

Retired

Shelter From the Storm

After years and years of performing on the road, the sudden necessity to shelter at home provided plenty of time to think, “What’s next?” Since the last issue, several performers announced they were retiring. Puppeteers from North Carolina, California, New York, and New Jersey are profiled below. In “Scene Between,” Monica Leo profiled Annie Zook. Bob Nathanson and Elise Handelman wrote about what they won’t miss and what they will miss. David Regan contributed a lovely memoir of his time with Crabgrass Puppet Theatre (founded by Jamie Keithline and Bonny Hall). All will be missed.

By Steve Abrams

Jamie and Bonny: Working Together Since 1979

Crabgrass Puppet Theatre is the touring puppet company created by Jamie Keithline and Bonny Hall. Jamie and Bonny met in 1979 while performing a puppet-and-actor production at the University of Connecticut in which Bonny played Jamie’s father. They have been working together ever since!

Bonny Hall started a puppet troupe while in high school and liked it so much that she decided to make it her profession. She studied puppetry at the University of Connecticut, and while at UConn, she ran into Jamie Keithline. Jamie was studying acting, but he fell in with the wrong crowd and wound up becoming a puppeteer.

In 1982, the couple took a break from the snow and moved to California, where they formed their own company. Their first show had giant puppets that grew to eight feet tall, and was selected to perform at



Crabgrass Puppet Theatre's *The Pirate, The Princess & The Pea*.

Photo: Crabgrass Puppet Theatre

the 1983 Pacific Southwest Puppetry Festival. In 1989, Jamie and Bonny returned to Connecticut. Since 2001, they have been living in Halifax, Vermont. They have given thousands of performances in schools, libraries, museums, and festivals.

Show titles include *Mr. Punch's Christmas Carol* (national festival 1995), *Just So Stories* (national festival 1997), *Anansi, The Spiderman of Africa* (national festival 2001, UNIMA-USA Citation of Excellence),

The Bremen Town Musicians (UNIMA-USA Citation of Excellence 2005), *The Day It Snowed Tortillas* (national festival 2009), *The Pirate, the Princess and the Pea* (national festival 2015), *The Lion and the Mouse & Other Tales*, *African Adventure Tales*, and *The Three Little Pigs Build a Better House*.

<http://www.crabgrasspuppets.com/>

Crabgrass Recollected

by David Regan

Last month saw the celebration of a remarkable creative era, as Bonny Hall and Jamie Keithline—Crabgrass Puppet Theatre—brought to a close their nearly 40-year career as a touring company. To mark the occasion, they live-streamed a final performance from the Puppet Showplace and hosted a retrospective virtual tour of their Vermont studio. There were many laughs and a few wistful tears.

It brought me back 25 years, to a phone call. I had known the Crabgrass folks casually for a while, ever since they came to UConn as guest artists to talk about the ins and outs of creating a touring puppet company. I had been entranced by their shows. Now, here they were on the telephone, inviting me to join their company. Flattered, but daunted by other commitments, I declined. A year later, undaunted, they offered again. I mustered the good sense to say yes. And so, Crabgrass became a "3-fer" for a time, producing one of the richest collaborative experiences of my career and two of the dearest friendships of my life.

The nature of my good fortune was obvious—I was a rookie who'd been drafted by a pro team. Already established as creators of top-quality work, they'd spent years refining their systems for both the creation and the touring of their shows. Stepping into a proverbial well-oiled machine, I had to find my sea legs fast. My initiation occurred amidst seemingly ceaseless activity—Bonny designing and crafting puppets, dyeing, sewing drops, and keeping track of schedules and lodgings, Jamie making molds and crafting soundtracks, sets, and lighting schemes, while together they developed new ideas and maintained current shows. (They have perhaps the most formidable work ethic of any two people I know.) Still, they always made time to "bring me along." The lessons were many, taught always by example. A few that come readily to mind...

Be impeccable in your work

Allow time to plan, to imagine, to build, and to rehearse, reflect, and revise. Produce the most fully realized version of your creative vision that your capabilities will allow. Whenever possible, use your design challenges to expand those capabilities.

Never shortchange the rehearsal process

Exploration, discovery, and revision are integral to a successful piece. Once you open, carefully watch and listen to your audience. (If possible, plant a trusted observer in the audience.) Use what you glean to further hone and reshape. Continue this practice until you close the show.

Don't constrain your style

One delight of Crabgrass's work is that every show has had its own "look." Bonny's puppet designs almost all share her trademark touch of applied wooden balls for the eyes, but she sought inspiration from a vast array of artists, cultures, and eras for all other stylistic choices. Jamie has constantly explored and mastered a vast array of mechanical and engineering solutions to provide booth and stage infrastructures and the inner workings of the puppets themselves. They've employed every type of puppet imaginable. Each show is unique; choices are based on what best serves the story.

When creating family shows, include the entire family

Imbue your storytelling with enough layers that each age group can find an enjoyable path of understanding. Never talk down to children of any age. Include a few jokes that will appeal to adults as well. That will help to keep parents and teachers engaged, and crucially, it will help to keep you amused. With any audience, especially children, be sure to mute your wireless microphone every time you leave the stage. If not, be assured that there will come an instance when you sincerely wish that you had.

Cumulatively, I spent more than four years on the road with Crabgrass. I could never detail all they taught me about building a reputation for excellence. Over time, Bonny's design, sculpting, and craftwork have continued to expand—fiber, clay, dye, and paint worked into an astonishing array of color, texture, and character. Watching Jamie, often sharing the stage with him, I've learned volumes about character, energy, presence, and how to work with audiences. Bonny refers to him as "the performing heart of Crabgrass." My dotting aunt, never mincing words, put it to me thusly, "He's very good. You're good. But he's very good."

Throughout, what I recall most is how often we laughed. That's the other lesson—if you're seeking collaborators, look for those you suspect might render you helpless with laughter. Make it your business to do the same for them. It will carry you through much.

Oh, and if you're bringing food from multiple households to share out on the road, it's useful to plan ahead. Otherwise, you might all bring the same thing and wind up taking a lot home. That being said, sometimes it's good to take the bananas out for a drive.

David Regan has been straddling the worlds of human and puppet theater ever since his enrollment in the UConn Puppet Arts Program in 1991. For the past year and a half, he has worked as the technical director and resident scenic designer at New England Youth Theatre in Brattleboro, Vermont.

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