

You're a what? PUPPETEER

by Elka Jones

Puppeteer Paul Mesner has Rapunzel on a string. But this Rapunzel gets her prince by taking the witch's scooter—an inverted hair dryer that has curlers for handle bars.

"I like to create zany, quirky versions of familiar stories," says Paul. For inspiration, he turns to classic fairytales and fables and then adds the unexpected. "It's quite engaging for kids to hear old stories told in a new way," he says.

Paul, like many in his trade, writes his own scripts and creates his own puppets. He primarily creates shadow puppets and rod puppets. A shadow puppet is a figure, sometimes cut out of cardboard, wood, or leather, that casts a shadow onto a screen. The audience watches the shadow of each puppet, rather than watching the figure itself. A rod puppet has a stick attached to its head and hands, along with strings that let the puppeteer move its arms, legs, and mouth.

"There are scads of puppets," says Paul. "Whenever you manipulate an object to bring it to life, that's puppetry."

Paul and his puppets—a cast that includes Rapunzel, The Big Bad Wolf, and others—perform for kids and adults at schools, libraries, theaters, museums, and other venues in Kansas City, Missouri, and throughout the country. Paul also occasionally collaborates with other artists, as he did with the Civic Opera Theater of Kansas City for a recent performance of the opera "The Mikado."

When performing, Paul is hidden from his audience. He sits on a short scooter underneath a 4-foot platform, and a screen blocks him from the audience's view. Holding his hands over his head, Paul moves and controls the puppets, which rest atop the platform.

A typical show lasts about 45 to 50 minutes, so Paul needs patience, stamina, and good eye-hand coordination. Strength is also important because he must load and unload all of his equipment—which includes a sound

system, scenery, and other props—for performances.

Although physical agility may be important for puppeteers, a need for attention is not. "Many puppeteers are shy," says Paul. Speaking through puppets and behind a curtain or screen allows people who are more reserved to share their talents.

Among the many talents puppeteers share is their sense of humor. Paul uses all types of humor to keep his audience entertained. "I love to hear an audience laugh," he says. "It's very satisfying to hear a group of 350 kids roaring, and it's often at the simplest things." After a performance, Paul explains to the audience how he does what he does, and then he answers questions.

Puppetry, says Paul, is an art form with a lot of potential. "Therapists, educators, librarians, and all of the theater arts use puppets," he says. Puppets are used in television and movies, from the Muppets on "Sesame Street" to the aliens in "Men in Black." Often, people don't even realize that they are seeing puppeteering, but it is gaining recognition. "It's definitely a movement that's achieving new growth," Paul says of his craft.

Hollywood, theme parks, and puppetry centers all offer employment opportunities, although many puppeteers work for themselves. Some puppeteers work part-time; others make puppeteering a full-time career. Paul often works more than 50 hours a week, in part because he travels all over the country to put on shows.

Puppeteers learn their skills in a number of ways. Some attend formal puppetry programs at colleges and universities, including the University of Connecticut and West Virginia University. Others take courses at local theaters; still others work with an experienced puppeteer to learn the trade.

Paul has done a little of each. He began by taking a class at a local theater, then moved on to work as a puppeteer's apprentice. Later, after performing for several years, he attended a formal puppetry program abroad.

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Fast-paced and filled with humor, Paul Mesner's performances delight children — and adults — throughout the country.

Preparation alone doesn't lead to success, however, especially in the beginning. "Starting out is tough," says Paul. "Word of mouth is always the best friend of any artist." To promote his work, Paul performs at festivals, creates brochures, and makes "cold calls," visiting or telephoning potential customers to generate new business. Puppeteers need good communication skills to set up these performances and to talk with an audience.

Organizational skills are also important because whether puppeteers get paid depends on their diligence in billing customers and keeping track of schedules. Paul has an assistant to help with these tasks, but many puppeteers manage every aspect of the business themselves. That might not be a problem for most puppeteers. "You have to control so many elements of the art," Paul says, "that often, out of necessity, you become a bit of a control freak."

Like many careers, success in puppetry also requires passion and dedication. "You must love it to excel at it," says Paul of puppeteering. Although most people don't enter puppetry to get rich, he says, puppeteers can make a decent living. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect data on puppeteers. Paul estimates that experienced puppeteers who put in the hours can make at least \$40,000 a year.

But when measuring his wealth, Paul factors in more than earnings. "I think I'm rich in many ways," he says. "I work long hours, but I love my work. It's very joyful."



Photo courtesy of Paul Mesner

Puppeteer Paul Mesner readies Rapunzel for another performance.