

A National Puppetry Archive

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Over the last few months a few members of the Guild and other puppet organisations have been having occasional discussions about the possibilities of forming a National Puppetry Archive. Personally I am a very strong advocate of an archive such as this and thought this would be a good opportunity to talk about it further.

So what does a National Puppetry Archive consist of? What would be its function and why is it needed? Well the truth is at this point there is not one single answer to any of those questions. Whilst I can't speak for anyone else in the Guild or outside, I can, as the Guild's current archivist give a little insight into my personal thoughts as to what a National Puppetry Archive should be and why I feel it is necessary.

I can understand those members who may read the title of this article and roll their eyes and think "here we go again, another white elephant for money to be ploughed into, when we don't see anything for it". However in my opinion an archive such as this would not fall into that category. Let me explain why.

To begin with we need to go back a few years, at a time when the Guild had a very large archive and

collection, but were struggling for space to store it. It was at that time that the Guild council decided that for the good of the collection the most sensible thing to do would be to donate it to the National Theatre Museum.

The council had been backed into a corner with no options to store the collection and had the risk of it being split up, so it was considered, after much discussion, that this be the best option and Tom Howard, the then archivist, dealt with the transfer. At the time the Theatre Museum did promise to display extensive parts of the collection and make other parts available to all Guild members. A very nice catalogue was produced by the Guild detailing what had been given to the Museum and the council could now rest assured that the majority of the collection was safe, the archives being reduced to a much smaller collection of puppets and paper material to be stored at the Barbican. I cannot sit here and in hindsight say that this was a bad decision, I also cannot say that the present Guild council would not have come to the same decision now had we been presented with such an attractive offer. What has transpired however is that the Guild really did lose the collection for good, and the majority of the Guild's collection is not now particularly accessible to the puppetry community as a whole. Yes the puppets are kept beautifully, in acid free paper and in air conditioned storage, but the majority of them rarely see the light of day and it is a difficult process to get to see much of the paper material. Some of the archives particularly relating to British Puppetry has been collated and placed upon the Theatre Museums archival website, www.peopleplayuk.org.uk. This is an excellent resource for the paper based material, but is not particularly relevant for anyone researching the actual tangible puppets.

The other day while browsing through some old copies of *The Puppet Master* I noticed a small article that was written not many years before the Guild collection was donated. It said that in attempt to help young budding Punch Prof's Fred Tickner, the

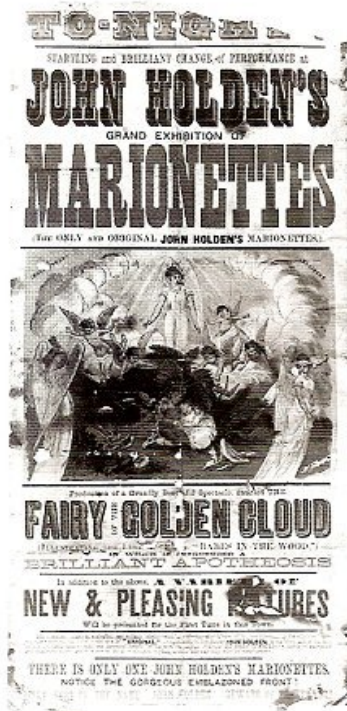
epitome of Punch figure makers, had come out of retirement to make a *standard* set of Punch and Judy figures to be stored in the Guild archives and be used to help young Prof's get a feel for the figures and ultimately inspire them to make their own. It is sad to think that the amount of young Punch men and women those actual figures ever helped can probably be counted on one hand as they now lie tightly packed away in storage. Alas there is nothing to be done about the Guilds past archives, that collection has now gone and despite us not really having any control as to how often it is seen, at least we do know it is safe. That said, what we do have control over is what happens to our present collection and any other puppet collections that become available in the future.

Over the last ten years many Guild events, or events that Guild members have been in attendance at, have been auctions of puppets and related material. In fact thinking back since the Marsham puppet auctions of the 1990's I can think of seven auctions that have taken place. The first one being to auction the remaining puppets stored in the Guild archives. Again due to lack of storage, the Barbican was no longer available and the council were forced to cull the archives again and sell the remaining puppets that we had. This means that the archive now only consists of paper based artefacts, the core of which are the wonderful Lanchester scrapbooks. After the Guild's auction in Ealing there were the first of two auctions at the Harlequin Puppet Theatre, which sold puppets from the collection of Eric Bramall, this was then followed by another smaller puppet auction at the Harlequin and consecutive auctions in London, Oxford, Stroud and then Bicester. The amount of puppets sold in these auctions is really incomprehensible and while many will be either used or displayed by those who bought them, so many will have disappeared again forever. Now while I am not suggesting that all of these puppets could have gone into a National Puppetry Archive what I

An archive picture of the 1926 Guild Exhibition ▼



What remains of an old poster advertising a performance of John Holden's marionettes ▶



am saying is that many of the historically important ones, of which there were quite a few, could easily have been saved. These puppets did not go for vast sums of money and with a little fund raising before hand (either through donation or grant) a large portion of those deemed worthy of buying could have been saved for the nation.

That is just one aspect of how a National Puppetry Archive could work, more importantly it could be a port of call for anyone wanting to dispose of puppets or puppetry related artefacts. So often do we hear the case of someone who has retired or whose relative has died and they then suddenly have a collection of puppets to dispose of. Where do they go? What do they do with them? If a National Puppet Archive were established then it would become an obvious answer for such acquisitions. Of course many people may want to sell their puppets and who can blame them. This I imagine will happen more often than not, and in most cases I foresee that a service such as is being proposed would probably not be able to afford to purchase much at all. Though in some cases money is not the most important factor. For some people it is far more rewarding to know that the puppets which have been performed, been loved and been so much a part of the

puppeteers life will continue to be seen and enjoyed by future generations.

So practically how would a National Puppetry Archive work? We are now in the 21st century and times have changed dramatically over the last 10 – 20 years. The last five years in particular have seen leaps in technology which has meant that so many people can now communicate visually as well as verbally all over the world in a matter of seconds. Because of this it does not necessarily mean that a National Puppetry Archive would need a building that would be accessible to the public. It would also not mean that the material housed by the archive needed all be stored together. A National Puppetry Archive could be a link between many establishments. I could foresee it having its own collection made up possibly from those organisations that form PUK, but it would also be linked to other establishments and museums throughout the country providing a network and a database of puppetry knowledge unparalleled anywhere else in the world. Documents and other artefacts could be viewed instantly by anyone who wished to see them through the use of a scanner, digital camera and a connection to the Internet and items that need to be actually seen and touched such as the puppets themselves could be made available to anyone wishing to do so. Puppets could be loaned to exhibitions and made available in public displays at any opportunity and those that were not historically fragile could still be used in performances and demonstrations. Most importantly the puppets and related material would be stored by those who

had a genuine enthusiasm for the art of puppetry and a knowledge that allowed the collection to be managed successfully and in a way that promoted puppetry throughout the country and taught people what a rich history puppetry in this country has to offer. I can see that storage would possibly be needed but this would literally be storage, we would not be talking about another Guild Headquarters here (for those of you who have been members long enough to remember that). It would not need to be anything too cosmetically spectacular, just safe, dry and suitable for the items for which it is going to store. We are at a time now where we have the opportunity to make this proposal actually become a reality. With the formation of Puppeteers UK in the last few years it has meant that puppetry as a whole in the UK now speaks with one voice. This is certainly necessary if we are to continue to raise our profile as a serious form of theatre and art. Should the proposal of a National Puppetry Archive be taken on board by the PUK council I would hope that Guild members would agree with me that we, as the Guild, should be at the forefront of its establishment and administration. As the oldest puppetry organisation in the world I feel it is now more important than ever that we begin to recognise and cherish what has happened in our history and enabled us to reach the point where we are today. Other areas of theatre and art have done it, areas which do not have as rich a history as us. It is important and necessary to look to the future, but it is also very useful to keep one eye on the past, what better way to celebrate our 80th Birthday next year.

Professor Day's Punch and Judy Show at Ryde IOW from an old postcard ▶

