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Anna Sobel of Shutesbury finds handmade puppets make good teachers

By *StevePfarrer*

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[arts](#) [entertainment](#) [local news](#) [shutesbury](#)

Like a lot of college students, Anna Sobel wasn't sure what she wanted to do when she first arrived at school - in her case, Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

But less than a year later, a chance encounter with some oversize puppets in Vermont put her on the path to her life's work.

Sobel, a New York City native now living in Shutesbury, is the jack-of-all-trades of Talking Hands Theatre, an educational puppetry company she started in New York and has now brought to western Massachusetts. Sobel, who makes her puppets, writes skits for them and maneuvers them in performances, sees the puppets as more than just entertainment for children. They are also a vehicle for teaching kids about social issues such as environmentalism, conflict resolution and healthy eating.

On Saturday she will perform a free show at Shutesbury Town Hall, "The Princess Who Escaped from Pirates." It is a tale about "how girls can be tough," she says, in which a princess captured by pirates uses her brains and sense of adventure to elude her dim-witted captors.

"Children's laughter is my take-home pay," said Sobel, 31. "This is such a great way of engaging kids on different issues. One of the best things about doing it is talking to them after a show about what they've just seen and showing them the puppets. They usually have a lot of questions."

Since moving to the area last summer, Sobel has been steadily building up her contacts and finding places to perform: cafes, hospitals, schools, birthday parties and recently the Children's Museum at Holyoke. She's also appeared at a number of Jewish community centers and museums, both in the Valley and the Boston area, for presentations built around Jewish holidays such as Purim.

'Eye-opening experience'

Sobel has been working with puppets since the summer of 1998, when, after her first year at Wesleyan, she saw a performance by the Bread & Puppet Theater of Vermont, which uses oversize puppets to dramatize political issues and satirize world figures. She says the show was eye-opening.

"I was so intrigued to see puppets used to express a political viewpoint," said Sobel. "It struck me that puppetry could be a poor man's microphone, a way to make your voice heard in a different and interesting way. It could be an agent of social change."

During her remaining time at Wesleyan, she worked part time with a regional chapter of a Maryland-based group, Kids on the Block, that uses puppet shows to explore social issues such as disabilities among children. After graduating, she trained with another Maryland group, Blue Sky Puppet Theater. There she learned the ins and outs of the field - designing puppets, staging shows, developing voices - and traveled in the Mid-Atlantic states doing two-person shows for the next few years.

Serious endeavor

Sobel spent most of 2003 in India on a Fulbright fellowship, studying how puppetry is used across that country - and not just for children - to promote social change and education. She also has a master's degree in educational theater, and in New York she worked in a number of schools as a teaching artist, doing workshops and longer residencies on puppet-making and show production.

She pursued her master's in part because of her experience doing volunteer puppet shows for children in hospitals. "My heart really went out to those kids," Sobel said. Some of the children receiving long-term care knew the details of the medicine "better than the nurses did," she added. That inspired her to learn more about how puppetry could be used as an educational tool to reach children from a range of backgrounds.

At a school in the Bronx, for instance, Sobel worked on a show about Greek mythology. She recorded a hip-hop sound track with some of the older students to use as the traditional Greek chorus, and she called the show "Big Daddy Z and the Greeks" - Big Daddy Z being the updated name for Zeus.

Another skit, "Alicia in Bodegaland," focuses on helping children choose healthy snacks. "I'm always looking for ways to make these shows relevant to kids," Sobel said.

Her travels in India further fueled her desire to carve out a career as a puppeteer. Every region in the country has a distinctive style of puppetry, she says, and it is considered a serious art form, one that many Indian teachers study. Her time in India included a stint working on a TV show that used puppets for political satire; in the process, she became conversant in Hindi.

Sobel works with both hand puppets and stick-mounted models; she also uses some larger puppets that she manipulates while standing in view of the audience. She makes all of the puppets herself - from papier-mache, foam and a clay-like porcelain that hardens - and also designs their clothes. Sobel has about three dozen figures for her current shows in the workshop of her Shutesbury home, and her basement is loaded with older models.

Just don't ask how many she has altogether. "All the kids want to know that," she said with a laugh. "I haven't a clue at this point."

Sobel's skits are primarily for children from preschool age up to third grade, and she tries to keep the shows moving at "a snappy pace," 35 to 40 minutes at most. She'll also play guitar and sing or read a poem as part of her performances. Though she does most shows solo - she uses a portable "roll-up" stage that she can pack in her car - she sometimes hires another person to help with skits that have multiple puppets onstage at once.

At the Children's Museum at Holyoke on a recent Saturday, Sobel performed "The Princess Who Escaped from Pirates," the same skit she will bring to Shutesbury on Saturday. Wearing a headset to amplify her voice and using a variety of props, she worked 10 puppets to tell the tale.

Settling in

Getting her business established in the Valley has taken some time. Despite her Manhattan background, Sobel says she was sick of battling traffic in the Big Apple and wanted to live in a more rural setting. She moved to the Sirius Community in Shutesbury last June and stayed there for several months, waitressing while she tried to build her puppet business. "I made a lot of cold calls, sent out a lot of emails, and did a lot of fliering," she says.

She's getting more gigs these days, she says, and has also received grants from local arts councils.

Sobel will also be turning a personal corner later this year: She and her fiance, Brian Bender, are getting married in September.

Her move to western Massachusetts is part of the overall message she likes to bring to audiences, especially in places like her old elementary school in New York, to which she periodically returns to perform.

"I love what I do," she said. "It's a way of showing kids that there's another way to make a life, that you can craft your own life. I think that's a pretty important message just by itself."

Anna Sobel and the Talking Hands Theatre will perform at Shutesbury Town Hall on Saturday at 11 a.m. The show, "The Princess Who Escaped from Pirates," is free.

Steve Pfarrer can be reached at spfarrer@gazettenet.com.

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