



from the UNIMA-USA CENTER

by Vincent Anthony, General Secretary

On a trip to Japan and China in the fall of 2001, I was witness to much grand artistry. The following is an account of my visit to China and its puppets extraordinaire!

I expected excellence in the puppetry of China, but I was unprepared for the real meaning of that word. Excellence doesn't really describe the level of accomplishment I observed on this leg of my trip. After my first 24 hours in Guangzhou, I had seen the artistry of two troupes. Mr. Wang Jingxian's Quanzhou Troupe performed their marionette magic, which included the masterful work of Mr. Huang Yi Que, who has also performed at the Puppeteers of America Seattle Festival and at the Center for Puppetry Arts. The whole troupe was simply splendid. They began with a children's piece somewhat similar to the Brer Rabbit tale with a bear, rabbit and other critters vying for territory and dominance. They then moved to more mature material with a series using historically based subject matter. This included the work by Mr. Huang where a General's spirit returns to get drunk and performs incredible feats such as drawing and returning his sword from the scabbard on his back! He also lifts objects and much more. Mr. Huang's monkey on a bicycle is legendary and he performed that routine to perfection as well. All of this is done with a traditional Chinese marionette control, and this artistry ranks among the best I have ever seen. This sequence was followed by a wondrous piece performed by several members of the company replicating a Chinese street parade. It was complete with clowns, acrobats and old women changing into young women right before our eyes! The second troupe I saw was not to be believed. These shadow puppeteers from the Hunan Troupe were mesmerizing. My notes from one of the first pieces that they performed literally read "very cartoon, but surreal and

cinematic." I was watching a wordless story of mice and a cat called The Fat Cat. It was similar to the old Tom and Jerry cartoons but with lots of twists. The shadow puppet manipulation was unparalleled, and the figures were designed with color and fluidity that produced genius results. One of the other pieces that they performed was a retelling of their cultural history and its reverence for female warriors. In this story entitled Lianghongyu, the wife of a General causes a favorable conclusion to a battle by wearing amour, beating on drums (thereby encouraging braveness), and even joining the battle. There is a terrific fight with two warriors on horseback.

I was to see no less than five troupes in Guangzhou, which included the Zhangzhou Troupe, directed by Mr. Zhuan Chenhua, with their hand puppets; and Mr. Xie Jiafu's Guangxi Troupe, featuring various ethnic-clad dancers holding ethnic-clad rod puppets suggestive of the border cultures nearby such as Vietnam. I also saw the Guangdong Troupe of Mr. Li Yuchao who is the first General

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Secretary of UNIMA-China. The Chinese Government is also in the process of building him a new puppet center in the middle of Guangzhou. It will house UNIMA-China and will open in November of 2002. His troupe works primarily with rod puppets while incorporating some westernized contemporary ideas. They began their performance with some traditional stories. The Canton Opera romantically wove the first story of the Princess and her Fiancé who must save themselves from destruction. Other pieces included the General and his servants, the "white bone" devil who transforms into a beautiful woman and more. Although most of these pieces are based on traditional Chinese culture, some of the pieces were performed in front of the play board (very western in nature) in full view of the audience. This

added to the charm of this troupe and complemented their excellent manipulation techniques. They ended their performance with a cute contemporary marionette dance, which included a half dozen silly ducks performing in unison and behaving in a fanciful, funny way. It was a most amusing piece.

Next, I traveled to Shanghai, the most beautiful city of my trip in my opinion. It was very cosmopolitan. I viewed videotapes of two troupes as well as the performance of one other. The two videos were very intriguing. The Chengdou Troupe is the only Chinese company under the direction of a woman, Ms. Tang Dayu. They performed traditional stories with rod puppets. The other tape of the Yangzhou Troupe, under the direction of Mr. Shen Yemin, was entrancing. It contained much of what the West expects from the Chinese performing arts--bicycle riding, martial arts and lots of skillful interaction. The rod puppets had incredible lives of their own. This was an example of the epitome of our profession. The Shanghai troupe under Zhang Zhao Xiang was a surprise with its very new "voice". It is clear that he is on course to break with tradition and create a new Chinese language with puppets. One piece in particular demonstrates the essence of what I mean: it was the classic tale of Androcles and the Lion told with intricately designed modern figures played in a wordless, funny original way. Suddenly this timeless tale was Chinese, the puppets Chinese and we were in 21st century China. The piece transcended the boundaries of nations and spoke to the human spirit of the twenty-first century. Next, I was taken to a high-rise office tower (among other great sites) to see the strategic placement of the Shanghai Troupe's new theater about half way up the building (approximately 10 stories, I'd say). The Chinese Government is building this complex to attract tourism as well as honor this noted theater's success.

I learned that Beijing is a big, big city! It is here that the only permanent puppet theater in China has been established. It is privately owned and doubles as a cinema and event venue to garner additional revenues. The director, Mr. Xie Qiguang, is an entrepreneur extraordinaire. He not only keeps this artistic endeavor afloat amidst a sea of communist oriented business practices but also operates a complex that sports an "American" style restaurant complete with burgers and fries. I tried to have a meal there but was unable to fit it into my very busy schedule, which included seeing two other shows from

this region (at this theater) as well as excursions to the Great Wall (where I did get to eat western food at KFC) and the Forbidden City. The first company I saw in Beijing was that of Mr. Xie's. His Puppet Art Troupe of China performed with large, splashy hand and rod puppets in their 650-seat theater. They opened with a beautiful lion dance featuring a dozen or so puppets leaping into the air and being caught in view of the audience. From there, they performed a funny cockfighting sequence replicated from street theater, a mice dance featuring female mice operated by women puppeteers in view of the audience, and other traditional sequences with big, lavish sets, costumes and lights. The show was very impressive and theatrically exciting! After this, Mr. Zhu Jie's Shanxi Troupe's performance featured nine puppeteers and utilized works from the Beijing Opera as the primary source for their material. A spectacular dance sequence showed monks spinning their bead necklaces into the air and catching them with their heads and girls twirling scarves in the air. The piece de resistance was the moment when the classic Chinese general spewed real fire from his mouth! This was done at some other theaters by generals and monkeys, but this troupe's execution of the special effect was just about as good as it gets! The Tangshan Troupe of Mr. Wang Jun Jie performed with shadow puppets and told the story of the birth and life of China's fabled Monkey King. This was a beautiful and colorful telling of this story featuring his birth in a volcano, a spectacular underwater sequence with mermaids (fish turning into women), a cloud/midair breathtaking scene, and other very magical puppet moments.

My trip to China both started and concluded with my collaboration (and visit) with Mr. Simon Wong of the Ming Ri Theater in Hong Kong. He and his assistant, Wanda Wong, who acted as my interpreter, also accompanied me on my entire trip. I spent my last night there, and we discussed several projects. As a result, I hope there will be many opportunities for puppeteers and puppet enthusiasts in North America to see this wonderful artistry in the future.

UNIMA Citations listed on page 13.

Short TAKES

PUPPETS TAKE ATLANTA

"Catch a falling star, encounter a fearsome beast or celebrate with a dazzling variety show at the first Southeastern festival of its kind.

Puppets Take Atlanta, a city-wide event co-sponsored by the Center for Puppetry Arts and the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, offers more than 15 extraordinary

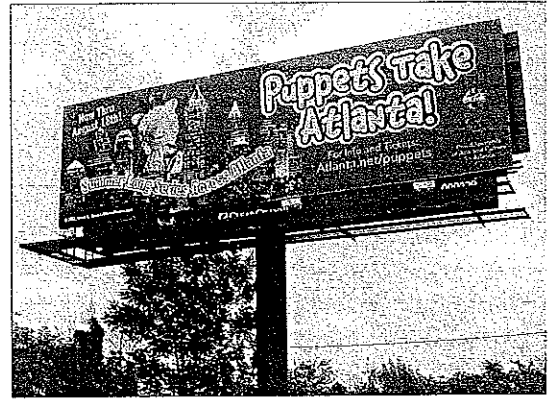


Photo by Alan Louis

exhibits, performances and workshops from June 1 - August 18. For information, visit www.atlanta.net"

WIZARD OF OZ TAKES OVER THE HOUSE

I am currently recovering from yet another sortie into Big Puppets. I'm attaching a picture of Oz the Great and Terrible, who occupied my entire dining room for way too long. He's currently hanging out at Columbus Children's Theatre... and he is NOT COMING BACK HERE no matter what my husband says.

The Life Lesson of this experience: never build anything taller than your ceiling.

Ever.



Not even if your enterprising son offers to rig up something like the stuff Tom Cruise used in Mission Impossible to allow you to get the right perspective on the thing (this offer was refused... the chandelier is not an acceptable starting point...)

--Nancy Lacher (Ohio)

Noteworthy

WHERE DO GOOD PUPPETS GO?

Many puppeteers who have collections of puppets--either their own or puppets they've acquired--eventually find themselves at the place when they have to ask the difficult question: what will happen to my collection when I'm no longer around, or no longer have space to keep them, or when I want to place them where they will be used for a good purpose.

Ever more frequently officers of the Puppeteers of America have been asked for guidance on this question. If the organization had a huge museum we could probably say, "send them over."

We don't.

The PofA collections committee is beginning research about options for puppet

placement. The American Theatre Association has a book in progress on the subject of puppet collections. Details about the publication of this book will soon be available. If you would like to offer ideas and suggestions to the Collections Committee, contact the chair of the committee:

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