

**t**he humans, except for their faces, are almost invisible. Everything is black: the backdrop, their clothes, and their gloves. The almost life-sized puppets in their brightly colored clothes are the main attractions, and it is to them that your eyes are drawn.

This is the artistry of Puppet Arts Theatre, a professional touring group based in Jackson. The puppeteers were in top form when the company, led by founder and artistic director Peter Zapletal, performed Sergei Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf" during the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra's 2005 Family Fun Concert.

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*The artistry of skilled puppeteers brings stories to life for Mississippi children*

# a show of hands

BY GREG WAXBERG

ERICA FLANNIS

Puppet Arts Theatre founder and artistic director Peter Zapletal holds a puppet named Nam Li in "The Toad Prince."





## A SHOW OF HANDS

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"Peter and the Wolf" is part of the group's 2005-06 season, which also includes "Carnival of the Animals," "The Toad Prince," "The Princess and The Pea," "The Fisherman and His Wife," and the newest production, "Golem." Their repertoire also features "Hansel and Gretel," a production by the Millsaps Players at Millsaps College.

Zapletal was born in Legnica, Poland, and grew up in the former Czechoslovakia, considered the world center of modern puppetry. "I was probably three or four years old when my father took me backstage at a puppet theater, and that's when I got the bug. And then he made another mistake—for a birthday, he bought me a puppet theater," Zapletal laughs as he sits in the living room of his Jackson home with about a dozen puppets for an upcoming show lying on the sofa.

Zapletal started the Empire State Puppet Theatre in the late 1960s, when he and his wife, Jarmila, moved to New York. "[Puppetry] was the only thing I really knew how to do, because that's what I studied on a college level," Zapletal says. It was at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague that he had taken courses about puppets, marionettes, design, production, and acting and received a master's degree in puppetry.



The Zapletals worked with local puppeteers and visited schools on Saturdays. In 1970, they were invited to perform at the national festival of the Puppeteers of America at the University of Connecticut. A month or two after the festival, the *Puppetry Journal* (the official magazine of the Puppeteers of America) advertised that Mississippi Educational Television (ETV) was looking for a puppeteer, and Zapletal started at the network in February of 1971.


"While I was at ETV, during the day, I had to fulfill somebody else's mission. In the evenings, we just tried to do whatever we liked and hope that the audiences would like it," he says.

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## A SHOW OF HANDS

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For every show, Zapletal says he looks for an idea that will challenge the company creatively and appeal to the audience. "Sometimes we miss. We do not miss in a sense that the audience would not like it, but...they don't know the title." Helping to ensure that the targeted young students do know the titles, elementary school teachers like to choose stories that are familiar. Puppet Arts Theatre works with about 120 schools and is on the touring program of the Mississippi Arts Commission, which gives grants to schools to host productions.

The students seem to provide endless amusement for the puppeteers, too. "Kids don't hold back at all. If they're going to laugh, they're going to laugh the loudest that they can," says puppeteer Keri Horn. "I just enjoy getting that kind of feedback from them and knowing that they're having a great time."

Fellow puppeteer T.J. McSparrin has similar sentiments, describing the children as "such an appreciative audience. They pay more attention to the puppets, but I still get to be dramatic."

Horn and McSparrin both studied theater, which fits with Zapletal's desire when he seeks new talent. "We try to find the best [puppeteer] from a community stage...who would be a good actor," he explains. Horn finds that being a puppeteer is a good creative outlet. "Getting up on stage, as a person...is kind of hard, but you can hide behind the puppet and you can perform even bigger sometimes."

The shows always have the audiences in mind, ranging from what students will like to how they react to how they can participate. "Even though we pick the show—a little bit—for ourselves, we do not do the show for ourselves," Zapletal says.

The development period for a new production can take several years, as is the case with "Golem." The idea surfaced two or three years ago, and the show is scheduled to open this April.

"We need to find something that is interesting, that is exciting. We came up with the idea of doing the story of 'Golem,' which is a Jewish-Czech legend based in Prague," Zapletal says. The production, for which he studied books and different versions of the story, is thought-provoking and sophisticated.

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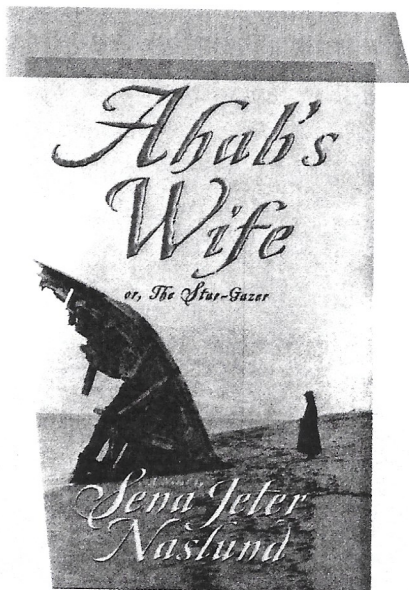
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## A SHOW OF HANDS

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"I really wanted to put together a strong creative team," Zapletal says, adding that he wanted the script for "Golem" to be written as if it were a movie. "I want it to move. I didn't want to have two puppets talking to each other. That's not exciting!"

Preparation includes rehearsals, when puppeteers become comfortable with the puppets. As Horn explains, "Each one does have its quirks. It's like learning a new character for a stage actor. You've got to learn, 'How does this person move?' or 'How does this person talk?' It's the same with a puppet—'How does this puppet move?' and 'How does he talk?'"

The adjustment can take several weeks. When she joined the company 20 years ago, McSparrin needed two to three weeks of rehearsal to become fluid, and she says she still needs that time for a new show. "You handle each type of puppet a different way depending on if it is a rod puppet, string puppet, hand puppet, or any combination. Each puppet has a different personality and moves differently from any other puppet in the show," she says.

All the effort leads to a feeling of naturalness. "It takes a while to get through this getting-to-know-you phase, and then the puppet suddenly feels like an extension of your body," says painter, sculptor, and puppeteer Erica Flannes.

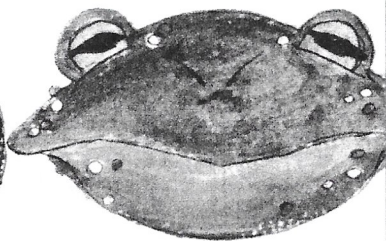
Along with the exposure to puppets, students are exposed to classical music in many of the productions. "Peter and the Wolf" uses Prokofiev's score, "The Fisherman and His Wife" uses a collage of music by Rimsky-Korsakov, and other shows incorporate Bizet and Rossini.

"We found that it works—working with classical music. Unfortunately, it may be the only time in their life that they hear it," Zapletal says.

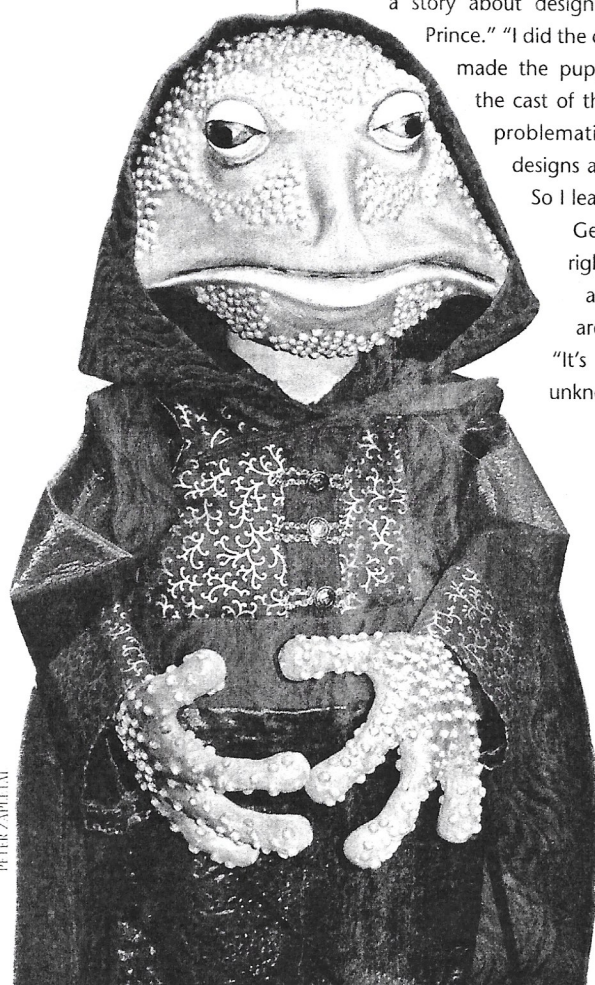
Walking across the living room, he picks up some of the "Golem" puppets from the sofa, plays with them, and shows how the heads are attached. Whether at home or in the theater, each puppet is only a human hand away from coming to life. ■

The Puppetry Jam Performing Arts Festival for Children, featuring performances of "The Princess and the Pea," will take place March 30-31 at the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum in Jackson. For a schedule and details, see [www.mspuppetry.com](http://www.mspuppetry.com).





# from sketch to stage



"Forever."

Peter Zapletal supplies a quick answer when asked how long it takes to create puppets, many of which are conceived as sketches drawn by the puppet designer. Otherwise, inspiration comes from pictures and books.

The creation process depends on the kind of puppet being brought to life, how it will be operated, and the materials. Hair usually is made from yarn and applied with hot glue. Heads are crafted from reticulated foam or papier-mâché.

Foam heads are carved, covered with cheesecloth, and painted, while the process for papier-mâché heads—such as those featured in "The Toad Prince"—is more extensive.

"From the sketch, I model the heads in Plasteline or Sculpey (modeling clays) and cast that into plaster of Paris to make a mold," Zapletal says. "Strips of newspaper are wetted with white glue, and layers of these strips are spread inside the mold until you have about an eighth-inch to a quarter-inch thickness. The dried head is then covered with patching paste and sanded until it's smooth."

At that point, Zapletal paints the head and attaches it to a movement control device inside the body.

Puppeteer and puppet-maker Erica Flannes relates a story about designing puppets for "The Toad Prince." "I did the designs, and Peter and Jarmila made the puppets. Well...I actually joined the cast of that show, and I realized how problematic some of my costume designs are, in terms of manipulation. So I learned a great lesson."

Getting the process to feel right—mentally and physically—and achieving a pleasing result are simply part of the challenge. "It's always a journey into the unknown," Zapletal says. **M**

Designs from "The Toad Prince:" Indri the Toad and Prince (top left), Water Sprite (far left), Toad Prince (near left and opposite top), Water Sprite with puppeteer Erica Flannes (opposite bottom).

PETER ZAPLETAL