

BeeSting

by Lisa Aimee Sturz

A devastating diagnosis. Cancer.
Lisa Sturz brought all her creative powers to the fight.

Things were looking good. I had gotten engaged over the weekend to the fabulous Mark Blessington and was preparing for a two-week run of "Aesop's Fables" at the Center for Puppetry Arts.

Monday morning, before leaving for Atlanta, I was squeezed in for a biopsy of a lump in my right breast. I called the technical director in Atlanta to let him know I would be late for load in, but not why. Everything went smoothly on the outside, but inside I was starting to withdraw into a place of anxiety and fear.

The following day I performed three shows and was able to block out my worries, still assuming the results would be clear. The news came via cell phone Wednesday evening. The following morning as the lights came up on the puppet show, inside, everything faded to black.

For the next thirteen months, my life revolved around doctor appointments, bees, and naps. I had to cancel several performances, postpone a video shoot in California, and train young puppeteers to take my place. I was feeling worthless and afraid.

While lying on my stomach inside an MRI machine for diagnostic pre-surgical imaging, I felt anxious and claustrophobic. The loud hum of the machine was frightening. As I let myself relax, the sound transformed into the sweet humming of bees and I imagined that I was invited inside the ancestral hive to take counsel with the Queen. I was transported to a deep place of sisterhood and communal support. I didn't realize it yet, but the sounds and images that comforted me would evolve into a concept for a highly personal shadow play on my experience with cancer, and now a full-length documentary film.

I consulted with a nontraditional medicine woman who listened to my fears and examined my dreams. She advised me that to learn from the cancer on a spiritual level, my artistic priorities needed to change and that I should find a way to give back to the bees. I prayed to the bees. I practiced a yoga technique called brahmari or "bee breath". I visited bee yards and watched as they brought their baskets of pollen back to share with the hive. My friend set up a healing totem for me in her bee yard where friends made offerings.

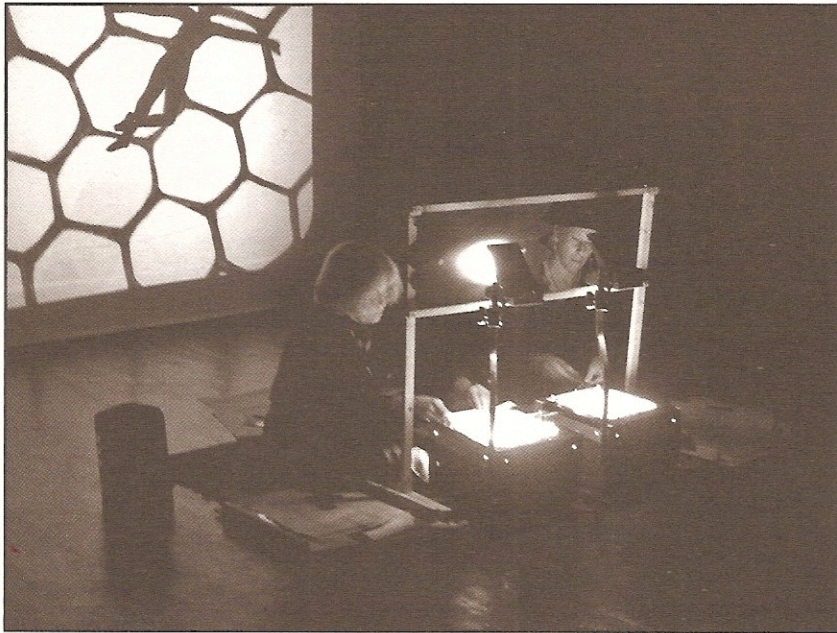
But how could I use my art to honor the bees. Trying to support a family on a puppeteer's erratic income, I often compromised political and religious convictions to create work neutral enough to accommodate the "politically correct" needs of public schools. I enjoy supporting school curriculum and inspiring young audiences; but the medicine woman had advised me to throw that aside and listen to what my heart was saying. Cancer is not middle-of-the road, but confrontational and edgy. The cute teddy bears with the pink ribbons were getting on my nerves.

So during the fog of chemotherapy, I started drafting a storyboard and writing poetry faster than I could think. It was only days before the

Asheville Puppetry Slam; but I knew I needed to make this happen - my life depended on it. Several friends came over with exacto knives and helped me create the shadow images on acetate to perform on overhead projectors

"BeeSting" addresses the emotional, physical, and spiritual stress of breast cancer against a backdrop of the declining bee population, strip mining, and the ever-increasing toxicity of Mother Earth. The narrative is a lyrical outpouring of creative force expressing the damage of the feminine archetype in Western culture, manifested individually with breast cancer, and witnessed globally through the careless abuse of Mother Earth. The story moves between metaphor and realism, blending personal expression, medicine, humor, poetry, and gratitude. The visuals connect the shape of the female breast with the traditional hive. The text speaks of breast cells, cell phones, prison cells, and the cells within the hive. The title "BeeSting" is redolent of the venomous "sting" of cancer alongside the "sweetness" that arises from deepening connections with friends, family, society and the natural world.





The performance received a standing ovation. We performed it again and won the award for "Breaking Boundaries" at the Asheville Fringe Festival. I continued to refine the narrative, and enhance the visuals. I added a soundtrack with music from "Hymns of the Hive" (used with permission) by Layne Redmond, an award winning frame drummer, author and composer. I hosted several "critical response sessions" which generated heartfelt discussion and helped shape the final script. I was surprised how many people expressed that "BEESTING" motivated them to make changes to their personal habits and diet, and to increase their active involvement with social change. And I realized there is a need for people to better understand the experience of cancer patients. It can be very isolating. But the fact is that everyone is at risk of developing cancer. The current statistic is one in four. This is a timely piece, which addresses the fears, hopes, intensity, warnings, and blessings that cancer reveals.

Cancer is everyone's worst nightmare; but puppets have a singular ability to coax meaning and healing from the shadows.

Diane Tower-Jones, a local filmmaker, recorded a rehearsal of "BeeSting" to test its potential as a short film. We are now in the process of creating a professional sound track, and filming in a studio setting where we can control keystoneing, hot spots, and other "live performance" idiosyncrasies. We hope to screen it for cancer patients, their families, health care professionals, caregivers, puppeteers, beekeepers, and the general public.

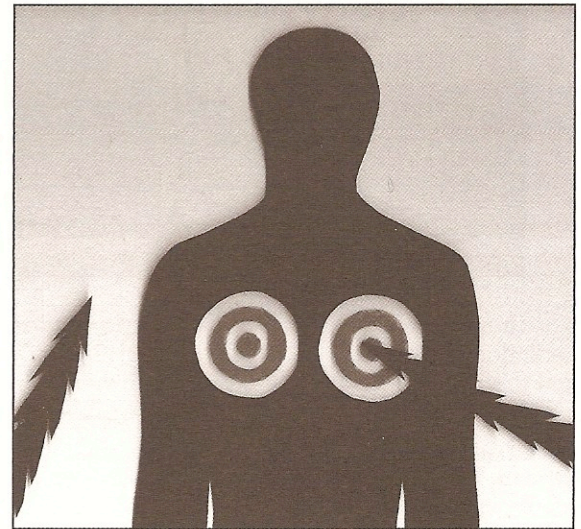
But it doesn't stop there. Diane and I are collaborating to make a full-length documentary using different forms of puppetry to express the scratchy physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges of cancer that people only speak of in mumbles and whispers. During treatment I kept a journal on "The Caring Bridge," a website for cancer patients to communicate with friends and family. My personal struggle became a sounding board for readers to resonate and share their own experience. My story expanded to include family and friends – and then became a blueprint for healing our planet.

One of the recurring themes is my sense of living in an "in between state" hovering between Eastern and Western approaches to medicine and spirituality, personal and public experience, past and present, life and death. In the full-length documentary, I express this through a rod puppet with two heads "facing both ways." I believe puppets maintain a numinous quality from their roots in religious ritual and magic and navigate gracefully between the human and spirit world. They speak the language of poetry heard by both the conscious and unconscious mind. They are themselves an "in between state" and the perfect "medium" for giving shape to complex feelings that are hard to articulate.

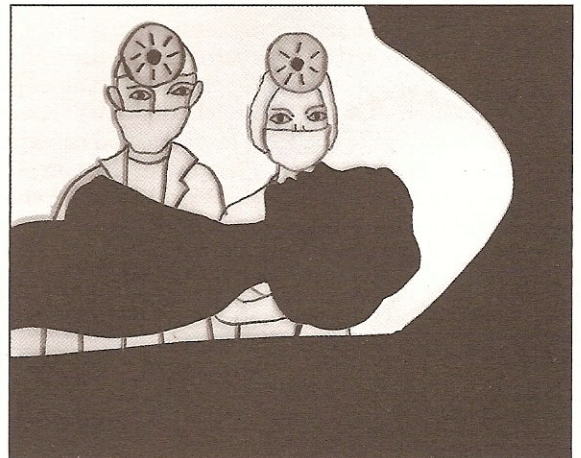
In another chapter, I am using a "toy theatre" stage with scrolling backgrounds to animate a series of dreams revealing my inner landscape as it changes through treatment. These sequences are illustrated with inverted rod puppets, original music and voice over narration. At times the camera tilts up to reveal me as the puppeteer, sometimes clothed as a surgeon, a bee, or Death.

Because of the pharmaceutical side effects, I felt like a stranger in my own body. I didn't recognize my own smell or the texture of my skin. I was unable to taste the food that nourishes us, triggering feelings of "disconnection". This carried over into my relationship with Mark and others - I couldn't "taste" the love they were offering. For this sequence, I am designing a black light ballet in which figures hauntingly appear just within reach; then quickly dissolve into darkness.

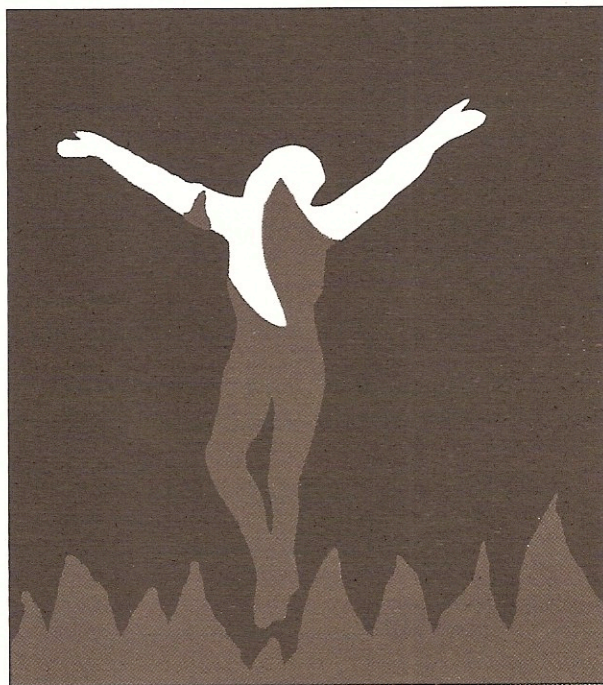
During radiation treatments, I experienced mounting anger as my naked breasts were repeatedly exposed and targeted. A



newspaper headline will read "BEWARE: PUPPETEER LOSES CONTROL" with a photo of me surrounded by a heap of twisted, tangled, marionettes. The photo "comes to life" as I manage to retrieve a control bar from the mess. The puppet opens her gown and reveals her naked breasts on the radiation table. When the



*Cancer is everyone's worst nightmare;
but puppets have a singular ability to coax
meaning and healing from the shadows.*



humming sound begins, she gets up and turns the radiation gun towards a row of pink teddy bears (supposedly put there to comfort cancer patients) blowing them to pieces.

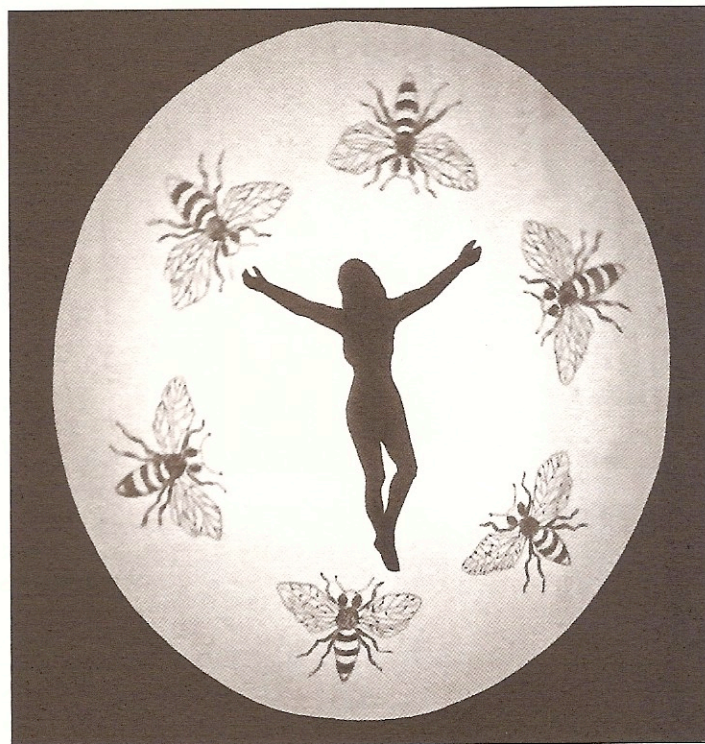
A chapter on "Accelerated Growth" is an exploration of unregulated, unsustainable growth applied to pollution, climate change, over-population, and global economics. For example, rampant cancerous growth in our bodies parallels the excessive speculation and risk-taking that is undermining our financial system and depleting our natural resources. My (now) husband Mark Blessington (a political economist) and I, create a puppet game show entitled "Who's in Charge?" exploring "accelerated growth" seen in the sub-prime mortgage scandal, which has led to massive foreclosures and recession. A puppet representing a giant corporation depicts this phenomenon of "economic cancer", growing larger as it consumes the common people, until it finally deflates.

"BeeSting" is ripe with artistic, medical, environmental, feminist, interpersonal, social, economic, political, and spiritual 'grit'. Its artistic signature is the use of puppetry to navigate difficult events and emotions in an engaging and unthreatening way. The finished film will comfort and educate cancer patients, their families, and caregivers, promote puppetry as an art form for adult expression, bring awareness to the plight of the bees, and inspire change through thoughtful review of our global habits.

We are currently seeking financial support. We have received a grant from the Southeast Region of the Puppeteers of America, a Regional Artist Project Grant through the North Carolina Arts Council, private foundation support, and individual contributions.

If you are able to make a donation, Asheville Puppetry Alliance is serving as a non-profit fiscal sponsor. Any contributions are tax-deductible and will be acknowledged in the film credits. You can send

a check written to Asheville Puppetry Alliance with the word BeeSting on the memo line to 130 Lynn Cove Road, Asheville, NC 28804 or make a contribution online using Paypal at <http://www.bee stingstory.com/>



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Lisa Aimee Sturz, Artistic director, is an Emmy award-winning puppeteer. She has worked with Jim Henson Productions, Lucasfilm, Walt Disney Imagineering, PBS, NBC, UNC-TV, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Indiana School of Music, the Asheville Symphony and many more. She has an MFA in puppetry from UCLA, an MA from the University of Connecticut, and a BA in theatre and religious studies from Grinnell College. Lisa has worked on epic productions combining music and visual effects such as Wagner's "Ring Cycle" creating larger than life puppets for the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and a touring production of Mozart's "The Magic Flute" with the Atlanta Opera and the Jacobs School of Music. She collaborated with the Asheville Symphony to create a puppet performance to Stravinsky's "Petrushka" and was commissioned by the Huntington Symphony to create a shadow play for "Pictures at an Exhibition." Red Herring has earned an UNIMA citation for their original production of "Aesop's Fables."

Diane Tower-Jones, Film Director, has been a filmmaker for six years documenting unique and compelling life stories. Whilst a dance major in College, Diane studied video production and directing (documentary/drama), and vision mixing and later worked on independent 16mm films. Prior to professional filmmaking, she practiced Chinese medicine for 20 years in the UK as an acupuncturist, body worker and dietary advisor where she was privy to thousands of patients' life stories. Her desire to make films reawakened. Being a seasoned interviewer, never tiring of people's stories, documentary filmmaking was a natural step. Diane trained with Documentary Filmmakers Group (DFG) in London. She learned camera operating, directing, lighting, sound, Final Cut Pro and pre/post production. Her graduation short "Where Do We Go From Here?", involved interviewing children about death. She has since made privately commissioned life stories, live performance films, promotional shorts, and films of cultural events.