

Message Audience Medium

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Good morning,

Welcome to the culmination of two years of planning by a wonderful committee and numerous other people. In a few minutes I will get going on my actual talk - Message Audience Medium. But first...

Some of the words that will be spoken this conference include 'them' and 'us', power, change, propaganda, agendas, issues, protest, enforcement, fear. And what readily comes to mind when we say these words are the protestors that have been imprisoned, hurt, blacklisted and killed. We may think of the Puppelistas – a word coined after the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting and the 'Battle of Seattle. We'll remember the workshops of puppeteers in Philadelphia that were forcibly closed down with the hundreds of puppets confiscated and destroyed, and these are just the most publicized events. I would like to make a toast to these folks.

We may spend a lot of time thinking of the state of the world – and words like impotence and powerlessness will surface as we wonder how to start, and what to do and where to find inspiration?

I want to acknowledge that it is not easy and it isn't simple.

I hope that what comes from this conference, for all of us, is some practical information but also a re- charging, solidarity and support so we can go back out and carry on.

I hope we *hear* and appreciate the success stories, and in the philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry we begin see the *arduous task of intervention give way to the speed of imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design.* <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu>

We all know the Margaret Mead quote

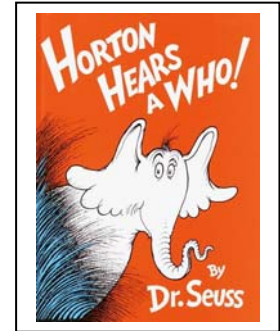
Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has."

I would add to the thought ...”never underestimate the power of a small (or large) puppet in the hands of a small (or large) group of committed puppeteers...”

But in preparing for today I came across another reference that might resonate – because of its whimsy - even better:

The people have spoken, no matter how small and their whole world as saved, by the smallest of all.

From “Horton Hears a Who” by ... Dr Seuss



Message Audience Medium...

What is the relationship between these three elements?

How do we create a successful relationship?

Message- Inspiration – Impetus to create

Where do the ideas come from- as the kids in my audience ask me? I say – well on certain days it rains ideas and you walk along with your head sideways so they go in your ears.

It’s hard to trace the path of how an idea unfolds. Sometimes I have a phrase of poetry or music, an image, a texture that becomes the muse for the piece, or these things become guiding aesthetic choices within the overall theme. For example I heard on the radio the other day, being sung by Joan Baez ...

The Speech (including Ed McCurdy poem)

"Last night I dreamed the strangest dream
I never dreamed before
I dreamt that all the world agreed
To put an end to war

I dreamed I saw a mighty room
The room was full of men
And the papers they were signing said
They'd never fight again

And when the papers were all signed

And a million copies made
They all joined hands and bowed their heads
And grateful prayers were said

And the people in the streets below
were dancing round and round
While swords and guns and uniforms
Lay scattered on the ground

Last night I dreamed the strangest dream
I never dreamed before
I dreamed that all the world agreed
To put an end to war.

Now the image that is stuck in my head is that of naked people dancing around a mound of uniforms and weapons

For past W.P. Puppet Theatre productions – when I created *The Great Kapok Tree and Other Forest Stories* I was a member of the Calgary Rainforest Action Group and dating a tree hugger. I had also spent a lot of time on the West coast and the campaign to save the Carmanah was full on.



The next show I produced was called “Pix and the Beetle” – and it was about balance in the universe – I knew fewer answers than I had in previous years – and found the picture more complicated than simply don’t cut trees down. The aesthetic was of copper, natural fibre and tumbleweed.



The most recent show “Frogs in a Blue Bucket” I decided that in order to save something you have to involve both the heart and the head. I combined endearing folktales about frogs with facts about their importance as a flagship species.



Sometimes, as in a commission, the idea is given – when I did the show “Jumping Jellyfish It’s a Panda” in 1988, it’s because the zoo was hosting two Chinese giant pandas. In this show, because I felt that any puppet of a panda would not be ½ as exciting as the real thing I portrayed the panda character as a shadow puppet. This linked into shadow puppetry traditions from china as well as the idea that the shadow screen is a medium for the dead or other world to speak to the living.



Paul Zaloom, "one of the most original and talented political satirists working in the theater" (says the New York Times), discussed the question of ideas at this years Animated Objects Festival. He starts from an issue. In his show “Mother of all Enemies” he says the inspiration was “*the idea of people who are caught between all these different warring factions.*” You know—the neocons, Shiites, Sunnis,



Christians, Muslims, heterosexuals, gays". Through the healing power of humour he explores these divisions. His other 11 full length shows also tackle various issues.
http://www.downtownexpress.com/de_151/paulzaloospuppet.html

In a conference about Social Action it's fairly obvious why we invited Gary Friedman to talk last night about Puppets and their use in AIDS projects.

But why present "Workshop of the Butterflies"? Can a message of beauty be a social action message? Here are the views of Sir Richard Eyre, theatre and film director in England, in his address to the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts - an organization actually started in 1754, and today promoting the creation, protection and utilization of bright ideas, among other things. www.rsa.org.uk – how cool is that organization?

The making of a work of art is itself a political act, because as long as people make art – even if it's not always "excellent" and even if it only appeals to a handful of people – it reminds governments of something they need to be reminded of: that we are all individuals - all "me(s)", not an anonymous "them".

And Susan Linn, author of "Consuming Children - protecting our children from the onslaught of marketing and advertising" says just doing a puppet show is a protest, as she picks up her duck and quacks.

So in fact the impetus to create something – with our own hands, our own ideas, is itself a revolutionary message in these times.

Audience – context -

Like a good politician or a marketing firm an artist needs to have their finger on the pulse of their community. Working in the schools around children their pulse is contagious and I learn what they and their teachers are interested in.

I think creators need to stay aware of everything, but must also take the time to reflect.

Ken Lum, visual artist, writes in the magazine Canadian Art that "To be an artist means to be in constant search for meaning, to assume everything in life is relevant".

And of course more historically Socrates wrote "the unexamined **life** is not worth living'.

Here is a story about a couple of performers who didn't pay attention to their surroundings.

Once there were two construction laborers who worked on the building of the Ulucami – The Great Mosque - in Bursa, Turkey in the 14th century. They spent most of their time clowning around and stirring up trouble by keeping the other workers from working. The sultan, who was upset with the delay of the construction, had them one of them executed. Then the workers were so glum and dispirited the constructions slowed even more. The sultan called the living laborer to figure out a solution – he came up with the shadow of his friend in order to joke with.

http://www.cankan.com/gturkishfolks/22hacivat_karagoz.htm

And as legend has it – this is how puppetry was born - at least in Turkey.

In this story, puppetry has the power to bring back the ‘dead’. But we know that in so many real life instances this can’t be done. We can’t turn back the clock to save an old growth forest, we can’t put up a screen and show a different news caste, the shadows lurk rather than entertain. Do puppets still have the power to get a mosque built?

Medium

The third member of this trio is the medium – in this case puppetry - which we will talk about momentarily.

These three elements are required for an event – puppet show- to take place, like an atom – the molecules held with a force – interacting with each other and required to be together if they are to not turn into something else.

So let’s look at the medium of puppetry. First the definition, and it relates to the message audience medium trio.

The animation of an inanimate object in front of an audience.

Simply this. Good news for the people who don’t think they’re up for building a 64 string Ronnie Burkett Marionette.

Your puppet can be milk bottle in a wig.

Add some eyes and a voice and the milk bottle has come to represent a human.

”To be or not to be – that is the question” says the puppet!

Plus we have all had an experience of animating an inanimate object – think of when your computer ate the file that was due the next morning – you believed it did it for some vindictive purpose. But the audience is necessary – or it is just a private moment.



We also need some content, a message - for the animation. And in our content we need to consider the audience – there is another quote used in art critique – is it art or is it self expression?

You have a concern, a mission, a cause, a belief, a message...

And you believe you know the solution and you need others to hear you, help you, to provoke or provide the solution.

The 'others' may be educators, politicians, businesses, they may be adults, children, students; they may be a geographic community or some other formal or informal group.

These 'others' are your audience and they help you to decide the medium for you to communicate your 'message'.

But the Issue will also help you decide the medium. For example maybe your issue needs the proof provided by photographic evidence.

Or perhaps the issue is very complex and needs, like the 4 1/2 hour documentary on coffee called "Coffee" a long time to explain.

Maybe you need the credibility or brand name of an Al Gore, Steven Lewis or David Suzuki.

Mediums you can choose from vary from trade shows like the Cry Havoc folks - raising awareness, documentary film, protests, parades, media campaigns, personal stories to anyone who will listen, etc or puppets!

Now you might say - of course I'm going to pick puppets because I saw a really cute penguin puppet at Walmart for only \$5.99 BUT that would be a mistake!

Or you might say my audience is children - they are going to grow up and save the world and of course they love puppets. And this too would be a mistake for a couple of reasons.

Strengths of Puppets

Why would you choose puppets for the medium?

In other words what is the power of the puppet?

The fundamental power of a puppet is that it is a symbol.

A symbol is an object that represents a very, very, complex idea – like the idea of a person or an animal.

For example – Sally is the star of the show called Frogs in a Blue Bucket. In the question answer session children often ask why she has a purple face. They are sorry for me believing sadly I had no pink tissue paper. But the real reason is that the story she is in could happen anywhere in the world (except for Antarctica because there are no frogs there) to any girl, or boy. As that is the case she has to represent every boy or girl, whether they are brown, black, white or yellow, hence she is purple.



Sometimes just to be more complicated a puppet can represent the object itself – for example a spray can. But the spray can represents a person. Here we have a character with an explosive personality, a rebel, a graffiti artist. This is the basis of the exciting genre of Object Puppetry

Basically you might choose to use puppetry *when you need to transgress a boundary in order to get people to hear your message.*

And how is it that puppetry can cross that boundary? Here are 15 reasons why...and there are probably more

As an Art form a Puppet's Power is its ability

- to be an umbrella for all the art forms visual art – painting, sculpture. Animatronics, photography - theatre, mime, mask, dance, music, film as well as all literary forms.
- Puppetry has roots in ritual and ceremony from pagan to any world religion. In one essay I have read there is a likeness drawn between a puppeteer moving dolls across a stage and a priest moving objects on an altar, or a shaman using fetishes.
- Puppets have a rich and diverse cultural in many societies, sharing that culture through puppetry can lead to intercultural understanding and acceptance.
- Puppets, as in any art form, affect us in emotional and sensory ways, sometimes bypassing our intellect and speaking directly to our souls.

When puppets are used in for Young Audiences they, being (sometimes) small themselves, can encourage children to face bigger things. Additionally Puppets can simplify and symbolize concepts to make them more understandable.

Puppet Power for Adults

- Puppets, as they come to life for performance and then 'die' at the end of the show – remind humans of our mortal lives, transcendence, life and death

- Puppets seem to achieve immortality as they repeatedly come to life to perform.
- The Power of Puppets, as Michael Malkin writes in the Atlanta Centre for Puppetry Arts Museum Catalogue, is that they “...*can transcend personal and even cultural selfhood. They are our undeveloped spirits and unrealized thoughts that need to escape... to do things we cannot or dare not do...*”

Puppet Power as a Therapeutic Medium

- Puppets can give voices to those with out voices – functioning as a proxy
- Puppets are sympathetic, unbiased listeners
- Puppets have no ego and can disseminate information with no barriers
- Puppets encourage creative play, in children and reconnect adults to play - allowing the participant to safely role play life. (try on characters as it where) and perhaps come up with solutions and answers.

And finally Puppet Power as Agents for Social Change

- Puppets sometimes seem to be an entity in and of themselves – allowing for freer speech in constrained circumstances. Indeed several times through history for example - the Puritans in 1600’s, Proscription in early America and heavy censorship in communist regimes. – puppets -seen as irrelevant - have prevailed over live theatre.
- Puppets, being a theatre form, lend themselves to community based projects. Giant puppets often need several people to work them. And finally puppets, especially big ones, are great at collecting attention in parades.

As German born, Hanne Tierney, an acclaimed puppeteer and performance artist writes in an article about Puppetry in the Third Reich, published in Puppetry International, *Indoctrination of one kind and another has been one of the many jobs with which western puppetry has been saddled throughout it’s history. Perhaps because puppets lend themselves so well to stereotyped caricatures, or perhaps because anything is easier to swallow if accompanied by laughter, no other art form has been applied so liberally in the service of politic, , advertising and education.*

So now you've decided that puppets really truly were the correct choice in the first place. But you have made an educated and informed decision.

You've got your issue or message and you've thought through your medium, you've identified your audience.

Let's look back at the audience again.

Where are they?

Is it in a private venue like a school, or a theatre? These places are more controlled - you are invited, they buy tickets, there are theatre conventions. You need to think about the appropriateness of your 'experience' for the audience that you can anticipate having. Schools are touchy about certain things - violence, nudity, swearing. In theatre however these are seen as an asset.

Perhaps you decide your audience is out on the streets, uncontrolled among the other uncontrollable aspects - weather, traffic, national emergencies or... weather.

Do you still have to think about appropriateness? I believe we need to balance the right of the individual's freedom of expression with the rights of society. As one web blog writes *freedom of expression is not an unfettered right. A right brings obligation as well. One has to ensure that the right of freedom of expression is exercised judiciously and reasonably without hurting the feelings of another.*

www.weeklyholiday.net/2006/100206/com.html

If you decide your venue is the theatre or school - you can use almost any kind of puppet that fits through a door- way and isn't flammable.

If you're for the streets you'll probably want your puppets large - to attract notice, durable - perhaps waterproof (see weather above) and transportable - from your \$3.00 parking spot 12 blocks away to the parade site. If you are in Miami you will also have to take note of laws that ban puppets from the streets.

However regardless of *where* your 'experience' will take place and who your audience is - you need to spend some time on the aesthetic.

The Aesthetics

Just to review, the term aesthetics comes from Greek and was coined by the philosopher Baumgarten in 1735 to mean "the science of how things are known via the senses". It pertains to the understanding that incorporates intellectual, sensory, and emotional involvement in and responses to the fine arts and more. What is considered aesthetic pleasing varies greatly in different contexts.

Ideally aesthetics are considered in any art endeavor. It's not just an artsy fartsy thing - the more aesthetically 'right', the better your audience will absorb your 'experience'.

Here again your Issue will give some guidance.

Slavery can't be treated in the same way as Save the Panda. You might have some fun

with Save the Yellow Lampmussel Mollusk, certainly Paul Zaloom would, but any issue must be treated with sensitivity.

And your Solution will also give guidance. If you are wanting your audience to write letters you'll probably present to them differently than if you want them to chain themselves to a bulldozer.

On your Dramatic Elements checklist for consideration, in no particular order

- Scale - puppets can be small or large - very large and they are good at doing David and Goliath type scenes.
- Contradiction - that cute and cuddly puppet as a soldier.
- Color meaning - and all the contradictions therein - red equals anger but also love, white for purity and also cocaine.
- Language - I did a school workshop on an environmental theme and we used this poem - the kids had so much fun saying it that they missed the point I'm sure.
- Puppet and set Appearance and Materials - is it rough or refined, commercial or folk-art-ish.
- Play with mood - are you angry - are your puppets rocks? Would you do better to skip the puppets and use rocks?
- Play with presentation perceptions - is it slick and professional looking or more amateur looking - rough and ready - suggesting more honesty perhaps? And I mean amateur in a professional way.
- Play with the stereotypes - the politician with his hands tied, or his strings pulled or the hand up his...
- Consider also the merits of the different puppet types.
 - A hand puppet picks things up well and is sort of the generic puppet. Just don't ask it to sit down and cross its legs.
 - A mouth puppet or Muppet is very good for talking heads.
 - A marionette can transform, fly apart, be an engineering marvel and can cut its own strings in a protest of independence
 - A shadow puppet brings an element of the mysterious and magical.
 - And for the uncommon puppet types see an Old Trout Puppet Workshop show.

- You can also play with the cultural aspects of the puppets - as we said earlier puppets have a rich heritage around the world. But of course you will *need* to and will benefit from making partnerships to avoid anything that looks like cultural appropriation. Perhaps you can build upon some known characters or there will be a familiarity that leads the audience to more quickly accept or understand the show.

All of these aesthetic elements allow you to 'manipulate' -in the best sense of the word your audience. *To hear and act on your issue.* And to save the world!

But sometimes they don't or won't. A lovely puppet show – is not enough. We would have to say that we have not created a *successful* relationship between the Message, Audience and Medium.

How do we create that success? This is almost another talk altogether...

First we have to do the due diligence – this is all familiar to us - what are the goals or the project, its measurable outcomes. How do you know if you have been successful? Have you established an evaluation process? Is applause at the end of the show your only indicator? Of course sometimes it's very hard to track an attitudinal change? You may have planted a seed that will take some time, and also some rain and sun in order to grow. Or maybe it's even a pine seed that will take 112-120 degrees F in order to start growing!

No matter how wonderful the show, parachuting into an audience may not work – or they may love the show but to make any changes.

- 1) The theatre must show the audience why they should consider changing their beliefs or behavior.
- 2) It must show them how they can go about doing it.
- 3) And it must empower them to feel able to do so. (ibid AREPP, 2003)

Let's look again at the audience. We may need to strengthen the connection between audience and medium or examine more closely connection the experience and the audience.

An un-published paper written, by David Silver and Marco Weeks for CARE International entitled "Evaluating the Impact of Popular Theatre" quotes

"Popular theatre, and I would add puppet theatre for social change, can only have consequential impact if the root cause of a people's 'apathy' is critically examined, not just within in the confines of local structures but in terms of wider historical, social,

political and economic forces at play at national and even international levels. Only when this deeper analysis occurs will PT be capable of motivating communities to initiate and participate in development activities in a meaningful way.

There will be more on Popular Theatre during the conference – briefly PT is a theatre form that extends beyond the traditional theatrical approach of simply imparting information, to engaging and empowering audiences to become active participants in discovering appropriate solutions for themselves”

Regardless of whether you have the active audience goals of Popular Theatre or you are simply wanting to bring beauty into the lives of your viewers, I would suggest that the Audience is the component of our trio that most often gets under examined.

We must remember the power of Jo Jo the smallest Who, who said Yop! And saved the world.

I would like to give the last word of this presentation over to Michael Meschke’s International Message for the 2006 World Puppetry Day. A full copy of his message can be found at www.unima-usa.org/international/world.html.

I think he will bring us back to the essence of puppetry and our role in our Social Action endeavours.

He recalls being in Sumatra Indonesia, were he had gone, with puppets in a suitcase to try to entertain the lost orphans after the tsunami of December 26 2004.

His says that his puppets stay in the suitcase – he felt he would be better carrying bricks to rebuild the walls of houses.

As natural destructive forces are never far away and destruction incited by human kind, looms as large as ever, in the year 2006 or 2007, he gives us pause to think when he writes:

Bringing a puppet into the midst of all this seems laughable. It makes people laugh, but not in the traditional sense, by delighting the audience: mostly because it is so powerless.

And all around us, this powerlessness is the true strength of the puppet. Because it is part of that “in spite of everything”, without which human beings would have perished long ago.

Times change. The puppet-master who, in days of yore, wanted to save the world, is happy today if he can live by his own hand. Let us, then, be humble, but without giving way to defeatism: let’s make our puppets dance, because that’s what we know how to

do, because we are privileged to do what we love the most – and because our reward is and will be the emotion we kindle in so many hearts.

So welcome to the Puppet Powerlessness conference.

As the New Zealand Maori say - Turn your face to the sun and the shadows fall behind you.

Thank you

OUT TAKES

Social Action and the Art of Puppetry

This conference is about creating Social Change and it about the Art of Puppetry.

That is why we juxtaposed our events last night – the beautiful puppet show Workshop of the Butterflies AND the powerful talk by Gary Freidman on Puppetry in AIDS work.

But even as I say this I am creating a dichotomy that might not be there. The panel and world café may get into this later today - is there 'versus' between art and issue? Or is it more like a continuum? Or are they embedded? My talk today is really more on the practical side but let me put forward a couple of thoughts on the relationship between Social Action and Art, before diving into the paper mache.

In this society of cradle to grave marketing, out of control consumerism, rabid individualism or blind group mentality and all the other evils from Pandora's box it strikes me that an examined life, mindful living or attaching relevance to a sunbeam are acts of revolution, in and of themselves!

Shankar Singh, a folk artist who worked with a puppet drama group in Rajasthan, India, writes in *Puppets with a Purpose* by Peter McIntyre for UNICEF

Slowly I realized the limitations of theatre, however effective. We could only create energy for a short while. We were unable to create the confidence required for making the leap forward, a confidence that can only come from sustained work and commitment to face the reactions together. It has become 'in' to have songs and plays and street theatre. The team that is involved has fun, learns some lessons and feels a glow of achievement. But what of the e people for whom the plays are evolved? Change cannot happen with out the participation of the people for whom it is important and relevant. It cannot come by just watching the performance of passing plays.

And if we can switch the metaphor to trying to light a fire in the rain, imagine your work as the match that just briefly catches the moss and small twigs and you blow gently, nurturing it and see the flame rise up to light the kindling and you add a log and give it independence to burn brightly and warm your food and body and spirits.

This tapping into culture, is illustrated by Indonesian puppetry after the 1940's Japanese invasion and withdrawal and then the subsequent revolution. The Dalangs' (story tellers) in Wayang theatre became important agents to interpret and propagandize social change. As Tamara Fielding writes *the dalang, relying on his audiences pre-disposed acceptance of the Panakawan family and their trust in Semar's superior wisdom, he successfully delivered political messages through these familiar mythological characters.* Puppetry International Spring 2001

A guide to this balance might be as the United Nations Charter of Rights and Freedom for the Child Article 13 states:

A child has the right to freedom of expression: the exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary a) for the respect of the rights or reputations of others or b) for the protections of national security or of public order or of public health or morals.

WARM UPS:

Hand	V, W // puppet show wave// puppet show cheer
Face	stretch long//wide//scrunch//pull//
Tongue	ice cream//snake//circles
Lips	
Vocalizations	hung (hummingbird) Ding (mosquito) La la la//ma ma//na na// ho ho// dee dee//he hee//
Tongue twister	Red bugs blood// red leather/yellow leather// rubber baby buggy bumpers