

# READY-MADE PUPPET SHOWS OR A NEW VISION FOR OUTREACH

## An Interview with Jason Yancey

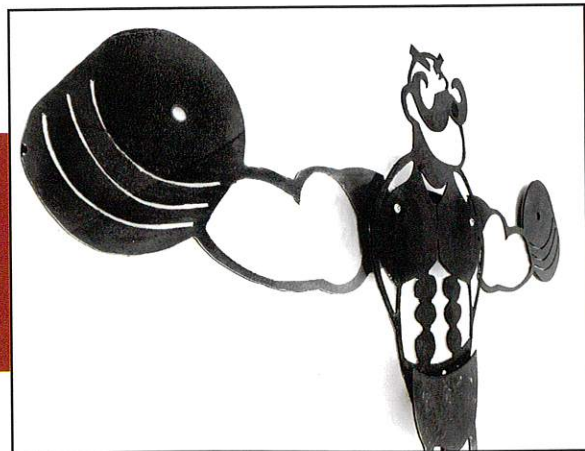
by Esther Fernández

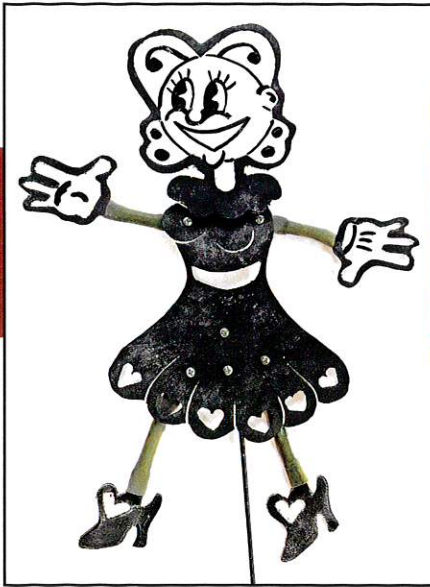
I have followed the work of Jason Yancey in puppetry and outreach since the 2000s, when I started working with adaptations of Spanish early modern theater. In 2018 our paths crossed again, and we decided to co-found the Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe with Jonathan Wade and Jared White. This collective is dedicated to disseminating the history, culture, and Hispanic literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries using shadow puppets to perform plays for young audiences guided by our mission of outreach.

While it is not uncommon for puppets to travel or serve as pedigree instruments in the hands of a puppeteer, the challenge resides in making puppets “come to life” seemingly of their own accord via the puppet’s movement when a non-professional puppeteer handles a puppet, which is one of the peculiarities of the Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe: Dragoncillo members are *not* puppeteers—with the exception of Yancey. Yancey, Associate Professor of Spanish at Grand

Valley State University, is the only member with formal training in theater and more than twenty years of experience building and performing with puppets for diverse audiences. The Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe arose as an extension of a puppetry course he designed and has been teaching since 2010. In this course, advanced students learn to read and analyze children’s literature while they write and produce original puppet shows in Spanish, a process that culminates in several weeks of performances at local Spanish immersion elementary schools.

Springboarding from this experience, Yancey devised a self-contained show, whose equipment can be packed in two travel bags, and where performers with no previous experience in puppetry can rehearse a full show ready-made by the troupe with no memorization required—in less than two hours. Yancey’s name might not resonate among professional American puppeteers because he has voluntarily dedicated himself to education: however, the mechanics behind these ready-made shows are visionary as they offer an innovative way for scholars to reconsider outreach, articulating heretofore inaccessible literatures and themes to young, eager audiences.





Jason, I mention "ready-made" as one of the characteristics of these shows. Can you talk about the mechanics behind these pre-made shows?

Working with students poses a unique set of production challenges. Not only are students notoriously difficult to schedule, all of the work invested in training them walks out the door with the diploma. My approach with Dragoncillo attempts to directly address these challenges by using techniques to minimize our reliance on the availability and skill-level of the performer.

The foundation for each show is a film that we rear-project onto a nylon screen supported by pipe and drape masking. As it plays, the film not only supplies the backlight for the shadow puppet show, it allows for detailed background images that change automatically throughout the performance, as well as built-in music and sound effects to accompany the action. Immediately below the scene, in a portion of the projection visible only to the puppeteers, the film displays two



columns of scrolling dialogue and stage directions. This feature removes the need for memorization without a reliance on "canned" or recorded dialogue. The performers simply follow along with film, manipulating the puppet in the light while reading their lines off the screen. In this way our shows maintain high production values but require very little time to rehearse.

Compared to other puppet shows geared more towards entertainment, the movement of the puppets we use are more constrained. How do these differences inform/impact our audiences?

I envision Dragoncillo's relationship to its audience as a sort of theatre on a traverse stage. On one side of the screen we usually have an audience of children who, generally speaking, have never seen a puppet show of any kind, much less one using shadow puppets. They sometimes speak Spanish but rarely know anything about its artistic tradition beyond the name Don Quijote. For those behind the screen this most often represents their first time acting in a play, first



time visiting an elementary school since their own experience, and first time seeing or handling a puppet. Their grasp of Spanish language and literatures may exceed that of their audience but not by much. What both groups share, among other things, is an attraction to the puppet—that fascinating little cartoon they've just witnessed spring to life. For this reason we are less concerned with deftly manipulated puppets—something probably beyond the abilities of our performers anyway—than connecting actor and audience to both puppetry and, more importantly, to the cultural message we hope to impart.

What is the role of puppet's movement in these shows, and how are your puppets designed to achieve these movements?

Because I design our puppets for simplicity in the hands of a neophyte performer, I chose to work with shadow puppets over alternative and more difficult-to-master forms, and build them for maximum expression with minimum input.

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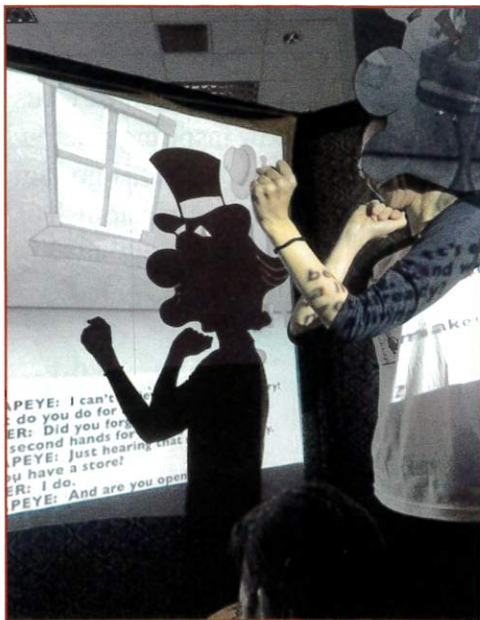
# PUPPETRY IN

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Each of our puppets is cut out of black ABS plastic for high durability and affixed to a 1/8" steel rod using a pair of 6mm machine screws and wing nuts that we can break down to fit in travel-sized luggage. For some puppets the ABS is additionally glued to a sheet of clear acrylic with details like facial features easily drawn on using an enamel paint pen.

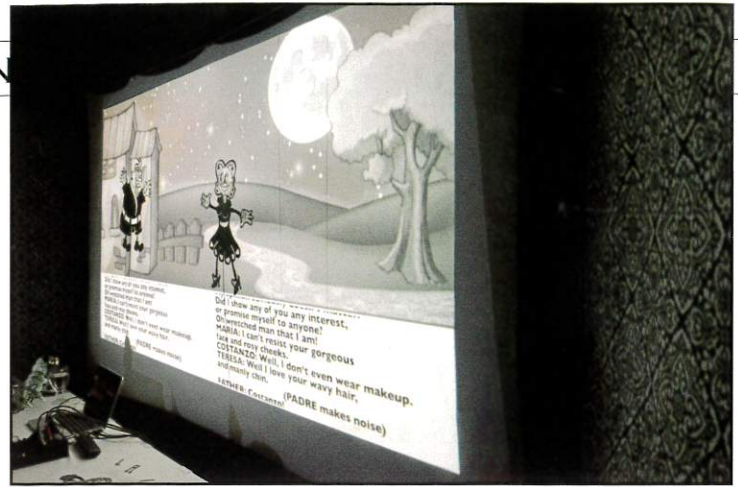
The puppets used in 2018's *The Fabulous Johnny Frog* included a finger lever that articulated a character's arm. Although simple, I found that inexperienced and nervous fingers often struggled with the effect and either overused it or completely ignored it. For 2019's *Second Hands and The Ladies' Man*, the play was conceived as a "rubber hose" cartoon from the 1930s, and many of the characters' limbs used latex tubing to join hands and feet to torsos in a way that looked the part and practically bounced themselves in the puppeteers' hands.

One of the plays we adapted for our 2019 production explored the notion of a second hand shop where customers enter to purchase more attractive replacements to their own undesired body parts. For this effect we used interchangeable heads and limbs held together with complimentary rows of small, neodymium magnets. As each character entered the stage the shopkeeper, shown in the actual silhouette of the actor, carefully removed the puppet's offending part and snapped on the more attractive alternative. This effect using shadow puppets and magnets actually enhanced the impact of the seventeenth-century source material originally conceived for actors to play off stage.



TO SEE A VIDEO ON "BUILDING THE PUPPETS," PLEASE VISIT:

[www.dragoncillo.com/gallery-1](http://www.dragoncillo.com/gallery-1)



How does the audiovisual component of these shows enhance the *movement and the life* of puppets in these shows?

The audiovisual elements of our shows are designed to support all aspects of the experience while preserving the unique contributions of a live vocal performance.

The entire show is operated as a PowerPoint presentation with roughly 60 slides. During the introduction a member of our company used a wireless remote to advance through slides illustrating everything from Spanish geography and culture, to theatrical practices and an in-depth exploration of shadow puppetry. These slides often incorporate a large number of comedic or surprising video elements embedded over static images. This dynamic approach blurred the line between the technical and the practical and helped lay the groundwork for the puppet show itself. For *Second Hands and The Ladies' Man*, I used Final Cut Pro to add an aged film filter over the stylized black and white background to produce the jittery, scratched and at times slightly blurred look we associate with vintage film stock.

The combined result of these elements in performance looked something like an interactive television screen playing cartoons from the 1930s, where shadow puppets—regardless of how well they were manipulated—moved about with an added measure of authenticity.

Yancey's techniques of puppet construction, combined with the modern technology of projected digital imagery, goes a long way toward allowing Dragoncillo's mission of imparting historical, cultural and linguistic knowledge. This new type of ready-made shows involving non-professional artists has become the first priority for a troupe devoted to outreach and public engagement.

ESTHER FERNÁNDEZ is Assistant Professor at Rice University. Her research principally attended to eroticism and the Spanish comedia; visual and material culture; and performance analysis of classical theater's most contemporary adaptations. She is currently working on a monograph on animated props in ceremonial and theatrical contexts, where material representations of religious and "non-religious" worlds took place in pre-modern Iberia and their contemporary legacies.

