

Spring 2018 Puppetry Journal has part I of an article about the library work of Doris Hicks

The article continues with Part II and Part III

PART II: Puppets at the Public Library Past, Present, and Future

The city of Albany, Oregon, with a 2017 population of 51,000 people, has a public library system that supports puppetry in a surprising number of ways.

Check It Out

When you walk into either of the two library buildings, you can find books and movies about the art and history of puppetry as well as how to make puppets and stages, how to perform with puppets, and how to use them in education. Both libraries include hand puppets in their children's play areas, and both offer a variety of circulating hand puppets – enough that many children have gotten in the habit of checking out a puppet or two to take home every time they come in to check out books.

Watch the Show

For thirty years, Scott Keeney, the librarian overseeing Youth Services for the city's Library system, concluded each story time and school outreach program with a short hand puppet skit . He never built a puppet, but only used puppets he bought. He seldom used props, as his puppets mostly talked and argued and played with words in memorable dialogues that could be quoted even years later by the children in his audience. In this small city with a population around 35,000 in the year 2000, Scott routinely entertained and educated audiences of between 30 and 100 children and parents at the Main Library and the Downtown Carnegie Branch every week. When he presented his final Story Time with Puppet Show before he retired in 2011, he counted over 200 people in the room, some of them the children and grandchildren of his earlier fans who were still reminiscing about, "the show about the pizza that you did when I was a kid."

Over the years other Library staff also used hand puppets in story times and other children's programs. Besides performing skits with puppets in traditional stages, staff used puppets at the front of the room as visual aids in storytelling, as masters of ceremonies, or as narrators. We learned that if you wanted to convey information about an upcoming event or teach a technique for taking care of the books and movies you were going to check out, you should have the puppets explain and demonstrate it, and the students would always pay rapt attention to what the puppet taught. And staff members who found it difficult to keep large groups of students or scouts together during tours of the Library discovered that the most effective tool for leading the tour groups was a puppet – especially a grumpy character such as a rat or a monster who could point and make "come on" motions while spouting bossy or critical comments about keeping up with the group and not

lagging behind, comments that a library staff member would never be expected to say out loud.

Not all of the shows were performed by Library staff, both buildings had a tradition of offering professional performances by local or touring puppeteers such as Tears of Joy, Jason Ropp's Dragon Theater, Peter and Debbie Allen's Parasol Puppets, Penny's Puppets, Red Yarn, and KCPuppetree. These shows introduced children and adults to rod puppets, Muppet-style puppets, and other types of puppets.

Not Just for Kids

I found out that puppets were not just for very young children. For many years I was invited to present book talks and a puppet show at a nearby Kindergarten through 8th grade school as the culmination to their springtime Book Week, including an invitation to participate in the Library's upcoming Summer Reading Program. The first year, I only performed a puppet show for the younger students because I thought that the 6th through 8th graders would think they were too old for a puppet show. I concluded my presentation, but the students made no move to leave the room. I asked for questions and comments, and they asked, "Aren't you going to do a puppet show for us? You did one for the other classes." So the puppets performed for the older students every year.

For a much older audience, I presented hand puppet shows. For 15 years I provided a puppet show for the Library staff at their annual holiday party. Twice I performed a show to honor colleagues at their retirement parties. I built a round-headed puppet with a fringe of gray hair and a little moustache, and I had a character to play the part of our retiring library director. Later the same puppet played the part of a middle school principal who told a young Scott Keeney puppet that "he could never earn a living making kids laugh," on the day when the real Scott Keeney retired after 30 years of doing just that in his library story times.

Starting in 2001, every summer local teenagers had the opportunity to join the Library's marionette troupe to perform a show. Teens could also serve as library volunteers, assisting at summer programs including Puppet Palooza. Working alongside adult members of the local Puppeteers of America guild (WVP, the Willamette Valley Puppeteers), the teen volunteers hosted activity tables where children and parents had the opportunity to make a paper finger-walker puppet, learn to manipulate hand puppets with moveable mouths or moveable hands, operate a Muppet-style puppet, try out a shadow puppet, and talk to a vent figure.

Mutual Support

Albany's two public libraries have supported and promoted puppetry in many ways besides frequent puppet shows. The WVP guild was always allowed to meet there free of charge. Both buildings hosted displays and workshops for the National Day of Puppetry in May 2007, with the Main Library paying for insurance to protect a month-long locked-case display of rare and historic puppets on loan from the

Portland Puppet Museum. This offered unique arts opportunities for the library's patrons as well as for the guild.

When the Albany Main Library moved to a new building in 2009, two Library staffers and several volunteers worked with a local cable television studio to produce the video "Puppets Gone Wild," a puppet-led tour of the new building. You can view it at <http://puppetsgonewild.blogspot.com/2009/03/> These actors and puppeteers also worked with a local high school's video production class in 2012 and 2013 to produce publicity videos for the Library's Summer Reading Program. Puppetry is alive and thriving as an art and an educational tool in the past, present and future in Albany, Oregon.

Part III: Library Marionette Troupe, by Doris Hicks

An Idea and a Stage

At the interview in 2000 for a youth services librarian job in the public libraries of Albany, Oregon, I mentioned my idea for a troupe of teens performing marionette shows for younger kids. Within a few weeks of getting the job, I was presenting hand puppet shows at the two Albany Public Library buildings during my weekly story times. The head of the historic Downtown Carnegie Branch asked if there was anything I would like to buy with a large grant of money. I told her about my idea for a wonderful puppet stage in the basement children's area. The puppet stage would live upon the floor of the raised stage that was a required architectural feature of all the public libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie. After years of performances done while standing in homemade cardboard puppet booths, squatting behind tables with a piece of cloth taped around the front and sides, sitting between curtains hung on PVC pipe arrangements that took a long time to assemble and to strike, and squeezing into wooden stages that were too small, I had a dream of performing in a large booth whose red velvet curtains and black backdrop enclosed two prosceniums: one up high at an adult's standing height for hand puppets, with another proscenium at a much lower height for marionettes. The upper proscenium would have a ledge for the props and scenery in hand puppet shows, and the bottom proscenium would showcase a spacious wooden floor for performances by marionettes. The front of the stage would provide a place to prop up a large flannel board for storytelling. While the puppet stage would not be portable, its entire framework could be disassembled and removed from the room when the space was needed for other types of presentations. When there were no programs, the empty wooden framework could serve as a pretend store or diner for children's play.

A local cabinetmaker, Brent Gourley, designed and built an amazing puppet stage 8 feet wide, 8 feet high, and 4 feet deep. I knew we had the right builder when he said that he had done some research to be sure he would match the wood stain and architectural style of the historic Library building. He somehow accomplished that while he converted my rough sketches and list of requirements into a stage that has been used for hundreds of hand puppet and marionette shows. He only charged for

the cost of the materials because “my own grandkids will attend puppet shows at this library.”

At least once a week year-round, my morning story time at the Downtown Carnegie Branch Library concluded with a hand puppet show, usually featuring Tino and Spotty coping with an adventure of everyday life, but occasionally offering my version of a traditional tale such as “The Three Little Pigs.” Other Library staffers also used the stage for their story time puppet shows.

Marionette Troupe

Beginning in summer 2001, students going into 6th through 12th grades could join the Library’s marionette troupe to perform a show for younger kids every summer. There were no auditions, and young people of all ability levels were welcome. While some of these teens had performed in school plays, band, or choir, for most of them this was their first experience onstage. I will never forget the giant smile on the face of the young puppeteer the first time the audience laughed at his ad lib, and he said softly, “I love this!”

The first summer, I had great ambitions as I wrote the script and taught the teens to make cloth marionettes using patterns from Bob Brown’s workshop at the 1982 PofA National Festival. The six young puppeteers and I worked together several days a week at the Library making puppets and sets, and rehearsing my version of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” After our performances at the Downtown Carnegie Library, I even had the city’s Maintenance Department disassemble the big wooden stage and move it to the Main Library so we could perform there also. A member of the troupe designed a logo to be printed on the back of black t-shirts, and the local group Friends of the Library paid for them. After each show the puppeteers brought their marionettes out front to let the audience see how they worked and even try them out.

After 2001, I simplified the procedures greatly. The Library used grant funds to purchase a variety of animal and people marionettes. We never again moved the massive wooden stage out of the building. We reduced the preparation and rehearsal time for the troupe to two weeks, and later to just three workshop/rehearsal sessions and two performances at the Downtown Carnegie Library. Some summers we presented an additional show at the Main Library, performed cabaret style using a backdrop curtain hung on some of the pieces of my old PVC pipe stage, with a bench for a stage floor. Some years a few members of the troupe got together again in October to perform a simple Halloween marionette variety show at the Main Library.

To make it possible for the puppeteers to perform after only three rehearsals, I served as narrator out front, so I could pace the show and cue the puppeteers rather than requiring them to memorize their lines and actions. Troupe members contributed extensively as we composed and developed the script together during rehearsals, allowing most of the dialogue to become ad libs within the structure of

my narration. I quickly found out that it was necessary to have at least one other adult staff member helping with rehearsals, and then stage-managing the teen puppeteers backstage where the curtains completely hid them from my view. When more than six teens signed up, we divided the troupe into two separate companies who either performed two different shows or a show within a show. Several Library staffers over the years helped with rehearsals and later acted as stage managers (and when necessary puppeteers) during performances, including Sheri Somerville in 2016. Sheri became the Troupe's director beginning in 2017, when I retired from my Library job.

Thanks to library consultant: Doris Hicks