

# Lisa Sturz / PETRUSHKA with the Asheville Symphony

Lisa Sturz (Red Herring Puppets) is collaborating with the Asheville [NC] Symphony on a performance of Igor Stravinsky's ballet score, *Petrushka*. It will premiere in mid-May. For the printed program, Lisa was interviewed by Steve Hageman, Executive Director of the Asheville Symphony.

*Your bio tells us that your work includes creating characters for Opera and Disney. How is this project different?*

When I was commissioned by Disney and The Lyric Opera, I needed to work within a particular production style. In this collaboration I have had the freedom to conceptualize the look of the puppets, scenic elements, lighting, and choreography.

The unique challenge with *Petrushka* has been sharing the stage with a full orchestra. Stravinsky's music is the driving force and the visuals must not compete with the energy and excitement of the score. I observed Daniel Meyer conducting at previous symphonic concerts and couldn't take my eyes off him. I knew his charismatic presence had to be part of the drama. I asked Daniel to double as the magician with the orchestra as the source of the magic and the spirit of the crowd at the Shrovetide Fair.

There have been many technical obstacles to solve to achieve our overall vision. The puppets need to work within a limited space; the scenic elements need to accommodate acoustical panels; and the lighting needs to focus on the puppets while still allowing enough light on stage for the musicians to see Daniel and read their music.

*What has been the most interesting part of this collaboration?*

I love working with music. For me puppets are visual poetry and their movements and postures are metaphors. The music tells the audience what the puppets are thinking and feeling. It has been a wonderful stretch for me to absorb the complexity of the orchestral score and try to make each moment count. Daniel has been vividly articulate in helping me gain a deeper understanding of the musical structure and mood. His creative insights and willingness to try things is electric.

*Tell us about the actual construction of these puppets—Material, dimensions, etc.*

Because of the grand size of this auditorium, the puppets need to be larger than life. With puppets this big (7-9 feet tall), the

challenge is to keep them light enough for the puppeteers to move gracefully. Creating a puppet is much like crafting a musical instrument. If it is not designed and tuned properly, the instrument will not perform well. The body shapes are created from lightweight high-density foam and an inner structure of wood, aluminum, and rope. The limbs are made from swimming noodles and a succession of hoops to give them more thickness. The most fun has been shopping for fabrics that give the production a "Russian feel" while at the same time using color and texture to express character.



Lisa Sturz in her shop

The shadow puppets are made from stiff plastic. The puppeteers hold the figures at varying distances from the light to change the size of the figures.

*How many people are involved in the production and what are they doing behind the curtain?*

I have had several assistants in the shop helping to build and costume the puppets and design and build the circus tent and shadow screen. Susan Paul, who has studied with dancers from the Russian ballet and is familiar with the movement vocabulary of Diaghilev's original *Petrushka*, has helped with the choreography.

There are six very busy puppeteers alternating between the three dimensional figures and the shadow images behind. With characters this large the puppeteers need to work as a team – much like the sensitivity of chamber musicians listening to each other while playing their individual notes. For difficult moves it takes three people to work one puppet.

*What is your next project?*

I have been building a new touring show for school age children and families entitled "The Big Dipper: Calendar, Compass, and Clock." The cast is a combination of detailed marionettes and shadow images designed for overhead projectors. The show explores what different cultures observed when they looked up at the same set of stars and how they used the constellations to find their way and tell time at night and to keep track of the Seasons. It is filled with stories from ancient China, the Micmac Indians of Nova Scotia, the classical Greeks, and Afro-American slaves following the "drinking gourd" to freedom in the North.

*And any other comments you would like to make?*

Several years ago I found an old version of this Russian folktale beautifully illustrated with a melancholy playfulness and whimsy. The book has had a numinous hold on my psyche – maybe because *Petrushka* is a puppet. I have cherished this book and referred to it many times for inspiration. I am very grateful for the chance to give *Petrushka* a new life.