

# A Dialogue in Review

by Frank Newman and Sara Cooper  
late nights at the UNIMA International Puppetry Festival,  
Perth, April 2008



In April this year Spare Parts Puppet Theatre and the city of Perth hosted the UNIMA Festival, an international jamboree of puppetry which happens every four years and is a gathering of the many people who hold puppetry dear to their hearts. Puppeteers from around the world descended on Perth to perform, watch, gossip and study their craft. Festival goers could be seen throughout Perth thrashing out the pros and cons of everything 'dolly wiggling'. One such heated conversation about two one-person shows where the puppetry served a story that was ultimately about the human character telling it – *Sleeping Beauty* by Compagnie Akselere (France), performed by Collete Dinnigan, and *Angel* by Duda Paiva Puppetry and Dance (Netherlands) – is reproduced for you here.

**SARA** I wanted to walk out.

**FRANK** Well, I liked it. I thought the writing was clever.

**S** I had no problem with the concept – sweet girl with fairy tale fantasies growing up in a less than ideal world. That particular style of theatre is a true favourite of mine; simple story telling, one person playing all the characters, object manipulation and images transforming through shadow projection. But, the fact remains, much of the time I wanted to leave.

**F** What was your problem? I thought she successfully merged a horrid real world story with fantasy. I've seen that idea tried many times but Collete merged the two interestingly. I thought the fantasy, almost children's, 'story telling' acting style that came from the character's delusions made me really care for her. It was like a Greek tragedy. You knew she was doomed. A children's book character in suburban drug world hell. How could you not ride with her? Where's your heart?

**S** I wanted to want to ride with her. But in reality I just wanted to read my program. I've spoken with others who felt the same way; granted, not many. This show was one of the darlings of the festival. But these fellow performers felt as strongly about it as I did. Why is this? Had she done the show many a time and been lauded for her efforts? Was she resting on some laurels somewhere up there? Because I was not drawn in. I didn't feel an electricity coming from stage, no real desire to connect with us and take us along, but more a satisfied air that we would come and that what she was providing was enough.

**F** So you think she was lazy?

**S** I wanted to tighten the pacing. Gears did shift but something was lacking. A fresh outside eye could encourage a recommitment to grabbing each audience member at the heart. I'm sure she's not lazy. Who travels the world with solo shows if they're lazy?

**F** I think you are misreading something fundamental. The actor had a certain demure presence to her that carried over into her performance. Now that can be a bad thing for some people, but for a work that was written, directed and devised by the one person it is going to autobiographical on some level. And I think her personality had a right to shine through, because the work is so obviously close to her heart. It's not about whether or not it was her story, that's not interesting, it's that it came from her. Therefore her personality is going to be all over it. Her demure, 'knocked back' style which she uses to invite us in, by often allowing the moments to linger, was specific and effective I thought. It wasn't that she was lazy or behind the moments, it was a pointed statement in the style of the work. It was for me what carried the 'story telling' style.

**S** Personality has an inherent right to shine through in any work and she has a unique charm and presence. But for me, she remained in a bubble which I felt I couldn't enter.

**F** But her character could only see things from a fairytale world. Put that character in a horrible situation and the ending is going to be tragic. She got fucked up on drugs and screwed over by some nasty people because she was a patsy waiting to be had.

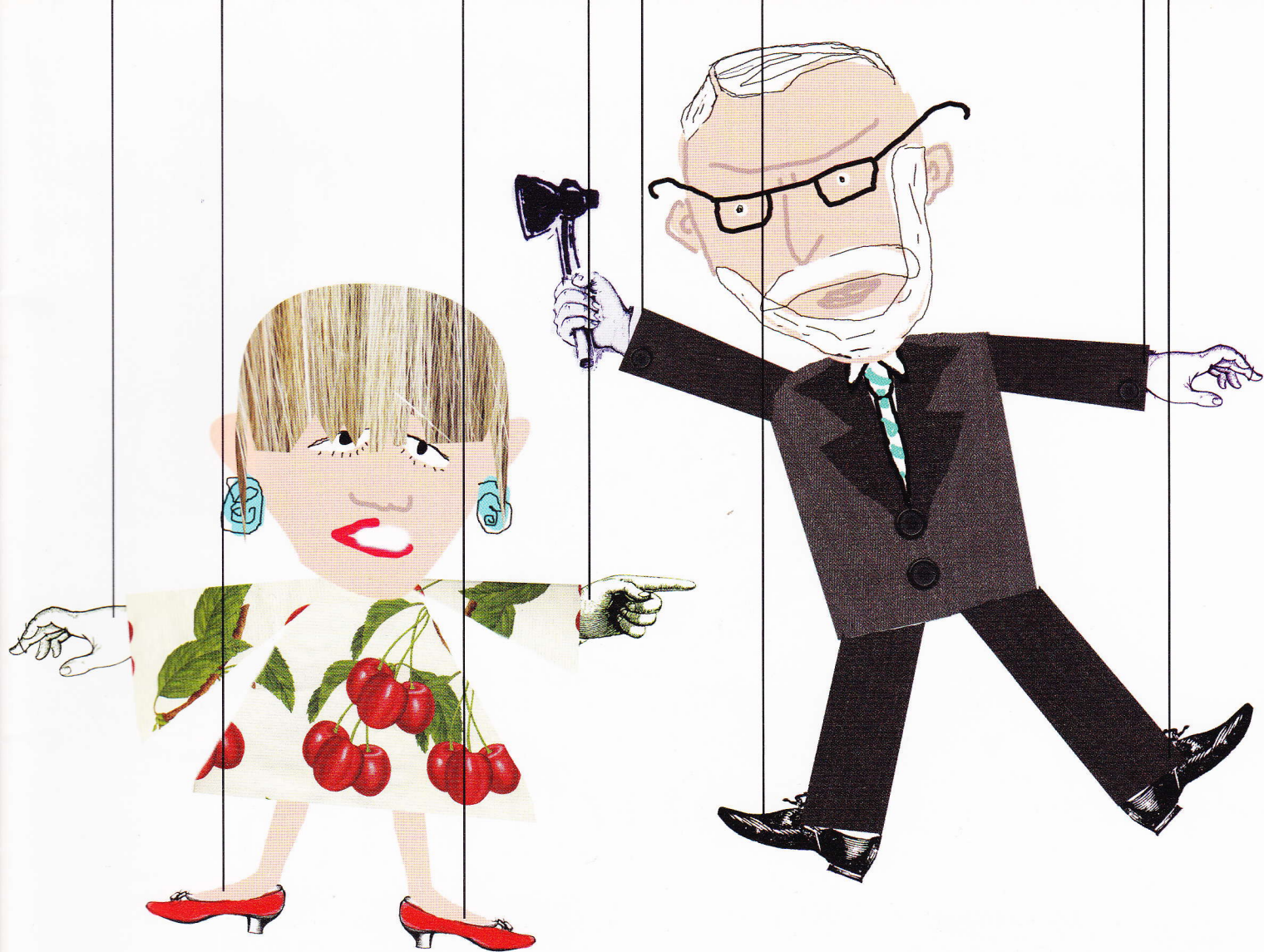
**S** Sure, but take me along, make me care.

**F** I did care.

**S** Yeah, but you fell in love with her just from her picture in the brochure.

**F** What bugged me were a few of her puppetry images. She had some set and puppetry pieces that did nothing. The puppets in the lampshade and the bowl of Barbies were both naff. Her use of shadows to transform the space, where we watched her shove a baguette in front of her nose to cast the image of a witch on a screen was great. We were watching two things, a performer playing with form, which I thought cleverly reflected her transformation as a character, and a very different image on the screen of a witch. You got the real world and fantasy in one picture. In that moment there was clever merge of form and content. Similarly with the show *Angel*. In that show





the performer, Dada, and his angel puppet were inextricably linked. Their relationship was co-dependant. The character of the tramp was ultimately animating his own death. The angel was brought to life by a tramp figure who was crossing the River Styx. The tramp was on the edge of life, and was imagining the angel, which was the head of a tombstone, coming to life. This 'imagining' was the reason for the puppet in the show. The puppet was that part of the character's madness that was leading him toward death. In other words the puppet represented a part of himself that was killing himself. Therefore it worked when the puppet killed him. The show didn't ask us to believe the puppet was a person. So often I ask myself why is this a puppetry show? What does puppetry achieve in the telling of this story? How does it advance the content? More often than not the form does not serve the content.

**S** The performer's puppetry and dance skills were exquisite, but what I enjoyed most about this show was his commitment to bringing us the irreverent. In the moments where we could have wandered into pretentious territory, he pulled us quickly out and I loved him for

that. When I passed the beggar on the foyer steps before the show I immediately thought 'Oh no, this is part of the show and it's a test of our integrity and generosity.' It made me fear the show was didactic even before it had begun. With great relief though I watched him enter the auditorium and, through his delightful play with the audience, completely dispel those fears. At other times the show lost me and I got confused within its structure; and once a Miss Piggy comparison with the puppet's voice had been drawn in my head, there was no going back. But this performance drew me in from the very beginning purely because the communication with the audience was so honest and alive. In comparison, Collette's choice when breaking the 'fourth wall' was to be slightly vague and detached; perhaps this hindered a true connection with her, on my part anyway. Now – ask me about *Puppet in the Drawers*, *Diva*, *Triangle*, and I'll start pouring out the love.

**F** Oh, don't get me started on *Triangle*...I wanted to leave!

And on into the wee hours of Perth nights did puppeteers from around the world grind their puppetry axes. UNIMA, with some beautiful and moving shows and others that set arms flying into the air followed by the cry 'that's just not puppetry!', was a huge success ... and loads of good fun. ✱

**Sara Cooper** is a performer in Terrapin Puppet Theatre's *Explosion Therapy* which played at the festival and **Frank Newman** is Artistic Director of Terrapin Puppet Theatre and director of the show *Explosion Therapy*.

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