of the Channel, where puppetry is still starved of subsidy.

I'll conclude with a brief description of a production which was forbidden to all under 13 years, and was truly an 'X' certificate show. It was called 'Le Gardien d'Images' and was performed by three young men, La Compagnie Daru.

It took place in a 'Museum of Womanhood', and used black theatre techniques, recorded sound, (no dialogue, just sound effects and music) and projected slides. Technically, the production was almost faultless, apart from dreadfully over-amplified sound, but the content was highly controversial with a force of impact that left at least one spectator in tears at the end. Mary Whitehouse would have been shaken to the foundations.

All the figures in the museum showcases were old-fashioned dolls, or mannequins, or their separate parts, an arm, a leg, a pair of breasts, a head. The action took place when the museum was deserted, at night, with the museum Keeper free to roam about the exhibits, to handle them, to bring them to life for the indulgence of his most basic fantasies.

Woman as object is what the play demonstrates, and the Keeper, a huge uniformed faceless creature having only a vast, pendulous, phallic nose and a pair of giant grasping hands to identify him, got the dolls to act out every erotic and servile role his sad little mind imagined. When one of his creations protested, answered back, refused to perform for him, the doll was discarded, assaulted, smashed, even blinded. The final image was of the moon, a woman's weeping face with only sockets for eyes, shedding her light over the devastation wrought by the Keeper of the dolls.

The atavistic violence inherent in the dismembering of a pink, curly-headed, mechanical doll was breathtaking; the 'blood' painted on the plastic body revolting. The piece was to some highly suspect extent a celebration of obscenity, and by the end - far too long delayed - one was not certain how far the creators of the piece objected to or sympathised with the plight of subjugated femininity.

Nevertheless, it was an excellent theme for a puppet play, and often dramatically exciting (though it needed to be shortened). Many of the French puppet companies produce regular work for adults, though they usually include children's productions in their repertoire for their bread and butter. And the level of invention of the children's shows was, though it distresses me to say so, a long way ahead of nearly all that we are to date producing in Britain. The French have exploited the possibilities of the inanimate object in theatre far more thoroughly than we have. Where is their inspiration? Better financial backing, or native genius? I fear there is not much doubt about the answer.

PENNY FRANCIS





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FRONT, HELEN RICKARDS; BACK, KEN EVANS
IN JANDY MAIONE & THE 9 O'CLOCK TIGER