

Downstage Center

Go behind the scenes with Kevin Selwyn



Remember Elmo? How about Kermit the Frog? Dare I mention King Friday XIII, the Fraggles and Yoda? For many of us, puppets were a big part of our childhood.

But what about the grown-ups who design, build and give life to our favorite characters?

One such puppeteer is a Shenandoah student who makes and performs with puppets. He is as thrilled and entertained with his own work as anyone who sees him perform with his puppets.

Jonathan Carlucci, a junior musical theatre major, has had an interest in puppets and puppetry for as long as he can remember. "I'm sure I was watching Sesame Street before I could speak. I was just always completely and utterly fascinated. I just ate it up," Carlucci recalled.

His latest – and perhaps greatest – puppetry work was for the recent children's show "Rumpelstiltskin is My Name."

For the show, Carlucci custom built a 5-foot-tall puppet complete with blinking eyes to play the role of Rumpelstiltskin. It took two men, Carlucci and classmate Jonathan Richard, to operate Rumpelstiltskin.

Carlucci is experienced in mouth puppets, often referred to as "Muppets," but he also has experience in ventriloquism, glove puppets, blacklight puppetry, full-body costume mascot work and Bunraku, the Asian style of puppetry that was employed in the performance of Rumpelstiltskin.

In this Bunraku-inspired performance, Carlucci and Richard dressed all in black so as to not distract from the movement of the puppet.

"I loved that when the puppet was on stage, after a while you didn't notice there were people controlling him," said sophomore Julia Pfanstiehl. "The puppet became another character – just as real and life-like as the actors."

"The thing about puppetry is you're literally in two different worlds," offered sophomore Will Goodwin. "If you sit back and just watch the puppet, you really get into what's happening in his world. It's totally amazing. It was an awesome puppet, especially when they



SUN Photo by CATHY KUEHNER
Jonathan Richard and Jonathan Carlucci use the Bunraku style of puppetry to give life to Rumpelstiltskin.

had him jump and stuff."

According to Carlucci, there are three schools that offer an actual degree in puppetry. "So, most people who do it don't really have a piece of paper. The majority is self-taught.

"I've competed in puppetry conferences, and I've done training at conferences, too," he said.

"But, puppet performance is just something that has to develop, just like actors acting; it's an extension of that. You have to be a very strong actor to be a good puppeteer."

Carlucci says he learned from closely examining other people's techniques. Some people produce kits, patterns or videos "so I kind of observe all that and combine it with how I like to do things. It's trial and error."

Carlucci guesses he spent more than 100 hours building Rumpelstiltskin from scratch.

But, different designs on different scales take different amounts of time.

"It depends on what you're making. Penelope, my little pink monster, was made from a pattern someone else produced. So, I didn't have to design it.

"A lot of construction is hand sewing in order to provide the best looking seam, and that's time consuming. But, a small puppet like Penelope can be made in two days."

In a semester past, Carlucci decided to make a puppet as his final project in Cheryl Yancey's stage costuming class, in lieu of making pajama pants, a popular final project.

Little did he know he was planting a seed in Yancey's mind that eventually blossomed into his involvement with "Rumpelstiltskin is My Name," directed by Associate Professor of Theatre Wade Fransen.

"Cheryl gave me an 'A' on my puppet," Carlucci said. "At the beginning of this school year, Dr. Fransen was talking about perhaps making Rumpelstiltskin a puppet, and Cheryl spoke up and recommended me."

Not only is Carlucci talented enough to make the puppet, but he also saved the university a lot of money.

"It probably cost close to \$400 for the materials to build Rumpelstiltskin," he said. "To order a custom-made puppet like that from another company, with blinking eyes and the works, would have cost between \$1,500 and \$2,500."

Puppetry is much more than a hobby for Carlucci. He sees himself in a career in puppetry, and the first words out of his mouth when speaking about his dream job are "Sesame Street."

"I would love to do children's television like that. 'Sesame Street' has just celebrated its 40th birthday.

"I would love to work with the Henson Company. I'd be happy building or performing. I'd also love to do 'Avenue Q.' There are a lot of puppeteers who have musical theatre degrees and who work professionally in musical theatre."

Already, he has an online company that specializes in building puppets.

"I don't have an order form or products you can order. But, I have a portfolio there and a contact page where people can get in touch with me if they want a custom project. People might say, 'Hey, I have this idea for a puppet. I really like this one, but it's a brown boy with purple hair, and I want an orange girl with yellow pigtails.' I can do that," explains Carlucci.

Visit his site at www.CarlucciPuppets.com to check out some of his work.

Wherever Carlucci's life takes him, he will actively use his education and experience to advance and increase his passion for everything puppetry.

So if you are clicking by the children's shows on the television one day and come across an Oscar the Grouch or Fozzy Bear, stick around for the credits to see of Jonathan Carlucci is the one operating them.