Working within the Mali n Puppetry Tradition: staging Tall Horse
by Laurie-Carroll Bérubé

"Why can’t we do something more traditional?"

I fielded this question repeatedly – and others like it, at least early in the project. Again and again, I would explain that we would stage Tall Horse (by Kephra Burns) traditionally... just not our tradition. I enthused about this form of total theatre from Mali, about the storytelling and dance, the masks and, best of all, the giant puppets. But to be honest, I had my moments, too.

Looking at the torso suspended above my kitchen table, the papier maché litter, and half a dozen human-sized puppets tied to my kitchen chairs (to allow the paper clay to dry), who could blame me for wondering how I got myself into this? What could I have been thinking of? From time to time, the question would flicker through my brain, but in the next thought I’d marvel I could even have asked it.

Genesis: A world theatre project

The seed was planted back in 2004, when our student Solidarity Committee began raising funds to build a school in Mali. Our first group of students and teachers went to teach English in Bamako that October. Our History Department introduced a unit on the Great Mali Empire, and in April 2005, a raft of new books on Mali had been added to the library, and I learned Peter Brook was bringing his production of Tiemo Bokar, about a Malian mystic, to our area... Mali, it seemed, was the thème du jour. Knowing nothing about West African theatre, I launched myself into the void. My students and I researched West African performance traditions, while studying Soyinka’s Strong Breed in class.

I suppose that much of what we learned, I had expected to find; but I had not expected to discover one of the oldest and richest puppet traditions in Africa.

We had stumbled on a treasure! Storytelling, dance, drumming, and an amazing range of puppets and masks are used in traditional Malian performances and ceremonies; we found images and descriptions of giant body-puppets, rod puppets, and masks represent humans, birds, animals, and mythical beasts. I was hooked. Although Julie Taymor’s production of Lion King was influenced by Malian puppets and masks, I had never heard of it. (Had you?)

A Cross-Curricular Project

My IBTA students got the research on its feet as it were, running workshops on different aspects of West African performance for the entire class 3 year group. They all then participated in a two-day residency in African percussion, dance and storytelling with an energetic Siere Leoneon performer I had hired through Music for Change in London.

Based on their own research, Strong Breed, and the group’s practical exploration of traditions, my IBTA class directed the younger students in a powerful performance. Both groups came away with a deeper understanding of their subject as a result of this terrific cross-curricular experience. It was only the beginning.

Discovering Tall Horse

When one opens Russian Matryoshki, one finds another doll nested inside. Such was the history of this project. In the course of researching for our West African World Theatre project, I stumbled on an intriguing pan-African collaboration: Handspring Puppets of South Africa were working with Yaya Coulibaly of Mali and his troupe Sogolon, to stage Tall Horse, the true story of a giraffe, accompanied by a slave from Mali, sent as a gift by Egypt’s Pasha to Charles X of France.

I learned Tall Horse would be performed at Stuttgart’s world theatre festival that summer...of course, we went! Whereas Lion King is all spectacle, Tall Horse had a simplicity of staging, with traditional Bamana (or Bambara) puppets, side-by-side with human actors and Handspring’s more eclectic designs – but what is forever scorched on our memories is the giraffe, a 5-metre tall body-puppet, operated by two puppeteers on stilts. I remember whispering in my stilt-walker 13-year old’s ear, “Would you like to play a giraffe?”

A Stagecraft Project

In the autumn of 2006, my husband offered puppet-making in his Stagecraft Workshop. They would create life-sized puppets for my Theatre Ensemble to use in a performance of a nativity play for the Junior School... we were inspired not only by Handspring puppets and the traditional Bambara designs, but also by Maurice Halder’s cover article on a Bunraku puppetry project in the May 2004 issue of Scene!

We were so pleased with the life-sized fiberglass puppets the students had made, in January 2006, I e-mailed photos to Handspring’s Basil Jones, who said he and his partner Adrian Kohler would enjoy running workshops with my students sometime...hmmmmm. How to celebrate our school’s link with Mali?

Meanwhile, our Solidarity
Committee’s fund-raising efforts were bearing fruit. Land had been purchased, ground broken, and the outer walls of the new school were rising out of the red earth of Bamako. In June 2006, it was announced that construction would be completed in June 2007, and its doors would open that September for 1,500 students.

Wouldn’t it be something to celebrate the completion of the school with a story of an extraordinary gift from Africa to Europe? I broached the idea with my long-suffering technical director – husband; for such a technically-challenging project, I would have to have him on board. He promised to give some thought to the problem of the giraffe.

Meeting Yaya

Handspring’s Basil Jones put me in touch with Yaya Coulibaly, and in October 2006, I traveled to Bamako with three colleagues and fifteen students. Invited to sit in on a rehearsal of Sogolon Marionettes, we were taken aback to discover that the Coulibaly family shares its home with 15,000 puppets and masks; every inch of wall and floor space is covered!

I had looked forward to seeing the wooden puppets of the Bambara tradition, with their classic elongated faces and vibrant colors that are said to have inspired Picasso and the Cubists; I was not disappointed. They were beautiful! Naturalism in performance and art is not as important as it is in Europe and North America. Faces are indicated sculpturally. Yaya carves the puppets with an adze.

Yaya carefully explained to us that puppets link the natural world to the supernatural; the relationship between puppet and puppeteer is seen as a mirror to the relationship between man and the gods. (what a wonderful thought!)

We were not the only ones attending Sogolon’s rehearsal, however. The entire neighborhood seemed to have turned out, ringing the earthen performance space! The parable of a giraffe hunt was told in song, accompanied by djembe and balafon, with three still-walking performers rehearsing without the giraffe sogow. Interludes by merens habitables, dancing castalets, and other traditional characters kept things moving at a clip – and before we knew it, an hour and a half had passed.

The day I left Mali, I returned to Coulibaly’s atelier on my own – and he made me a gift of a rod puppet representing a fertility goddess. She had a star turn in our production. Technical challenges

We returned to Switzerland with hundreds and hundreds of photographs, which guided our own work in the coming months. Our Stagecraft group began with mask-making – and by December we had hunters’ masks, a king’s menagerie, including peacocks, hyenas, and a baboon. They had also made the king and queen, and several crowd scene puppets. The students modeled clay positives, then cast them in plaster molds. We made the masks themselves of fiberglass, so that they would withstand rehearsal, though this was a time-consuming process. Many of the later puppets and masks we made with Chinese paper clay.

We had no space on campus large enough to construct the giraffe or giant Pasha puppets in, so my husband built them in the barn of our family’s chalet (what our neighbors thought I don’t know!) He passed plastic electrical conduit through holes drilled in the plywood spine, to shape into the giraffe’s skeleton, and used fishing poles up the neck (and yes, the puppeteers were able to raise and lower it, and to turn it from side to side). His primary consideration was to make Sogo Jan light enough for two teenage girls, our still-walkers, to carry on their backpacks.

The Pasha’s head and hands, as well as the adolescent and baby giraffes, he carved out of huge blocks of Styrofoam, which we coated in carpenter’s glue, cotton sheet and newspaper before painting. The “neck” had dowels inserted into it, as did each “wrist,” so they could be manipulated. Once he was on campus, we built a frame for his body, so he could be carried onstage by his “slaves,” as if on a divan.

Come spring, my task was to work with the Stagecraft workshop on making the merens habitables, castalets, and giant rod-puppets. Given that some of our actors were only 11 or 12, I wanted to keep the puppets as light as possible as well. We found that modelling faces with wood paste or paper clay on giant Styrofoam Easter eggs worked. Each face emerged with its own style, character and expression – depending on who made it, each was an individual.

The Bambara, also a character who embodies the “ideal” of womanhood, a merens habitable who is the traditionally well-endowed “beautiful lady.” I built on this idea, to create a Queen Marie-Thérèse who towered over her little hand-held rod-puppet spouse. We mounted her giant head on plywood, which was attached to an ordinary backpack. The costume was draped from the puppets neck, covering the puppeteer entirely.

Like Bunraku, the puppeteer is often visible to the audience, holding the puppets “spine”. We had to begin rehearsals long before the puppets were finished, so for the first month actors worked with heads mounted on sticks, with wooden hangar shoulders, holding the still unattached wooden arms.

Then, came the two-day residency with Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler of

During our visit to Mali, Yaya Coulibaly showed us how a merens habitable is worn. Because these puppets are sacred power objects, only initiates may “re-enter the womb.”

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Handspring Puppets, en route back to South Africa after production meetings at the National Theatre in London. Basil and Adrian gave the group a big boost of confidence and energy, teaching skills, but also simple things, such as the importance of stillness and of focus.

With my actors, I worked on storytelling, soundscaping, and physicality. I also worked closely with the music department. Our Middle Schoolers have a djembe group, and the head of music rented a balafon. The chamber choir worked on West African songs to open the performance with, and the voice coach taught the cast to sing a Malian slave song, Jonnya Mari (helped by a Malian admissions officer). By the end of May, Tall Horse was all taking shape.

My plan was to stage Tall Horse open air, in the field beside our school – as it had been in Mali. But two weeks of rain before the end-of-year festivities put pay to that. Instead we rented a tent, and had bleachers on either side of the performance space. We asked the gardeners to bring in some of that beautiful red tennis court clay, and my husband riggled a way to suspend the giraffe sogow backstage, so the actors could walk into it on their stilts.

And the performance? It was absolutely magical, a truly wonderful celebration of our connection with Mali, and the construction of the school. Flaming torches and African rhythms drew the audience to the tent. We asked the gardeners to bring in some of that beautiful red tennis court clay, and my husband riggled a way to suspend the giraffe sogow backstage, so the actors could walk into it on their stilts.

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Inspiration and Resources

**Performance Traditions in Mali:**


5) Elisabeth den Otter, Verre vrienden van Jan Klaassen. Poppenspel in Afrika en Azië (Distant Friends of Punch. Puppetry in Africa and Asia), (Amsterdam: KIT Press, 1995). den Otter is a Dutch theatre anthropologist with wonderfully eclectic interests (in Balinese, Indian and Malian rituals, music and puppetry). Esther Dagan’s book (above) includes a chapter by her (“Of dancing masks and men: visible and hidden dancers of the Bamana and ‘Bozo (Mali)’). Her website was the first I heard of this tradition: http://web.mac.com/edotter/Homepage_of_Elisabeth_den_Otter


7) Rosalind Flynn, Sogolon Marionettes Cue Sheet for Teachers, Kennedy Center, http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchVal ue_0=ED442152&ERICExtSearch_Search_Type_0=eric_accono&accno=ED442152

8) Frances Harding, ed, The Performance Arts in Africa: A Reader (London: Routledge, 2002), ISBN: 0-145-26198-7. Although there are no photos, this is a brilliant resource. Twenty-four authors each describes a different tradition. Mary Jo Arnoldi contributes one on puppetry in Mali.  

9) Dawn Kennedy, Puppetry is the soul of Arnoldi contributes one on puppetry in Mali.  


11) Princonetol has a very comprehensive website for teachers, with links to resources on performance & puppet traditions all over the world, including Malian. http://www.princonetol.com/groups/iai/les sons/middle/puppets.htm

12) Rand African Art’s page on Bamanan puppets has terrific photos with a good explanation http://randafricanart.com/African_puppets _buffalo.html


**On Giant puppets and puppetry**


2) John Bell, Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History (Diagram (DetroIt Institute Arts)

3) Eileen Blumenthal, Puppetry and Puppets: An Illustrated World Survey (UK: Thames and Hudson, 2005) ISBN: 0-500-51226-4. This is a comprehensive look at puppetry traditions from around the world— including a section on Yaya Coulibaly, and Handspring Puppets. Lots of color photos and illustrations.


6) Bread and Puppet Theatre is one of the most famous giant puppetry troupes http://www.pbpub.com/bread&puppet/bre ad.htm

7) Kimmer Puppets, of the Netherlands, explains how to make large puppets: http://www.newvictory.org/show_moreinfo .cfm?show_id=23


9) Handspring Puppets of South Africa were a godsend, fielding questions, putting us in touch with Khephra Burns and Yaya Coulibaly, and coming to work with my cast and crew. The photos of past productions on their website gives an idea of just how creative they are! http://www.handspringpuppet.co.za/

10) Puppeteers Cooperative has sketches, photos & instructions for giant puppets http://www.gis.net/~puppetco/


12) The puppetry homepage http://www.sagecraft.com/puppetry/buildi ng/index.html was very useful in answering some basic how-to questions!


**About “Tall Horse”**

1) Michael Alíin, Zarata: A Giraffe’s True Story, from deep in Africa to the Heart of Paris (Walker & Company, 2003) ISBN: 0-802713394. This is the book which inspired Khephra Burns to write the play Tall Horse, the history of the giraffe, her handler Atr, the eminent scientist St-Hilaire and their journey.


**Miscellaneous**


3) John W. Nunley and Cara McCarty, The Truth Commission”