

Curtain Calls

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Pat S. Fiske and James L. Spearly

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Introduction

Puppetry, often a source of delight for children, has emerged as a technique for serving the mental health needs of a wide population and varied age groups. This new application of a long-time skill prompted the Hogg Foundation to make a grant to the Bijuberti Players of Austin, Texas, to try the puppetry process with a broad base of older persons.

Initially, the grant request seemed to have remote possibilities for endorsement by a mental health foundation. However, closer examination of the implications of a program using older people to create and dress puppets, make up stories, manipulate the characters, and perform shows evoked other possibilities.

In this society many older people live arid lives, devoid of stimuli and exciting relationships. For too many of them, old skills are forgotten, buried in the dry fields of mundane activities. Memories often are dormant and gray as volcanic ash. Emotions, like fingers, have grown stiff from disuse. And creativity slumbers like a giant beneath a mountain.

Programs like the Foster Grandparent project, which has involved older people in person-to-person contact with retarded children, have proved that involvement enhances health and outlook both for the seniors and for the young people being helped. The same principle seemed valid for the use of puppets with coping older age groups, with the frail elderly, and with audiences of children.

The enthusiasm and imagination of the director were contagious. The Hogg Foundation felt that this project, supported for one year, could demonstrate some important truths concerning several populations of old people. The project, if successful, could serve as a model for other programs or for variations.

The publication which follows, co-authored by the project director, Pat Fiske, and Jim Spearly, a Hogg Foundation Fellow whose primary interest and energy went into work in gerontology, explains how and why all of the drama of the puppet shows did not take place on stage but, instead, was enacted in positive ways behind the scenes. The Hogg Foundation has been glad to be a part of this endeavor.

Bert Kruger Smith

Curtain Calls

It was a sultry summer afternoon, an ordinary day, yet the usual lull of institutional life was shattered by the bustle of strangers. The residents of the small East Austin Nursing Home were at once confused and excited. Those who could get around without assistance watched as the new arrivals struggled into the dining room loaded down with bags, boxes and other odd-shaped and colorful objects. Some of the more alert elderly noted that all but one of the strangers were black and of their own age, as well.

Instead of the usual apathetic shuffle, residents moved with a livelier gait to stay out of the way of all the activity generated by the strangers' arrival. Attendants moved furniture to make room for the wheelchair patients being ushered in by nurses and aides. The visitors began to assemble their paraphernalia in one drab corner of the room, transforming it into a brilliant focal point for the curious onlookers. They added curtains to a bright, box-like object, bantering with the patients as they did so. A perceptive observer suddenly realized that this was to be some type of performance.

The black lady stranger spotted a former neighbor being wheeled into the room. She left the two black men and the younger white woman to finish the work while she conducted an animated conversation with her frail friend in the wheelchair. Preparations were finished, but feeble men and women were still being helped to nearby seats. The remaining visitors circulated among the prospective audience and extended their warmth and concern.

Finally, the home's social director introduced the middle-aged, grey-haired lady as Pat Fiske of the "Beejoobertee" Players. Pat stepped forward and jokingly corrected the oft mispronounced name of her organization to *Biju bertti* (Bee-*joo*-ber-tee). She then told the residents that they were about to see a puppet show, entitled *Noah*, which had been developed by seniors like themselves. The players were members of the Salina Senior Activity Center which was under the auspices of the Nutrition Program of the Austin Parks and Recreation Department. She added that funding for the project was provided by a grant from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health to the Bjuberti Players. Expressions on the residents' faces ranged from blank to taciturn during this necessary introduction.

Mrs. Fiske finished her remarks and stepped behind the brightly colored facade where the three senior players stood with their puppets on their hands. The room lights were turned off, the tape recorder turned on, and a chorus of singers could be heard rendering a lively version of "The Old Ark's a Moverin'." The audience's attention was drawn toward the small stage opening as the spotlights revealed an ancient ark bobbing on cardboard waves to the rhythm of the song. Some of the residents, recognizing the hymn from their childhood Sundays, joined in the chorus and clapped their hands.



The song ended and the play began. The lilliputian actors unfolded the well-known Bible story in a unique way.

Origins

The director of this band of puppeteers, Pat Fiske, is a veteran of radio, television, and stage productions throughout Texas. She has taught art, dramatics and puppetry. It was through a national puppetry publication that she learned of two earlier efforts to involve older persons in the production of puppet shows. Parks and Recreation departments in both New York City and Columbus, Ohio, sponsored troupes in senior centers that performed for senior citizen carnivals, nursing homes, hospitals, church groups, high schools and other senior centers. Despite bad hearts and legs, arthritis, and even cancer operations, the seniors who participated traveled and performed at least twice each week. Their pain seemed to be forgotten in the thrill of bringing joy to their audiences.

Prompted by a crisis in her own family, Mrs. Fiske decided to share her puppetry production and performance talents with senior citizens in Austin. She proposed to the Austin Parks and Recreation Department her idea of a similar series of workshops for participants in the city's Senior Luncheon Program. Aging men and women in that project are eligible to attend the nearest community center for a free noon meal, an opportunity to socialize with friends and neighbors, and a potpourri of activities scheduled prior to the meal.

The workshops were designed to cover all aspects of producing a puppet show, from writing the script and making the set and puppets to actually performing the show. City officials agreed to provide the space for meeting and working and a theatre for holding the performances. Seniors in at least five centers had responded enthusiastically to the idea.

Because of the potential mental health implications for those seniors who would participate in the productions, a request was made to the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health to fund the demonstration phase of a puppetry skills training program. While seemingly an artistic endeavor, a creative activity involving senior citizens in the community appeared to the Foundation's Executive Committee to promote several important mental health goals: to encourage social interaction, to enhance self-esteem, to facilitate intergenerational relationships, to promote a positive image of older adults, to strengthen expressive skills, and to inspire seniors to overcome disabilities.

Participation in the production and performance of shows, it was felt, would provide Austin seniors with opportunities for meaningful social interaction, both among themselves and with the broader community. In this way, the puppetry training could help reduce the social isolation and loneliness so often experienced. By providing a service to the community, both as entertainment and education, seniors might realize a sense of usefulness and improved self-esteem.

Intergenerational contacts would be facilitated by performances at schools and children's hospitals. And a positive image of older Austinites as creative



8

and contributing citizens would be furthered. The ability to express one's feelings and emotions becomes particularly important as one begins to experience the losses which accompany later life. Both verbal and nonverbal expressive skills would be called upon and strengthened in the process of generating scripts and manipulating puppets. And even manual dexterity might be enhanced through the construction and manipulation of the puppets.

Never before had an attempt been made in Texas to promote mental health through theatre in quite this way. The Hogg Foundation recognized the potential of this unique idea. Under a Foundation grant, puppetry skills training would take place in three senior activity centers—each center serving a neighborhood populated by one of the three predominant ethnic groups in the city. In addition, at the suggestion of the Hogg Foundation, a special attempt would be made to train able residents in a local nursing home.

Obstacles

Once funding for the puppetry training had been secured, the real test began—that of translating an exciting and innovative idea into a workable project for senior citizens. It soon became clear that motivating and sustaining the interest of seniors in learning the art of puppetry would be a difficult task.

Many seniors resisted the idea of “playing with toys,” expressing the opinion that puppets were only for children. In addition, factionalism and discriminatory attitudes toward other seniors hampered the initial formation of puppetry production groups. Nevertheless, the tireless effort and constant encouragement of the project director, Mrs. Fiske, finally melted the resistance and won the trust of a handful of creative seniors. The excitement of accomplishment generated by those first brave few soon became contagious and others gradually began to take part.

The facilities available at the Senior Luncheon Program sites varied in many ways. However, they each had one glaring fault in common—none had any storage space for the puppets and stage. Only two of the locations had adequate working room. Despite a regularly scheduled time for training sessions, the buses bringing seniors to the centers were often late. The meals, prepared at a central location, also arrived at inconsistent times.

At Metz Center

In contrast to the other senior centers where men helped in every aspect of center activities, the Spanish-speaking men at Metz would have nothing to do with the puppetry production. A large group of younger, better educated,

bilingual women also did not join in. They seemed to enjoy more individually-oriented crafts that could be sold for a profit.

Nevertheless, a small group of ladies was inspired to become involved. These women, while seemingly shy and lacking in confidence, turned out to be the most creative puppet makers. Their puppets were birds with flamboyant mixtures of imaginative painting, colorful fabric and feathers. A warm and affectionate relationship developed between them and the director, despite the difference in language.

At South Austin Center

The South Austin Center was deeply divided along lines of ethnicity and disability. Seniors from the immediate vicinity were predominantly bilingual and of Mexican ancestry. A large group of deaf elderly also attended. And many Anglo elderly arrived by bus or private auto from areas nearby. Signs of prejudice were not uncommon, and special needs of the deaf were not always accommodated. With many seniors coming to the center, often more than one activity would be scheduled for the same morning. The puppetry production suffered numerous distractions as multiple activities competed within the single large gymnasium.

The luncheon program site manager characterized the seniors at her center as less than enthusiastic about any new activity. Even so, a sizeable group gathered in the craft room to view a demonstration puppet show and hear Mrs. Fiske describe her project. Most were dressed quite formally. They segregated themselves as they sat with the Spanish-speaking on one side and the more affluently attired Anglos on the other. Ignoring the invisible boundaries were a number of deaf and hearing impaired seniors. They seemed to be more interested in the show than in who was sitting next to them. From this latter group came most of the volunteers.

The decision to use the South Austin Center as one of the training sites came after two previous attempts had been made to initiate the program elsewhere. Participation at both of the centers originally contacted could not be sustained. The difficulties stemmed from changes in activity directors, conflicts between individual seniors, and the resistance of the housing manager at one of the locations.

At Salina Center

The seniors at Salina, all black, were the project director's biggest challenge and also her greatest reward. As in the other centers, only more so, she had to persist in demonstrating her commitment in order to gain their trust. Too often

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10

the seniors had experienced someone's coming to their center to arouse enthusiasm for a project only to have that person leave before it was completed.

It took many weeks to get the project moving. Initial problems were created by the activity director's scheduling competing activities and by a small but quite vocal group of critics. As the production began and the puppets slowly emerged, a core group of interested seniors was available on a regular basis. Unlike those at Metz, the men at the Salina center participated in all phases of the production, often taking the initiative. This core group worked diligently to put together a public performance. In the project director's own words:

Salina Seniors worked harder for public recognition than any other group I worked with. They thrived on praise, and I was always generous with it. The people in my group were so dignified, polite, and warm that praise from me was genuine.

At the Nursing Home

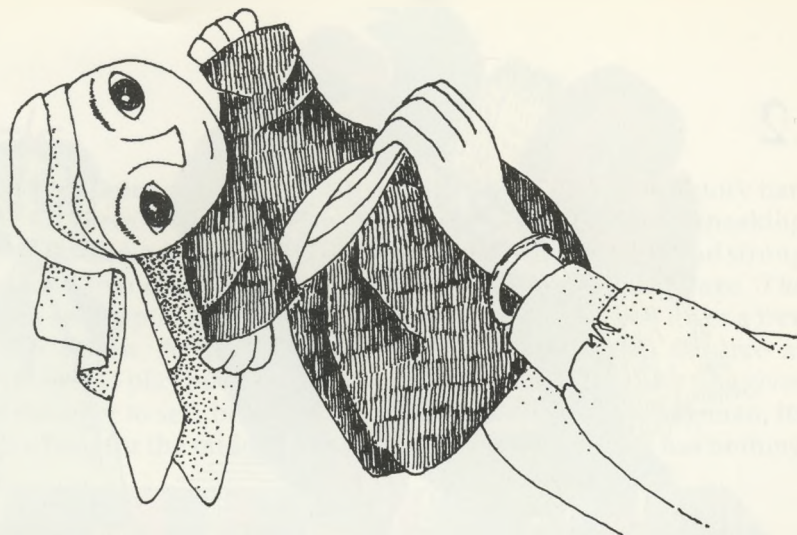
The nursing home site was also difficult to establish. The first one visited contained residents who were either not interested or too disabled. Another nursing home's activity director was able to encourage two residents to prepare a Christmas show for others living there. Even though the facility was attractive and seemingly well managed, most of the residents did not appear to have adjusted well to their living arrangements. The puppetry project drew many critics, especially those seniors who preferred complaining to participating in any type of activity.

The nursing home was quite large with three complete units housing residents of varying degrees of disability. Despite luxurious accommodations and game rooms, no working space for crafts was available other than the activity director's cramped office.

Creating the Shows

Every phase of the puppetry production process took considerably more time than was originally expected. A special effort was made to include as many seniors as possible in each aspect of the production. The first task was to select a story to be developed into a puppet show. Then the puppets, their costumes, the stage and props all had to be constructed. The scripts needed to be written and the dialogue recorded for playback during the actual performances.

Different groups of seniors participated in the various tasks. Some seniors stitched the costumes, while others fashioned the heads of the puppet characters. Patience with hearing difficulties and slow hands was essential to



garner the special talents that lay buried beneath years of toil. It took almost eight months to complete the full production cycle, and only a short time remained within the grant's duration for touring the performances.

Despite the sluggish beginnings, the project director displayed sufficient enthusiasm and perseverance to bring together a group of exceptional seniors. Her advice to others working with the creative talent of senior citizens comes in the form of these "Words to the Wise":

**Allow plenty of time when working with seniors. They may not be slower mentally than anyone else, but their bodies dictate a slower gait and they have learned something a younger generation could heed—"slower is surer."*

**Don't give up if their creativity is not immediately apparent. Most have not had many opportunities in life to express the inner self, and they need encouragement and motivation. Everyone has creativity. It's buried more deeply in some, and in seniors it has been buried longer. So, dig!*

**If you believe in what you are doing, it will come through to others. So, do your homework and have confidence—it's contagious!*

Selecting a Story

The Metz seniors, to be called Las Titerotas Vagabundas (The Traveling Puppeteers), chose their theme during their first working session. After being read four Mexican folktales commonly told in South Texas, the seniors' unanimous choice was *El Pajaro Cu*. This tale was about a little bird, Pajaro Cu, that God had left naked. The other birds donated a feather each to make him a cloak. When Pajaro Cu saw his new and vivid reflection in the water, he considered himself so beautiful that he left in search of "birds of his own class and distinction." The characters in this play were seven beautiful birds with brightly colored heads and colorful print fabric and feathered bodies.



The Salina Celebrities took almost a month to settle on their story. A series of African folktales was presented to the group. The older generation would have nothing to do with these “Ananse” stories, even though they recognized them as “Aunt Nancy” stories told to them as children. Since most of the group were also in a Bible Studies class, a suggestion was made to perform a story from the Bible. When someone mentioned Noah, one of the seniors burst into song, “Animals Comin’, Two By Two.” The idea of combining spirituals and puppets to present the story of Noah began to materialize. The Old Testament story was carefully adhered to with the addition of individual character enrichment for Noah, his wife and three sons. The dialogue, puppets, and spirituals reflected the ethnic flavor of the all-black Salina Center.



The Seasoned Citizens at South Austin got such a late start that a story had to be selected for them. With many hearing impaired and Spanish speaking elderly, the project director chose a play that could be narrated, that had strong visual appeal, and that could be easily communicated in sign language. *The Giving Tree* was an adaptation of a book with the same title. A boy loves a tree and is loved in return. As the boy grows older, he returns to the tree at intervals—no longer to play but to receive what the tree can offer. The tree gives apples to the teenager to sell, branches to build a house for the young man, its trunk to build a boat for the middle-aged man, and finally the tree has nothing



to give. It is just a stump. The very old man has no more needs than to sit and rest, and the stump is just right for that—so the tree remains very happy. The puppets included the tree (in three parts) with apples and a face, and the tree's friend at five stages of life—as a boy, a teenager, a young man, an older man, and a very old man.

The Nursing Home performers chose *The Warm Fuzzies* over several other stories read to them. They made their selection despite a belief that some of the other residents might find a fairy tale demeaning. Actually, the story is a modern parable about what happens when we stop giving and receiving love. A bad witch convinces people that their supply of warm fuzzies (which have always been limitless) would someday run out. People begin to hoard their warm fuzzies and give green pricklies instead. The green pricklies don't make one feel warm and fuzzy but they do keep people from shriveling and dying. Finally a lady with big hips, born under the sign of Aquarius, comes to the land and



convinces everyone (especially the children) that their warm fuzzies will never run out, no matter how many they give. Everyone returns to giving warm fuzzies and all is well. Puppets for this play were selected from the collection of the Bijuberti Puppet Players.

Making the Puppets

A group of seniors at each center participated in the construction of the puppets. Styrofoam balls were used as a base with an empty toilet paper roll inserted to establish the neck. The features were shaped by carving or pressing the styrofoam and using instant paper mache for the noses. The styrofoam heads were then covered with paper mache and eventually painted with acrylics. Yarn was used for making the wigs and beards. A carpenter was commissioned to build several small frames, eventually referred to as “wig machines,” on which the yarn could be formed into strands of hair.

At the Salina Center, the seniors decided to make the Noah puppet look like one of their members. It took several sessions and a few tries at finding the appropriate type of paint to represent the proper skin tones. The ladies at the Metz Center had no difficulty with the powder base paints in producing their multicolored birds. The South Austin seniors used acrylic paints to bring “Tree” and the five stages of “Boy” to life.

In all three Centers a separate group of seniors was used to create the costumes for the puppets. Many of these seniors were enthusiastic about selecting colorful fabrics and sewing them together to produce hands and attire for their little characters. Patterns and an antique sewing machine were provided, and an array of beautiful costumes was the result.

Developing the Scripts

As soon as the puppets were completed, actors were selected and work began on developing the scripts. This was a very time-consuming and often frustrating phase of the production. At Salina the actors discussed the story, the characters, and various scenes for several sessions before beginning the actual taping of the dialogue. Based on these discussions, a script outline was drafted containing the information to be presented in each scene. Each character was given a distinct personality by the seniors in order to make the presentation more appealing. Given the limitations of the facilities, it was difficult to find a time and place to do the taping. The entire script was generated improvisationally and recorded for presentation. Taping left those who would manipulate the puppets free to concentrate on that activity during the performance.

None of the women at the Metz center had any acting experience, and most of them were hesitant about performing. A considerable amount of time was required for the director and interpreter to get to know the ladies well in order to help them over their shyness. The relaxed atmosphere of visiting plus some creative dramatics techniques encouraged the needed spontaneity. The women generated the scripts in their own words. Each scene was repeated until everyone was satisfied with the result.

After each show was completely recorded, the project director edited the tapes into a final version. The scenes were placed in sequence, music added, and the finished tape transferred from cassette to reel-to-reel. Because of the late start at the South Austin Center, that show was adapted and taped by the project director herself.

The Seniors

A common misunderstanding of those who are younger is to think of senior citizens as all alike—grey and feeble, approaching senility with little remaining to contribute. Mrs. Fiske discovered to her delight that seniors are a very diverse group, and a rich reservoir of talent awaited her encouragement. The following are some examples:

“The Voice of Noah”

The man who provided “The Voice of Noah” was a real charmer with the women. He always had lavish praise for them. Although his back bent considerably forward, “Noah” still drove his battlescarred Toyota truck each

16

day to the senior center. He was notoriously late for everything but was cheerfully accepted by all. An inveterate showman, he would burst into song at any moment—as he once did when they were all in a crowded elevator on their way to a performance. (He knew a captive audience when he saw one.) His pockets were stuffed with scraps of paper containing scrawled poems and songs which he constantly reworked. Diction was a source of pride for “Noah.” He carefully articulated his excellent vocabulary of both English and Spanish. His twinkling eyes and mischievous good humor mirrored the delightful little boy qualities still vibrant despite his aging frame.

“Queen of the Center”

She walked with a cane, but this did not prevent her from baking delicious pies and cakes to be sold by the slice to help support the center. Her contributions won her the respect of all and the title of “Queen” of the center in an annual celebration. When she entered regally in a flowing white gown and curled wig topped with a glistening tiara, she was hardly recognizable as the same little lady in the print dress who stitched most of the puppet costumes.

“A True Puppeteer”

From the very start she was eager to learn all she could about puppets. Being practically deaf and in a new city, she was anxious to begin a new venture. However, after the first meeting of the project, illness struck. Not to let go of such enthusiasm, the project director brought the unfinished puppet to this future puppeteer’s home for her to complete. The lady’s health improved rapidly, and soon she was back at the center. A staunch supporter of the project and an apt pupil, she had, in the opinion of the project director, the greatest potential for becoming a true puppeteer.

“The Austin Native”

There was hardly an area of the city that he did not remember as it once was. He had either killed a snake, chased a rabbit, or worked at a house in every area the Salina performers visited. He told of an old Civil War bunker in North Austin where he played with the “bossman’s son” until he was told it was dangerous.

“The Native” lived in the housing project where the center was located. He did much of the work around the center and insisted on carrying the heavy stage and tape recorder to the shows. He taught Mrs. Fiske how to “walk” the stage

into her station wagon—a trick that enabled her to handle the stage alone without back strain.

“The Pastry Chef”

“The Pastry Chef” retired from a local cafeteria. She earned that position and still works for them on occasion. She chose, however, to put her priority on performing the puppet shows. She read every word of the daily paper and followed many television shows. She was always eager to share opinions. The men teased her incessantly, but “The Pastry Chef” always remained good natured.

“The Jokester”

He was polite to everyone and always tried to keep the atmosphere humorous yet dignified. He spent most of his life doing yard work in various parts of Austin. Widowed for nine years, he lived alone in a modest brick home, a youthful 82.

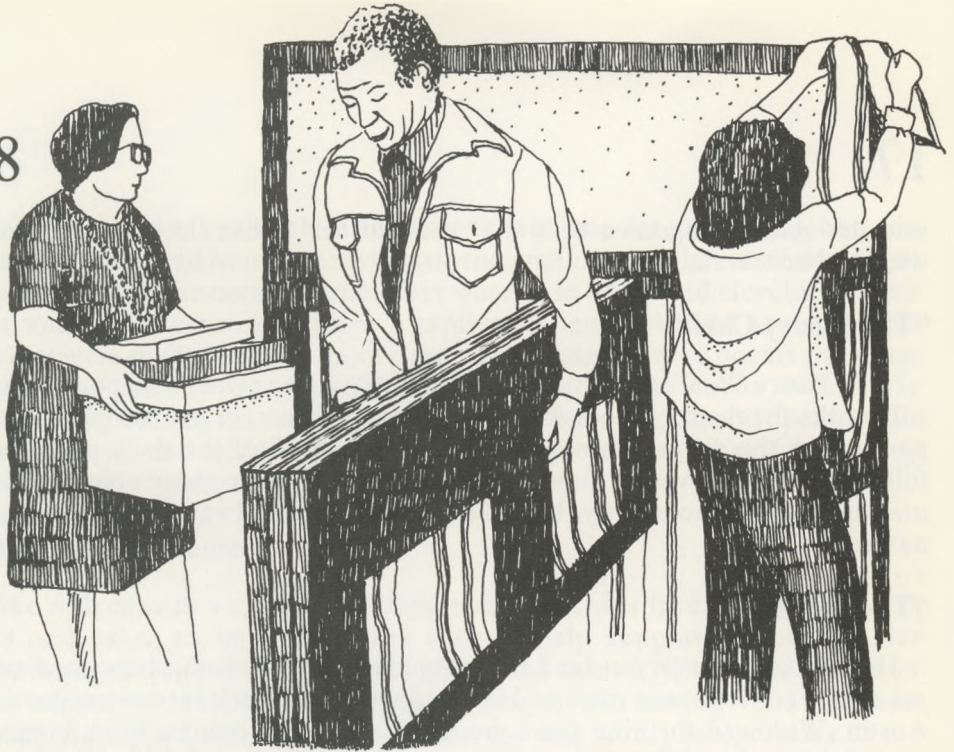
“Close Friends”

These two ladies both came from rural backgrounds to a large nursing home. They took part in every activity offered. They wanted to do all the things they never had the chance to do on the farm. Both agreed to come to this nursing home to relieve their families of the responsibility for their daily care. They, unlike many others, seemed content with their new surroundings.

The Performances

When the project began in October, the plan was to prepare and perform a series of Christmas shows. But the groups at the centers were not ready in time. The “Close Friends” from the nursing home decided to borrow puppets from the Bijuberti Players in order to meet their goal of performing at the annual Christmas party. *The Warm Fuzzies* was presented to two wards at the nursing home before one of the ladies became ill and had to discontinue.

It was the next April before any of the shows were completed by seniors at the centers. That month was spent rehearsing, booking, and scheduling performances. By May, all three centers’ puppeteers had performed their show for their own center as a dress rehearsal. The tour was finally ready to begin.



As many as two shows per day were scheduled in order to accommodate all the requests. The director carried stage, props and equipment, puppets, and puppeteers in her heavily loaded, seven-year-old station wagon. They would leave early enough for a leisurely trip and an unhurried set-up time. This made each trip seem like a joyful outing for the seniors, and for Mrs. Fiske as well.

When the troupe arrived at the performance site, the arduous task of unloading the stage, sound and lighting equipment, and puppets began. The seniors would struggle with their boxes to the area set aside for the stage and begin to set up their paraphernalia, a process which took 30 to 45 minutes. After the performance ended, the process was reversed, often involving a total of four hours for each showing of a fifteen minute presentation. Nonetheless, between the three centers, one show was presented each weekday (on the average) during the months of May and June.

Because of the rigors of transporting a puppet show, the strongest, most energetic, and most interested people from each center were selected for this phase. For these hardy seniors, May and June of that year will be a kaleidoscope of happy memories. . .

The Salina Celebrities' first show was scheduled on a Sunday at the Fellowship Christ Lutheran Church. "The Native" feared it might be sinful to do a show on Sunday, but finally agreed since the audience consisted of "fine Christian folks." One sprightly lady saw the stage and wanted to know if that was the kissing booth . . . The "Juneteenth" performance at Rosewood Park had

to compete with many distractions to hold the attention of the children. The players began to worry that their show was too sophisticated to entertain the children. . . The day care center was packed with many children of various ages. The room was small, stuffy and hot. Nevertheless, the children's rapt attention convinced the puppeteers that their show could touch the little ones' hearts as well.

The players took pride in their being chosen to entertain the National Advisory Council of the Hogg Foundation. The scenic trip to the Lake Travis resort was climaxed by a delicious buffet luncheon. . . "Noah" often accompanied the puppeteers. He would sleep through the show but never miss a bow. . . There was quite a camaraderie between the puppeteers as they traveled from one end of Austin to another. "The Pastry Chef" would discuss current events and her television shows while "The Native" reminisced. "The Joker" good-naturedly teased "The Pastry Chef," while Mrs. Fiske tried unsuccessfully to encourage a match. The challenge of each new adventure proved to be an elixir of youth for all.

Las Titerotas Vagabundas will never forget the little black, brown, white and oriental day-care children hugging them three and four at a time in appreciation for the performance of *El Pajaro Cu*. . . They were moved by the excitement of the frail and blind nursing home resident, the only resident who



spoke Spanish, as she suddenly heard this colorful play being presented in her own language. . . . Everyone admired the fantasy-feathered fowls featured in the Mexican folktale. The performers' short stature prevented their reaching the opening of the stage to present the birds, so extra platforms had to be added to compensate.

At the Care, Inc. day-care center, laughter of young and old erupted in unison when a five-year-old declared that the roadrunner puppet's "honk" was wrong—it did not sound like the television cartoon character. . . . The diminutive ladies from Metz were thrilled by the continued applause of over 200 students at the St. Elmo Elementary School's Summer Program. . . . The project director and the performers struggled to communicate on those occasions when their interpreter could not be present. The earthy sense of humor they shared became the common ground of their communication.

The South Austin Seasoned Citizens enjoyed a patchwork quilt of experiences. Due to the illness of one puppeteer and the reluctance of others to perform, the project director and one other senior performed most of the shows alone. They performed *The Giving Tree* at every type of facility and for audiences of every age. The only complaint they ever received was that the show was not long enough.

The colorful patches of this quilt of experiences defy logical organization. Random, irregular shapes might be arranged as follows: During the outdoor carnival for Muscular Dystrophy held in a shopping center, music blared from the nearby cakewalk while two teenagers held the puppet stage to keep it from blowing down in the wind. . . . The performers experienced the dramatic contrast between the community residence of mentally ill elderly and the clean attractive private nursing homes they visited. No matter what type of atmosphere they found, the performers shared their warmth with each resident individually, by word, hug, pat, or handshake. . . . They toured the hill country on the way to the Lake Travis Elementary School. They saw the campus of The University of Texas when they performed for the Hogg Foundation staff. They visited the Bergstrom Air Force Base where they entertained nearly one hundred children and parents.

There were frequent problems with the main character in the play, a four-part breakaway tree, which had to be taken apart in full view of the audience by one of the puppets. With the help of a little showbiz wizardry, the tree's styrofoam apples drop off, then its branches are removed, and finally there's only a stump remaining. One very young spectator attempted a bite of an apple. . . . A particularly meaningful reward came in the form of a mural prepared by the children of the Rosedale Elementary School



Extend-A-Care Program. The mural depicted the show with many apple trees and personal messages of appreciation.

On two very special occasions, the children and seniors from the Rosewood-Zaragosa and Montopolis Recreation Centers were entertained by all three puppet productions. The response was enthusiastic, and the three sets of performers could exchange stories about their travels.

What Was Accomplished

The production of the three puppet shows yielded an array of colorful hand puppets, costumes, props, taped scripts, and a stage to bring continued pleasure. The performances touched the hearts of preschoolers and nursing home residents alike. Through them the public got a glimpse of creative and active seniors contributing to their community in a special way. But probably the most important accomplishment of this project was what was learned about older Texans. Through their involvement, seniors were able to overcome the effects of physical disabilities and even emotional difficulties they were experiencing. There could be no doubt that their creative potential was still vibrant and that new types of expressive skills could be learned. In addition, abilities acquired at some earlier time could be reignited by enthusiasm and adapted to new tasks.



A total of thirty seniors served as a nucleus of puppeteers (manipulators), costumers, puppet makers and actors (taping the music and dialogue). Their level of skill varied greatly. While only one woman had the soul of a true puppeteer, a number of others acquired considerable competence. Considering these aging hands, arthritic or calloused from years of hard work, the manipulators managed beautifully. The costumers brought experience to their task which they shared with great delight. The artists who crafted the puppet heads had to call upon their creativity rather than experience. They met the challenge, and a beautiful set of puppets was the result.

The impact of their participation on the mental and physical health of these seniors can best be explained by their own words and example.

When first discovered, “The True Puppeteer” was not only ill but also discouraged about the changes that were taking place in her life. Now she is so busy teaching herself more about puppetry that she is unaware of the amazing transformation that has occurred. She still has multiple physical problems and a considerable hearing impairment, but she refuses to let them interfere. In her words:

Ya know, between Pat Fiske and the Hogg funding, I feel encouraged—my ears are no better, my hands are still sore and awkward, and I spend much time in bed, but I’ve my puppets and puppetry to occupy my mind and help me over my very uncomfortable moments.

“The True Puppeteer” has since completed part-time employment with the City Parks and Recreation Department teaching her own class on puppetry for children.

A definite hierarchy of the more highly educated existed at the Salina Center. This placed “The Native” near the bottom in prestige. He was included in every

phase of the program even though his participation was discouraged by others. The project director described his involvement by saying:

I think the prestige of being in the forefront for once gave him more self-esteem than he ever had before. Recently, as we were leaving to go to do a show, a formidable ex-teacher who often picked on him insisted that he help to clean up an area of the center. He turned grandly and said, "Do it yourself!"

"The Pastry Chef," another Salina Celebrity, put it this way:

Before I started with the show, I had arthritis in my fingers. Now I am happy to say I have improved. I did not believe it would help, but now I am convinced it is good physically and intellectually.

The inspiration for selecting the story of Noah for the Salina production stated it succinctly:

It's something to think about. It keeps down senility.

The several college students who became involved in the project not only contributed but also shared in its rewards. The project director's relationship with her interpreter and assistant at Metz was a truly valued one. They could share perspectives on their own generations, helping each to understand better her own children and parents respectively.

Two additional students participated as part of a practicum course about supports for older persons. Their involvement opened a whole new world to them. For one student, it led to her pursuing her first job after graduation with hospitalized mentally ill elderly. She is considering graduate study in psychology and gerontology for the future. For the other, it contributed to understanding and recognition of her own aging process. The relationships she established with the seniors helped ease the troubled times she was experiencing in her own family. The project director could easily describe the benefit to her of having the student assistance:

I found it very refreshing dealing with an older and younger generation at once—great perspective!

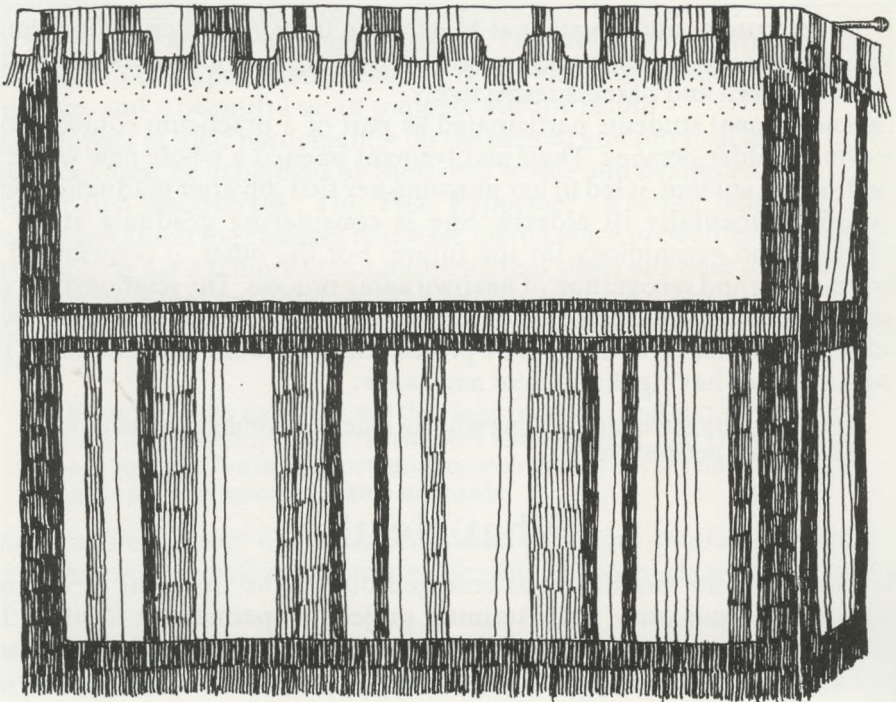
What Next?

Several ideas for modifications emerged during the first year of demonstration of this puppetry skills training project. A permanent location for working, rehearsing, and storing equipment seemed essential. Too many delays and disruptions resulted from having to transport all of the materials

from center to center in addition to the distractions caused by simultaneous activities.

Transportation to and from performances could be provided by volunteers interested in touring with the seniors and assisting with the shows. They could be trained to carry on the coordinating responsibilities for the shows already prepared. Such assistance would enable the director to devote time to conducting bi-weekly workshops for both seniors and volunteers designed to generate new productions.

During the initial stages of the project, several potential uses of puppetry came to light. One particularly promising, but as yet untapped, area involves the role of puppets in nursing home care. Residents who were reluctant to talk to strangers or staff about emotional concerns tended to express their feelings more readily through the "voice" of the puppet. Staff or volunteers, trained in puppetry, may be able to reach patients isolated in their rooms with short one- or two-puppet skits.



Nursing home aides seemed to enjoy the performances as much as the residents. This raises the possibility of topical puppet shows as a potential medium for helping staff better understand the mental health needs of those for whom they care.

A stage design can be adapted for wheelchair performers, with an elbow bar to help prevent arm strain while holding up the puppets. The involvement of hearing-impaired elderly is motivation for developing plays that are more action oriented and with less dialogue.

Suggestions of future possibilities are found in the director's remarks:

When I conceived of the idea, I envisioned listless, apathetic individuals' being brought to life and vigor through the art of puppetry. Actually, we reached only people who were already open to new experiences and willing to accept puppetry as something worthwhile.

These people had good mental health to begin with, and perhaps this program only enhanced what had to be there in order for them to even take part. There were many who might have benefitted even more, but their poor self-esteem prevented their even trying. Perhaps the program should be geared toward reaching those individuals through shows that would encourage good mental health attitudes.

At this writing, efforts are being made to attain funding, facilities, and volunteer help to make senior puppetry a continuing reality in Austin, Texas. Emphasis will be given to changing attitudes among the aging from one of resignation—of *Curtains!*—to a new one of *Curtain Calls* as these men and women come back into the community circle of activity and productivity.

Design by Rebecca Winger

Illustrations adapted from photographs by Tim Lyons



