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The PUPPETRY
Journal



KINETIC STEEL
The Marionettes of John Payne



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The Marionettes of JOHN PAYNE

By Lisa Sturz and Hobey Ford

Photo by Michael Mauney

The puppet world and the arts community of Asheville, North Carolina are mourning the death of artist, John Payne, who passed away on July 17th, 2008. John's work was showcased at Asheville's Regional Festival in 2004 where many of the puppeteers attending were blown away by the size, the mechanical genius, and the beauty of John's steel creations. Phillip Huber of The Huber Marionettes commented, "John Payne's work is truly astounding to me! I walked into his studio to be greeted by a gigantic scrap metal, prehistoric bird suspended high in the rafters and manipulated as an upside-down marionette with thick cables. John was so gracious about letting visitors try the mechanics of his creations. The feeling of creating movement and life in this massive kinetic sculpture was something I will never forget. One had to stand in awe of his amazing talent as an engineer and as an artist. I am so grateful for even the very short meeting I had with this gifted man."

John moved to Asheville from Chicago in the early 90's where he had been a sculptor. When Lisa Sturz, puppeteer, moved to Asheville in 1996, John was the first person she met. Within a few months of their friendship, John pulled up to their Fairview farm with his pick-up truck hoisting the 5-foot head of a T-Rex skeleton pounded out of steel. "Hey Lisa, I'm making a marionette!" John exclaimed. He spent the next few weeks constructing the body, and then built the control - a 14 foot steel grid that housed a series of cables and pulleys with large rings that pulled the cables from below. John continued to create metal dinosaur skeletons that were often colossal in scale. These massive constructions, some involving hundreds of jointed components, are suspended from overhead frames and controlled like marionettes.

Payne became interested in dinosaurs when living in Chicago with his wife Chris and children Trevor and Lydia. They would visit the Field Museum where the dinosaurs were always a favorite. Earlier, while living in Atlanta, he had taken his children to performances at The Center for Puppetry Arts and helped with some set and prop construction. In Asheville these interests came together in his steel dinosaur puppet creations.

John began each new piece by studying bone structure and movement. He would then draw with a welders crayon on a huge grid on his concrete floor before fabricating the steel components.

John's marionettes weigh hundreds of pounds, and yet respond at a touch. Payne spent countless hours balancing his figures much like marionettists do. Through experimentation he would find the

pick points to set them in motion. To call them marionettes isn't quite right. They operate like huge planchettes, those medieval one-stringed figures who dance when you tap your knee. Like a planchette or limber jack, the magic happens as the figure swings into motion. The movement comes out of the puppet figure by the careful engineering of its maker aided by the laws of physics. John's "Stringings" are deceptively simple at first observation. With one or two cables manipulating the puppet, the whole creature becomes animate.

John's dinosaurs went off on a two-year run at some of the nations finest science museums. During their absence, John added a series of birds

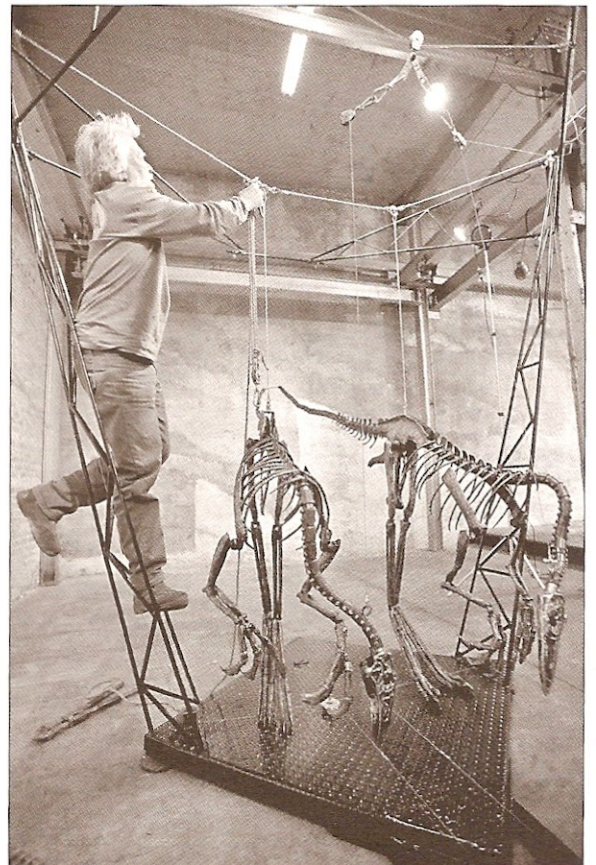


Photo by Michael Mauney

to his collection. One of his masterpieces is a colossal Raven with fully articulated wings and feathers. Among the more delicate figures are his small long necked, bird-like dinosaurs, whose spines are a wonder of fluidity in their engineering.

In 2006 Payne was inspired to take his creature rigs a step further. With the help of artist/engineer Brett Pierce, he replaced his earlier manual control levers with integrated servos, winches and custom electronic circuitry. With this new setup, John could operate his creatures from his old tall chair across the room, articulating motion in real-time and triggering special effects on a wireless game controller. The computer system could memorize up to ten minutes of movements and queue blasts of fog, strobe lights and sound effects. Ever the polymath, John matched his mastery of engineering with a sure deftness in the art of presentation. The dramatically lit puppets along with the cacophonous sound of clanging steel parts, flashing lightning, dinosaur growls and oozing clouds of fog make for an immersive environment few could forget. The system is designed to allow museum visitors to take control of the beasts themselves or to stand back and observe John's sensitive and nuanced articulation preserved in computer code.

In addition to John's incredibly artistry, John was a business entrepreneur who helped other artists achieve their dreams. While in Atlanta in the 1980s, John's eye for architecture and his knack for finding the human beauty in industrial landscapes drew his attention to an abandoned mattress factory. He contacted the owners of the ruin, and got permission to use the building for an exhibition and performance space. "The Mattress Factory" became a highly successful annual event, which catapulted the careers of many local artists. His success with the Mattress Factory paved the groundwork for his vision of the "Wedge" building he later purchased in Asheville's struggling River District. John rented out studio space to artists in all disciplines. John's partner, Gwenn Roberts, commented, "John wasn't interested in credit checks and collateral when meeting with prospective renters. He asked to see their work. He fast became influential in the Asheville arts scene and is considered the "white knight" of the River District."

John's Wedge building also houses the modern dance company "Terpsichore" and has been used as a rehearsal space and performance venue. Pamela O'Connor (puppeteer) adds, "The most intense time of our friendship was our collaboration of the set for *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. I had fallen in love with his tower design and had realized the theatrical potential of an adaptation of it for this multi-scene adult puppet show. There was a synergy that existed at the Wedge that was all about dreams. He listened to my vision for the show, and because he believed in dreams, helped me make it happen. For such generosity of time and spirit! I am eternally grateful."

Two years ago, Payne started to suffer from a mysterious illness. Through the patient care of

his new partner in life, Gwenn Roberts, he was nursed back to health. He remained productive until a stroke paralyzed half his body.



Hobey Ford and John Payne with the Tin Dog • Photo by Hobey Ford

Hobey Ford recalls, "John and I had begun work on a tin dog for a music video we were involved with and so after his stroke I went and coaxed him back to the studio to work. He wasn't sure he could work again after the stroke because of the lack of control of his hands, but the work on the dog seemed to lift his spirits. We continued work for a week, and through his enthusiasm and will, he gradually brought his hands under his control and began to return to his studio."

In June, John underwent open-heart surgery and was doing well by all accounts. He said he felt like he had another chance at life. But two weeks later, he suffered a massive stroke. At his bedside with John's immediate family, Lisa Sturz noted that John passed peacefully. "The pure energy present at the moment of John's passing gave me an overwhelming feeling of love and creativity that has changed the way I experience the world."

John had two assistants, Chas Llewellyn, 22, a puppeteer, animator and filmmaker and Tina Councill an artist/blacksmith. Both Chas and Tina hope to continue John's work under the management of John's brother Tom.

The Asheville community held a memorial for John at his Wedge studio warehouse. It began with a parade of puppets and friends accompanied by the Firecracker Jazz Band who played a New Orleans style funeral procession followed by a gathering of friends who raised newly brewed "John Payne Pale Ale", made there at the Wedge Brewing Company. Lisa Sturz and two other singers performed a short puppet trio to honor John's life after which doves were released to circle above the Wedge before flying away. He will be greatly missed.

John Payne's work can be seen in action at his website: www.paynestudios.com

You can see John Payne and Hobey Ford's tin dog in action at <http://www.hobeyford.com/video/tin-dog>.

And the music video at:

<http://www.hobeyford.com/video/happy-feet-the-firecracker-jazz-bands-music-video>

Chas Llewellyn's work can be seen at his website www.zenatopia.com.

Pamella O'Connor's set for "The Anatomy of Melancholy" which was designed and built by John Payne can be seen in her slide show at: www.poconnor-puppets.com

Lisa Sturz's large foam dinosaurs for the Field Museum inspired by John's dinosaurs can be seen at www.redherringpuppets.com

Brett Pierce who created the electronic controls for John's puppets can be found at www.iedllc.com

Lisa Sturz, artistic director of Red Herring Puppets, has been creating and performing puppets for film television, schools museums and special events for the last thirty years.

Hobey Ford performs and teaches Internationally with his Golden Rod Puppets and as a Kennedy Center Teaching Artist. He is the creator of the Peepers Puppet.

John Payne in his Studio



Studio Photos by
Michael Mauney

