



Noah's Ark Puppets Come to Life

*Gallery educators participate
in ongoing training
with the puppets' creator,
Christopher M. Green*

JOHN ELDER

One of visitors' favorite aspects of the Noah's Ark experience is meeting the handcrafted puppets made from found objects. Not only are the puppets uniquely and whimsically designed, but bringing them to life requires spirited collaboration, a theme echoed throughout the Noah's Ark galleries: that only together can we build a better, more hopeful future.

In the tradition of Japanese *bunraku* puppetry—where several performers work together, in plain view of the audience, to animate each puppet—the animal puppetry aboard Noah's Ark requires close cooperation. It is only through the puppeteers' teamwork that pink flamingos strut, African ostriches march, and white snow leopards go prowl.

Springing the puppets into action is a challenge that requires dexterity and skill at both the individual and group levels. Noah's Ark educators receive ongoing puppeteer training during which they learn to operate all the puppets, from the Indian vulture that flies solo to the life-sized anaconda that requires five staff members working in synch.

The team recently participated in an intensive three-day training program led by Christopher M. Green, the Brooklyn-based artist responsible for the design and construction of the ark's kinetic animal

figures. Green began to craft the puppets years before Noah's Ark at the Skirball opened, in June 2007. Today he remains deeply involved in the training of Noah's Ark puppeteers and the maintenance of the puppets themselves.

Green's very presence at the Skirball generated excitement among the Noah's Ark staff as they eagerly anticipated the opportunity to learn from the artist. Through the course of the training, Green used a variety of exercises to sharpen both the puppeteers' self-awareness and their awareness of the movements of others. Experimenting first with objects as simple as a chair, then graduating to work with the puppets themselves, the team of puppeteers learned to read their colleagues' body language and non-verbally communicate through eye-contact cues and subtle shifts in assuming leadership of the puppets' complex moves.

When a Noah's Ark visitor experiences the lifelike grace of the puppets in action, the relevance of these training exercises becomes clear. Take, for example, the performance of a puppet favorite, the gangly pink flamingo. Sporting fly-swatter feet, stilt-like legs of bamboo, a handbag (discovered on eBay!) for a body, and a lanky neck made from spools of pink thread, the flamingo is perhaps the most challenging to manipulate. It requires two puppeteers, one supporting the head and torso, and another operating the legs. Many of the puppeteers struggle to achieve a smooth stepping rhythm, with both puppeteers moving at a synchronized, steady pace. They must log many hours of practice before making their debut on the Noah's Ark floor. Once there, the flamingo puppeteers work as a team, sensing and responding to one another's movements and behaviors: they must decide together when to start walking, when and where to pause and interact with an intrigued gallery visitor, when to dig at the floor for food, when to reach its long neck around its body to groom itself.

Through these remarkable performances, it is the puppeteers who round out the personalities of the animals aboard Noah's Ark. Trained by Green to regard the puppet as an extension of their own bodies, the puppeteers channel their energy into the puppet, collectively sharing the joys of animating the once inanimate. Learning to work together, coordinate, and share theatrical power to enliven the puppets, Noah's Ark puppeteers truly uphold the Skirball's core ideals of making connections, building community, and celebrating life.

