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Paperhand Puppet Intervention

By Edward Holm

If you ever doubted that fire was alive, that water could smile, that the very stones could dance, then doubt no more: Paperhand Puppet Intervention, a band of artists, musicians and craftspeople, summons up spectacles of elemental power and disarming sensitivity. Using the ancient technique of puppetry, one of the first forms of theater, as well as music and dance in an expansive outdoor setting, Paperhand strives to enrapture, mesmerize and even motivate you toward art, love and the creation of a better world.

Co-founders Jan Burger and Donovan Zimmerman have been friends for more than 11 years. While building separate careers in the arts, they decided six years ago to collaborate on a show for the Haw River Festival Learning Celebration.

A major event with a strong message of environmental conservation and community activism, the festival was the perfect place to find their common ground. From that point on, their imaginations, along with those of their core collaborators, have taken on a life of their own. And this energy has helped create a resurgence in puppet theater as a form of social commentary and personal freedom--for Paperhand and older institutions, such as Vermont's Bread and Puppets Theatre (with whom Burger interned back in the day and in whose political demonstrations both he and Zimmerman have participated).

From demonstrations at George W. Bush's inauguration to World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, Paperhand Puppet Intervention has helped raise awareness, instill a sense of wonder and defuse potentially disastrous situations--often all at the same time. The most frequent cast of characters brought to demonstrations are the Caribou, who educate onlookers about environmental issues. As with all interventions, the theme and combination of puppets is flexible, and no performance is exactly the same.

Paperhand will present *Catywonkus*, a new show, at the Haw River Celebration this fall. Described by Zimmerman as "a silly and wonderfully wacky adventure story about two characters who move out of the city and back to the land," *Catywonkus* is playing at various other festivals as well, and usually includes an impressive Paperhand parade to involve the community.

Using gentle, larger than life activism, Paperhand doesn't just work on an intellectual level. They engage audiences of all ages, leading the crowds back to the origins of their own wonder and provoking thoughts about the spiritual presence that runs deep through the earth.

When asked how they arrive at themes for their lavish productions, Zimmerman and Burger answered together that "sometimes the theme will come from a dream, or from a lot of intense brainstorming, a theme will emerge ... or it will emerge from a waking dream. Sometimes we go through a process until a puddle forms. Then we splash around in that puddle."



Donovan Zimmerman and Jan Burger of Paperhand Puppet Intervention
Lissa Gotwals

This philosophy of a streaming confluence of ideas extends to the people involved in every production undertaken by Paperhand. The core group spans a variety of temperaments and ages, from Alan Best, aka Pickle Dude, who at age 13 is a six-year veteran of the puppet stage, to his sister, the airy Alicia Best, 15 years old and growing into her fourth year of performing at Chapel Hill's Forest Theatre. There's also local potter Sarah Howe (Alan and Alicia's mom) and Carrboro sculptor/marionette artist Tori Ralston, as well as Michigan transplant and renaissance man Jimmy Magoo, among others.

The musicians, very much integrated into the performance, include Kevin Brock, Gabriel Pelli and Jill Baldwin. The instruments most often featured are percussion, guitar, violin and accordion, with each musician performing on all of these as well as any other musical devices needed.

All this unfettered creativity coalesces to bring birds with 30-foot wingspans to life, to cast prehensile shadows onto a screen that appears as a primordial flower opening to reveal the future. And don't forget the giant bugs, or the butterflies on stilts....

At Paperhand's studio, a former textile mill in Saxapahaw, reminders of past performances stand, recline or float, suspended in expressive silence. The majestic and muddy Haw flows in the background, as Burger and Zimmerman share their ideas and inspiration with the same seamless grace as the neighboring river.

Everything about them, and about Paperhand Puppet Intervention, is a combination of the simple, such as hand-formed papier-mâché, and the sublime, characterized by the carefully orchestrated music and movement. Both aspects are wedded to the idea that if we care enough to witness the world we see, and move to create the world we dream of, then maybe we really can reclaim the wonder and joy found in the *Garden of the Wild*.

Garden of the Wild will play at Chapel Hill's Forest Theatre every Friday through Sunday from Aug. 12 through Sept. 4 at 7 p.m. For more information, visit www.paperhand.org.

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