



# San Francisco Bay Area Puppeteers' Guild **CELEBRATING 50 YEARS!**

February 2011



*Vintage Photo: Guild members Ralph and Bruce Chesse and puppets*

## **Guild History Celebrating 50 Years of Puppetry**

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2010-2011 Board of Directors  
and Guild Officers

President  
Conrad Bishop  
eye@independenteye.org  
707-824-4307

Vice President  
Art Grueneberger  
PuppetArt@aol.com  
916-424-4736

Treasurer  
Valerie Nelson  
magicalmoonshine@gmail.com  
707-363-4573

Secretary  
Sharon Clay  
sharonclay@comcast.net  
925-462-4518

Membership Officer  
Michael Nelson  
magicalmoonshine@gmail.com  
707-363-4573

Newsletter Editor  
Talib Huff  
tahuff@dcn.org  
916-484-0606

Barbara Grillo  
bgrillo@contracosta.edu  
510 964-1513

Randal Metz  
puppetcomp@aol.com  
510-569-3144

Jesse Vail  
jessevail@gmail.com  
510-672-6900

Librarian  
Lee Armstrong  
images@vom.com  
707-996-9474

Webmaster  
Matt Baum  
mattymatt@gmail.com

## “Water Works” at Guild Holiday Party

Michael Nelson

On January 29 the guild held its annual holiday party at Christ Presbyterian Church in San Rafael. The event enjoyed a lovely location, excellent food, a puppet display, a raffle and gift exchange. But the highlight of the event was when a full house of guild members and members of the public got to watch Images in Motion’s Lee Armstrong and Kamala Portuges perform “Water Works.” For decades Images in Motion has been lending their talents to puppet production for video, and their shelves are weighted with the Emmys and other awards they have won for their media work. With this recent “live” show, I realize that up until now they have been depriving us of their immense talent for live performance. The show was beautifully crafted both in the building and in the story arc.

I must admit that with water conservation being a big news topic these days, I expected a show with the title of Water Works to be about water conservation. Instead we are presented with a lovely story of a friendship between a boy and a duck lovingly portrayed through the four seasons. Water is a theme throughout the play and the friendship, as the boy and duck water plants together, swim in their pool, grapple with a sunken shopping cart (that becomes a kind of trash monster in a beautiful and delightful shadow sequence,) a winter snow play scene and then when spring rolls around again, we learn with the boy that the duck is a GIRL when she shows up with a brood of little, yellow ducklings. The story itself is a simple one of devotion and friendship, with the more significant focus being on the characters and relationship between the boy (wonderfully voiced by Kamala) and the duck (wonderfully “quacked” by Lee!)

The design of the show was clean, very attractive and meticulous. The puppets were built to move well, and in the expert hands of Lee and Kamala, they achieved their goal exceptionally. The show was full of moments of sublime hand puppetry (comparable to the kind of fine manipulation we see at a Luman Coad show.) One outstanding moment of manipulation was when a snowman is ice skating and then falls. We can’t see the ice or the skates or even the feet of the puppet, but there is no doubt that the puppet is skating and not only has skates, but legs that alternately stretch out, knees that bump out of the costume, and balance issues until he falls in a “poof” of snowflakes. The rod puppet boy is always alive and moves expressively throughout the show. The duck,



*Post performance at “Water Works”  
Puppeteer Kamala Portuges points out the fine points of the rod puppet boy, held by audience member Fred Riley III.*



*Children in the audience crowd forward at a chance to meet the cast and puppeteers Lee Armstrong and Kamala Portuges.*



*Backstage Lee shows off a watering can mechanism to Benny Buettner.*

without arms or legs, didn't have a lot to move but was very lively anyway, and had a very funny couple of moments when the boy did not see the duck who was right beside her, but the audience did and called out "Beside you!". The boy did not react to the audience and look over at the duck, but the duck, amusingly, looks to the side to see who they are referring to. Very funny little touch.

The scenery is changed from season to season by a pair of red gloved hands that are so expressive and friendly that we feel we know them by the end of the show, and so well liked that the children in the audience wanted to meet them after the show. The little duck has another very wonderful moment when after its bath it is drying off and wants privacy from the boy who obligingly turns away. Once the duck is dry but no more dressed to our eyes than before, all modesty is done and the show moves on.

There are some great moments of puppet "magic realism" throughout the show, such as flowers reacting to the super fertilizer water and the kiddie pool opening up to a much larger underwater world that we see on a lower stage level through the magic of shadow puppetry.

Puppeteers have a stock of little stage tricks that we use over and over because they work with the audiences. Sometimes these can get formulaic for those who have seen a lot of children's shows. At various times throughout Water Works I thought I saw one of those formula moments coming and was delighted to see the action take a different turn time after inventive time. Instead of relying on proven formula, Lee and Kamala seemed determined to base the action on the actual personalities of the characters and the real situations unfolding on stage. What a delight! And the performers had no fear of spreading seasonal detritus all over the stage, so that by the end of the show, the inside of the stage was littered with a substantial amount of snow flakes, autumnal leaves (there is a marvelous leaf-blower scene in the show where leaves are flying about the stage) and what-not that needed cleaning up afterwards.

Let us hope that these talented TV puppeteers continue to delight us with live shows in the future. And if you didn't get to see the show, check out the guild calendar and go to a show. It is well worth seeing.



*The cast, at rest backstage.*

## Junior Guild Member Wins at Film Festival

Michael Nelson

Junior Guild Member Eli Nash has performed at guild meetings, written insightful reviews for the guild newsletter, and now once again surprises us with his talent. Who knew Eli was also a film maker with skills in film editing and stop motion animation! His work is showcased as the promo video for the California Independent Film Festival. You can see the promo film at [www.caiff.org](http://www.caiff.org). Regarding the festival itself, Eli says, "For any of you who are interested in films, the festival is a great place to see some wonderful independent films and to watch an "iron filmmaker" contest in which contestants receive "secret ingredients" and have only 24 hours to incorporate them into a 3 minute film!"

Eli got involved with the film fest this last October when he took three films he made to the Danville International Children's Film Festival,



*A scene from Eli Nash's promo film for the California Independent Film Festival.*

which is related to the California Independent Film Festival. He won the award for best claymation for one of his films. Afterwards he was approached by one of the festival coordinators about creating the promo for the whole festival. He built the set and projector from cardboard and paint, and the figure from a wire skeleton coated by modeling clay with beads for eyes. He then filmed the entire piece in three hours, posing the figure, taking a picture, and then reposing, again, and again, and again.

## Review of "Big Bad Bruce"

Elisheva Hart

Images in Motion's "Big Bad Bruce", a suspenseful story told with hand, rod and shadow puppets has just finished a tour of libraries. I caught lucky #7 in the Sonoma County tour. This fun classic story about Big Bad Bruce, who happens to be a Ge-normous Bully of a Brown Bear, ROCKS!

Intended for grades K-2, the audience also was thoroughly sprinkled with toddlers, who loved the peek-a-boo sequences, "Look out behind you! etc" and did their own thing in relatively few places because of the show's pacing. The age-appropriate viewers, all of whom had either read or heard the story a zillion times, were totally focused on the story, the action, and the solution.

Kamela Portuges and Lee Armstrong (SFBAPG members of course) have a wonderful interpretation of this classic book by Bill Peet, both visually and in storyline. As a puppeteer, some of the fun elements to me were seeing rodless boulders being tossed around on stage; the amount of suspense in the production which peaked, fell and peaked again and again; a witch mixing up a magic potent before our wondering eyes; and the best manipulated pair of flitting/flirting butterflies I've ever seen! One trouble with staging a performance with major "bad guys" is that this character is usually much more interesting and exciting and seductive than the hero. (In a gentle way this is shown in Mickey Mouse, whom I adored as a tike vs Donald Duck which was my fave at the 2nd and 3rd grade level, I being much too old to let it all rip with tantrums like he did! Mickey now seemed as banal as milk toast.) Years ago there was a puppetry group on the East Coast who won parent, etc, awards for an anti-drug version of Pinocchio. I finally had an opportunity to see it at a P of A Festival. Guess what? To me, Pinocchio-unlike the book original-was very much a Namby Pamby Goody Two Shoes while the drug scene, instead of causing disgust, was brilliantly full of action, blacklite, psychedelic and probably way cool music! Did the award presenters ever go to performances and see where the intended audience attention went? Luckily, Bill Peet and Images in Motion have a very bullying Bruce whom not many audience members would like to imitate (or even be in the same class with) PLUS a strong heroine in the Witch, faithfully rendered into 3-D as a puppet complete with spiky, messy feather hair which gives incidental movement to the puppet. She and B. B. Bruce are equally strong and well developed characters, which adds to the suspense and interest. The phrase "That's how you deal with a big old bully....you shrink him down to size" sums up the whole show -but- does Miniature Bruce change his ways? See the show, read the book, I told you it was suspenseful! Another good thing about this show was the insertion now and again into the script of "you good folks in Petaluma...." which could only be accomplished through the joys of live, not taped, voices. Also the integration between performers and audience of pacing, amping up/playing down action, etc. is another perk of this live show. They were wise enough to cut one character out since it added one too many puppets on stage for four arms to manage, and the cat really wasn't necessary to the plot. Transitions were illustrated in a brief beautiful shadow sequence, one underwater and one in a forest. The main characters, Mini Bruce and the Witch were black silhouettes, as was a tree trunk and an owl. The fish were colored and shaped plastic. Silhouettes are always stronger visually because of their solidness and presence (fyi). When Kamela was talking with the kids while waiting for the audience to gather, she asked them to tell her what books they had been reading and really carried on conversations with them, not just "popcorn" [random words thrown about] responses. This was interesting for the adults to hear and the children were thrilled to have an opportunity to talk with such a Special and Important person, the Puppeteer! After this morning show was finished and packed, we took time to relocate to a coffee shop for drinks and chat. We chose Peet's, possibly an homage to author Bill Peet and/or to excellent beverages. Lee had given me a survey which they give to the hosting librarians and of

course I took notes on places in the performance which could be adjusted and tweaked to polish the "gild" on the lily. We went over these and tossed around suggestions. Take what you will and ignore the rest, is my motto. As real pros who are always interested in giving their best, Lee and Kamela graciously thanked me for my input and I thank them for the opportunity. And the chai. (Should I mention the 2 chocolate caramels which I had to eat because not a one of the other goodies was gluten free?)

## Scholarships Available for Puppet Festival

The Puppeteers of America still has plenty of scholarships to award for the upcoming National Puppetry Festival in Atlanta, Georgia, July 12-17, 2011! So we've extended our application deadline to April 1st!

P of A scholarships cover registration fees for the festival. Housing, food and transportation are the responsibility of the scholarship recipient. Scholarships are awarded in three categories: Youth (ages 12 to 17); Young Adult (ages 18 to 21); and Adult (ages 22 and older).

Go to [scholarships](#) to check out eligibility and application requirements! Don't delay!! This is a limited time offer!

To be awarded a scholarship you must be a member of Puppeteers of America.

You can [join PofA on-line](#).



Festival Registration:

Current Puppeteers of America Members

Early Registration (through March 31): \$375.00

Regular Registration (April 1 through May 31): \$425.00

Registration on or after June 1, if available: \$475.00

Non-members (includes membership in Puppeteers of America)

Early Registration (through March 31): \$430.00

Regular Registration (April 1 through May 31): \$480.00

Registration on or after June 1, if available: \$530.00

### Guild Membership Tops 110 Members!

As of January 30 the guild membership reached 110, the largest membership we have enjoyed for years (and we are not even half way through our membership year!)

**From Puppet Art Theatre:** If people are interested in viewing our process of building a new educational puppet show for Napa Humane they can "Like" the Puppet Art Theater Co. Facebook Page and see over a hundred photos showing the various stages of the puppets being built. Go to <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Puppet-Art-Theater-Co/126020881399> and click "Like." There's also some fun video of puppets on the site.

## Guild Member's Puppet Designs Featured in Folkmanis Line

Guild members have ogled the wonderful furry creations of **Lex Rudd of Primal Visions** (primalvisions.com) on the display tables at various puppet guild meetings, but now, thanks to Folkmanis Puppets of Emeryville, we can all own our own Lex creations. Does anyone besides me think that the jester (center, right) looks like a close relative of our SFBAPG logo character?

Here is a little tip about Folkmanis puppets...they do not keep their designs in stock forever, so if you see one you really want to have, do not wait because it might disappear from the shelves.

## Guild News Regarding the Guild Roster:

At the January 2011 guild meeting the membership voted to make a change in the way the guild roster (names and contact info of all guild members) is made available to the membership. From now on, instead of being mailed to everyone, the guild will save trees and money by first emailing a PDF version of the guild roster to all members with email. For those without email and for those that request it, a printed version will be available.

## SFBAPGuild Group on Facebook

The guild now has a group page on Facebook. If you are on Facebook, you can join the group and post puppet posts or read the very latest updates. This is a new service that we hope to develop further with your participation. To find it, search on Facebook for sfbapg, then find the button for joining the group.

## Guild 50<sup>th</sup> Celebration Slated for Fall, You Can Help

As you may know, the guild is 50 this year (notice the new newsletter banner on page 1?) We are planning a gala bash to celebrate and it is tentatively scheduled for the last weekend in September or the 1<sup>st</sup> weekend of October, 2011. Michael Nelson is committee chair for the celebration committee and if you want to join us to help make this a party worthy of half a century, contact Michael at 707-363-4573 or sfbapg@gmail.com.

Below are three of Lex Rudd's designs that will now travel the world as Folkmanis commercial puppets. Congratulations to Lex.



# CALENDAR

## Storybook Puppet Theatre Children's Fairyland - Oakland

### **The Gingerbread Boy.**

Feb. 5-6, 12-13 - 10 am, 2 pm, 4 pm

Our bad little gingerbread boy just wants to run away from everyone who wants to help him. This is the story of how he learns to behave, and appreciate the meaning of family. Based on the style of German "Jumping Jack" toys. Puppets by Lewis Mahlmann, adapted by Lewis Mahlmann.

### **The Tale of Peter Rabbit.**

Feb. 19-20, 26-27 - 10 am, 2 pm, 4 pm

Based on the classic tale by Beatrix Potter, this is the story of what Peter learned when he didn't listen those around him. Almost caught by Farmer McGregor for playing in his garden, Peter has to think quick and figure out a way to return home to safety. Will he make it? Puppet and Script by Lewis Mahlmann. Scenery by Annie Wong. Song by Tony Jonick.

## Puppet Art Theatre Company <http://www.puppetarts.com/>

February 10<sup>th</sup> 7PM

Menlo Park Library, Riley the Wiley Rabbit

19<sup>th</sup> at 11am

Portola Valley Library, Riley the Wiley Rabbit

26<sup>th</sup> at 2pm

Oakley Library, Tommy's Train Troubles

**Thomas John (Clown Conservatory 09)** will once again be performing his comedic puppet noir: *The Lady on the Wall*. A tragic story about the death of Humpty Dumpty. Follow Bob, the hard boiled detective as he works his way through Carton City, fighting eggs and puns. Many many puns. Thomas combines his juggling skill and clown training with classic storytelling to create a unique world. Come see *Lady on the Wall*, Feb 4th and 5th at 8pm. Tickets \$10 975 Howard at 6th. The Garage Theater ([975howard.com](http://975howard.com))

## Avenue Q

Feb 15-27, 2011

Orpheum Theatre

Tickets and info: <http://shnsf.com/shows/avenueq>

Blurb from the web site:

**AVENUE Q** is Broadway's smash-hit 2004 Tony Award® winner for BEST MUSICAL, BEST SCORE and BEST BOOK. A hilarious show full of heart and hummable tunes, **AVENUE Q** is about trying to make it in NYC with big dreams and a tiny bank account.

Called "one of the funniest shows you're ever likely to see" by *Entertainment Weekly*, **AVENUE Q** features a cast of people and puppets who tell the story in a smart, risqué and downright entertaining way. *The New Yorker* calls it "SUBVERSIVE and UPROARIOUS!"

## The Hobo Grunt Cycle - Lone Wolf Tribe

February 17-March 5, Thursday, Friday, Saturday - 8 pm

San Francisco Fringe Festival - Exit Theatre, 156 Eddy Street, San Francisco

[www.sffringe.org/now.html#anchor23159](http://www.sffringe.org/now.html#anchor23159)  
415.673.3847

Tickets \$20 (General Admission Ticket), \$15 (I Need a Discount Ticket), \$25 (I Support the Arts Ticket)

Hobo Grunt Cycle is a war and peace epic colliding connections between wounded soldiers, illegal dog fighting, and the hierarchies of circus performers and military personnel. Created and performed by Kevin Augustine and company, Hobo Grunt Cycle features Lone Wolf Tribe's signature blend of life-sized puppets and performers and challenges the insanity of warfare.

Hobo Grunt Cycle is performed predominantly in silence, in keeping with the tramp clown's pantomime tradition, just as dogs and soldiers are essentially silent characters doing what they are told. Incorporating the "Winter Soldier" testimonies of the Vietnam War, one soldier finally breaks this rule.

A Big

# THANK YOU

To all the dedicated volunteers who helped make the guild holiday party a rip roaring success including (and in no particular order):

Elisheva Hart for arranging and coordinating the venue

Christ Presbyterian Church for hosting us

Lee Armstrong and Kamala Portuges for bringing the entertainment

Lee Armstrong for bringing the Library

Mary Decker for bringing supplies and coordinating the raffle

Morgan Connor for selling raffle tickets very successfully

Jesse Vail and Barbara Grillo for planning the event

All the wonderful table decorators

Tia Smirnoff and Ruth Stotter for being our table judges

All the great guild cooks and food bringers for the excellent repast



San Francisco Bay Area Puppeteers Guild  
PO Box 1258  
Vallejo, CA 94590

