

Pulling the strings behind Sea Beast Puppet Company

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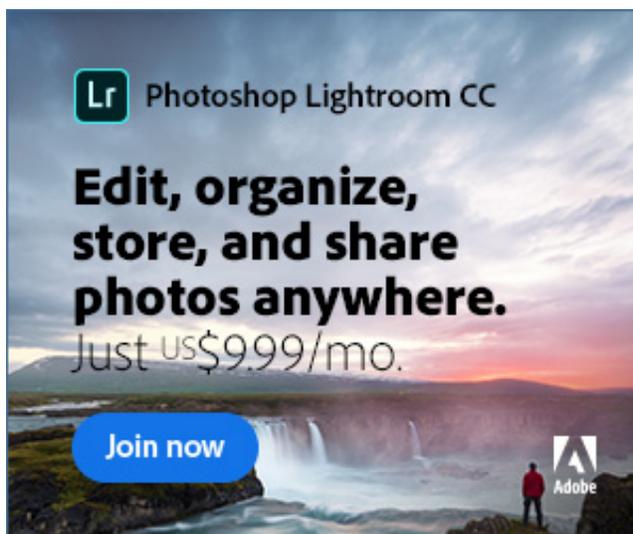
Kat Pleviak, center, of Glen Ellyn, owns Sea Beast Puppet Company. She and puppeteers Mary Kate Rix, left, and Jessica Simon are developing original puppet shows for children. They'll use these puppets when they perform "Surf and Turf" Jan. 23 in Glen Ellyn.

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(Bev Horne | Staff Photographer)

Howdy Doody, Kukla and Ollie, Garfield Goose, Kermit the Frog, Elmo. Solid family entertainers and household names, each and every one of 'em.

Yet without someone like Kat Pleviak, they'd be little more than bumps on a log.



Sea Beast Puppet Company

Pleviak pulls the strings, holds the sticks, casts the shadows and everything else you can think of that makes puppets come to life and tell a story.

The Glen Ellyn woman founded Sea Beast Puppet Company last summer after completing her master's degree in youth theater. She's

Niche: Puppetry

Founded: June 2009

Employees: 1 full-time, 3 part-time

Hours: By appointment

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Sea Beast Puppet Company's
next shows

degree in youth theater. She's put together a small troupe of puppeteers who have developed several original programs to present to children and family audiences at schools, libraries, festivals and beyond. Performances are scheduled this month in Glen Ellyn and Glencoe.

Pleviak tells us more about the art of puppetry and her plans for sharing the craft with children and adults.

Q. What is your background in puppetry?

A. I became involved with puppetry professionally for the first time in 2002. I apprenticed with Renaissance Artist Puppet Company in Norristown, Pa., for six months before returning to Glen Ellyn to begin to begin a

- Today: "Hans, My Hedgehog" 1:30 p.m. at Glencoe Public Library, 320 Park Ave., Glencoe. Free. Info: glencoepubliclibrary.org.

- Jan. 23: "Surf and Turf: A Whale of a Tale" at 2 p.m. at Glen Ellyn Public Library, 450 Duane St., Glen Ellyn. Free. Info: gepl.org.

career in theatrical properties and puppetry design.

In 2006, I began the MFA Youth Theatre program at the University of Hawaii and completed my degree in May 2009. I then returned to Glen Ellyn to open Sea Beast Puppet Company.

Over my years in the industry, I have achieved a number of accomplishments. In addition

to designing and performing for numerous theater companies in Chicago and Hawaii, I have created pieces that have been showcased at conferences and festivals such as the O'Neill Puppetry Conference, Puppetfest Midwest, the 2007 Puppeteers of America National Conference, and the UNIMA International Puppetry Conference in Perth, Australia.

I have also been published in the Puppetry Journal and was included in Puppetry International Magazine's 40 under 40 list in 2009. This issue printed biographies of 40 influential and up-and-coming puppeteers under 40 years old active today.

Since I opened Sea Beast in June, we have been featured performers

at the Illinois Storytelling Festival at Dominican University, the LACONIYSS Harvest of Resources, and the Puppeteers of America Potlatch Festival in Indiana.

Q. When and why did you strike out on your own?

A. Though I have only just opened Sea Beast, my journey began three years ago at the University of Hawaii. I knew I wanted to open the company but needed more experience in puppetry and a great deal of research on how to run a business.

To accomplish this, I went back to school to attain my master's. While there, I wrote scripts, built puppets and performed in a number of student and professional productions such as "Skupper Duppers" and "Klak-en Ka" at the University of Hawaii and "Rumplestiltskin," "Sleeping Beauty" and "James and the Giant Peach" at the historic Hawaii Theatre.

For my work on "James," I received a Po'okela award for excellence in puppetry from the Hawaii State Theatre Council. I also designed the framework for my company including our mission statement, Web site and logo, and built a five-year business plan. During the summers, I traveled all across the country attending conferences and studying with professional puppeteers. It was through these conferences that I met and built professional relationships with Mary Kate Rix, Jessica Simon and Tom Pleviak, the three other founding members of Sea Beast Puppet Company.

Q. How did you know you could be successful?

A. Because I love what I do. It has taken years for me to develop my puppetry skills, but the journey has been challenging and exciting. Since I have such a great passion for puppetry, it's not as hard to put in the immense amount of work that is involved in running a company.

I also have a talented group of puppeteers to share the workload as well as family, friends and mentors who support my dream. Having a support system keeps me going when times get tough and provides me with the tools I need to create. All this feeds my confidence, which empowers me to succeed.

Q. What milestones are you looking for that will indicate you've made it?

A. Since we are so new, everyone still has part-time jobs to help cover the bills. It will be a huge achievement when we are all able to work for Sea Beast full time.

We also would love the chance to perform, as a company, at a National Puppetry Conference. The next one will be in Atlanta in 2011 and we are working hard toward being scheduled to perform.

Q. What's your niche in the market?

A The mission of Sea Beast Puppetry is to promote the art of

A. The mission of Sea Beast Puppetry is to promote the art of puppetry to audiences of all ages. We create productions that are written for a family audience, which to us means appropriate for children but also clever and entertaining to adults.

We also build our shows to tour, which means they are great for school assemblies, library performances or community events.

We are very passionate about education and offer a wide range of workshops in puppetry design, construction and performance. These classes are available for both children and adults.

Q. What sets your company apart from competitors? Who are your competitors?

A. Our competitors are anyone doing live performances for a family audience, however we are different from the average performance troupe. Our puppet shows are complex works that involve many styles of puppetry and performance techniques blended together to create a unique experience.

Some styles used in our shows include shadow, hand, mouth, rod, tabletop, Czech marionette and found object puppetry to tell our stories. We layer our designs, music, scripts and performance styles together in a complementary way that fuses these separate elements into a single work of art. Our shows are special and represent us and our style. We love doing what we do and that comes across loud and clear in our shows and workshops.

Q. Where would you like to see Sea Beast in five or 10 years?

A. In five years, we would like to be a well-established company in our community for youth puppet shows and be in the beginnings of growing an adult repertoire of performances. We also want to have established a series of classes in puppet design and performance in conjunction with a local college or community center.

In 10 years, we hope to have our own performance space that we can use to present our work and to bring other artists from around the country to share their puppet art. We also hope to have a full puppet studio dedicated to teaching puppetry to professionals and amateurs alike.

Q. How has technology changed puppetry?

A. It has given us more options to take traditional forms of puppetry and enhance them with a modern flair. Our current production of "Hans the Hedgehog" takes the traditional form of shadow puppetry and uses overhead projectors to allow for new techniques of performance and a more cinematic effect in the show.

Q. What trends are you seeing in the industry?

A. Puppetry is an ancient art form and this gives present-day puppeteers an excellent grounding to expand upon. Each performer creates something based on his or her personal preferences and

experiences utilizing traditional forms.

As new technology is developed, we are able to blend new techniques with established methods, thus creating fresh takes on time-tested formats. So anything is possible and new puppetry styles are being developed all the time.

Q. What advice do you have for someone looking to hire a puppeteer or puppet company?

A. Just do it. There is nothing like the magic you feel when experiencing a live performance. The sets, music, lights and sound are truly enchanting. You will not regret the choice.

We are flexible in our material and can easily adapt to a variety of situations. We also are willing to take suggestions to craft a performance or workshop to meet any need.

Q. How does Sea Beast support the community?

A. We are providing an opportunity to experience and learn about a traditional art form that is expressive and entertaining in a way all its own. Puppets can do and show things that a person never could. They have the ability to live out the fantasies we imagine, much like a cartoon, but in a live 3-D venue. They are magic, and everyone should have a little magic in their lives.

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