

# Attached to strings: Puppetry proves lasting in the age of screens



“Chimpanzee,” created and directed by Nick Lehane, is based on the stories of chimps that went on to be test subjects in labs after being raised as children among humans. It was performed this fall at a global puppet theater festival in France.

Richard Termine/Courtesy of Yannick Dufour

November 4, 2019

By **Barbara Tannenbaum**, Contributor

## CHARLEVILLE-MÉZIÈRES, FRANCE

**F**or devotees of the puppetry arts, there is no season like autumn. Halloween skeletons dance in front yards. Full-bodied costumed mascots cheer their football teams. Giant effigies tower over parades and protest marches.

Each one is part of a tradition that stretches back for millennia with roots in ancient Greece, Egypt, India, and China. Even the floating balloons of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, dubbed “upside-down marionettes” by their 1927 inventor, New York puppeteer Tony Sarg, are part of an art form UNESCO has designated as an “intangible cultural heritage of humanity.”

Watching something inanimate become animate in a live setting is alluring, say puppetry experts. And it suggests why this three-dimensional entertainment is surviving in a world smitten with flat digital surfaces. One sign of the craft’s ongoing appeal: the delight on display recently in the small French village of Charleville-Mézières, which hosts the biennial Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes, attracting around 100,000 attendees.

### WHY WE WROTE THIS

*Society may lament the loss of a less technological life. But a fall festival in France celebrates a thriving old art common to many cultures – combining everything from music and acting to craftsmanship.*

“People mistakenly assume puppetry is only for children. That is a prejudice,” says Philippe Choulet, a Strasbourg-based philosopher and art historian, and moderator of the festival’s Philosophy Café, where attendees gather to discuss ideas. “With puppetry, one finds elements of music, video, acting, singing, mechanical craftsmanship, scenic construction, folkloric references, and political commentary. It is a total art, like opera.”



In “The Alchemy of Words” a puppeteer, a filmmaker, and a musician explore the narrative of Arthur Rimbaud, an influential French poet.

Megan Kelly/Courtesy of Yannick Dufour

In September, visitors to the international festival packed 40 venues around the city to capacity. Museums and libraries also mounted exhibitions of beautifully crafted marionettes used by notable performers from previous decades. It is the kind of teeming display envisioned by French puppeteer Jacques Félix, who launched the festival in 1961.

## Yoda and beyond

Those who follow the art form’s popularity say it is in the midst of a 40-year renaissance, tracing interest back to the first “Star Wars” movies in the 1970s and 1980s. “George Lucas’ work is often described in terms of CGI and special effects. But his team, especially Yoda’s [co-creator] Frank Oz, really advanced the reach of puppetry, too,” says festivalgoer Colette Searls, associate professor in the theater department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

A new generation became puppet fans through the work of Muppets creator Jim Henson, adds Blair Thomas, founder and artistic director of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. The late Mr. Henson, who conducted a rare master class in puppetry at the nearby Institut International de la Marionnette (IIM), was honored with a photographic retrospective at the festival. Mr. Thomas notes that the 1997 production of Julie Taymor’s Balinese-inspired “Lion King” was a watershed moment, generating great public interest in other styles of puppetry. “Critics saw the richness in Taymor’s use of masks, shadow, and rod puppets,” he says. That eclectic tradition “continues with Broadway shows like ‘War Horse’ and ‘King Kong.’”

The use of puppets in storytelling introduces a different quality to dramatic performance. “Unlike traditional theater, puppetry is not text-driven,” Professor Searls says. “Instead, puppetry makes an impact through pacing and visual images” that appeal directly to our subconscious.

As for influences propelling the art form today, Professor Searls and Mr. Thomas both refer to an observation by Claudia Orenstein, co-editor of “The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance.” Her idea, they say, is that interactions with smart, hand-held devices have created pushback by audiences craving the unexpected spark of autonomy in otherwise familiar objects.

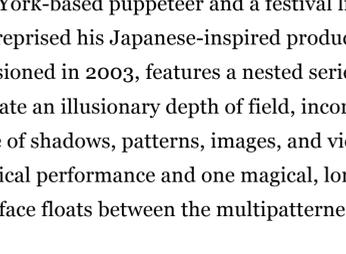
“The material quality of puppets has an immediacy that is not dependent on technology,” says Mr. Thomas. “It’s happening right in front of you. You see a well-manipulated puppet that you know is not alive. Yet, irrationally, it appears to be. That contradiction creates a tension in our mind that’s exhilarating.”

## In France, a showcase

At the festival, touring companies from 28 countries presented shows with themes that included environmental destruction, immigration, LGBTQ rights, and technological progress. The approaches often blended the traditional and the modern.

“Gimme Shelter,” a meditation on human need and fragility designed and directed by Violaine Fimbel with her Yoki Company, is set in an abandoned amusement park. Half the audience is inside a small room decorated with electric fuses, garbage, and animatronic toy animals placed around an actor who resembles a refugee or homeless person. Outside, the remaining spectators sit on carnival rides watching human-sized toys move about the post-apocalyptic landscape, creating an unsettling dreamscape of warning.

Basil Twist, a New York-based puppeteer and a festival lifetime achievement honoree this year, reprised his Japanese-inspired production, “Dogugaeshi.” The show, commissioned in 2003, features a nested series of telescoping shoji screens to create an illusionary depth of field, incorporating a mesmerizing dance of shadows, patterns, images, and video feeds. It also includes a live musical performance and one magical, long-whiskered white fox whose dancing face floats between the multipatterned scrims.



“Paper,” directed by Bernard Cauchard, features the manipulation of paper to create characters that tell “a wordless tale of life.”

Petra Hellberg/Courtesy of Yannick Dufour

“Ambergris,” a humorous romp following Pinocchio through the belly of a whale in search of a scent-making ingredient useful for perfume, offers more lighthearted fare. The puppets, including a whale, Captain Ahab, and a giant nose, cavort around a giant musical calliope whose inner workings reveal Pinocchio’s path through the whale’s digestive system.

What unifies these disparate performance styles, says Raphaële Fleury, manager of the research center at IIM, “is a certain way of playing with space and materials that gives life to the inanimate, driving the audience to feel something vivid and present.”

A throng of children crowding around Scotland’s Bernie Wilson, the Punk Puppeteer, demonstrates this notion. Mr. Wilson is camouflaged within a backpack worn by his banjo-playing puppet. Repeatedly, the children draw close, staring into the puppet’s face. Suddenly it moves and they scatter, screaming. After a moment, they return to surround Mr. Wilson again.

“Puppets operate on the periphery of every dominant culture,” says Mr. Thomas. “They operate by their own logic, outside of human rules. That’s a type of freedom, giving the form a timeless strength.”