

Puppet Master

Anna Sobel '97 has travelled extensively, using puppets to share positive messages with children around the world.

by Zoe Settle '00

Mrs. C. likes to bake. She's a bit elderly and a bit flightily with a robust pseudo-British voice, and on a recent Saturday she was whipping up gingerbread: "I need sugar and spice and everything nice." As Mrs. C selects the decorations, the Gingerbread Boy comes to life, causing giggles throughout the audience of 60 kids who are watching this scene as part of a free Saturday arts program.

Mrs. C is brought to life by Anna Sobel '97, as are a number of other characters who are out to eat the Gingerbread Boy. First, Sobel's voice transforms into a sophisticated red hen; then it's a grey, hip-hop-speaking cat; next it's Dusty Musty, a mutt dog, followed by Freddy the Fox. Freddy the Fox convinces the Gingerbread Boy to jump on his back to cross the river, only to attempt to eat him, whereupon the Gingerbread Boy courageously dives into the river and learns he can swim. Each animal pretends to befriend and help the one-day-old Gingerbread Boy, but he's already wise enough to trust his instincts. It's an inspiring message: believe in yourself and you can do anything.

ACT I. This is a five-year-old show for Sobel, whose attraction to performance art started early. She grew up animating her own paper dolls; where other kids might be preoccupied with their dolls' clothing and hairstyle, Anna gave each of hers a unique voice. In third grade, she was ecstatic to be cast in the Nightingale performance of *Robin Hood*, although she only had four lines. In seventh grade,

she was cast as the Modern Major General (she still knows her lines). She has long been a believer, as she says, "in the power of theater to enhance creativity." She also admits to doing some dead-on impressions of Nightingale teachers—although, diplomatically, she is keeping quiet on which ones!

ACT II. It wasn't until she arrived at Wesleyan University and saw a performance of the Bread and Puppet Theater that Sobel learned about the activism involved in puppetry. "It was a combination of everything I love doing," she says of the writing, kids, and dolls crucial to a puppeteer's success. Captivated by "making things come alive," she named herself a puppeteer, enrolled in a class on Indonesian puppetry, and went to work for the Wesleyan costume shop, teaching herself how to sew. To her delight, the Blue Sky Puppet Theater in Maryland hired her directly out of college, and she honed her skills there over the next two years.

ACT III. Sobel found herself wanting to learn more about this art form, and after much research and the discovery of a little yellow pamphlet in a D.C. library about India's use of puppetry to teach social issues, and she applied for and won a Fulbright to study just that. India has a rich history of puppetry, particularly using puppet shows for government-subsidized education and to spread awareness about difficult topics like AIDS awareness.

Following a series of miscommunications and unfortunate circumstances ("All of my contacts sort of evaporated once



I arrived!" Sobel recalls), she found herself befriend-
ing non-English speaking artists. One, in Ahmedabad, was using
puppetry to teach communities about water conservation
and, Sobel says, was "very encouraging of me to try things
on my own." Mansingh Zala was another new friend with
whom Sobel collaborated on a show about Gandhi called
"A Dream Larger Than Life." Along her tour of India, Sobel
found herself repeatedly revered as
some sort of authority, even though
she was the one there to learn.

In Delhi, teachers wanted to know
how to incorporate puppets to teach
literacy. At a community arts center
called Janmadhyam, founded by a
woman with a disabled daughter, Sobel
was enlisted to teach a daily workshop
for a month. After seeing the slums
and getting to know the children
there, Sobel morphed the workshop
into a drama therapy program in which the girls performed
skits that let them share the conflict in their lives (including
performances about alcoholic fathers and beatings). Sobel's
penultimate Indian experience was appearing on a primetime
television show on New Delhi TV that ran right after the news
and spoofed the headlines. Her time on the show apparently
lives on, "because I was the first—and still the only—woman

Sobel found herself
repeatedly revered as
some sort of authority,
even though she was
the one there to learn.

who could manage the heavy puppets and operate the head
as well as the hands," Sobel boasts.

ACT IV. In 2005, Sobel founded her own company, Talking
Hands Theatre. Almost everything she performs is her own
creation: the music, the puppets, the plays—and the voices,
of course. Each performance involves a character who learns
something over the course of the show (like a princess who

trusts herself and manages, despite her
sheltered life, to escape pirates). One of
her shows, about nutrition, is so complex
that she enlists three other puppeteers to
put it on. While there's a message in these
shows, they always feel like entertainment.

Sobel just completed her master's
degree in Educational Theater at New
York University and has since relocated
to a house in the country near Amherst,
Massachusetts. This is her new base of
operations as she restarts her business

and tours all over New England, bringing her theatrical
lessons to a new set of lucky kids.

*For more information on Anna and her puppetry,
visit www.puppetree.com.*