

PUPPETS AT THE CHILDREN'S THEATRE OF CHARLOTTE

CONTRIBUTED BY CTC STAFF

Magda Guichard is a gifted puppet designer and builder with Children's Theatre of Charlotte (CTC). In 2011, she completed her MFA in production and costume design from Savannah College of Art and Design. In 2013, her first season at CTC, she was assigned to create a puppet for *The Reluctant Dragon*. Later, there was a 20-foot dragon for *Shrek, The Musical*. She has gone on to design and build puppets for about a dozen productions, added to her duties of designing costumes for many productions at CTC. Cindy Taylor, part of the staff at CTC, said of Guichard, "She's bold in her craft but humble in her nature."

The penguins for *Mr. Popper's Penguins* are especially memorable, as are Guichard's puppets for *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*. She created animals from a curiously small mouse, to a mid-sized and elderly Amos, to large jungle-sized creatures. *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*, by Philip and Erin Stead and winner of the 2011 Caldecott Medal, was the source for a play commissioned by CTC. It is a story about the joys of friendship, with lots of animals, portrayed mostly by puppets. Zookeeper Amos visits his animal friends at the zoo, running races with the tortoise, caring for a particularly shy penguin, and reading stories to an owl. One day, Amos is too sick to



Puppets from *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*. Photo: John Merrick

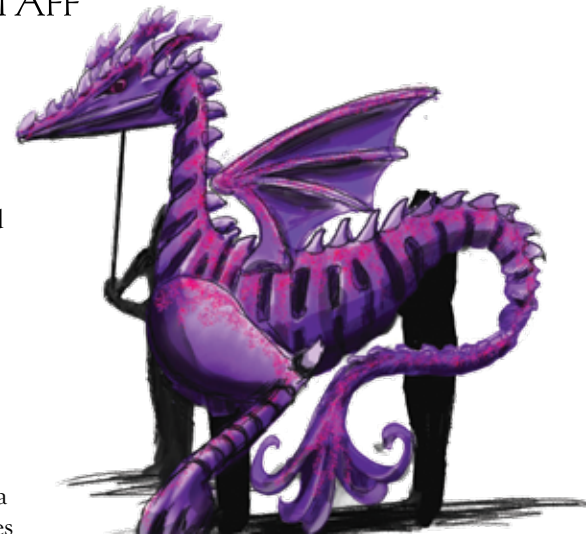


Puppets from *Mr. Popper's Penguins*. Photo: Donna Bise

visit his zoo friends, but fortunately, the animals know just how to help. The story fits nicely into the theater's theme, called "The Kindness Project," and the puppets were designed with a very specific goal in mind, to spread kindness.

Other shows with puppets include *Caroline, My Wonderful Birthday Suit*, and *Go, Dog, Go!* Occasionally, Guichard reimagines puppets so they can fit in a trailer, enabling shows to tour across North Carolina and South Carolina.

Even after nine years of building puppets, Magda says, "I'm somewhat new to the puppet world. Growing up near West Palm Beach, Florida, I always liked drawing clothes or costumes. I loved *Sesame Street* and the Muppets, but at the time, my focus was on costumes. In high school, I'd make Halloween costumes for my friends. It was at CTC that designing and fabricating puppets became important



Dragon from *Shrek, the Musical*. Photo: John Merrick

to me. Visiting my parents, who live most of the year in France, I was lucky enough to see the puppets of La Machine. Their work is so amazing, using classic techniques on such a gigantic scale. Roger Titley from South Africa does work that is awesome in its perceived simplicity, and I drew from that for a couple of pieces. I repeatedly watch Adam Kreutinger's YouTube videos for help on some mechanics. London-based puppet designer Jimmy Grimes has a new book that wonderfully breaks down the process for a newbie like me, but otherwise I research and test as much as I have time for and hope for the best when I hit a deadline."

Children's Theatre of Charlotte was founded in 1948 and established their first permanent home theater in 1971, and then an even better facility in 2003. In 2008, they produced *BFG (Big Friendly Giant)*, collaborating with Grey Seal Puppets.

Of course, there are other prominent children's theaters that are puppet friendly. Children's Theatre Company, Minneapolis, uses puppets as part of their teaching to engage children in the delights of theater. Seattle Children's Theatre is another company that has used many puppets. Doug Paasch (1959-2009) served as puppet master before his untimely passing. Since 2014, Annett Mateo has designed and built puppets for the Seattle company. And in Charlotte, Guichard will keep designing costumes and puppets. As her creativity continues to grow, audiences are eager to see what she will do next.

SCENE BETWEEN

By Monica Leo

It's been a challenging year for the St. Louis Puppetry Guild. Weeks before the Great Plains Puppet Train, our regional festival, two of their most active members died within days of each other. First, they lost their president Stan Gulick, whose obituary appears in *Puppetry Journal*, Summer 2022, and then Jeanie Bryan. Jeanie was 37, a rising star, when her sudden death robbed us of a piece of our art form's future. Two years earlier, they lost another pivotal member, Tom Bonham. Last April, Jason Kohner, a newer member, passed away. Jason, a musician, focused on puppetry for adults, interspersing his rock-and-roll shows with puppet vignettes. He was the victim of a bicycle accident.

These losses might be enough to break most groups, but the stalwart St. Louisans grieved their losses and continued their work on the festival. Dan (Digger) Romano organized the workshops while Michelle O'Donnell Gulick, Stan's wife, took charge of the festival exhibits. As always, they had the full support of their guild.

The St. Louis Guild stands out as an unusually tight-knit, supportive group. Formed in 1939 and chartered in 1963, they worked on four national festivals, 1941, 1947, 1968, and 1975. Marilyn Myers, Michelle's mom, exemplified the guild's positive vibe. For decades, Marilyn was our region's "Puppet Mama." She specialized in education, creating scores of workshops and programs for kids. She nurtured all of us as beginning puppeteers. She invited Teri Jean and me to perform at our first festival and took the same chance with many of our peers.

Her daughters are much like her. No grass grows under the feet of the Myers gals. When Stan was diagnosed with cancer and subjected to a brutal round of chemo and radiation, he and Michelle already had a full summer of shows, workshops, and residencies booked. Older sister Maureen stepped up, learned

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Stan's parts, and even wrote some additional music for their new show, *The Three Little Fishies* (and the Shark). Stan was delighted, insisting, "The show must go on!"

After Stan's death in July, Maureen and Michelle finished the tour. Digger stepped into Stan's role as guild president. Work on the September festival continued.

Digger does many of the same kinds of gigs that Michelle did with Stan. Their shows and residencies for preschool through middle school are booked

through Springboard to Learning and Young Audiences. They meet with each group once a week for nine weeks in classrooms, summer camps, and after-school settings. The kids, even the youngest preschoolers, make puppets and learn to tell stories with them. At the end of each residency, they perform for another class or, in the case of the older kids, for the school.

Digger's shows—folk tales and original stories—use traditional hand puppets and shadow puppets. His troupe, Blaque Berry Puppets, includes an artistic partner, Sandra Griffin, an artist and illustrator. Sandra designs and cuts the shadow puppets; Digger adds the controls.

Bob Kramer's Marionette Studio was established in 1963 and has operated continuously since, presenting shows in-house and touring to other venues. Bob, the primary marionette craftsman, had dreamed of being a puppeteer since early childhood. He tends to be the silent partner. His co-puppeteer, Dug Felch, has a background in theater and excels at spreading good cheer and news about upcoming shows. Dug does most of the marketing for the studio. Young interns round out the staff.

Most of the Kramer shows use carefully crafted, wood-carved marionettes, performing in cabaret style, with their characters dancing, skating, and cavorting through musical numbers. Occasionally, a rod puppet appears over a backdrop. As often as not, it's Marvin the Moose announcing the next act or telling a joke. In October, the guild held their meeting after a cabaret-style show at the Kramer Studio.

Papa and Jackie Wright are longtime members performing as a storytelling/puppetry/percussion duo. Papa does percussion and puppets; Jackie is a dynamic storyteller. Together they specialize in performing interactive shows for young children. Jackie and the audience interact with the puppets, and Papa somehow manages to work the puppets and add percussion!

And then there's Doris Benz! Doris is in her 90s now, not very ambulatory, so she can't come to festivals. When she was able, she attended every available festival and event. She was positive, wise, and insightful. I always enjoyed hearing her comments about shows, workshops, and life in general. I got a note from her recently. She wrote "I'm so sorry that I can't get out and see my friends as I can hardly walk now...It's the pits as I'd like to do it all over again."

Remember to take the time to enjoy your life! Then tell me about it, so I can write about you! monica@puppetspuppets.com

