



Once Upon a Time at Fairyland

By C.J. Hirschfield

Wanna make a puppet?



Photo by Josh Stein

Fairyland master puppeteer Randal Metz is creating puppets for an upcoming "Avenue Q" production.

Since Fairyland's inception way back in 1950, we've realized that puppets are a wonderful way to teach children tales from every culture, instill morals, and provide unique entertainment that the whole family can enjoy.

Our master puppeteer, Randal Metz, has published a new book, *Making Puppets the Fairyland Way*, that shares the techniques developed over 55 years by the remarkable artists and puppeteers of our Storybook Theater.

Not only that, Randal describes in detail how to create hand, rod and marionette puppets from simple materials. No batteries or electronics (or papier-mâché, for that matter) are required. A sewing machine is helpful, but a little time and ample imagination are all you really need.

A recent review of the book in the international *Puppetry Journal* reminded me of how highly regarded Randal and our historic theater are in the world of puppetry. We are the oldest continuously operating puppet theater in the United States, and our directors are among the country's

most respected puppeteers.

So what exactly is "the Fairyland way" of puppet making? The answer requires a little history.

Puppet shows — we offer seven productions each year — are one of our park's most popular attractions. Our devoted audiences love a new story, so our puppeteers have needed to create and maintain a large repertoire of shows. From the beginning, because our puppeteers made their own puppets, they also needed to devise methods that were fast and effective.

Here's how the *Puppetry Journal* review described it: "With fabric, needle and thread, a sewing machine, and a few other items such as cardboard, dowels, sand, glue, etc., they are able to build whole casts of characters in a fraction of the time required by other methods. It's the Fairyland way."

The book contains patterns by

"We are the oldest continuously operating puppet theater in the United States."

Marian Derby, Lewis Mahlmann and Lettie C. Schubert. The book's publisher is Luman Coad, who directed our theater in the 1960s and is now in Canada with Coad Canada Puppets. In his preface to the book, Luman divulges a personal reason the Storybook Puppet Theater is so special: "I met Arlyn, my talented late wife, at the stage door."

He urges readers of the book to "pull out the felt and raid the costume fabric stash. Have fun and see where your imagination leads."

There's one special kid who read the new book before it was even published. Will came to our puppet theater when he was 7, already demonstrating passion and talent for

the craft. Now 8, Will has already designed many of his own puppets. Encouraged by Randal and our Puppeteer Emeritus Lewis Mahlmann, he figured out advanced techniques such as designing moving eyes and mouths. Will is now back East taking a puppetry class where he's the youngest kid in the program.

Randal figures that when he (Randal) is ready to retire, Will will be just about the right age to carry on the legacy. And he'll have a bright future. Randal notes that there are five professional working puppet companies in the Bay Area, and that puppets are now used extensively in the fields of education and psychological counseling and at libraries.

But it's in the artistic arena that they've really taken off. The Broadway productions of *War Horse*, *The Producers* and, of course, *Avenue Q* all prominently featured puppets. Former Fairyland Puppet Theater Director Tony Urbano achieved fame in Hollywood for puppets featured in the first two *Men in Black* movies.

Randal himself has benefited from the rising popularity of the craft. For the last four months he's been working every day to build 15 large puppets for an *Avenue Q* production for Fremont's Stage One theater. Once the Fremont production has closed, Randal will rent out the puppets to theaters all over the country. He says he's earned a fair amount of income from the Audrey II man-eating-plant puppets that he created for theatrical productions based on the *Little Shop of Horrors* film.

Randal is understandably enthusiastic about his new book.

"I hope it excites another generation of kids to pursue the art form," he says. "This is the book that will start you on a puppetry career."

You can buy *Making Puppets the Fairyland Way* on Amazon, or you can stop by our puppet theater and buy a copy from Randal himself. If you have a kid who might be interested in a career in the field, feel free to bring him or her along. Because dreaming, and then doing? It's the Fairyland way.

C.J. Hirschfield is Executive Director of Children's Fairyland, which is located next to Lake Merritt at 699 Bellevue Avenue, Oakland. For more information call 452-2259 or e-mail cj@fairyland.org.