



Recent Press
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puppet PEOPLE

A local couple keeps alive the age-old art of puppetry in a large way.

By Jenny Carey

When Jerry Bickel and Holli Rubin want inspiration, they need go no further than their own Dover backyard. A few steps outside their home is the door into PuppetWorld, a custom designed puppet theater space, better described by Bickel as "a studio filled to the rafters with magic."

The magic is created by extraordinary 9-foot puppets designed and sculpted by Rubin for their Bits 'N Pieces Puppet Theatre company. These are not gently worn theater props, beloved by children for decades, but museum worthy sculptures and works of art. The Queen of Hearts with the White Rabbit, the Mad Hatter juxtaposed next to Jose Gaspar and a 9-foot mermaid, Rip Van Winkle and the Snow Queen, all figures from fairy tales made literally larger than life.

The PuppetWorld theater doesn't stand alone on the property. What can only be described as a magic school bus Bickel refurbished several years ago, resides nearby as another puppet theater space designed for the couple's hand puppets. While PuppetWorld offers wonderful acoustics and performance space for the 9-foot puppets, the school bus is a child-sized theater where puppets and audience can interact.

PuppetWorld—a studio, a theater, a workshop and source of inspiration—is the latest evolution in the love story of Bickel and Rubin with puppets and puppet theater. The two met more than 30 years ago at a University of Connecticut puppet festival. "We im-

mediately started producing puppets and puppet show after puppet show," Bickel relates.

Their roles were easily defined.

Rubin immediately became the puppet sculptor for the company. Her background in theater and dance led her to become artistic director and performer with the puppets, as well.

Bickel concentrated on the scripting and handwork. "It gave us two different areas to work in," he says.

In the past three decades, Bickel and Rubin have traveled to festivals and educational workshops around the world and perform regularly across the Southeast.

All Bits 'N Pieces works begin as familiar fairy tales. Bickel's role in the company is the storyteller; as the writer of the story and lyrics he speaks about the importance of choosing a tale: "All good storytellers are revisionists," he claims. "We adapt the tale to what is important right now. We have always stuck with universal themes and morals. I have tried to stay away from transitory pieces and choose works that will stand the test of time."

It takes a year for Bickel and Rubin to put a puppet show together, from script to completed puppets in costume. Over the last three decades, they have created 11 giant puppet musicals with 52 giant puppet characters in thousands of performances locally and nationally.

Where do they go from here?

Puppet ballet. Ever evolving, the company is reintroducing small puppets back into the performances and will open "Petruska" in January with The Florida Orchestra on a spinning stage. Originally a ballet about three puppets that come to life, "Petruska" will be a mix of giant puppets and a cast of small marionettes.

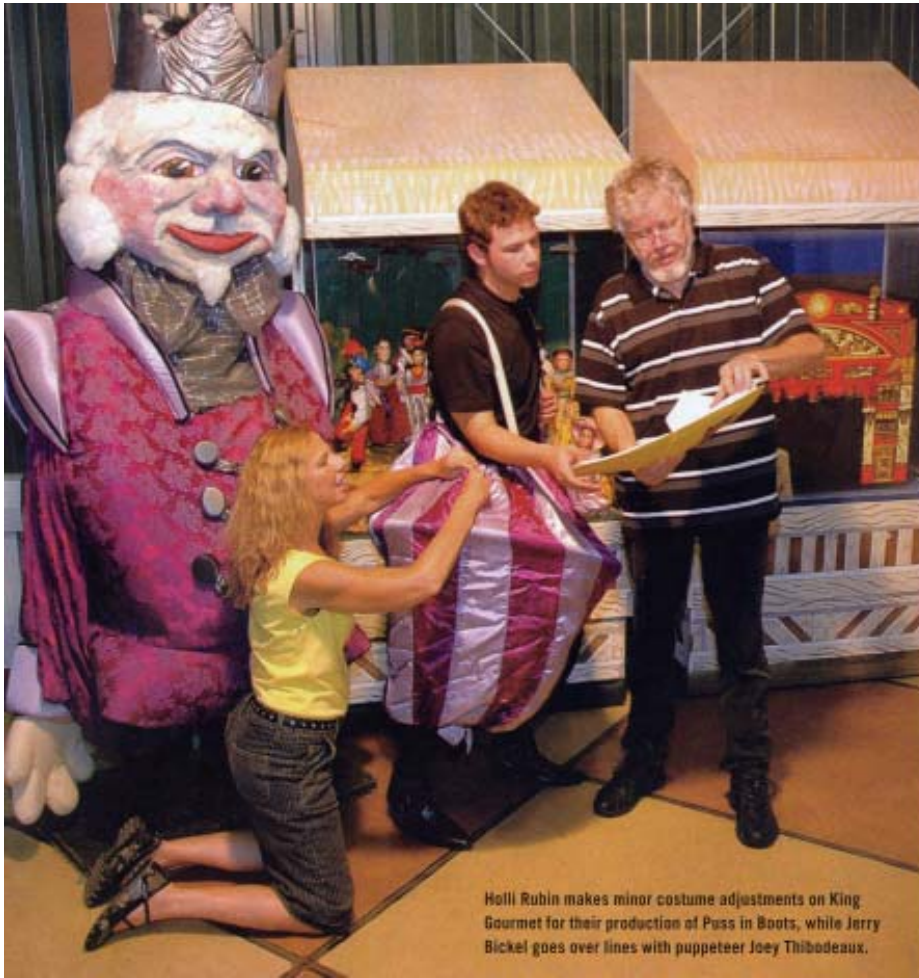
Bickel, the puppeteer, can work as many as four marionettes at the same time. It's a skill which will serve him well for their fall project, puppet opera, a marionette performance of "Pirates of Penzance."

He hopes it will be a magical introduction for school children to opera.

Visit the Bits 'N Pieces Web site at www.puppetworld.com to find local performance schedules or reserve your spot for the upcoming Puppet Ballet Jan. 7-12 with The Florida Orchestra.



Above, Holli Rubin shows off a few of her gigantic creations. Right, Jerry Bickel rehearses with several marionettes for an upcoming performance of Hansel and Gretel.



Holli Rubin makes minor costume adjustments on King Gourmet for their production of Puss in Boots, while Jerry Bickel goes over lines with puppeteer Joey Thibodeaux.

HOW ARE THEY MADE?

How the giant puppets are made is a common question.

Holli Rubin, the company's puppet sculptor, says "the most important thing is the story. I always read the script first to figure out the character and personality of the puppet." She keeps an image board of features, animal and human, at all times to inspire her before she begins.

Often, a whole production of characters is being created at the same time, sometimes as many as six puppets. Rubin creates on an armature, or framework, of Styrofoam, chicken wire, whatever is needed to form the oversized puppet head and covers it in modeling clay.

She shapes the face, taking care to change the physical expression slightly from one side to the other, to give the audience a sense of change of expression as the puppet moves. She creates deep pockets in the clay, shadows on the finished product.

The clay head is covered with aluminum foil, smoothed, and covered again with her choice of grease. Celastic, a plastic mache, is applied as the final step before the drying process, which is only a day or two.

Rubin cuts the face from the form and reassembles it, hair may have been imbedded before the end process, or she will choose a wig for the character. The head is sent to a moving parts expert to put in spring mechanisms or the mechanics needed to make the facial features move.

Still, there is more work to be done. Crossbeams and backbones are built and inserted into the giant puppet, fabric is selected and sewn for the costumes.

"Since I do all the characters together, it is hard to estimate the time it takes," Rubin notes. "Probably, if you broke it all out – it would take about four months to create one puppet."

Each finished puppet weighs from 40 to 60 pounds.

When not onstage or awaiting a performance in PuppetWorld, Rubin's giant puppets have been exhibited in solo exhibitions and museums around the world.



Rubin, in her workshop, begins adding paint to start bringing the Queen of Hearts to life. The giant puppet will be featured in a production of Alice in Wonderland.