



## An Evening of Adult Puppet Theatre in Minneapolis

A Review By Suzanne M. Sturn

About the puppet, it has been said, "The puppet is precise, incapable of false statement, and cannot relapse into affectation. Its functional command of space drawn from the imagery of the collective consciousness is capable of instantaneous communication."<sup>1</sup> This statement summarizes the great attributes of the puppet theatre, about which we were reminded recently on February 6 in Minneapolis when the United Puppet Artists presented "An Evening of Adult Puppet Theatre." In addition to indicating that puppetry flourishes in this city, the event was a reminder that the puppet has a long tradition as a serious form of expression. All too often the puppet has not been treated as a serious aspect of theatre from which it has been separated as a plaything, a toy for the amusement of children. The performance in Minneapolis ran the gamut of puppet expression beginning with storytelling through hand puppets and climaxing with an epic tale set to music and performed by a masked puppeteer on fifteen foot stilts. Of course, in reference to the statement quoted above, the puppet can lie when imprecision and the ego of the puppeteer creep in, yet when this happens the faults are glaring and the mind is aware of the purity of form demanded by puppets, and the art of theatre itself.

The recently formed collective of United Puppets Artists in Minneapolis includes The Beanstalk Puppets, Pangolin Puppet Theatre, Rose and Thorn Puppet Theatre and the Heart of the Beast Puppet Theatre. The audience at their sold out performance probably first encountered puppets similar to the hand puppets with which Joan Michelson mimed a story about Trickster Hare, a hero of the Winnebago Nation. Puppets and stories this piece recalled are one of the oldest combinations in theatre.

Already familiar to the Minneapolis audience was The Heart of the Beast who annually lead the Mayday celebration in Powderhorn Park. Their River Allegory, part of a longer work in progress involved hooded puppeteers and rod puppets whose improvisations examined the poetic relationships between the town and the river, a work that will tour the Mississippi River in 1982.

Two hands can create puppets with simple gesture as audiences discovered in KissKissBangBang. This piece suggested the relationship between puppet and pure mime. Furthermore, the impersonality of puppets adds a further dimension to their humor and sheer bawdiness as evidenced in the huge comic figure of Ollie created and manipulated by Margo McCreary. Ollie's age old clown jokes on farting thoroughly delighted the audience, as did 400 year old Vila's delight for well built college boys.

The combination of shadow puppet theatre and dance is well known in the Eastern theatre where dancers have looked to the shadow puppet for its purity of gesture. One notable work in Minneapolis featured shadow puppets based upon the Old Testament story of Sarah visited by God and promised a child after 90 years of being barren. Against the huge shadow screen a dancer powerfully performed the role of Sarah. The rhythm of the dance was combined effectively with the color, rhythms and silence of the shadow show.

Again, the poetry of rhythm, color, sound and silence natural to puppets was displayed in "Here's Looking at Euclid." This ballet of geometric forms designed by Lisa Sturz utilized a series of wooden rod puppets that danced to the music of Flotantze. The real versatility of puppets and the possibilities for stage poetry not always seen in the live theatre was demonstrated in this and one other work by the same puppeteer. Her solo performance of "The Hungry Child" utilized a small, simple marionette stage. The puppeteer worked above it in full view of the audience, singing the ballad of The Hungry Child to the miming of two marionettes. This work demonstrated the evocative power of simple puppet gesture when combined with sung narration.

The "United Fruit Company," by Ray St. Louis of Rose and Thorn was inspired by a poem by the late Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Brightly colored two dimensional puppets on a gigantic puppet stage against a simple moving screen back drop depicted the corruption of life and land in Latin America. The piece moved to the narration of the poem by a large rod puppet representing Neruda at stage right and, appropriately to the music of Initi-illimani from the Andes Mountains.

Rose and Thorn also climaxed the evening with an epic drama about St. George and the Dragon. Ray St. Louis, an accomplished stilt dancer and puppeteer, performed the role of the hero who slays the dragon in a spectacular finale with a host of dancing puppeteer manipulating large rod puppets to the music from the Solemn Mass for St. Hubert.

Bring on the puppets again and again until we recognize them once more in the light of what they have been in the greatest periods of theatre: "the symbol of man in the great ceremony." <sup>2</sup>