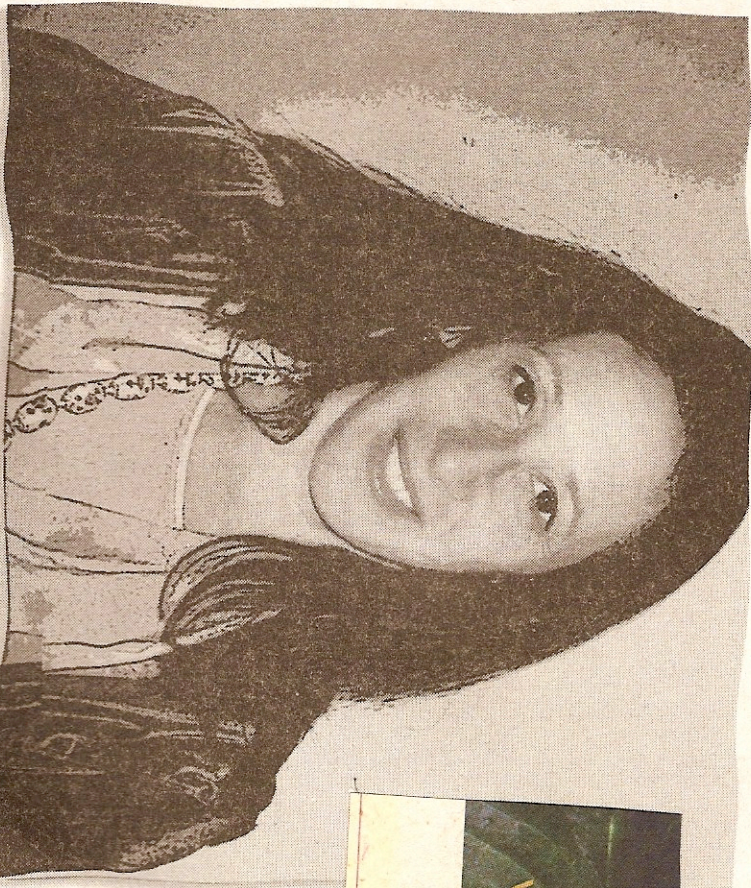


Western North Carolina Woman

celebrating the strength, wisdom, and grace of women



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PULLING HER OWN STRINGS

the magical world of Lisa Sturz by Kerry Lee Daniel

Magic happens in these mountains. I witnessed it myself, became a part of it that day fingers of fog stroked treetops while the sun peeked through branches wet with dew.

As I turned the corner onto a gravel road, I squinted my eyes and there it was—a shimmering mirage. A gingerbread farm house and rust colored barn tucked into a little corner of the valley. I opened my car door, planted my feet in the soft earth and heard women's voices singing. I shuffled quietly through the weeds, careful not to waken the chickens napping with kittens. Up the stairs to the loft of the barn-turned-studio. Into the web of the puppetwoman.

Lisa Sturz is the puppetwoman. At 17, while taking a college theater course, she was invited to the home of Rufus Rose, creator of the famous marionette Howdy Doody. "His home was truly magical," says Lisa, her eyes misting with memories. That night, in that

enchanted space, she discovered her muse. Puppetry would become her life's work.

"I was attracted by the tremendous range of artistry the craft requires. I enjoy all of it—creating, designing, building, acting, directing. And I love choreography and dance. As a puppetmaster, you get to do it all!"

Now, a small contingency from the Asheville women's choral group, Womansong, would get to do it all too. We answered Lisa's call that morning to help assemble the puppets for Yemaya, our musical performance in the upcoming Southeast Regional Puppetry Festival. Yemaya is a legend out of the religion of the Yoruba people of West Africa, who live in Nigeria and Benin. She is the great mother goddess of Santeria, mother of many Orishas (deities), the maternal force of life and creation whose home is the ocean.

We gathered at Lisa's that morning to build puppets and sing. Lisa had organized things in advance of our arrival. I was on the gluing team, making foam headpieces for

seven puppetwomen. Other teams traced, cut, sewed and assembled. I remember thinking it was probably a lot like the long ago days when women gathered for quilting bees, a time of weaving together threads of creativity and camaraderie. There we were, our little village of Womansong women, making puppets and music together. A day that initially sounded to me like a lot of work turned out to be thoroughly enchanting.

The history of puppetry is steeped in legend and folklore. The earliest puppets were tribal ritual masks or jointed skulls used in sacred ceremonies. The masks evolved into doll-like, jointed figures that moved. Native Americans used puppets in their corn festivals and ceremonial dances. And Egyptians fashioned puppets from terra cotta. Puppet theater is also referenced in the writings of philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Today's puppetry is more sophisticated, both in theme and design. Because it is so lyrical and metaphorical, puppetry is often used to tell stories, convey emotions, act out themes on the human condition, and to dialogue.

It is a powerful means of personal expression. In Lisa's words, "Puppetry is to theatre what poetry is to literature."

This may explain the universal appeal of puppetry.

Lisa's route to Asheville was as mystical as the Yellow Brick Road. During her 25-year career she has worked with Jim Henson Productions, Walt Disney Imagineering, Lucasfilm, PBS, Ice Capades and puppeteer director Julie Taymor of Disney's *Lion King*. She also served for 3 years on the board of the Puppeteers of America where she was responsible for overseeing festivals and conferences.

Through all the years and across all the miles, the work she is most proud of is the dragon she staged in collaboration with designer John Conklin for the Lyric Opera of Chicago production of Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*. The New York Times Opera Review reported that Sturz's "representation of the giant FAFNER as dragon satisfies even the

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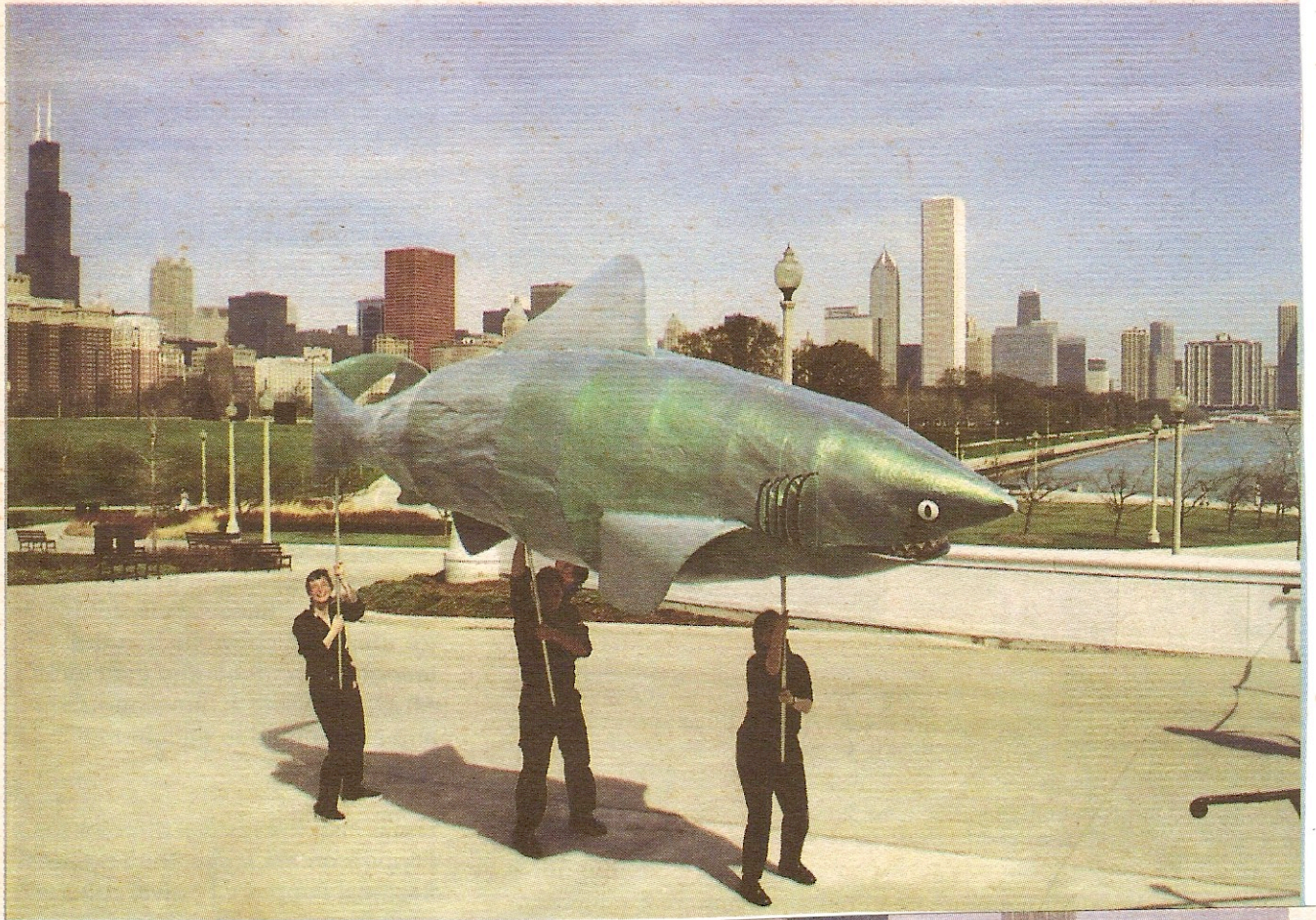
Lisa had only three weeks to build three
20-foot puppets for the Shedd Aquarium's
opening of their new Wild Reef Exhibit.

She needed something lightweight, wind resistant,
and fast! Over the weekend she swatched some
fabrics and started playing...with anything she could
get her hands on....and there is was...bubble wrap!

Lightweight, pliable, inexpensive, easily available. She
loved the way it looked under the iridescent textured
organza she purchased for the outside. You could see
through it and experience the bubbles that held the
poetry of the ocean.

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wildest expectations..." The 20-foot giant reptilian skeleton required 16 black-clad acrobats to manipulate its vertebrae and massive fanged jaw. Lisa says, "Conductor Zubin Mehta was leading his rehearsal and all the bigwigs were there to see the dragon in action. Zubin had seen bits and pieces of my work, but not the whole thing. He sent his assistant to the conductor's podium and came back to the production table where I was standing. He jumped up and down with delight and told me, 'That's the *best* dragon I've ever seen!' It was an unforgettable moment."

In addition to Rufus Rose, Lisa credits Bruce Schwartz with being one of her greatest influences. "He's so inventive," she says. "He created wonderful puppet vignettes, sculpted delicate characters, even composed his own music. During one project, he was obsessed with achieving a certain sound so he *built* his own piano. He was a genius."

During much of her early career Sturz lived in southern California where work was plentiful. But when she and husband, François Mantavit, started a family, they knew they wanted their children, daughter Manon (13) and son Theo (8), to grow up in a more natural environment than Hollywood could offer. During many conversations with friend and fellow puppeteer Hobe Ford (from Weaverville), Lisa came to believe the mountains of Western North Carolina might be the perfect place to raise her family. So she and François packed up their kids and their dreams and moved east.

"It isn't always easy," Lisa says. "But I'm glad we made the move. It's a great place to raise a family. I love living here, but I have to be out of town a lot with my work."



ABOVE: The Three Muses; BELOW: Persephone, Goddess of the Underworld, who was captured by Hades as a young maid. [Painted neoprene cast with foam and fabric body. Approx. 4']

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW: both from *Eros and Psyche*, directed by Lisa Sturz, script by Tom Jacobsen, music by Michael Eagan, choreography by Young-ae, and puppets by Lisa Sturz

This production was created in 1986 through the UCLA theatre department with a cast of 60 puppets, 17 puppeteers, and a five piece orchestra. It is the story of Psyche (soul), a young girl who grows through many struggles to find wholeness. It comes from a time in ancient Greece when the cultural emphasis was moving towards humanism. Psyche is the first mortal to see a God face to face and survive. She marries EROS, the God of love and gives birth to JOY.

Work is sometimes difficult to come by in Asheville, so Lisa has had to diversify. "I love building and creating things," she says. "Anytime someone needs something like that – I can do it." As *Red Herring Puppets*, she performs original puppet productions, teaches puppetry in schools, builds specialty props for commercials and theater sets, and designs and sews character costumes. If you can imagine it, she can do it. If you can't imagine it, she can probably still do it. Lisa's ingenuity can breathe life into the smallest spark of an idea.

Recently François, also an artist, built a bakery in the lower level of their studio. There he creates delicious old-world French bread from a secret family recipe. He

enjoys being able to do something he loves and still be at home with his children. And the Fairview community they call home is becoming a "carb friendly" haven as residents fall in love with his bread creations.

Manon and Theo are part of the family act, too. Both are active in local theater. And Lisa credits her children with providing some of the creative genius behind her puppet wizardry.

"Manon is incredible with voices. She can sing, she can act, and she's voiced several of my characters. I love working with Theo, too. He's full of ideas and is very intuitive."

These days life is full and rich for Lisa Sturz. Recently she was commissioned by the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago to build four 20-foot sea creatures for the opening of its Wild Reef Exhibit. "We needed something



lightweight, wind resistant, and fast! Over the weekend I swatched some fabrics and started playing... with anything I could get my hands on... and there it was - bubble wrap... lightweight, pliable, inexpensive, easily available. I loved the way it looked under the iridescent textured organza I purchased for the outside. You could see through it and experience the bubbles that held the poetry of the ocean."

June 23, 2004, *Beauty and the Beast* premieres at the Flat Rock Playhouse in Flat Rock, NC. Lisa collaborated with Flat Rock's costume department to create the lightweight whimsical elements for the production, such as the teapot, the armoire and the clock. All are stunning achievements and guaranteed to delight the audience.

Lisa is also the festival director for *Puppets on the Ridge*, the Southeast Regional Puppetry Festival coming to downtown Asheville July 28-August 1, 2004. In addition to the professional conference, the festival includes numerous public performances for adult and family audiences.

Lisa Sturz makes a living making a difference, working in these beautiful mountains. I asked her how she came up with the name for her company, *Red Herring Puppets*. She recalled years ago when she was switched out of a PhD program because the decision-makers felt she was too creative. They didn't know what to do with her and called her a red herring. Lisa smiles and her warm brown eyes turn mischievous, "Sometimes the person who wanders off the main path never catches the rabbit, but think of all the wonderful things they discover along the way."

Kerry Lee Daniel is a writer, a member of Asheville's Womansong, and will soon be a fledgling puppeteer. Maybe that will help make up for the fact she could never be a Mousketeer. She lives in a tree house apartment with her three darling boy cats, Barney, Ben and Dennis, who are studying ways to make puppets out of hairballs.

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