

# Austin Public Library's Literature Live! Changing Lives, One Puppet at a Time

BY ELLEN TURNER SCOTT

The Austin Public Library (APL) is one of only a few library systems in the nation offering unique programming through puppetry. Throughout the years, our puppet program has ebbed and flowed, beginning as the Traveling Puppet Theatre, then Echo's PALS (Puppets and Libraries Equal Success), and currently Literature Live!

Literature Live! houses over 30 puppet shows, each complete with a script, a puppet cast of characters, and props, scenery, and music, which all get makeovers each time the show is remounted. We serve the Central Library, 21 branches, and a variety of outreach locations, with seasonal offerings, usually of four runs a year. Our team of three puppeteers, Devo Carpenter, Karen Carlson and myself, perform over 120 shows to approximately 8000 audience members annually. We create a video archive at the end of each run, for future generations of puppeteers to preview during rehearsals. We create prerecorded musical soundtracks, although our voices are always live.

Our first puppets were born in the Office of Program Development, a tiny hole in the wall in the basement of what's now the Austin History Center. My original mentors were Grace Schmitt, who worked as a Children's Librarian at APL, and Nancy Renfro, who owned and managed a puppet media company just down the street from the Central Library. In the late 1970s, Brenda Branch (head of programming services and later

Library Director) had a vision: to bring literature to life through puppetry. Child development studies tell us that children's learning processes are enhanced by visual components. Using puppets maintains even a small child's interest in a story, as well as prepare them to listen and follow narrative. The puppet becomes an essence – condensed, powerful and fascinating – allowing the imagination of the audience to do the lion's share of the work. We communicate, stimulate and educate through live literary theatre.

When former children come to our performances as adults, they show us what a deep and lasting impression these living stories made on the memories of their childhoods. This positive experience so early in life made many audience members lifetime library users. At a PofA national festival Honey Goodenough recognized me as a puppeteer from her childhood. Soon after I was thrilled to read *From Inspiration to Vocation*, an article by her mom, Jan Goodenough, found on page 11.

Keeping current with ethnic and social issues, Literature Live! is sensitive to gender equality, steering clear of stereotypes, and attempting to be as inclusive as possible. We create at least one new puppet show each year, and recently developed an age-rating system much like movie ratings, so potential attendees understand for what age group the show is intended. Every summer we offer puppet labs to engage the kids in

DIY puppet making, often around the theme of reuse/recycle. At every program we have a survey form available to collect feedback from audience members to assist us in improving the show.

Puppet shows are advertised through our marketing office with flyers, posters, social media, LCD screens in the libraries and, of course, on the APL website. Two puppeteers travel to each library branch and some outreach locations, performing up to 30 shows during the run. We perform tabletop, bunraku-style, shadow, rod, humanettes, stop motion animation and traditional booth puppetry. The library has 13 folding puppet stages. The unbeatable design, which fits in a small car, is by H. V. Tozer, published in *The Puppet Theatre Handbook* in 1947 by Marjorie Batchelder. We upgraded the design by using piano hinges, which makes for a sturdier, more durable stage. Nine libraries permanently house puppet booths, and the remaining 4 stages are circulated to 11 branches by our facilities department. Set up usually takes about an hour, and all of our shows are under 30 minutes, an optimum attention span for kids and adults!

Van, our Muppet-style puppet host of The Van Show, interviews authors, librarians and kids about literacy. The episodes are posted on the APL website, and Van's repertoire is expanding rapidly. The Literature Live! team regularly posts puppet-related blogs, which sometimes include Printable Puppets for the visitors of the Literature Live! page on APL's website to print out and build.

Our team gets ideas for new builds from a variety of sources: adapting folk and fairy tales, writing original scripts and getting permission from authors to adapt stories. Keith Graves is an Austinite who has written and illustrated many wonderful children's books with whimsical characters that lend themselves perfectly to puppets. He has given us blanket permission to take any of his stories and bring them to life through puppetry. We took him up on the offer and created two shows: *Chicken Big* and *Frank Was a Monster Who Wanted to Dance*. We contacted author Mike Thaler, to ask permission to recreate *In the Middle of the Puddle*, and reenacted his simple, but magical, story with humanettes.

Literature Live! partners with our community, building new shows, performing at parades and community events – *The Selfish Gardener* for the City of Austin Watershed Protection's Grow Green Campaign; *Chicken Big* at the Funky Chicken Coop Tour; and for the *Bibliofiles*, Austin Public



ROOSTER, KAREN, MAMA BEAR, DEVO, ELLEN AND FRANK'S HEAD IN 2016. PHOTO BY TATIANA GONZALEZ

Library's Book Cart Drill Team! We have facilitated puppetry-training workshops for schools and have taught summer student volunteers the art form.

The Austin community is very excited about our new Central Library, which will be opening in 2017. In addition to offering flexible and blended spaces, art galleries, community gathering places, reading porches, a Library café, a gift boutique, and state-of-the-art technologies, our "library for the future" will feature a permanent exhibit of beloved puppets created by the Austin Public Library. Come on down to Texas, y'all, and see what the fuss is about. You are welcome anytime!



MR. TAMARIN'S TREES FROM AUSTIN PUBLIC LIBRARY. PHOTO BY DEVO CARPENTER

## FROM INSPIRATION TO VOCATION

As parents we never know where or when our children are going to be inspired to the degree that it shapes their lives for good. Little did we suspect it could be at the library.

As a stay-at-home mom I took my two children to the Austin Public Library puppet shows and storytelling sessions as often as possible. It fit our budget perfectly; it was free! But, culturally, it was the mother lode of child centered-entertainment. The puppet shows were charming and delightful. Every branch library posted their schedules. Sometimes we followed a favorite show around Austin, as the performances traveled from branch to branch. Often, certain puppet plays became seasonal favorites, so our kids grew up with them--seeing them many times at different ages. The fact that they could browse around the children's section without restraint and bring home stacks of picture books of their own choosing was just the icing on the cake. The library became our children's favorite place.

Our children became familiar with the two librarians who manipulated the puppets and told the stories. "Miss Ellie" and Grace Schmitt were marvelous at holding the attention of their young audiences. The ladies

invited the children to meet the puppets after the performances. What we were unaware of, at the time, was that our little girl had found her life's calling at four years old; it was the art and drama of puppetry.

Our daughter, Honey, grew up to become the artist we always knew she was. She graduated from UT with a BA in Theater and Dance with a focus in puppetry and performance. Honey then earned her Master's Degree in Educational Theater from NYU. She has now performed and taught with puppets for the past 12 years.

At the 2009 Puppeteers of America National Festival in Atlanta, Honey met her inspiring muses two decades after her first exposure to puppetry and performers. Austin's treasures, Ellen Turner Scott and Robbie Lueth (former APL puppeteer) of "Hand to Mouth Puppet Theater" were attending the festival. Honey recognized them these many years later and so far from home. But, this time, she met these artists as fellow puppeteers. It was a lifelong journey from childhood admirer to professional colleague. The circle is complete thanks to the inspirational performers at the Austin Public Library.

– Jan Goodenough



WIZARD AND TIGER WOMAN FROM AUSTIN PUBLIC LIBRARY. PHOTO BY KATHLEEN HOULIHAN

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