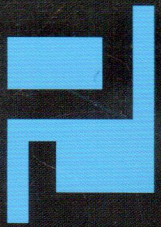
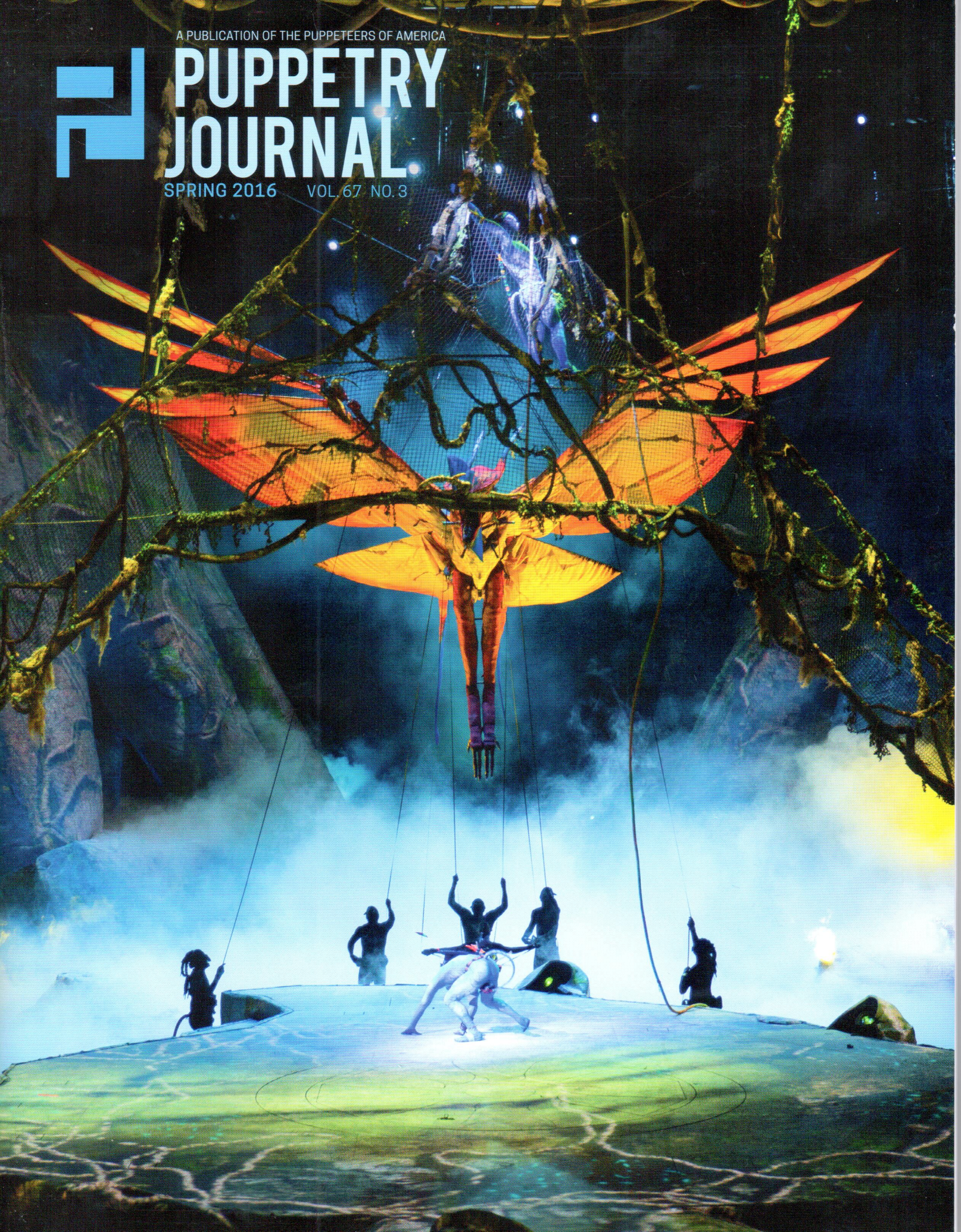


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SHOSHANA BASS AND ERIC BASS PHOTO COURTESY SANDGLASS THEATER

RE-Generation:

Shoshana Bass Breathes New Life into a Classic

BY ANDREW PERIALE

In April 2016, I saw a new work at Sandglass Theater: *When I Put on Your Glove*, by Shoshana Bass, daughter of Sandglass founders Eric Bass and Ines Zeller Bass. Shoshana, or Shoshi, as she is known in puppetry circles, has taken her father's classic *Autumn Portraits*, and combined it with the story of her life—growing up in a touring theater company, finding her own identity as an artist, developing an adult relationship with her father and giving new life to his work.

Autumn Portraits was a signature piece for Eric Bass for decades—a solo performer in a series of scenes, each enacted by a single puppet. It is a funny, moving and thought-provoking consideration of life as it moves toward its inevitable end. Now Eric has given the show—or, most of it—to Shoshi, not in order that she should simply remount it, but that she might weave her own story around the old scenes.

I found the new show quite remarkable. I am, admittedly, not without bias—I've known and loved this family, their art and their great humanity for over thirty years. I've watched Shoshi perform since she was a child, but with this show she takes her life and transforms it into art—a profound act of sharing—just as her parents did so many years ago with *Sand*. It left me with many questions about her creative process and personal history.

Andrew Periale: What was it like for you, growing up in a family that was also a theater company?

Shoshana Bass: It was a normal childhood for me, but I am starting to get the sense that it was not a normal childhood in most people's view. This was how I learned to understand the world: through growing up amidst ever changing architecture, languages, flavors, and in building relationships with the many artists we visited and who also visited us in Vermont. I didn't have many friends my age, because we were often gone for long periods of time, but I have friends all over the world. Where there is puppetry, there is home. I also understood my parents through the theater they made: *Sand* is very dear to me because it is how I understand the story of my parent's union. And their work has continued to grow and move with their lives, so I have learned to view my own art and life journey in this same way.

I love the activity that surrounded the theater. Because I experienced so much of this activity as a young child, I can easily relax at the back of a darkened theater, in the wings (or even in the old touring suitcase my parents would fill with curtains to let me sleep through the show) and let the atmosphere surround me a little like a lullaby. Certainly, there is a little nostalgia here, but there is also a new excitement to find my adult re-

lationship to theater in creating, presenting, and producing. I know the feeling of that great magic of community; artists, builders, visionaries, staff, audience, local businesses, joined in the hard work, emergence, and celebration of a creative endeavor. And it is this great gift of theater that I strive to bring forth in my own life, in my community, as well.

AP: What are your first memories of puppets?

SB: When I was working with Gerry (director, Gerry Stropnicki) on the devising of *Glove*, he had me draw a timeline of my life as it related to puppetry and touring. The first image of puppets on this timeline is the tableware fairytale, which made its way into the show. My father would keep me entertained by animated whatever was available on the table. It is definitely a parenting tool I will remember.

I cannot really remember a time without puppet shows. I started touring when I was sixteen months old. There are specific moments that stand out, but like I say in the show, "I am never sure whether it was my memory, or someone else's, or perhaps just a photograph I'd seen." A group of hand puppets put me to bed every night and woke me up in the morning when I had a hard time getting up: Jasper the dog, Lola the bear, and sometimes Fido the rabbit. I like puppets with my father's presence behind them.

AP: When were you first aware of *Autumn Portraits*? Is it a show you saw often growing up, or infrequently? And what did it mean to you?

SB: This show was what my father did. Yes, I saw it often—very often. I don't think it ever scared me, but there was much mystery in the darker pieces for me. There was a quality of feeling that went along with each individual vignette, which is I think how I understood them when I was too young to think about meaning or philosophy. And I knew never to interrupt my father as he readied himself for the show. It was comforting to just sit in the theater, watching or listening, or watching the audience, or doing some kind of craft, and letting the show wash over me. But I always watched the finale, which is not in my own show, because it was always different.

I also never really touched any of the *Autumn Portraits* things, there was something a little bit taboo or sacred about it all. Or maybe my father is just exactly like me and doesn't trust anybody else to set up the show.

AP: When you went off to college and then were working with dance and circus arts, did it feel like a time you needed to separate from the family/theater, or was it hard to be away?

SB: I think we are all used to being far away from each other. I was not always on tour with my parents. There were many times they would leave for long periods of time and I would stay in school. So I don't think there was ever a rejection of them or their art form. Actually, it was always very precious when the whole family was in the same place at the same time. I always miss my family. While I was in Boulder and was looking everywhere for a certain kind of artist philosophy and training when I realized that I was actually looking for my parents' work and Sandglass. I came to the conclusion that I needed to move home and learn all I could from my parents while they were still as active as they were.

In University I was working in interdisciplinary studies, combining performing arts, peace studies and tai chi. At the same time, Sandglass became more active in NPN (national performers network), and therefore much more engaged in socially relevant/activist theater. So my father and I were suddenly peers, exchanging book titles and ideas on the meeting ground of performing arts and conflict transformation.

AP: When you returned to Vermont, were you working more as an individual artist, or as a member of Sandglass?

SB: When I returned to Vermont I was still working full time as a circus instructor and performer. Circus has the difficulty of being overwhelmingly demanding in terms of time needed for training at a higher level. I think life said to me "you came back here to work with your parents and you are still being too

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—SHOSHANA BASS

distracted, you aren't listening well enough!"

Jana and I inherited my mother's children's shows two years ago, and have been touring and performing them together as one program, which has been the most fun! I missed Jana through most of my childhood, because of our age difference she was in college and then living in San Francisco when I was home. So now it is so very special to travel and perform with her. At the end of *Punchi*, Jana and I share a blessing that our mother gave us when she gave us these shows: "Long live, long laughs, good play!"

Then I took a bad fall. I couldn't walk for a period of time and had to stop dancing and circus. It was in this recovery time that my father proposed this project.

Perhaps there was desire to also pass on work and see it live in new hands. It was an opportunity in a time when I could not engage in my usually physicality. It turns out puppetry is more deeply physical than circus ever was for me. There is a subtlety and depth of movement, focus, and energetic expression, which cannot be habitual, which leaves me as exhausted as if I had done an aerial act.

AP: Did writing the "Shoshi" parts of the show occur during the rehearsal process or before? Or both?

SB: Mostly during. Gerry would interview me and transcribe our discussions and we drew some of the material from there. We also did story circles with my parents to remember together experiences of touring as a family.



SHOSHANA BASS PHOTO BY KIRK MURPHY

AP: How active a collaborator was your father in the playmaking process?

SB: Very. We worked intensively on the *Portraits* and even once Gerry was here we continued to return to the portraits in order to make them as precise as possible. He was so supportive, even when that meant he had to leave. Often we would have long discussions about concept and I would share my text with him, and we would develop it more together. I was always excited and nervous to share new ideas and new elements with him, because of the respect I have for him as a director and artist. It is really special for me to learn and create this piece with my father still actively contributing and, well, living. I count myself so lucky that my father has been so generous with his work during his lifetime.

AP: At what point in the process was the director brought in?

SB: There was a very important awareness around making sure that I could confidently explore my own artistry without feeling overshadowed by my father. From the beginning we were both clear that there needed to be a director, who wasn't part of the family, to support my work. Gerry Stropnick came in for the devising process after I had learned the individual pieces from my father. He has been a compassionate, supportive and thoughtful director. He really gave me the space for my own voice and tools for devising.

AP: The use of flowing sand, and all that it implies—first from the salt shaker, then as the "movie screen" brought me right back to the first time I saw *Sand* in 1985. When did that imagery enter the production concept?

SB: This was the first image I was sure about before we even began rehearsals: I wanted O'Neil projected onto a curtain of flowing sand. Sand and the sounds of Glass music. These were the things that weren't even decisions, they were just known, if that makes sense.

AP: The performances at Sandglass were advertised as a "Work in Progress." What is on your "to do" list for its next iteration?

SB: As my body is recovering, I would like to have more dancing in the next version, as this is my first and main form of expression. I need to develop the unfolding paper theater scene on the front of the traveling case. I would like also to build another sand falling contraption that is wider.

When I Put on Your Glove will be remounted this summer at the Ko Festival. I hope that before too long it will appear at a PofA National Festival. Though Shoshi's background makes her unusual, this story of a young artist "becoming" is a story we all share.

Andrew Periale is the editor of *Puppetry International* magazine.