

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

the puppet in contemporary theatre, film & media



\$5.95 US \$7.95 CAN



The Avant Garde

Stein, Taeuber-Arp, Depero: *Who's your Dada!*

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

issue no. 40

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Puppetry International is a publication of UNIMA-USA, Inc.



American Center of the
UNION INTERNATIONALE de la MARIONNETTE

Promoting international friendship and understanding through the art of puppetry.

c/o Center for Puppetry Arts 1404 Spring Street, NW
Atlanta, GA 30309 USA 404-873-3089 www.unima-usa.org

Puppetry International is funded, in part, by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts



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On the COVER:

Moby Dick, by Blair Thomas & Co.
photo: Joe Mazza – Brave Lux *see page 30*

SLAM:

The New Avant-Garde Puppetry

by Vanessa Gilbert

Providence, RI has always been a strange city that thrives on and in its shadows. Those shadows (and the cracks between the ivy-covered towers on College Hill and the soot-covered mills of Olneyville and other villages of the city) bred life. Providence supported gay bars long before it was safe to fly a rainbow flag. It nurtured warehouse shows before and after the reign of Lightning Bolt.¹¹ It fostered H.P. Lovecraft and his dark-loving creatures. On the shadowy western edge of downtown Providence, beyond the reach of the universities' ivied halls, but within range of their more adventurous students, was a street where the real estate was cheap enough. And on this strip that would eventually trade its underage prostitutes and empty storefronts for valets and eateries, a small theater thrived in the shadow of a large theater by exploring the limits of its small black box. This was Perishable Theatre, whose mission was to create and present new and wide-ranging performance in Providence, including such genre-bending offerings as the MA & PA (Multi-Media and Performance Art) Festival and plays by living writers. It was where I worked: my artistic laboratory. Within its shadows, something grew.

The seed for *Blood from a Turnip*, Perishable's second longest running program, sprouted in 1997, as my design collaborator Jeremy Woodward and I became more curious about puppetry in general and who was using puppets in our area. I had been directing theater and noticing that I was consistently employing performing objects in my work. Jeremy, trained as an architect and working as a scenic designer, delighted in the ways that puppets created a bond between a performer, object, and an audience, encouraging audiences to engage their imaginations and wonder.

Whereas we were all once children who turned sticks into wands, built sandcastles, made dioramas, played with dolls, [and] built forts ... we understand that we were once all artists without knowledge of the term and once made art without knowledge of its distinction from life. (David Higgins: *Puppetism Internationale 2012 Manifesto*)

We started performing as The Lunchcart Circus, the "only circus in the world with a snack for the audience at the end of the show," a direct homage to Alexander Calder's puppet

circus, but with foam rod puppets, huge foam mustaches and an embarrassment of foam-like candy circus peanuts. We also participated in an annual community May Day celebration complete with a Mummer's Play in which anthropomorphized Chinese Zodiac animals represented through masks and costumes played out a timely social or political problem. Each Halloween we worked with the same folks on a séance, paying homage to those who had passed away over the preceding year by rendering the deceased in puppet form, usually a metonymic visual pun or a grouping of objects that evoked the dead celebrity. We, and seemingly all the artists we knew, were deep in the flow of performing objects. Together, Jeremy and I dreamed up a venue for all the artists we were meeting who were finding their way to puppetry. In this way, *Blood from a Turnip*, a "late night puppet salon for adult-style audiences, with charming and personable musical interludes," was created.

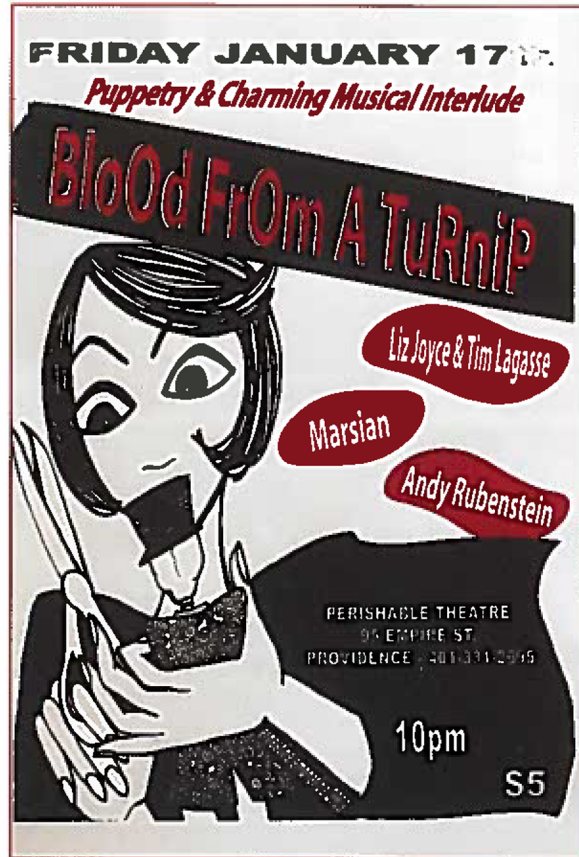
Hospitality is both the grease and the point. The sharing of food and shelter lubricates the exchange of ideas, which are the building blocks of performance. (Gilbert: *Manifesto for a Hospitable Theater*)

Over 16 years, *Blood from a Turnip* adhered to a simple set of guidelines, outlined below. All we changed were the frequency of the outings, from monthly in our first year to 4-5 times annually.

1. *Blood from a Turnip* would be a salon, not a slam. Slam connoted competition and we wanted to create a space where there was no pressure to win at art.
2. We would welcome anyone who had a puppet show or thought that they had a puppet show whether they considered themselves puppeteers or not. It was important to open the door to people who were new to puppetry in addition to the seasoned professionals. We adopted an "If you are so moved to do a show, we will present you" attitude that delivered some exciting and wonderful surprises over the 16 years that we presented the program.
3. We would limit the acts to 10 minutes. While some artists tested our (and our audiences') limits, most artists came in around 5 minutes per show, a quality that we found more and more as the puppet slam circuit was established.

4. We would be a late night event; we wanted to serve adult audiences both to reclaim puppetry as a form for adult enjoyment as well as provide an alternative to going to a club. We wanted to make watching short form puppet shows as ubiquitous and as accessible as going to hear a band.
5. We would celebrate art forms besides puppetry. We asked bands and solo musicians to provide "charming and personable musical interludes" between the acts. We commissioned a single graphic artist to design and print posters for an entire season, giving each year a hallmark "look" while increasing the portfolio of the artist.
6. We would provide a communal meal before the show and that meal would always feature a dish with turnip as a main ingredient. Although this tradition fell away as people's schedules became more packed, I have learned so many ways to incorporate a turnip into a meal. Hit me up if you want recipes.
7. We would pay all artists. While we couldn't afford actual artists' fees, we pledged to divide the proceeds among the participating artists. As the Puppet Slam Network and its grants were established, this was easier to do, making us less reliant on admission fees.

From the very first event, we knew we'd plugged into a rich conduit of energy. Our shows attracted students studying in the Puppetry



Program at UConn looking for performance opportunities and as well as painting and sculpture students from Rhode Island School of Design, whose inquiries into their own practice pushed them into time-based art with performing objects. Our first show featured a vagabond from the stand-up circuit who performed alongside his own televised image. He would not be the last person from the stand-up circuit to find a home among our puppet-loving audience. Over the years, a carpenter was moved to create a wearable replica of an American Revolutionary War frigate to use as his stage and a film/video artist created a toy theatre space for others to use called the Theatre of Hope and Intimacy. Dancers and animators, visual artists and musicians, all used Blood from a Turnip to explore how their bodies and objects could merge to tell new stories. And artists already dedicated to working with puppets found a new audience in the delighted people of Rhode Island.

One memorable performance consisted of a single person, covered from head to toe in a coverall that resembled a crocheted blanket, constructing a life-size game piece in the form of a spinner, upon the needle of which he placed a series of small, cast plastic barnyard animals. He then spun the needle, gently. Once an animal had fallen, the performer consulted a Fisher Price See n' Say Farmer Says, selected the image of the animal that had fallen from the board, then pulled the See n' Say cord, triggering the sound of the chosen animal. This continued until all the animals had fallen off the board at which time the artist left the space, eschewing any applause. Dealing with scale and found objects and expectation,

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the performance didn't have much in common with what most people considered a puppet show, but for Blood from a Turnip, the work fit right in.

Why? Because we were curious about what a puppet is, what a puppet could be, and what a puppet isn't. Our attempts to trouble the definition of puppetry were meant to encourage more people to "dream" in puppet. So, because we loved puppets of all types and because we were excited to see what other people might create under the guise of puppetry, we did something that seems revolutionary in retrospect, although simply quite natural at the time. We created a stage that veterans and novices would share equally, and on which they could explore the chinks between disciplines or the shadows on the edge of their own practices.

This commitment to being both in the middle of the flow and on the fringe was maintained through a cycling roster of MCs, including Evan O'Television (the video ventriloquist who performed at the first BfaT event), Marsian DeLellis, and David Higgins (who, like many others, answered the closing call at every salon to go build a show and transition from audience to performer). Blood from a Turnip functioned as



an invitation and a deadline for nascent puppeteers creating a project. It gave veteran puppeteers a chance to flex new muscles. It provided a safe haven for children's performers to tell darker or racier stories. It invited visual artists to explore storytelling in new ways. It dissolved the barrier between creator and enjoyer of art. And, it collected people together from myriad artistic disciplines (as well as those who didn't identify as artists) to form a community, as they suddenly found themselves in an affinity group centered around telling stories and communicating ideas with objects and bodies, sometimes objects that looked like bodies.

Perishable Theatre closed in 2011, and Blood from a Turnip ceased hosting salons in 2013, but I feel their presence in the shadows constantly.

Vanessa Gilbert is a interdisciplinary artist and creative producer. She recently completed an MFA in Performance and Interactive Media Arts at Brooklyn College. For more information about Gilbert and her work, visit

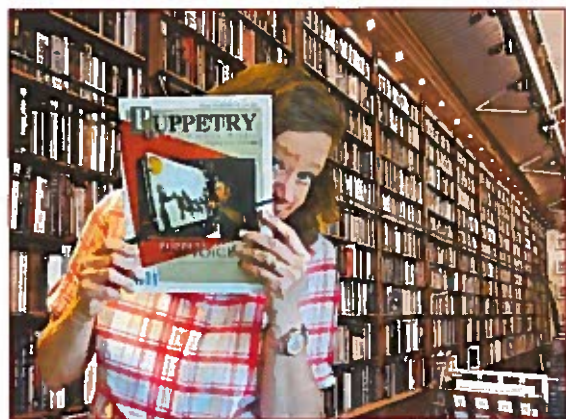
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