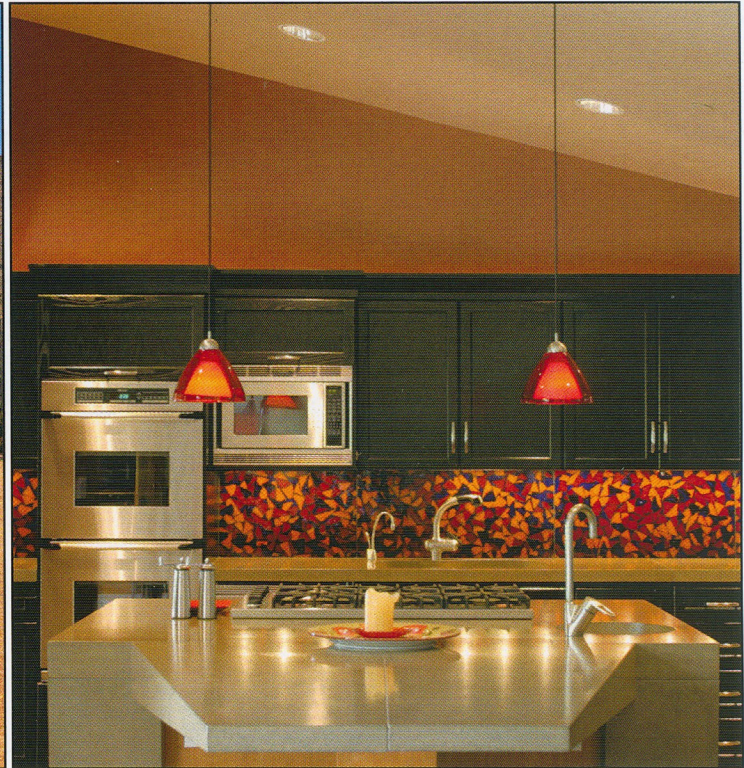


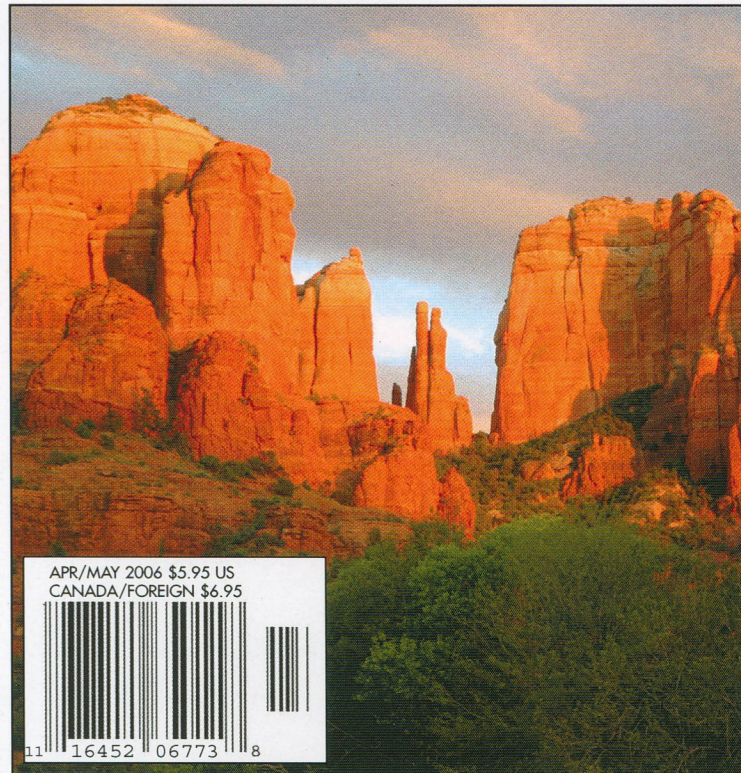
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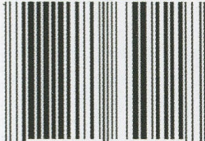
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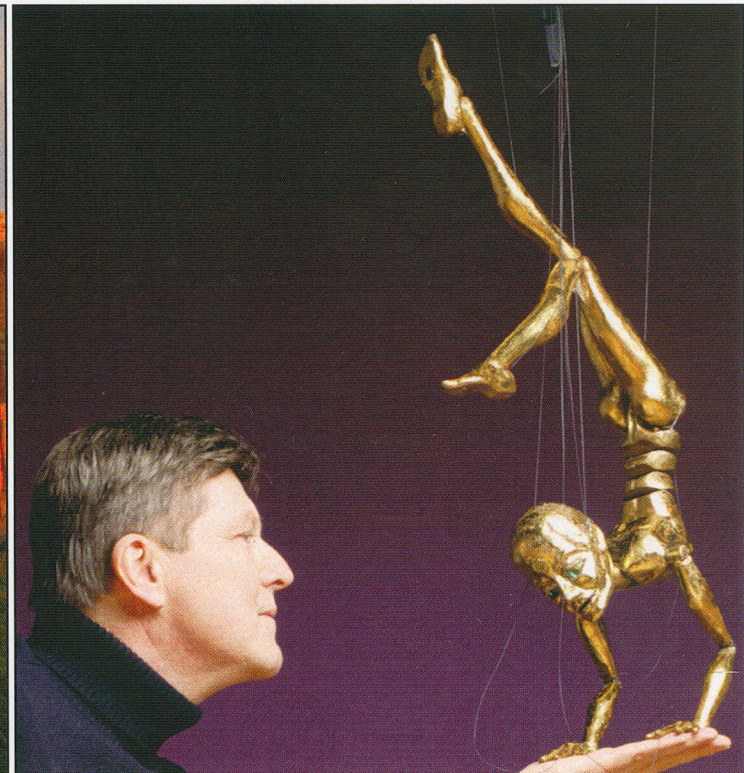
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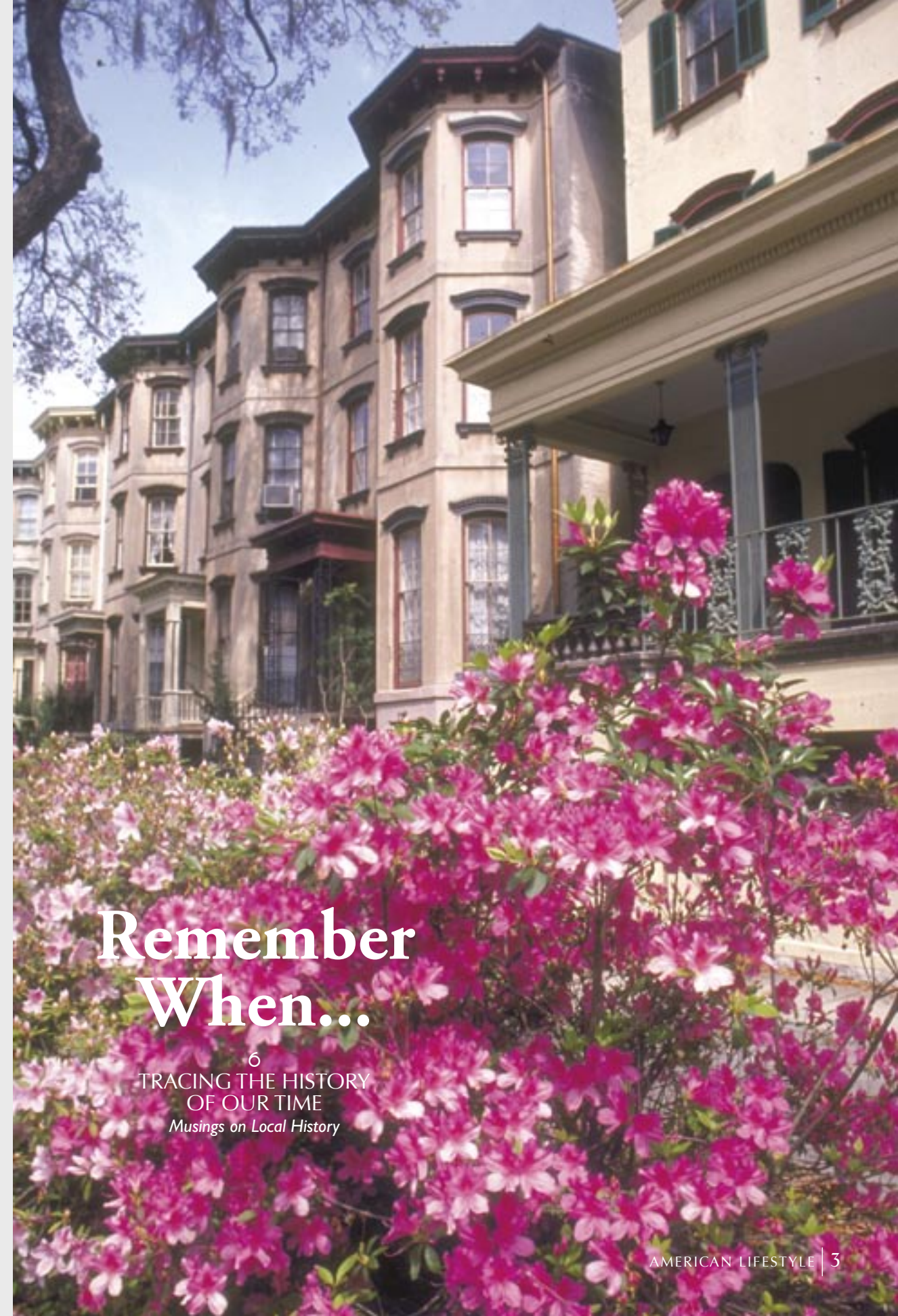
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Who inspired you to read?

Self portrait of Patricia Polacco with Horton © 2008 Patricia Polacco.



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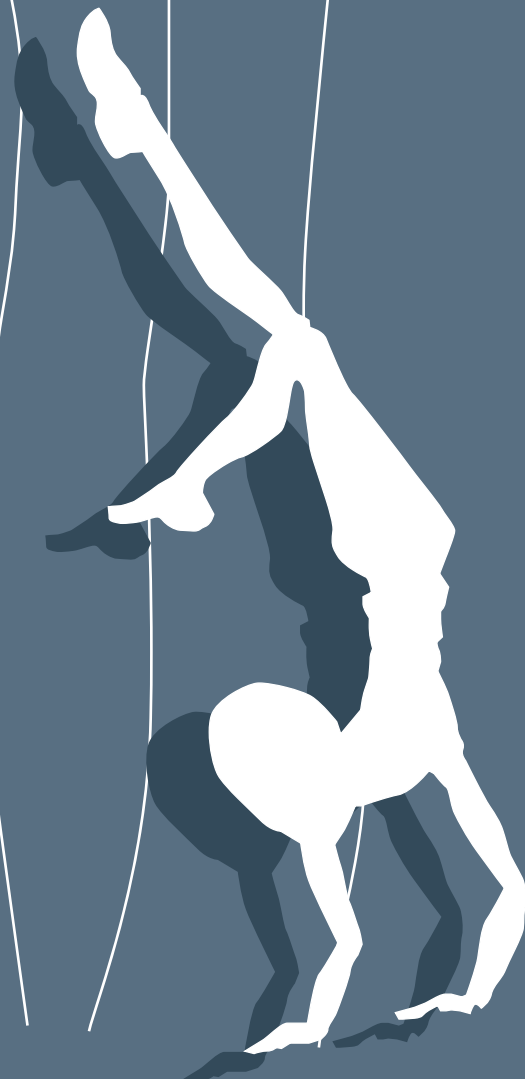
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in a
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of speaking

WORLD OF
HUBER
MARIONETTES

Article by Phillip Huber, as interviewed by Keller Rose

Q & A
PHILIP HUBER

Phillip Huber and David Alexander collaborated 26 years ago to form The Huber Marionettes. Since that time, their highly sophisticated, visually oriented, marionette review has received enthusiastic acclaim worldwide. There is no language barrier here. The universality of their work for stage, television, and film is apparent, and their performances have been highly-praised by audiences and critics alike.

The term “puppet,” or in this case “marionette,” conjures preconceived images which have little to do with The Huber Marionettes. This company has always had a primary appeal for adult audiences. Phillip Huber’s manipulation is the key to their success. In a series of variety vignettes, he reveals incredibly compelling characters of humor, pathos, drama and grace. Fantasy is imbued with a sense of reality. These are not performances of grand spectacle, but rather ones employing subtle artistry to touch the innocence within us all ... entertainment that makes you “smile with your heart.”

KR: When did the love of puppets start? Was your family supportive? Your friends? Were you teased in school or encouraged?

My mother gave me my first puppet when I was only 3 years old. It was a dog hand puppet that quickly became my favorite toy. I was pretty shy and this puppet

became a means of expression. I could hide behind the sofa and manipulate the puppet over the back to present a show for any unfortunate family member who happened to step into the living room at that moment.

My family was very supportive. My father spent hours patiently untangling my first marionette, and my mother designed and sewed all the costumes for my

was quite surprised to receive so many compliments from fellow students after the show. The biggest shock came when even my physical education teacher walked up to say how impressed he was with the show. Later, I won first place in a local talent show and had my picture printed on the front page of the hometown paper. Nobody ever teased me again about my career choice. And it had indeed become my



©Sean Beltrand Dennis

first attempts at puppet plays. It is no coincidence that my best friend growing up, David Herzog, was also interested in puppetry. (He is now a respected professional puppeteer based in Chicago.) He and I would spend countless hours re-creating scenes from movies and plays using puppets and our own elaborately conceived scenery.

Gaining the respect of classmates at school was far more difficult. At one point, I gave a performance for a special school assembly and

career choice since the age of 15, when I was earning money doing shows for local organizations and holiday gatherings.

KR: I’ve read that you took dance lessons. Was this solely because of puppetry? What did you learn about movement that you use with your puppets?

I started tap dance lessons when I was six years old, just because I was interested in it. Of course once I had decided to enter the

field of puppetry, I discovered that this dance training was invaluable. Movement, rhythm, timing, grace, along with the principles of choreography were the building blocks of my future marionette variety acts.

KR: What was your college experience like? When did you know you wanted puppetry to be a career?

I attended Principia College in southern Illinois. Since my sights were already firmly set on a puppetry career, I majored in theater while taking as many art courses as possible. My mother had expressed some concern over the economic prospects of my career choice, so I started a double major in education, with the idea that I could possibly teach drama. The demands of my theater work were so great that I was never able to finish my education major. But, it didn’t matter because one week after graduation, I received a plane ticket and a job offer from a professional puppet company in Los Angeles. My puppetry apprenticeship lasted eight years until I re-established my own puppet company in partnership with David Alexander.

KR: How was working with Jim Henson? Is it different operating someone else’s puppets? Do you have an emotional attachment to your own creations?

I was offered a job by Jim Henson to join his team of 12 puppeteers working on a Christmas special starring John Denver. It was a dream-come-true for me! Jim was a quiet, even-tempered man and one of the nicest people I have ever worked with. He and Frank Oz were true puppeteer geniuses. I would slip away after completing my own scenes to sit and watch these two masters while they improvised hilarious and sometimes touching scenes



with Kermit, Miss Piggy, and John Denver.

During the course of my career I have worked all types of puppets and I enjoy them all. Marionettes are definitely the most challenging to perform. Maybe that's what I love about them. You must work extra hard to give them that sense of life and personality. Their high degree of technicality also means that a puppeteer will always be most comfortable with a marionette that he has created for himself. But, that personal attachment never crosses a certain line with me ... I don't talk to my creations in the dressing room!

KR: Do you teach your puppeteers or have they had previous schooling?

My own show is actually a solo operation. I had a unique opportunity to hire other puppeteers this past year for a performance art piece called "Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty," conceived

by Dan Graham and created in collaboration with Tony Ousler, Rodney Graham, and the band, Japanther. Most of the puppeteers that I hired came from master classes I have taught at the O'Neill Theater Center Puppetry Conference. Many of them studied in the highly regarded Puppetry Department of the University of Connecticut. Whatever their background, I still put them through extensive training and exercises to meet my top level of requirements in marionette performance.

KR: Explain some features of a marionette.

Most of my marionettes are still made with traditional and old-fashioned techniques. The arms, legs, hands, feet, and torso are usually hand-carved wood, with some pieces created from stuffed cloth. The heads are usually cast in more modern materials like 2-part resin or cellulose impregnated cloth, to save on weight. On average, it takes about three hundred hours to construct one marionette, and it can take several years to perfect its movements and performance. My average marionette has 16-22 strings connected to 18-32 moving parts, which can include very elaborate facial animation like the characters in my own show, "Suspended Animation."

KR: Where do you find inspiration for characters? Do you analyze different ways people carry themselves?

My puppet ideas come from music, film, TV, stage, Internet, and the street. People-watching is a definite requirement and a pleasant research tool of my trade.

KR: What is the most difficult part of puppeteering? How many puppets are you able to control in the span of one performance?



The most difficult part of my job is the travel—getting my equipment safely from one point to another. The actual performances require incredible concentration and dexterity that can only be maintained with many hours of rehearsal, but I would be lying if I said that felt like "work."

The complexity of my marionettes pretty much dictates the necessity of manipulating only one puppet at a time.

KR: Is it hard to transition from puppet world to reality? (i.e. center stage rather than "behind" puppets)

Early in my career, I chose a style of marionette performance called "cabaret" which means the puppeteer is working in full view of the audience. That leaves the marionette and puppeteer free to interact. The puppeteer is only psychologically hidden behind the personality of the puppet, much the same as an actor is hidden behind the character of

Pictured above:
Phillip and Priscilla Pipes with the
Honolulu Symphony



Pictured at right:
Jeff Edgerton, Taffy, and Tom Plotkin from
the musical "Road to Hollywood," Good-
speed Opera. Director Walter Bobbie.



Pictured at top right:
Manuel D'Exterity: Violinist from "Suspended Animation"

Pictured at bottom right:
Nicole: Based on Natalie Cole. A character
in "Suspended Animation"

his role. It wasn't until I started performing on cruise ships and developed a special lecture-demonstration that I was thrust into the spotlight on my own. At first, I found it challenging to "step out" from behind the puppet and talk, but my desire to help people better understand and appreciate this unique art eased the transition. At this point, I am so comfortable speaking about my work, it is more of a challenge to shut me up.

KR: What would you consider to be your big break?

Puppeteers do not have the luxury of specific career benchmarks to achieve. There is no standard market for this art. I, as my fellow puppeteers before me, have had to search out and create a market for this work. I have had to prove that marionettes would be an effective and profitable addition to venues that had never tried them before, like the Magic Castle in Hollywood or venues that had not used marionettes for the past two decades like the Lido in Paris and the Casino de Monte Carlo in Monaco.

It seems that a puppetry career requires a series of "big breaks" and I have been blessed with several. One of the first was appearing on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno. Another was when Tony Award winning director/actor Tommy Tune created a special role for me in his Broadway show, "Busker Alley." Perhaps the biggest break was being hired for the film "Being John Malkovich." This one project put my work in front of more people than all the live performances I have given in my entire thirty-five year career.

KR: I've read that you turned down both a director of a film and Johnny Carson because of previous contracts. That says a lot about your character.

Business ethics are of primary importance to me. I expect them from others and I would never consider my own career path without them. I have not been hurt by that stand for principle. In the case of both The Tonight Show and "Being John Malkovich," they contracted me later when I was available.

KR: What about the entire experience of working on "Being John Malkovich" are you most proud of, or what was the most valuable thing you learned?

I did not choose this film ... it chose me. The subject and script did not immediately appeal to me. The film was an independent production with a low budget, which meant that none of the performers would be making much money. Yet, I felt uniquely drawn to this project and well qualified to do the work. It was my deep desire to "raise the bar" on marionette work in film. This was an opportunity to show the marionette as a uniquely gifted dramatic and cinematic tool. The Director, Spike Jones, asked me to produce marionette actions which even I thought were impossible, and though I made no ridiculous promises, I ultimately discovered ways to achieve 99%



©Huber Marionettes

of those actions, including a forward somersault and a back hand-spring.

I am grateful I persevered to break through those moments of doubt. I am grateful that I didn't rely too heavily on my own value judgments about this film which went on to be nominated for three Academy Awards and became a major box office success, as well as the means of introducing marionettes to a whole new generation of audiences.

KR: How did the loss of your puppets affect you? Did you have any moments of wanting to leave the craft or did it motivate you to rebuild?

All my puppets were stolen from my car just at a point when it seemed that the financial rewards would finally put me above the level of "starving artist." It was tempting to wallow in a sense of despair, especially since I was well aware of the tremendous amount of work necessary to rebuild those lost characters. However, I didn't just choose to do this work — it is my passion. I couldn't imagine doing anything else. Besides, I knew I could create new marionettes that would be even better than the originals. And, I did.

KR: Shirley U'Jest and other characters are very tongue-in-cheek, and geared to adults. What was the motivation in gearing your art to adult audiences?

My show's content is appropriate for all ages. It is not what I do, but rather how I do it that makes it interesting to a certain age range. In the long history of puppetry, we find it principally fashioned for adults. My vision happened to take root in those qualities of elevated sophistication, artistry, and class that are best appreciated by adults, even when I had younger audiences.

KR: Favorite reaction of an audience member?

Just last week, at the show's end, a lady walked up to me with a look of awe in her face and said, "I have never been **so entertained** by something **so simple!**" Then realizing what she said, continued, "I mean it's not really simple at all. It's actually very difficult, very complicated, but it's ..." Laughingly, I said, "I know! Thank you."

KR: Do you feel you've made puppetry "cool," and was this a goal?

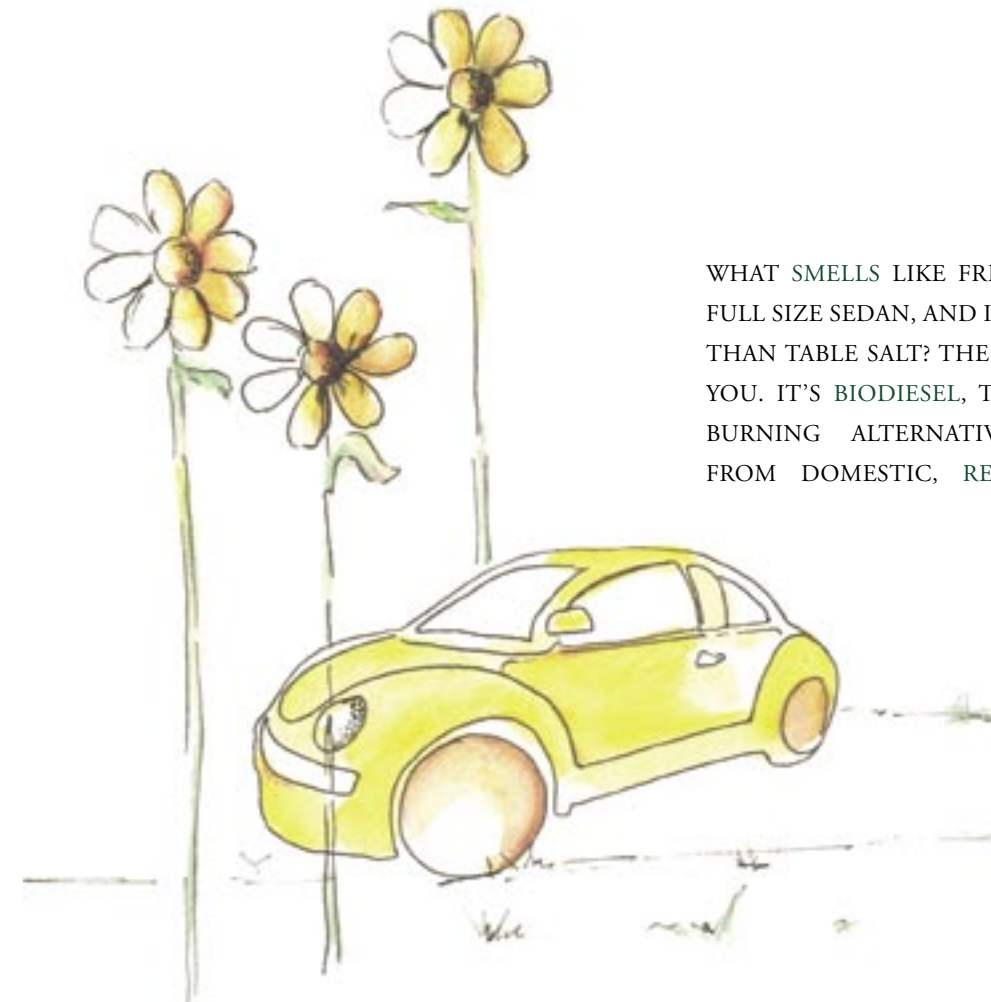
To my mind, making something "cool" seems to have a quality of superficiality about it. My goal has always been to achieve the highest possible expression of my art. Puppetry will certainly be "cool" when the audience experiences those magic moments that cause them to forget reality and accept the fantastic. [AL]

Pictured at left:
Arianna Blade, a figure skater from Huber's
"Suspended Animation"

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