

Performance/Process

By Brad Brackenridge

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When I was approached last year about putting together this exhibition, I was excited and terrified at the same time. Performing is something I have been involved in for over thirty years. For the last fourteenish years my focus has been with puppets and puppet making. The idea of taking this work that I do and presenting it in a gallery setting, static, with no movement, seemed daunting to say the least. Was there a way to show how and why they were created?

My original idea was to unpack all of this work, repair any damage, and repaint and polish them for presentation. However, this didn't seem true to these characters. It seemed false. Their history, like ours, is made up of flaws and imperfections. Any damage from our past should be part of a process and keep us living in the present. My hope is to give you a glimpse into my inspiration and their creation.

Skulls

Tex, Planet Twelve, performed at The Theatre on King, 2019

Plaster of paris, clay, acrylic paint

The play *Tex* is a murder mystery/ghost story. A cursed skull is found, possessing one of the characters. The only way to lift the curse is to smash it and break that curse. These skulls that I made, 7 in total for the run and about 15-ish for the tests, had a few criteria. Not only did they have to look cool, they had to be hard enough to handle on stage without breaking, but brittle enough to “theatrically” shatter when smashed with a sledge hammer. It took many tests and many different materials to get the proper desired effect I was looking for. I eventually settled on a thin, molded base, and this was the first time I experimented with molds, cast out of Plaster of Paris. I then hand-sculpted facial features from two different types of clay. Apart from the base mold, each was unique. Unfortunately, I misjudged the shape of the mold and the bases ended up with an odd shape I hadn't planned. By the time I realized the error, I decided to finish them all with the same mistake. All smashed really well!

The examples you see here, except for the unpainted one, have been rebuilt using most of the smashed bits from that evening's performance, glued together, painted, giving that "olde" skull look. I prefer the post-smash ones!

Enkidu Horns

Commission for John Hedderwick. Performed at The Theatre on King, 2023

Foam, acrylic paint, tape, papier-mâché, plastic

John Hedderwick, poet and spoken word artist, among other wonderful things, performed his one man show *Enkido* at the Theatre on King this past January. He approached me last year with a desire to have horns for his character of Gilgamesh. We discussed some types and basic shapes that he was interested in and passed back and forth some image inspirations. I began to make a number of different examples out of papier-mâché and foam, concentrating on shape, size and texture. We met after I had a number of examples. He picked a shortlist of three. I remade those with adjustments according to Jon's wishes. The final one was chosen, we tried them on for placement, and then I attached them with glue and tape to a hair band and painted them. I wanted an aged, dry, bone look that wouldn't reflect under the stage lights. For the show, the band was covered by folds of his hair and pinned into place to secure it, avoiding slippage or movement.

Hand Puppets

Nut. Cracker. Performed at The Theatre on King, 2015

Foam, tape, paint, cardboard, papier-mâché. Costumes created by Kate Story

The first two hand puppets I made were for a benefit for the Theatre on King. It was a somewhat naughty, alternate universe take on that ole chestnut, *The Nutcracker*, called... *Nut. Cracker.*! I played a little boy that starts out the play, playing with my many toys, settling on the two puppets. They are fashioned after theatre artists, Ryan Kerr and Kate Story. Once I started playing with them (the puppets), Ryan and Kate appear from offstage, dressed identically to the puppets, and they begin to move, mirroring the movements of the puppets I am manipulating. It starts innocently enough, Tchaikovsky's delightful music playing, me swaying, puppets up high, with light, playful gestures, quickly spiraling in a prolonged series of sexual positions, not necessarily

suitable for your traditional Christmas family entertainment. To be clear, there was absolutely no sex between puppets and humans!

Bernie Martin Festival Puppets

Life Comes To Resemble Unimaginable Literature: Or, The Moment Of My Death, The Bernie Martin Festival, performed at The Theatre on King, 2016

Wood, glass, foam, papier-mâché, glue, paint, foam, tape, string. Costumes created by Kate Story

This fun little noir-ish romp gave me an opportunity to show different scales and types of puppetry for the same characters. I designed the set and operated all characters. There are tabletop, talking heads, and larger, solid figures. Recycling materials are always a priority for me, for every project I take on, be it for sets or puppets. I have and continue to dumpster dive and comb construction sites for materials. For some reason, I decided to carve an old wooden knife block for the larger fellow, and I used a glass jam jar for the smaller body. Not practical at all really!

Chichimus and Hollyhock

Little Lake Cemetery Pageant, Trent Valley Archives, 2022

Plasticine, paint, foam, papier-mâché

Costumes created by Kathryn Bahun

These two hand-puppets were made for one of the short vignettes that was one part of Trent Valley Archive's "Little Lake Cemetery Pageant" tour last Fall. The Audience is led around the cemetery to visit a number of grave sights with a story written by local authors and performed by actors and storytellers. I was approached 3ish years ago with an idea by Geoff Hewitson. He was working on a story about John Conway, a Canadian puppeteer and his two creations, Uncle Chichimus and Hollyhock. John and these two characters appeared on the inaugural English broadcast for CBC television out of Toronto, in 1952.

I created the Chichimus head at that time. The pandemic stopped the tours for a few years until last year when I resumed building the rest of the characters. The colours are quite striking. The broadcasts were in black and white. I recreated them as best I could, using photos from the Canadian Museum of History, where copies of these two now reside. The originals were stolen and never found! Canadian Television Puppet History!

Extinction Rebellion Protest Puppet

2019

Plastic water jug, cloth, glue, paint, cardboard, foam, wood, papier-mâché

Extinction Rebellion is a global movement dedicated to promoting awareness and education, addressing climate change and other environmental issues, through nonviolent action. I was approached by a friend, asking if I had any large style parade puppets to borrow for XR's inaugural rally. I didn't have anything suitable at the time, so I said I would build something. I was able to put this one together rather quickly as the deadline was soon. I went with a simple build for easy carry and manipulation. Jon Hederwick suited up and operated both the arm and body.

Depending on the size of the puppet, anywhere between one, two, or three people would normally operate one of these. Bread and Puppet Theatre out of Vermont will often have dozens of people working their mammoth puppets. The French company, Royale de Luxe uses large cranes and dozens of performers to operate their massive figures.

Berlin Blues Buffalo

Berlin Blues, 4th Line Theatre, 2011

Wool, bamboo, wire, rope, burlap, paint, wicker, glass, foam, faux fur and real fur

I contacted Kim Blackwell at 4th Line and inquired how they were going to handle the buffalo sequences in Drew Hayden's play. She mentioned a sound design. I pitched building a life-sized buffalo to include as an addition the soundscape. She said yes. How hard can that be, I remember thinking? I was living in an apartment in downtown Toronto at the time. I quickly got to work. I decide bamboo was gonna be the frame of the beast. I began constructing it, quickly realizing that it wasn't going to fit outside the door. I then transferred it outside on the small balcony. Once I got the majority of it built, I was prepared to move back to Peterborough to finish making it. We lowered it over the balcony and realized that it wasn't going to fit between the side of the apartment where I was living. We had to carry it over four neighbours' backyards to find a large enough space to get between houses in order to get it to the street. What I initially thought would be a light-ish build turned out to be heavier than planned, once

all the finishing touches were applied. Kim asked if I was interested in playing part of the buffalo over the summer. I said yes. I would strap myself inside. The frame would rest on my shoulders while two other people would carry the back from the outside. The head was separate and I could manipulate it like a mask. Between the hot weather, the weight on my shoulders, and the uneven weight distribution on the back end, I'm happy to report that I survived without a crippling back injury. Somehow!

Komachi on the Shrine

Collaboration with Kathleen Adamson. Performed at The Theatre on King, 2018

Wood, glass, foam, paper, wire

I first met musician and composer, Kathleen Adamson, at the Erring at the Mount. She asked if I was interested in collaborating with her on a Japanese puppet opera about Komachi. How could one say no? Over the next year or so we began to share ideas and I dived into Japanese Noh Theatre and Japanese puppetry in general. I began to develop a style inspired by that, combined with a few other Japanese influences. My earliest thought was that the puppet characters had to be wearing masks, huge in Noh Theatre. We had the opportunity to remount the show. What you see here are examples from each of the two versions of the characters from the show, also playing with scale. I feel I became obsessed with the details for the second version and lost some of the character from the first.

Pareidolia

2023

Crayola Model Magic Clay, acrylic paint

The dictionary definition of a pareidolia is the “tendency to perceive a specific, often meaningful image in a random or ambiguous visual pattern...or “the human ability to see faces, shapes or make pictures out of randomness”. And I am constantly seeing faces in things.

I fell in love with this air dry clay while I was creating the Komachi show. For this show, I decided I would like to make a series of flat masks that would not immediately suggest an obvious face pattern. I flatten the clay with a rolling pin and carefully pick up the sheet, fold it quickly within seconds, without thinking too much, into the shapes you see here.

Lear Project Puppets

The Lear Project, Erring at King George, 2022

Paper, burlap, acrylic, wood, cardboard, wire, rope

Dreda Blow, a Dance/Theatre artist, and I teamed together to develop something for Public Energy's *Erring at King George* Festival, initially due to happen before the pandemic. Our proposal was to create a work on Victorian artist, Edward Lear. When the pandemic happened, we had the luxury of all that downtime to develop this over a number of meetings, discussions, and come up with any number of ideas, good or bad. As time drew closer to the projected date, we refined our thoughts, materials and settled on four chapters to present within 4 different locations on King George school. These puppets and the train were for three of the pieces using Lear's absurd poems as text, spoken by us, with the fourth part being a wordless dance that Dreda performed, inspired by Lear's troubled, personal life. The response was overwhelming and we are developing this into a full work to be presented next year.

Terror and Erebus Puppets

Terror and Erebus, performed at Trans Canada Trail at Murray St in 2011, Turtle Island, Peterborough in 2013, and The Theatre on King in 2015

Papier-mâché, foam, wire, wood. Costumes created by Mel McCall

Upon returning from my Banff Puppet intensive course in the winter of 2010, I saw very clearly that my first puppet show of my own creation would be Canadian Poet, Gwendolyn MacEwen's verse play, *Terror and Erebus*, the story Franklin's search for the Northwest passage. I was obsessed with it!

In August of 2011, with Public Energy's invaluable assistance, I was able to bring together some fellow artist friends and together we presented a workshop production. We staged this outside, as a bit of a walking tour, starting out with the audience looking down at me, as the Narrator, in the exposed portion of Jackson creek at the Villa Car Wash. I traveled underneath the street, following the creek. The audience walked on land, crossing Bethune and Brock, settling onto the metal bridge, in the park behind, where we had transformed into the ship, eventually moving to the side of the creek where we performed the rest of the play, in the water.

Two years later, after some puppet refinement and stage design improvements, and an increased budget, we mounted a full production. It's always a privilege to remount a show that people have really responded to. You enter into the production improving upon things that you didn't have time for for the first workshop production. This time we moved the location to East City, along Little Lake shore. It was completely different from our urban environment, downtown.

I then remounted it as an indoor production at the Theatre on King where I played all characters. Yaaaaay Remount!

G8 Limberjack / Jig Doll

G20 Toronto Protests, 2010

Wood

This style of puppet probably started hundreds of years ago in Italy and spread out across Europe, eventually across the sea to become part of a strong American folk tradition, usually accompanied by music.

I was cat-sitting at a friend's house in Toronto during the summer of these protests. This was where we learned about "Kettling". I had it in my head that I was going to make these lumberjacks of the G8 (not all G20!) go down there, join the protesters and pass them out for others to operate. As often is the case when I have an impulse or start a project, time management is not often factored in! Not only did I over estimate how long these would take to make, I chose the wrong wood to carve them out of. Not good! As you can see, I didn't get too far.

I did join in the protest for a brief time, thankfully, no kettling for me!

Sputnik's Shadow Puppets

Sputnik's Shadow, Public Energy. Performed at The Theatre on King, 2023

Foam, wood, paint, cheesecloth, wire, paper

This was part of Public Energy's Alternating Currents program. This program offers participants a chance to explore and develop an idea or a work in progress, at any

stage of development without having to be concerned with the final product. My project is about the wonder of space and space travel. Eventually I will look at significant events that have shaped the progress of space exploration. This first stage was looking at the first man in space, Russian Cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin and the launch of the Sputnik Rocket.

Casino Slamma Bamma Puppets

Casino Slamma Bamma, Peterborough Artsweek, 2016

Foam, tape, paint, wood, cloth, wheels, cards, costumes

This project was my response to the then, yet to be built Casino, in Peterborough. There was considerable public debate as to whether the city of Peterborough wanted/needed this and where it would be located. As of this writing, the Casino's surrounding infrastructure is still to be completed.

I thought I might save the City and public's time by operating a portable casino on wheels, that would roam around downtown and entice people of all walks, especially children, to enjoy the exciting and addictive world of gambling! The people loved it, especially children. I offered three ways to gamble; Crown and Anchor, Blackjack and Roulette. Money was exchanged and fun was had by all. All monies I collected went to the Peterborough Food Bank. These four clown heads are all that remain of the ridiculously, overbuilt cart that I made.

House of Asterion Puppets (work in progress)

House of Asterion, Precarious Festival 3, Theatre on King, 2021

Papier-mâché, cardboard, wood, string, foam

I have always been fascinated by the ancient tale of Persius and Minotour. I ran across Jorge Luis Borges's short story, "La Casa de Asterion". This fantastic telling of this Greek myth is told from the Minotour's perspective. I immediately began to work on the mask. About a year or two later I was accepted to participate in Theatre on King's 3rd Precarious Festival residency program. This program allows the participant to bring an idea into the theatre, at any stage, and develop it within a short time frame. Then present a show and tell what you have to the other ten festival participants and an invited audience. What you see here is the unfinished mask, a cardboard structure, and a head and body of Queen Paciphae, the human Mother of Asterion. The rough

marionette with wooden legs, arms and foam torso were put together on the afternoon of the presentation, before I was to show the work.

Murmuratio Puppets

Murmuratio, performed at Erring on the Mount, Public Energy, 2014

Clay, wire, foam, string, dyed cheesecloth, paint

This show was created for Public Energy's, "Erring on the Mount", in the summer of 2014. It took place in the former Mother House of the Sisters of St Joseph Congregation, now the Mount Community Centre, on Monaghan Rd. My goal here was to create a simple folk tale presented with a European style of marionette not often seen or practiced here in North America. A centre rod extends from the head, with a few strings to manipulate the limbs. Melody Thomas, an awesome, local Peterborough singer and vocal teacher, enchanted the audience with a short, beautiful opera piece, while I operated the show from behind a puppet stage, with a window to the audience. A shout out to my friend Spencer Allen for helping with some very last minute final touches on the puppet booth, minutes away from my first performance on opening that day. I returned to the Mount at a much later date with Cal Coons, a local film and television director/writer/showrunner/etc, to make a short film. We currently are looking at ways to complete it with the possibility of some additional filming.

Murmuratio is dedicated to Sgt. Gordon Dewart Morrison MSM. CD. 1966 -1992

4 Dogs

Lady with a Lapdog, Commissions for Lisa Hamalaimen. Performed at Toronto Fringe, 2012 and Market Hall, 2014. *Endgame* (Samuel Beckett). Performed at Theatre on King, 2016. *Baroness*. Performed by Kate Story at The Theatre on King.

Metal, foam, cloth, real and faux fur, string, wood, glass

The white dog hanging here was the second version that I built for this show. The first. On the workbench shelf, was a small version that stayed inside a basket. For the remounted production I decided to build my first marionette. What I naively thought would be a pretty simple build wound up being a harsh lesson in patience and the basic understanding of scientific principles. Balancing this creature with just 5 strings was a Herculean effort! Some marionettes have 20 or 20 strings!!!!

The black dog, or poochie from *Endgame* was pretty fun to build. You could do no wrong and the finer details were definitely not needed or wanted. I would like to think that Samuel Becket would have approved.

The other black pup is Pinky. This was my second attempt at a marionette. It went much smoother. I never quite got the head attachment to fit/work properly. It remains unattached at the moment.

Coming up in May of this year at Theatre on King, we will be putting on a production of *Baroness!* I am contemplating making another dog for that production. Will I ever learn to let this sleeping dog lie!

Apparitions

Cut & Paste Macbeth, by Eryn Lidster, 2021, 2023.

Papier-mâché, wood, paint, wire

Due to the lockdown of all but essential businesses, during the height of the pandemic, Eryn Lidster had the brainstorm for this nutty project; a benefit for the Theatre on King. She was to assemble a collection of itchy theatre artists, cast them as various characters from Macbeth, and have them film themselves separately from home. She then edited all footage and put together a unique telling of this tragic tale. I offered to make the apparitions that Macbeth visits. I became obsessed with not only making these figures, but filming them multiple takes, over and over. I experimented with different light sources and positioning. For the 3ish minute sequence in the final film, I probably filmed several hours. Did I mention obsessed?

While putting this show together I thought it might be fun to see some of this extra footage. Jinian Harwig is an experimental filmmaker that is currently working here at Artspace. I suggested a possible collaboration and she agreed.

The Theatre on King will be showing two screenings of *Cut & Paste Macbeth* on April 3rd. Get to it!

30,10,1

Collaboration by Brad Brackenridge and Jinian Harwig, 2023

Video

In Jinian's words:

I've called it 30,10,1 referencing the 30 hours of work you put in, the 10 I did, and the 1 minute long video at the end. Like most of my films it's meant to loop. This was out of the box for me as a starting point and I wanted to make sure I was making something that spoke to both of our work but especially your exhibit, as I was researching themes of Macbeth and the witches I came across the theme of the inevitability of time, which really spoke to me and I felt also spoke to the artist process as a whole. Not just the amount of unseen time we put into our projects but also the time we lose managing other things in life, for me the biggest time stealing is illness, for another artist I know it's her motherly responsibilities. I think as artists we both lament the time spent away from making art, yet time spent making art can also be a lot in and of itself.

The Studio

2023

CDs, found materials, tools, wood, paper, radio, quilt, toys

I decided to recreate the bench of my studio here. The essential place of all puppet makers. It is perhaps slightly busier throughout my life than normal. It's not too far from what I constantly face from day to day. I have tried over the years to be more organized with all aspects in my professional and personal life. I've come to realize over the years that I need a certain amount of disorder and chaos to fuel my creative impulses.

Throughout my life I've always collected dolls, figures, masks, etc. I need to have them ready to pull them out, arrange them within the studio and sit with them until I need new visitors, and then change them up. Marie Kondo would not approve.

In Closing

While my name is on the poster for this solo exhibition, I have had many collaborators over the years that were invaluable to all that you see here. Good, essential theatre work comes from collaboration. While there are too many to list here, I salute each and everyone of them and thank them for their incredible work that has made me the artist I am today.

For this exhibition I would like to thank Leslie and all the incredible staff and volunteers here at Artspace, John Macewan, Phil Oakley, Kate story, Eryn Lidster, Ryan Kerr and the Theatre on King, 4th Line Theatre, Bill Kimble and Public Energy, Sam Sayer of Sam's Deli, Jeremy Moore for donating Sandbaggers drinks at our opening reception, and Theatre Trent.

Additional photos other than my own were taken by Andy Carol, Esther Vincent and Wayne Eardly.