Puppetry Cavalcade

(A History of the Detroit Puppeteers Guild) by Stanley M. Taylor, 1996

Preface

A preface is, literally, saying something before you say something. I feel compelled to say something in general about puppetry before I begin an actual account of the Detroit Puppeteers Guild. A preface says, "please pay attention and read this before you begin to read."

Where does one begin a history of the Detroit Puppeteers Guild? With the year 1946, when the Guild was organized? Or should it begin with a description of the puppet landscape and the interest in puppetry, out of which the Guild grew as naturally as a trillium in a shaded grove?

This writer thinks that there is something to be gained by drawing, as it were, a puppet perspective. Paul McPharlin, who was at one time a resident of Detroit, has provided us with a marvelous scholarly history of The Puppet Theater in America, from 1524 to 1948. This fascinating volume provides us with some vignettes of puppetry in Detroit. Paul's widow, Marjorie Batchelder McPharlin, continued his account, covering the period from 1948 through 1968. It is from McPharlin's book that we take a look at puppetry in Detroit before 1946.

In earlier ages puppets as more than entertainment for children. Puppets played an essential part in sacred rites, in the practices of "medicine men" and in the legitimate theater. As a matter of fact, there are some who believe that the puppet theater was the most ancient form of theater and that modern drama developed from puppetry.

Germany had many puppet performances which dealt with the legends of Faust and Mephistopheles. Johann Wolfgang Goethe's great dramatic poem Faust was based on the legend and Goethe himself was a lover of puppets and refers to them in his poem. Franz Joseph Haydn composed operettas for a puppet troupe which belonged to Prince Miklos Jozset Esterhazy, member of a noble Magyar family of Hungary.

McPharlin thought that it was quite possible that puppetry began in America in a performance given on July 4, 1734, in what became known as Fraunces Tavern, in New York City, and which is still in existence. Henry Holt advertised that he would give a pantomime performance in the Queen's Head Tavern (later bought by Samuel Fraunce). The performance presented "The Adventures of Harlequin and Scaramouch and The Burgomaster Tricked." In 1934 the Puppeteers of America held its fourth annual festival at Fraunces Tavern to celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of the first puppet performance in America.

An advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on December 31. 1742, proclaimed that a puppet show would be held at the Coach and Horses on Chestnut Street. This was the first use of the word "puppet" to describe a performance in America of Punch and Joan; the latter name was an early form of the name "Judy." One more interesting historical note George Washington bought tickets for a puppet show which was playing in Williamsburg.

It is now my purpose to describe the events in puppetry which took place in Detroit prior to 1946. In 1811 Detroit was still a frontier town and a fort, and although France no longer had possession of the territory, there were a great many French speaking inhabitants. In that year, on January 22nd, Colonel Jacob Kingsbury received a letter from a showman named Moreau, stating that he would perform "within the fort" a puppet show, displaying Napoleon in front of the city of Marengo in Italy Moreau was probably French and thought that French Detroiters would respond to Napoleon. This is the first recorded instance of a puppet show in Detroit.

It seems that some puppet shows offered risqué activities or in some way offended the moral principles of moral people because. on April 12, 1827. the Michigan Territorial Legislature passed an act prohibiting immoral practices, including puppet shows. A puppeteer could be fined ten dollars Michigan became a state in 1837. and acts of the Territorial Legislature were no longer in effect.

A Punch and Judy show was performed in Grand Circus Park sometime during the 1870's. A person who saw the performance wrote to the Detroit News on February 2, 1930. The opening of the Punch and Judy movie house in Grosse Pointe had reminded him of the event.

The show had been put on in the early 70's. using a stage set up at the south est corner of Grand Circus Park.

The audience was upset at Punch punching Judy and threw snowballs at the show, effectively disrupting the performance.

McPharlin's father remembered a Punch and Judy show which was put on in 1875 or 1876, on a vacant lot on Jefferson Avenue, near Meldrum. The operator worked alone and passed a hat to collect coins from the crowd.

The Lanos were a famous puppeteer family, of Italian and Danish origin. They came to the United States in 1825, knowing no English They played in frontier towns and in French Canada, crossing back into this country from Windsor, and playing the week of March 10, 1887, at Sackett and Wiggins Wonderland and in Merrill Hall, at 80 Woodward Avenue. Their plays included The Knights of King Arthur. Jack the Giant Killer and Tom Thumb. Their performances included trick acts, such as juggling and trapeze artistry.

David Lano, the last of the family to perform, came to Detroit in 1894. He finally settled in Flint, where he continued to give benefit performances.

The Middleton Brothers. George and Harry, played for five weeks in 1884 at the Dime Museum, 9 Michigan Avenue, opposite the Family Theater. On July 8, 1936, George gave an address at the first American Puppetry Conference in Detroit. At the same Conference Marjorie Batchelder gave a talk on rod puppets. It was Paul McPharlin who actually organized this first Conference. The Chamber of Commerce in another Michigan town had agreed to sponsor it, then pulled out at the last minute. McPharlin managed to transfer the event to Detroit. The world premiere of Gertrude Stein's "Identity or I am I," was performed at the Conference.

Paul McPharlin remembered a Dime Museum on Woodward Avenue that produced a Punch and Judy show on the second floor. This was probably around 1911. On the first floor was a vaudeville show, on the second, in addition to Punch and Judy, were glass blowers and magicians and on the third floor was a menagerie. Ten cents admitted a person to the whole shebang.

McPharlin also remembered seeing the Faulkners at the Temple Theater in 1914 Lillian Jewel as born in France and came to America as a child. She married Rex Faulkner in 1912. He formed a puppet outfit called *Lillian Faulkner and Company*. She and her husband did a variety act called "Play Ball." In it a baseball player was at bat and stalled until it started to rain, with real water falling from overhead pipes, causing the frame to be called off.

Tony Sarg played in Detroit in 1919, a performance of "The Rose and the Ring," based on a story by William Makepeace Thackeray. Mr. Sarg was not basically a puppeteer, but an organizer of puppet shows and a designer of puppets. In everything that he did he gave the highest artistic consideration to backdrops. stages, handbills and programs.

Paul McPharlin thought that two Detroit boys were superior to Tony Sarg in the artists of their productions. They were William Duncan and Edward Mabley. They called their company the Tatterman Marionettes and performed the "King of the Golden River" in Detroit in 1923 Their best production was Henrik Ibsen's Peer Gynt, put on in about six cities in 1937 and accompanied by local symphony orchestras.

Ed Johnson began his career in 1928. He soon developed a one-man marionette show. He was a pioneer in the use of puppetry on television. During the Second World War he was stationed in the Philippines and became enchanted with folk-lore, producing Wonder Mountain, dealing with the Philippines; Neptune's Kingdom (an underwater fantasy); The West Wind, (American Indian); The Great Forest, (life in an ant colony); Secret, (Egypt); The Macie Man, (India). Ed helped start The Detroit Puppeteers Guild.

Greek coffee houses had appeared in Detroit by 1930, featuring shadow puppets. The early thirties also witnessed the last of Paul McPharlin's shows. They were performed in a small auditorium in the old Ford factory in Highland Park.

Fern Zwickey began teaching puppetry at Wayne University (now Wayne State University) in 1936. The Puppeteers of America was organized the following year in Cincinnati. Ten years later saw the formation of The Detroit Puppeteers Guild.