

# Whitney

CONTINUED FROM | PAGE A-3

Maine author Sarah Orne Jewett; "Home is Heaven" featuring 32 poems by Ogden Nash; and "Silver Lake Summer" about poet e.e.cummings.

Have you ever wondered about puppetry behind-the-scenes? If so, a special exhibition at Strawberry Banke Museum in Portsmouth through July 31, features the art and craft of Pontine – storyboards and puppets crafted by master puppet designer Greg Gathers.

For the last 28 years, Andrew and Bonnie Periale have published the biannual Puppetry International Magazine for UNIMA-USA (Union Internationale de la Marionnette International Puppetry Association). A survey of UNIMA magazine themes suggests that the puppet world is vast – from traditional puppetry to propaganda and television; from spirituality to sexuality and dance; from mega-puppets to puppets in space; from science fiction to puppetry therapy.

As a journalist and biographer, I am particularly intrigued by true stories – like that of Forman Brown, poet, protégé and lifelong friend of Robert Frost, whom he met at the University of Michigan where Frost was artist-in-residence from 1921-1926.

Inspired by seeing Tony Sarg and his marionettes in 1919, Brown and his cousin Harry Burnett set about making puppets – their first performances were in 1923. They continued their education at Yale where they met Richard Brandon. In 1927, Brown, Burnett and Brandon founded the Yale Puppeteers. Burnett built the puppets; Brown wrote the texts, lyrics and music; Brandon was the company manager – and all three performed.

In 1928, Brown found a property in Franconia as a summer retreat from touring and running a theater and asked Frost to check

it out – if Frost said it was a good deal, he would buy it. Brown summered there until 1942. According to one reference, Frost "tromped through a New Hampshire cloudburst to get to one of Forman's puppet shows." Frost wrote a quote for the fly-leaf of *Spider Kin*, Brown's second book of poetry: "From the first line I was lifted out of the languid inattention with which one generally regards modern verse into a responsive attention to a language which I understand to be the medium of beauty."

After a decade of performing at various theaters in Manhattan – chronicled by Brown in his 1936 memoir *Punch's Progress* – the Yale Puppeteers opened on July 10, 1941, in the Turnabout Theatre in West Hollywood where they performed satirical adult musicals until 1960.

Patrons – including celebrities like Einstein, Chaplin, Garbo, Bradbury, and Martha Graham for whom Burnett often made puppet look-alikes – entered the theater via a patio connected to a two-way stage filled with reversible old trolley seats. The first half of the program was an original musical comedy puppet show.

At intermission, patrons flipped their seats to see a live musical revue headed by the inimitable Elsa Lanchester who became a permanent member of the Yale Puppeteers. Critics hailed Brown, comparing his work to that of Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman. Brown wrote more than 50 original songs for Lanchester; he also wrote for Imogene Coca and even a White House event organized by Jackie Kennedy.

The backstory of the Turnabout Theater – and the Yale Puppeteers – chronicles the surprisingly sophisticated live entertainment in 1940s Los Angeles, and the story of how three men who happened to be gay at a time when being out was untenable, forged remarkably creative lives. Brown's novel

*Better Angel* (1933) about a young man dealing with his homosexuality, carried the pseudonym Richard Meeker and is considered the first American novel to present a "gay" life in a healthy light.

For Periale, an Emmy-nominated puppeteer, poet and playwright, three-time UNIMA Citation of Excellence in Puppetry recipient, former poet laureate of Rochester, NH, and vice president of the Poetry Society of New Hampshire, portraying Forman Brown – a New Hampshire puppeteer and poet who became nationally known – must be bit like looking up to a mentor you never knew, but with whom you nevertheless still feel a strong connection.

So how to chronicle such a life? I helped to found the Biographers International Organization where biographers are constantly debating the best way to tell a life story. The puppeteer must take it one step further, making intangibles tangible – how to form the puppet; facial expression; costume; how to translate a story through the nuance of gesture – live performance in real time. The curious power of puppetry is that it is both real and unreal. It taunts and flirts with reality and imagination while aptly expressing things that cannot be said conventionally.

Puppeteer Susan Pemsler writes about that transference of energy to objects made of wood, clay, and strings: "Puppets, universally appealing, poke fun, chase one another in hilarious synchrony, argue with authority and communicate clearly with and without words. They confront human fears and conflicts, improvise, problem solve and move audiences to new worlds... metamorphosing before our eyes. They seem to listen to one another, feel emotion and think."

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