



## March 2023 Newsletter

**Let's get together! In Person! Sunday March 19<sup>th</sup> 1:30**

**Bring something to eat together (or don't and just come yourself).**

**Bring some show and tells!**

**It's Clay Day!**

**Bring your own or we'll have some oil-based clay for experimentation.**

**Iver has some pointers and maybe you do too.**

**Let's enjoy being together for the first time in forever.**

**Sunday March 19<sup>th</sup> 1:30**

**Oneida Lake Arts and Heritage Center 1201 Main St.  
Sylvan Beach, NY 13157**



**What does PGUNY mean to us?** Summed up in a few words; access, information, sharing, support, mentoring, and comradery. Iver fell in love with puppetry as a senior at Oswego University. Pam talked a professor into giving him an independent study in Puppets. Iver read most of the books in the library and made different styles of heads. Someone from the Sterling Renaissance Faire saw them and insisted that we do something 'puppetry' that summer. Pamela taught Iver about sewing skills and working fabric and Fool on the Hill was born. We made and sold marionettes and folk toys. Few people knew anything about our work.



In Sterling we met the Wiebers who ran Historic Waxcraft. Besides being friends and eventually employers, the Wiebers introduced us to another friend of theirs from NYC, Eric Bass. Eric urged us to join the P of A and attend the 1980 thanks to Sandglass Theater prompts, we did attend. The two of us were married in June and had a fantastic

“honeymoon” at the Festival! (And we are still honeymooning).

We had stumbled into a treasure trove of inspiration and information. We experienced SO MUCH diversity in puppetry and performances 5x a day for a week. We saw BIG NAMES, like the Muppets, Bill Baird, Burr Tillstrom (Keukla and Ollie), and unknowns to us, Jay Marshal, Albrecht Roser, David Syrotiak, and amazing foreign acts like Henk Boerwinkel’s Figuren Theatre Triangle and Sergey Vladimirovich Obratsov. We met so many US puppeteers; Marianne and Tom Tucker, Hobey Ford, Bill Lorenzen, Diane and George Neff to name just a few that we would revisit. We also met many of the movers and shakers of the PofA. We were immersed in the art and saw theater that most Americans never know about, cementing our love of puppetry. In one week, what an amazing introduction to puppetry! But after all that, what could possibly be inspirational in Central New York?

Luckily, Mike Oltz pulled together about two dozen NY puppet lovers and formed the charter group for PGUNY. The networking and connections were astounding. Within a short while we went from ignorance about puppetry to fantastic glimmers of its potential, to discovering people doing incredible work within hours of us. The two of us published the PGUNY newsletters (on a library Apple IIe) and helped find programs for the meetings as PGUNY grew into a family of puppet lovers and puppeteers. There was a lot of sharing of practical and creative ideas as well as skills. PGUNY also helped us hone our skill in creating events and motivating people. The Guild was such a positive experience for so many with an acceptance of everyone no matter their skill level. It was energizing for both of us. It was wonderful to see Dave and Jean McDonough and Deb Poplasky, early PGUNY members, during our Zoom meetings!

Five years after first seeing National Marionette Theatre at the festival, we were selling puppets in Hartford CT. Someone stopped at our booth and said that someone in his building was looking for a puppeteer. We said, “Syrotiak?” to which he replied, “Yes! You can say his name!” We left messages on his studio machine and drove back to Rochester. On Monday we walked into our apartment, checked our messages, and heard an unmistakable voice. The two of us were hired for a three month tour through the Northeast with *Peter and the Wolf* (a bridge show) and *Beauty and the Beast* (in concert with short strings). We had two weeks of intense training, manipulation, assembling two stages, learning the script, blocking, lighting, and... how to smile when the show is over! Iver returned to do the annual Christmas shows for three seasons, as well as work on the construction of *Sleeping Beauty*. Without PGUNY we would not have the foundation to take the leap into performing.



Concurrently UCONN started a Master’s program at the Institute of Puppetry Arts (IPPA). It opened at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center in Waterford CT, not far from the Margo Rose home. Bart Roccoberton from Pandemonium Puppets was the director. There were monthly performances by puppeteers who were adjunct teachers. Iver saw so many groups; from Bread and Puppet, Paul Zaloom, Paul Vincent Davis, Bonnie and Andrew from Periale Puppets to the Margo Rose Marionettes, Jon and Carol Farrell of Figures of Speech Theater, and a list of other teaching puppeteers, Eric Bass Sandglass Theater, Gisela Drescher, Bern Ogrodnic, and Derek Devoe.

IPPA was a dream education for Iver. He camped in the back of our truck, often helping visiting puppeteers with load in and set up. We watched shows from the best in the Northeast, sometimes in the audience, sometimes from backstage. While Iver was working the holidays shows in Hartford he sat in on UCONN classes (and the workshop had the best shower in CT) and was frequently invited to the dining room to hob nob with the performers. Many times Iver did write-ups for the PGUNY newsletters to try to capture the energy of the moment and share his insights. PGUNY was instrumental in shaping his thinking and getting the most from countless puppet adventures.

Our time with David Syrotiak Sr. really was one of most thrilling experiences for both of us. Although it was a painful decision, Pam followed her passion for working with children and returned to teaching, Fool on the Hill eventually

morphed into FOTH Performance Figures. Many of Iver's skills were learned from PGUNY meetings; workshops, peer conversations, or suggested resources. This allowed him to work for other professional companies (rather than craft shows); Sandglass Theater, Figures of Speech, Catskill Puppet People, (who probably taught me more than I taught them). Luckily, I freelanced with Midway Caravan from Ithaca where I made mascot heads, puppets and backdrops. I created foam rod puppets of storybook characters for Bennington Marionettes. Hasbro Toys hired me to work on a robotic character. When Derek Devoe was in CA he would occasionally hire me to do armature building and rough out sculpting. These jobs were new experiences, pushing my boundaries, and offering amazing challenges.

Travel was becoming longer and more frequent, then in 1989 we both were offered positions in a private school that was highly recommended. We bought a home and puppetry began to take a back seat. Over a dozen years we wrote grants for artists in residence. Iver finished his Masters in Art Ed, and started a Teaching and Curriculum PhD. In Syracuse he also became enamored by figure drawing.

**We have witnessed the ability of PGUNY to change people and would like to see others get similar opportunities in puppetry.** We are indebted to Nancy Sanders for sustaining PGUNY for all these years and now rekindling PGUNY. Now that we are both retired it is an excellent time not only to recall our past but plot more adventures. While the world has shifted in the past few years, puppetry still holds magic. Puppeteers can make audiences squeal with delight, find awe and wonderment, and soar into theatrical fantasies. Although economic opportunities have radically changed, we can still collectively provide learning opportunities for the next generation and have fun while doing it! **Come and discover the joys of the Guild!! Share your interests and skills and together, we can all create something new.**



## Nurturing an Artist through Critique

### Iver Johnson

Education in all the arts has a special challenge to navigate the inner world of artists' feelings. Some feelings run deep and may not be visible. Most artists are deeply connected to their work. It is often what is most important to them. Since the 1990s I've sought ways to foster the artistic mindset without generating ill feelings while still increasing metaconsciousness, their awareness of their thinking about their work. In the visual arts, thinking may be in images rather than words. This can provide additional challenges but these thoughts may be revealed through an artist statement. Within their statement framework artists can clarify their artistic discovery or define their informal research. Mission or artistic statements often are a mixture of thoughts, feelings, and opinions which motivate production. The question is how to best nurture and boost growth.

At some point the question of 'how am I doing?' arises for most. It comes in many guises... "Is it satisfying? Is it compelling, is it good?" Careful questioning of the process can lead to understanding and growth. Currently I am investigating Liz Lerner's CRP, *The Creative Response Process*. This four part process was developed for performance review. It includes the creator, respondents, a facilitator and possibly a note taker. The facilitator is a guide through the process. I have only attended one informal review session and most of the following comes from Lerman's book, "Critique is Creative" 2022. A phrase repeated in the book... '*transforming worry into inquiry*' describes a CRP core principle. Part of the process is discovering how to form acceptable questions.

**CRP** starts by viewing a work, or portion thereof. **Step one** responders recap the positive aspects they witnessed withholding negative comments (discomfort, doubts or negative opinions) until later steps. Goodwill can better resonate when negatives are filtered out. Alternative terms are described as '*personal reflections, working examples, honest kindness, or asset inventory*'. Affirmations come from exposing what is evocative or meaningful, what works, what should be kept, or what is inspired.

The **second stage** of CRP uses considerations from the artist to frame the information needed from responders. Artists have presented their sincere efforts and focus responders on explorations. Some of the elements artists may choose to focus feedback upon their worries/doubts, excuses/apologies, gaps\*, hopes/aspirations, observations, process,

intuition, or motivation. Exposing hopes and doubts creates vulnerability, artist may not have experience speaking to the community of peers and strangers about such matters. Ideas can pile up, conflicting emotions may cause befuddlement. Commentary should stay on the artist's topics during this phase.

\*Gap Perception – Intentions put forth and communicated are misunderstood by audience. Artist expectations meet the perception of people

The role of responders has an important two way contract, *“a shared responsibility in forestalling defensiveness that might shortchange learning.”* The egos involved with critiquing requires examination as some responders display their knowledge and opinions without regard for artist's queries. Discussion should specifically bear on the work. Responder's opinions may not be relevant and inadvertently challenge the artist's aesthetics and training. The goal is to spur artist's reflection upon the piece, not to provide a platform for responders. Artists learn critical thinking skills about their process. It is about *“agency, taking ownership, empowerment, and exercising autonomy”*.

In the **third phase**, facilitators assist in forming *neutral questions*. These help collaborative relationships that minimize authority and opinions. Framing neutral questions invites dialog rather than challenging choices. Examples are *“what is the relationship between...”, “what is your interpretation or meaning...”, “what informed your choice...”, “how did you think about...”* or *“what is the role of...”* Facilitator's role can help translate opinions to neutral questions. The example given: instead of asking why the scene was so dark, reframe the question to, *“tell us about your choice of lighting.”* The concept behind neutral questions is to express curiosity, not opinions. This method elicits the artist's perspective and understanding. This is a shift from challenging to questioning and provoking explanation rather than defense. The wish is to lead artists to reflect and find inspiration and their own solutions through alternative perspectives.

**Step four** allows for artists giving permission to address responder's opinions and fix it. *“I have an opinion about \_\_\_ would you like to hear it?”* The process can be compared to toss and catch, both parties prepare to work together. Exposing new knowledge while exposing *‘tastes, preferences, aesthetics, biases, assumptions, and delusions’*. If the artist is saturated, or upset, or put off they can simply refuse to accept more information by saying ‘no’. This feature put the learner in control of the process.

This process fits into my view of the nature of the artistic process. I believe artists begin their development by muddling, working with little information and spontaneously reacting to the stimulus at hand. Becoming reflective often happens at a later phase and develops through trial and rework. CRP helps strengthen the reasoning behind the process. Style forms over extended periods of time, perhaps unconsciously and makes strong internal bonds with the work. When deeply held personal views are questioned, it can elicit flight or fight responses. CRP places positive comments first, then seeks what the creator would like to explore. Thirdly it offers opportunity to explore the rationale behind choice. Lastly, it gives opportunity for suggestions, only if the artist is feeling receptive. I see that there are limits to how much information can be comfortably integrated during a critique. The built in option for no more comments during feedback is brilliant. Multiple viewpoints help deal with authority, more knowledgeable others, and I look forward to putting this to use for PGUNY or OFD.

## PGUNY.org

Chuck Burke created PGUNY.org so that we can connect with each other. It has copies of the newsletters and it's possible to create your own page as well. Contact Chuck if you have any questions. [cjburke1962@gmail.com](mailto:cjburke1962@gmail.com)

Have you visited PGUNY.org yet? Check it out! You can get PGUNY stuff!

