

Puppeteers explore and recreate an ancient art form

By Timothy Meinch

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As an acting student, Laura Facciponti spent a summer living in amusement parks and county fairs as a puppeteer with a traveling theater show more than 25 years ago. The associate professor of drama at UNC Asheville said it was her first paid job as a performer.

"I think in the United States a lot of the movements within puppetry alliances are helping our culture understand that puppetry is far more reaching than just for children," Facciponti said. "So many different artists are encouraging the growth in the movement and creating either new forms of it or they're bringing old forms forward again and helping people receive those forms again."

Local puppeteers said the presence and acceptance of puppetry as an art form is growing, and professionals in the field are gravitating toward Western North Carolina.

"This is one of the most active cities in the United States for puppets as far as organizations," Facciponti said.

The Asheville Puppetry Alliance formed more than 10 years ago, functioning as an umbrella organization for area artists. The nonprofit organization celebrates and promotes puppetry in WNC through quality family education and entertainment.

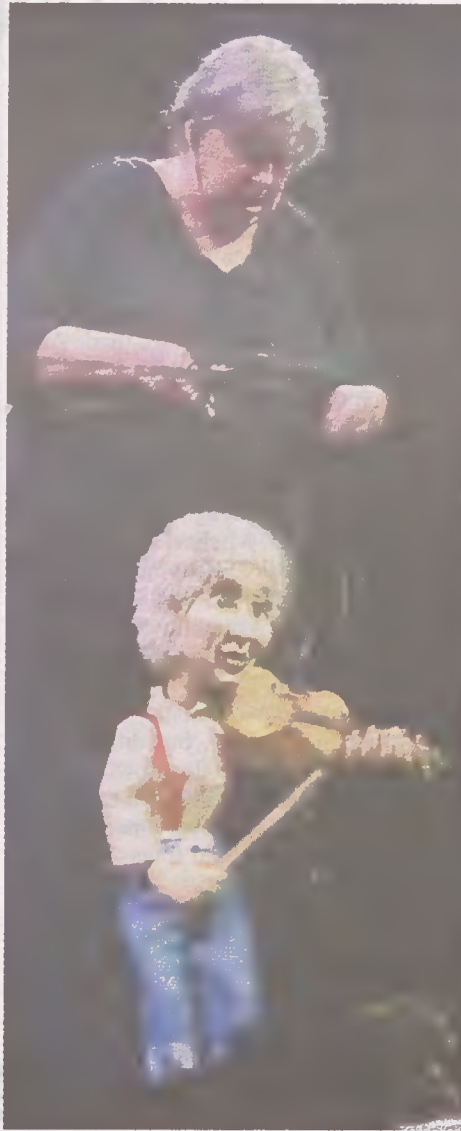
"They wanted a way to bring good puppetry into Asheville and showcase the Asheville puppeteers," Susan VandeWeghe said after her performance at the Diana Wortham Theatre Friday. "Except for performances like this, where we are actually making money, everything is volunteer with the APA."

VandeWeghe is a do-it-yourself professional puppeteer who started Mountain Marionettes, based in Cedar Mountain near Brevard. The 61-year-old designs and creates her own intricate marionettes out of neoprene, clay and wood. Each is specific to their role in her original on-stage productions.

"Puppetry, as an art form, encompasses sculpting, painting, set design, choreography, dramatic skills such as voice technique, music and other art forms all into one," said Pam Gabler, a member of APA who currently studies under VandeWeghe.

A puppet production requires as much rehearsal and performance preparation as a drama production, according to VandeWeghe and Gabler.

"It is very underappreciated here in the United States," VandeWeghe said. "Jim Henson had an organization, but most of us are single or double performers and we have to learn how to do all those other things that are part of being in business."



Timothy Meinch- Assistant Arts and Features Editor

Asheville Puppetry Alliance member Susan VandeWeghe presented her original production "Stories from Aunt Nelly's Mountain Home" at the Diana Wortham Theatre to an audience of children Friday.

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— *Laura Facciponti,*

associate professor of drama at UNC Asheville

She said it often surprises school and library officials when they hear how much she charges for her performances or that she charges at all. During question-and-answer sessions after her shows, people often ask, "So what do you really do for a living?"

"This is a business, it is not a hobby," New Jersey native VandeWeghe said.

APA and other puppetry alliances embrace the diversity and extensive outlets for puppets in society. VandeWeghe, Gabler and others perform at assisted living homes, libraries, schools, day care

centers, outdoor festivals, park districts, camps, birthday parties and night clubs. Some therapists even use puppets in counseling.

"The therapist can use puppets, and kids will talk to puppets when they won't talk to people," said Gabler, who previously worked with disabled children.

Beyond children, the growing presence of puppets in dramatic productions also integrates the ancient art form into everyday life and entertainment in America, according to local puppeteers. Even large Broadway productions such

as "The Lion King" use puppetry.

"We have done various productions that include puppets and puppeteering," Facciponti said of the UNCA theater department. "If you have a puppeteer with just enough skill, they know how to give any object absolute life. It's just like a mime knows how to ripple their muscles and let you believe there is something in the air around them."

She said puppets bring a magical element to the stage that live performers

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