



Puppet Patter

The Official Publication of the Chicagoland Puppetry Guild

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March 2025

Steven Widerman's The Puppet Company on Display at The Fine Arts Building

by Dave Herzog



The Fine Arts Building, located at 410 South Michigan Avenue, was the center of puppetry in Chicago during the month of January. Not only was it the headquarters and main stage theater location for the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, but the Fine Arts Building gallery space curator invited Steven Widerman, who maintains a studio in the building dedicated to his companies - Puppet Vid 3-D and "The Puppet Company" - to offer a display of his fantastic marionettes in the second-floor gallery space during the festival. The festival is primarily dedicated to more modernistic work so it was wonderful to have the work of a more mainstream nature represented as well.

Steven operated a permanent puppet theater in Union Square in New York City for over a decade. His extensive collection of fabulous marionettes from his New York days are now located in Chicago. When I heard Steven was going to be mounting the display I jumped at the chance to help. Not only have I been on Steven's team helping to set up exhibits at National Festivals, but I have done several projects with Steven in Chicago, and any chance to work

with this incredible master puppeteer, is not to be missed.

I can tell you from personal experience that not only do Steven's puppets look incredible, but they work like a dream. The figures are beautifully sculpted in a very theatrical style with some inspirations of the world famous Bil Baird marionettes, with whom Steven worked. In addition to the marionettes Steven composed the original music for all his productions.



Cast members from *Harmony Castle*

In preparation for the exhibit, Steven and I spent a day choosing the figures and making sure everything was in good shape, fixing a string here and there, as well as adjusting costumes and generally spiffing things up. The exhibit was installed on January 16th and was comprised primarily of groupings of marionettes from Steven's musical productions *Harmony Castle* and *Attention Earthlings*. Steven's marionette musicals were performed on a large double bridged marionette stage. So many of the marionettes from these productions have rather long strings but fortunately the gallery

curator provided a tall ladder to help with the process. It had been a while since I had handled long strung marionettes and I had forgotten just how much fun it is. I sure wish I was twenty years younger so if Steven re-mounts these shows I could get up on the bridge myself.

We had only hung a few figures when people already began to gather and express an interest in the proceedings. By the time we had the preliminary hanging work done, people were telling the elevator operators (the Fine Arts Building is the last in Chicago with manually operated elevators) to stop to let them off so that they could see what was going on.

During the Chicago International Puppetry Festival these magnificent figures were seen by thousands of people and photographed by renowned New York Times photographer Richard Termine, famous for his incredible photos of modern puppetry.

I hope many of you had a chance to visit the gallery during the festival, the exhibit will be up through February 28th. I'm sure this will not be the last exhibit of Steven's fabulous work. In the meantime, be sure to check out the schedule of the Fine Arts Building open houses and take an opportunity to visit with The Puppet Company www.fineartsbuilding.com.



Dragon from *Harmony Castle*

Mr. Punch Visits Chicago (or Madness and Mayhem Near Midway Airport)

by Dave Herzog



The Marc Dunworth Foundation For The Performing Arts invited Guy and Christine Thompson, of the Mousetrap Puppet Theater, to Chicagoland the weekend of February 9 to 11, 2025, to provide mirth merriment and mayhem for enthusiastic audiences. On Friday February 9th the students of Our Lady of Snows Catholic School enjoyed Mr. Punch's antics. Saturday February 10th a general public audience, including this author, enjoyed Mr. Punch and delicious Pizza at Vince's Pizza, 6117 W. 63rd St. And Sunday the 10th a large audience at the Oak Lawn Children's Museum was treated to Mr. Punch's brand of hilarity.!

Attending the Saturday afternoon performance was a unique experience for me. I've seen Professor Guy Thompson's Punch performed many times at Potlatch, but this was the first time I had seen him perform for a public audience who had never seen a *Punch and Judy* show. Guy started the show standing in front of the bright new red and white striped curtains of his recently refurbished Punch "fit up" and gave the audience a brief introduction to the historic characters and warned that they might see the puppets behave badly, but that no puppets would be hurt and they always come back for the next show. Guy also let the audience know that it would be perfectly acceptable to talk to the puppets during the show.



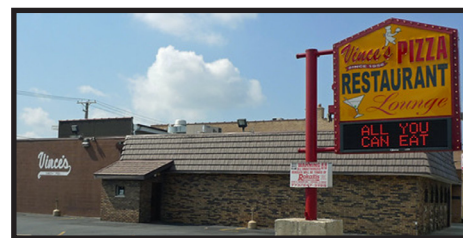
The show began with a new character to Guy's cast, a bright and cheerful looking soft sculpture snowman hand puppet, created by Potlatch Smith Handerson, to perform the famous "curtain bit" - where a character opens the curtains only to have the curtains refusing to stay open causing mayhem and much laughter from the audience as they frustrated the snowman's efforts to keep them open. Through this bit, the children quickly caught on to the fun of participating as members of a *Punch and Judy* audience and were soon having the time of their lives squealing with laughter, and shouting warnings of "Spider!", "Ghost!" or especially "CROCODILE!!!!!!!" I was sitting up front and off to the side and had the experience of watching the children's delighted faces as they were caught up in the magical world of Punch and Judy.

Mr. Punch, Judy and the Baby, as well as the policeman, the crocodile, and the ghost all performed, along with visits from an uninvited spider, who elicited a huge response from the delighted audience.

Following the performance Guy posed for pictures with each group of children from about a dozen families attending and asked each child if they had any questions. Both the children and the parents expressed how much they had enjoyed the show. As families filed out at different times after a delicious Pizza lunch, Guy stood up and thanked each family in turn. This showed Guy's dedication to professionalism in puppetry and was very impressive indeed.



Many thanks to Tim and Rose Dunworth of the Marc Dunworth Foundation for the performing Arts for bringing Mr. Punch to Chicagoland. A grand time was had by all!



Author's note: The Pizza at Vince's Pizza is some of the best Chicago thin crust Pizza I've ever had, if you're in the area stop by



Chicagoland Puppetry Guild News

by Steven Widerman

Chicago Women of Color Puppetry and Performing Arts Fringe Festival

This is a new festival running from January 20 to March 16, 2025. The festival is founded by Jacqueline Wade, who is the Executive Producer. The festival offers works intended for underserved communities that focus on biodiversity, activism, human rights, oppression, racism, and other marginalized segments of society and can be seen at the Zhou B Arts Center, fourth floor, in Bridgeport, Chicago.
<https://chicagowomenofcolorfest.com>



Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

The annual Festival, which ran from January 15-26, 2025, was founded by Artistic Director, Blair Thomas. In collaboration with outstanding support from Executive Director, Sandy Gerding, Thomas has successfully grown the Festival from a biennial event, begun in 2015, occurring every two years, to an annual event, now held at the end of every January. Attendance, number of productions, and budgets have continued to grow substantially, while the restraints of COVID-19 on travel and large gatherings are no longer limiting performances or the ability to bring international performers into the country.
<https://chicagopuppetfest.org>

Here are highlights of a few of the productions I had the pleasure of seeing:

Dracula: Lucy's Dream by Plexus Polaire

This international show is by this famed French company. The following information is from the printed program: "In her visual adaptation of the famous myth of Dracula, Director Yngvild Aspeli chooses to freely draw inspiration from the story of Bram Stoker to focus more particularly on women. The show thus focuses on the experience of the character of Lucy – and her fight against her inner demon embodied by Dracula, who then represents domination, dependence, addiction to a destructive force. A metaphor of control, both forced and desired, seductive and deceptive. The audience embarks on an intimate and psychic journey, in this phantasmagorical universe that Lucy has build for herself, in which she had plunged and against which she fights."

The production cleverly integrates the puppeteers as actors with life-size puppets portraying multiple representations of Lucy and Dracula, used most effectively in scenes of mirroring and disembodiment. All sorts of clever techniques are employed that deceive and delight the viewer including curtain of light, scrim, and duplicate figures. This was an impressive production and a highlight of the Festival.



J.M. Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K by Baxter Theatre & Handspring Puppet Co.

This performance employed Bunraku-style puppets to tell the tale of Michael K. on a journey to find his mother's ancestral home. It is an emotional tale with expert manipulation. The puppets are by Handspring Puppet Company, best known for *War Horse* and *Little Amal*.

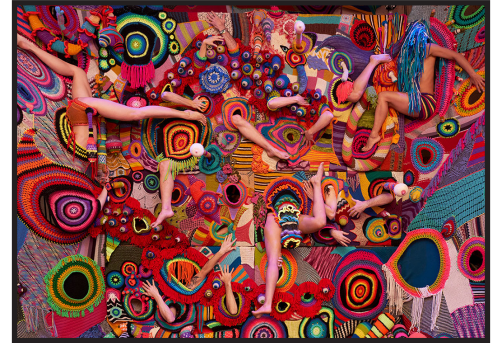
Look! Look! (a work in development) by Vanessa Valliere

Vanessa is a brilliant performer and trained dancer. Here she collaborates with Lindsey Noel Whiting, who mostly plays straight to Vanessa's clownish interaction with found objects and dolls. She manages to engage and entertain in a charming comedic tour de force.



Organismo by Maraña

An international production from a company based in Berlin is performed against a wool backdrop installation of knitted and crocheted forms that take on a life of their own while being pierced by the limbs of the athletic performers. There is some nudity and other sexual innuendo. Lighting is used effectively to change the atmosphere and the performance is beautifully choreographed to live music.



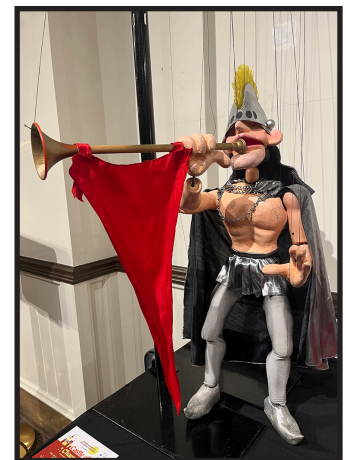
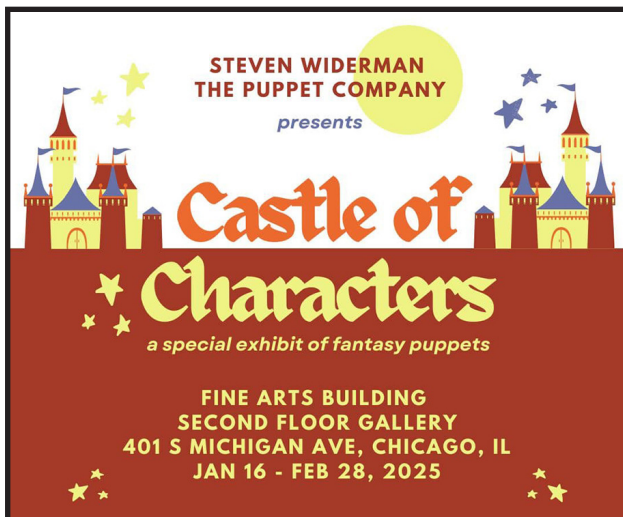
The Cabinet by Cabinet of Curiosity

It is the story of Dr. Caligari and his somnambulist, Cesare. This is a revival of a piece originally created by Frank Maugeri for Redmoon Theater in Chicago. The set is a giant cabinet and the scenery evokes the expressionist milieu of the classic silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

The planning is already begun on next year's Festival, and Chicago is fortunate to be host to this impressive international event. Be sure to sign up on their website to receive next year's brochure.

Castle of Characters Exhibit

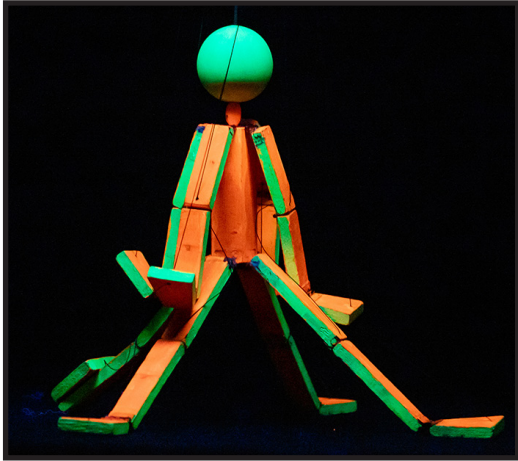
Chicago artist, Steven Wideman, Director of The Puppet Company, is exhibiting puppets from productions presented at his Union Square theater in New York City in the mid-1990's. It can be seen at the Fine Arts Building at 401 S Michigan Ave, Chicago, from January 16 to February 28. The exhibit "Castle of Characters," features fairytale marionette figures from Wideman's original musical productions *Harmony Castle* and *Dragon Soup*. Included are Jack Jive the jester and his marotte, Chuckles, Mordent the Magician, the royal family, and a large dragon, to name a few. The Second Floor Gallery is open during building hours 8:00 AM until 10:00 PM. #castleofcharacters



King Stentor and Royal Trumpeter from Castle of Characters Exhibit.
Photos by Steven Wideman

Rocket & Friends

As part of the Chicago Women of Color Puppetry and Performing Arts Fringe Festival, the Puppet Company performed *Rocket & Friends*, on February 9, 2025. It is a delightful marionette variety show intended to be seen by the entire family. Children are mesmerized by the classic breakaway skeleton, gnomes on a see-saw, ghosts, a puppet choir and more, all hosted by the groan-worthy bad puns master of ceremonies, Al E. Gator. A quick demo for making a sock puppet is also part of the show. It can be seen in an upcoming performance by Steven Widerman and Connor Asher on Sunday, March 2, at the Zhou B Arts Center in Bridgeport, Chicago. See the Festival website for tickets. <https://chicagopuppetfest.org>



Haywire
photo by Alex U. Griffin

(below) Rubber ball puppets from "Musette"
photo by Alex U. Griffin



(above) Al E. Gator, emcee
photo by Alex U. Griffin

And a few more photos



The Puppet Company's group, "The Gum Rappers": (left to right) Yo-yo, Sloop and Thin Ice, performed by David Herzog, Jacqueline Wade and Steven Widerman, respectively. Chicago Women of Color Festival. photo by Alex Griffin.



Jake Jive and his Marotte
"Chuckles" from "Harmony Castle"



Evil magician, Mordent, on his flying carpet from "Harmony Castle"



Evil Ganat and his Master
"Stinger" from "Attention Earthlings"

The Chicagoland Puppetry Guild Files

by Dave Herzog

The Chicagoland Puppetry Guild files were meticulously kept by Fred Putz for decades. While perusing this amazing collection of Chicago, national, and international puppetry ephemera, I continue to discover files of historical significance or special note. I am fortunate to be able to share my findings as a regular feature in each quarterly issue of The Puppet Patter. Appearing in this Issue...

Franceska's Marionette Theater

Franceska Spahic emigrated to the Chicago area from her native Bosnia in 1992. In Europe Franceska was an actress and puppeteer of note performing on stage, film and television. Transitioning to full time puppetry after the birth of her children, Franceska became a skilled master puppeteer, a career which she relied on again after barely escaping war torn Bosnia- Herzegovina at the start of the 90's conflict in Europe.

In the Chicago area Franceska became well known performing in many libraries, museums, Navy Pier, senior centers, and schools. Franceska performed The Emperor's Nightengale at the Great Lakes Regional Festival in Northbrook in 1998. With productions ranging from her variety show, From Folk to Rock to Pop, The Emperor's Nightengale, Little Red Riding Hood, The Nutcracker, and Christmas Around the World. Franceska's marionettes charmed Chicagoland audiences, until her passing in 2021.



Franceska's Marionettes
Zana Fader (630)833-3862

Little Red Ridinghood
Well-known classic, which everybody loves. See what happened in the woods on the way to grandma.

From Folk to Rock to Pop
Pull 112 strings and travel with fantastic European handcrafted marionettes via music and dance.

The Nutcracker
By Tchaikovsky
Magnificent ballet performed on the puppet stage with complete scenery and light. More than 40 puppets.

The Emperor and the Nightingale
A puppet play adapted from the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. This story has been compared to Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol. Audience of all ages will delight in the magical story of how the song of the elusive Nightingale changed the life of the selfish emperor.

Children's participation and demonstration with marionettes, question and answer session after every show.

For More Information Call (630) 833-3862
Franceska's Marionettes
225 S. Summit Ave.
Villa Park, IL 60181, marionettes@hotmail.com

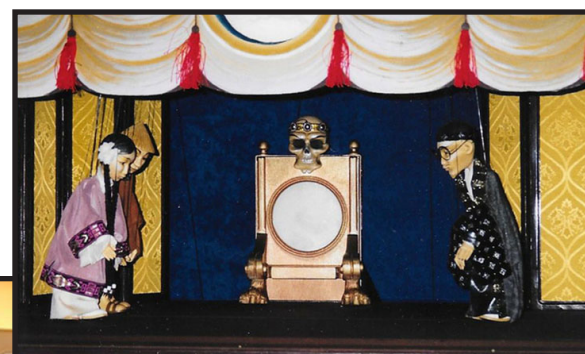
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PRESENTS

THE NUTCRACKER
By Tchaikovsky

Magnificent ballet performed on the puppet stage with complete scenery and light. More than 40 puppets.

Children's participation and demonstration with marionettes.
Special Guest ***Santa Claus***** A 3 foot tall marionette**



Franceska's Marionette Theater

Is a touring Puppet Theater complete with a stage and scenery using Marionettes, hand and rod puppets.

Audience Participation
Puppet Demonstration
A question & answer session every show...
... and shows for all ages.

A Theater experience they will never forget...

Shows are a magical mix of music, dance, recognizable melodies and the right amount of fun with an educational twist.

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Magnificent Marionettes
Folk to Rock to Pop
Pull 112 strings and travel with fantastic European handcrafted marionettes via music and dance.
Length: 45 Minutes

The Emperor and the Nightingale
By Hans Christian Andersen, classic performed with Italian Marionettes.
Length: 45 Minutes

Little Red Ridinghood
Well known classic played with hand puppets. See what happened in the woods on the way to Grandma's house.
Length: 45 Minutes

The Nutcracker
By Tchaikovsky
Magnificent ballet performed on the puppet stage with complete scenery and light. More than 40 puppets.

Children's participation and demonstration with marionettes.
Special Guest ***Santa Claus***** A 3 foot tall marionette**
Length: 45 Minutes

Christmas Around The World Performance
Children's participation and demonstration with marionettes.
Special Guest ***Santa Claus***** A 3 foot tall marionette**
Length: 45 Minutes



Introducing the Melikin Puppets' "Unsung Actor"

by Mel Biske

...Or has TV comedian Red Buttons might have said, "Never got a dinner!" This young unsung actor became an integral part from the very early days of the fifty-four year run of the Melikin Puppet Theatre. When LaVerne and I founded the Melikin Puppets, we decided to relinquish our "hobby" of puppetry. We put aside the variety show aspect of performing and moved to a more fulfilling outlook in the same field with a newborn ambition: "An introduction to live theatre for young childrens' audiences through the "Art of Puppetry".

As we launched into a new career in puppet theatre, we realized it would involve producing a new "full-length" production. We would need to make an impression on our young audiences as well as encouraging the sponsor - in our case the school principal and teaching staff - to hopefully re-book for the following year. LaVerne and I created a list of future productions and possible stories we both enjoyed while growing up. Our first offering was our adaption of *Rumpelstiltskin*, complete with a special effect: A "real" spinning wheel that the crafty little gnome would use to spin straw into gold... three times!

In the writing stage of creating our adaption we included eight-character puppet actors. In our "hobby" days with simple shows done live, we provided the character voices ourselves (short pause here for "pondering"). Now to we had to record the voices. Enter my baby brother.

I was six years older than Brad and we shared so many wonderful memories growing up. During that time period, TV was still a novelty so we both would listen to radio serial programs with fifteen-minute episodes daily. Some broadcasts were complete half and full hour story programs, seemingly referred to as "the theater of the mind". Now, as young men, we shared our interests in two fields that eventually became each our future occupations - Brad, in the field of radio announcing and acting, me in the field of puppetry. I took the lead in marriage. It was Mel and LaVerne, then Brad and Jane. Both couples met as blind dates. Our wives were supportive in our chosen life's work. Brad took the lead in establishing himself in the business of voice-over radio and TV commercials as well as acting. LaVerne and I followed eventually when, in 1967, we announced the forming of our touring puppet company.

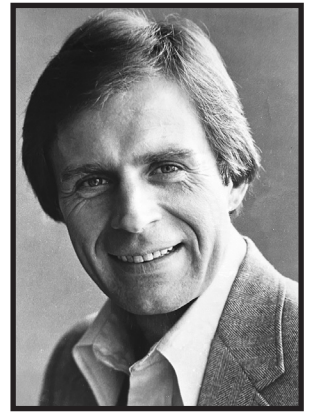
With cast, props and scenery for *Rumpelstiltskin* still in progress on the work bench, Brad would stop by to check on our progress. We had previously discussed the matter of working with a taped show rather than performing the voices live. Providing proper voice casting for the expanded number of puppet actors used in this production, the largest production we had ever created to date, was on our "to-do" list. I was capable of doing Rumpel and the father, LaVerne could do the Miller's daughter as well as the queen. After being in the business a few years, Brad had developed his voice-over talents and would attempt the remaining five. Five characters in the same script?! One by one he studied each completed puppet character and created a personality-voice for a perfect fit for each one. The trio of "voice talent" began work recording the dialogue in my home recording studio. LaVerne and I then rehearsed the finished production until it was polished! Brad made a suggestion: If this production was going to be the first of many, we should book our recording sessions with a professional recording studio. Brad had worked with a few in downtown Chicago and was familiar with each of the recording engineer's excellent work.

In as much as I had previous experience working with tape for editing and adding bridge-music and sound effects for my one person shows done live, I was able to take home copies of the session for final editing, adding and mixing the bridge-music and sound effects where needed, as well as spacers for timing. Looking back at it now, it is hard to believe that over a period of years that same process was used to record sixteen major productions and fourteen shorter works, 15 minutes or less, in our series of *Fractured Fairy Tales*, a *Melikin Puppet Circus* and a collection of nine Beatrix Potter short stories. As far as I could ascertain, Brad had created at least fifty-character voices if not more.

All of our productions were recorded from the very beginning. Brad's polished "Narrator's" voice or character voices can be heard in just about every production. Whenever additional vocal talents for a production were required, he introduced us to other famous voice-over professionals in Chicago, contributing to our works. Probably our the most memorable production was, Charles Dicken's, *A Christmas Carol*. Brad was the lead as Ebenezer Scrooge throughout the story, with four additional professionals in supporting roles. Brad's son, Ellory, was Peter and our son, Jeff, was Tiny Tim.

Brad refused any billing in our advertising for any of our works. However, if he happened to be present in the audience as a theater guest we of course would introduce this excellent vocal talent. He would respond only by remaining seated with a slight wave of his hand.

I bring all this up because we recently lost Brad and we have been reflecting on the amazing work he did for the Melikins, as well as our entire family. Brad was truly, our Melikin Puppet Company "Unsung Actor".



The Bisk(e) clan gathers to remember Brad

Who's That Lady?

In the December 2024 edition, we asked if you could identify the woman pictured with Hans Schmidt. Only one person knew who it was. That person was the woman in the photograph. Come on. Give a try. Who is the "Mystery Lady?" Submit your answer to Mel Biske. Remember, no penalty for wrong answers and no prize will be awarded for right ones.



Submit your answer to Mel at:
melikinpuppets@comcast.net



Have You Checked Out the CPG Website Lately?

Be sure to visit our guild's web site on a regular basis for the latest postings on what's happening in the Chicago area and a roster of active and newly added puppeteers, current and past issues of the Puppet Pater, and more!

Our address is:
www.chicagopuppetguild.org



The CPG is on Facebook, too!
Be sure to check us out!



Leave 'em Laughin'!

Twonks by Steve Nelson

