

A Night of Poetry and Film

By Nathan Mader

An all-ages audience of about twenty gathered inside the Neutral Ground arts centre for A Night of Poetry and Film 8, on July 18, 2013. The event was originally scheduled in June at the Saskatchewan Filmpool, its usual location a couple of doors down, but an unexpected rainstorm and the water damage it left in its wake caused ANPF 8 to be rescheduled and temporarily relocated. This was my fourth time attending the event and I was looking forward to the eclectic mix of short film screenings and poetry readings I had come to expect, perhaps even more so because a special feature of ANPF 8 was that all of the films would involve puppets. Puppets! I was also a little nervous because, for the first time, I was going to be one of the poets reading at the front of the room. I would be in good company, though. A Night of Poetry and Film 8 featured poet Matt Hall, as well as filmmakers Angela Edmunds, Jessica Riess, Gerald Saul, Chrystene Ells, Red Smarteez and Kelly-Anne Riess, who, as creator and host of the event, casually greeted people at the door and checked the time as she waited for any latecomers to arrive.

In many ways, the birth of A Night of Poetry and Film reflects Kelly-Anne's diversity of interests. She has three published books (including *To End The Conversation*, a collection of poems) while simultaneously being an active member of Saskatchewan's film community. While Kelly-Anne is generally drawn to making documentaries, at ANPF 8 she was screening her puppet film, *Scotty*, a dinosaur love story she initially produced for the Eastend T-Rex Discovery Centre.



A full house at Poetry and Film.

ANPF started in the spring of 2009 when Warren Dean Fulton, a writer from Vancouver, was on a cross-Canada book tour and contacted Kelly-Anne wondering if she could set up a reading in Regina. Having been a Filmpool member since 2008, Kelly asked the collective whether they would be willing to host Fulton. To her surprise, the Filmpool was very responsive to the idea—something she says isn't always the case when an organization is approached about hosting a literary reading.

Based on the Filmpool's positive response, Kelly-Anne saw an opportunity to bridge two burgeoning artistic communities while creating a platform for those artists to engage with the public. She hoped that people who might "be intimidated by a poetry reading would be drawn into the more familiar atmosphere of a film screening," while poetry fans could be exposed to independent films and filmmakers. The formula has been a success. While Poetry and Film started out small, it has now grown into a biannual event so well attended that Kelly-Anne has occasionally had to turn people away at the door. Despite the event's growing popularity, however, she has even more ambitious ideas for A Night of Poetry and Film and hopes it may one day expand to other cities in the province.

A few days before A Night of Poetry and Film 8, I was asked to be part of a radio interview on CJTR radio's *SOHL Connections*. I was joined by Regina filmmaker Gerald Saul, whose short puppet film *It's About Time* was going to be screened at ANPF 8. We soon found that we had a lot to talk about. During our on-air conversation, Gerald noted how he felt that the creative process behind short films and poems was similar, and we went on to discuss how they even rely on some of the same formal techniques, like compression and metaphor. When asked about ANPF 8, Gerald emphasized how "we are both working in arts that aren't entirely mainstream" and suggested that ANPF is an important way of "expanding the community" through bringing together a diversity of artists. Gerald's comments led me to think of the last ANPF I was at in which we heard Regina poets Cassidy McFadzean and Courtney Bates reading poems, some of which were inspired by Old English riddles and fairy tales, followed by Steve Suderman's *Over Land*, a near-feature length documentary on the increasing challenges faced by a family of potato farmers. The evening was a wide-ranging exchange of ideas and aesthetic concerns, and it was hard to imagine that I would have gotten a chance to see Suderman's film otherwise.

At A Night of Poetry and Film, the readings usually take place before the screenings and at the eighth edition I was the first one up. One of the poems I read, "*Daniel Day Lewis On Why He Left the Stage*," was inspired by the story that Day Lewis abruptly left part way through a performance of *Hamlet* after



First Seizure by Red Smarteez.

seeing the ghost of his own, and not Hamlet's, father on the battlements. He has restricted himself to acting for the screen since. The poem made its way into an anthology of cinema-inspired poems called *I Found It At the Movies* (Guernica 2014), and the concept behind the anthology seems to underscore the potential for dialogue between the two mediums that A Night of Poetry and Film provides a live outlet for.

Following my reading was poet Matt Hall's. During her introduction of Matt, Kelly-Anne emphasized her enthusiasm for Matt's reading voice and as he began to read you could see why—the rising and falling inflections of his voice sounded like a bowstring being gently drawn over a saw blade of language. Some of the poems Matt read contained a kind of roaming consciousness coming into contact with evocative inner and outer landscapes, and his voice suited the subject matter. Matt has published three fairly recent collections of poems: *Royal Jelly* (Black Rider Press 2011), *Distant Songs* (Sea Pressed Meta, 2012), and *Hyaline* (BRP, 2013) and, as is customary for poets with published books, they were all available for purchase at the event.

You can find a more detailed account of the puppet films featured at ANPF 8 elsewhere in this magazine. What I will say, however, is that we encountered a variety of stories, styles, and puppetry techniques. We saw Gerald Saul's Beckettian meditation on existence in the prairies in *It's About Time*, the whimsical encounter between Aunty Fox and Ms. Chicken in Angela Edmonds' *A Place For You*, the pathos and humor of a man coming to terms with his wife's illness in Red Smarteez's *First Seizure*, Christene Ells' haunting portrait of a prairie woman in *tougher*, or maybe just simpler, times based on the

fragments of a found diary in *Kathleen's Diary*, Jessica Riess's folkloric, love beyond death tale *Love in Any Colour*, and Kelly Anne's dino-romance, *Scotty*.

After the readings and screenings, there is a brief question period in which Kelly-Anne gives the audience the opportunity to ask the artists any questions they might have. Then the crowd mingles, samples refreshments, checks out any books or DVDs on display, and talks about the films and poems they've seen and experienced. It may be the way in which A Night of Poetry and Film gets these conversations started that proves to be the true measure of its success.



Kelly-Anne Riess poses with her shadow puppet Scotty the T-Rex.

Puppets Take Regina

by Milena Džordeski



Still from Chrystene Ells puppet film *Kathleen's Diary*, 2013.

The First International Puppet Underground Film Festival (IPUFF) occurred over the weekend of April 6 -7, 2013 in Regina. The festival consisted of screenings and workshops that took place at the Regina Public Library's film theatre and the accompanying exhibition and artist talk at Dunlop Art Gallery, upstairs from the theatre. Together with the Regina Public Library and Dunlop Art Gallery, the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative put the festival on, while the creative team consisting of Chrystene Ells (IPUFF Artistic Director), Amber Christensen (IPUFF Festival Curator), Berny Hi (IPUFF Technical Director), and Wendy Peart (Dunlop Curator of Education and Community Outreach), aided by the rest of the Filmpool staff, put the festival together for the enjoyment of its Regina audience.

The festival kicked-off early on Saturday afternoon with an enjoyable film retrospective of a legendary NFB animator Co Hoedeman. The retrospective consisted of five films from various stages of Hoedeman's fruitful career: award-winning *Sand Castle* (1977), featuring interplay of different sand creatures; two depictions of Inuit legends—*The Owl and the Raven* (1973) and *The Owl and Lemming* (1971); *Tchou-tchou* (1972) a tale of children's play told with wooden blocks; and *The Snow Gift* (1998), one of the four children's puppet tales featuring Ludovic the teddy bear.

The highlight of the first festival day was "Prairie Puppet Underground," the suitably-titled premiere of nineteen Saskatchewan-made puppet films. This long-awaited premiere took place in the packed RPL film theatre in front of an enthusiastic crowd made of filmmakers' families and friends, local art lovers and filmgoers. The majority of films shown at this premiere were the result of "This Big World"—a Filmpool-designed puppet-making workshop that lasted from October 2011 to October 2012 as the implementation of its first-ever Artist-in-Residence program, made possible with a Saskatchewan Arts Board's Creative Partnerships Grant. The residency was taken by Chrystene Ells, a successful interdisciplinary artist hailing from San Francisco, who now makes Regina her home. Chrystene's residency consisted of mentoring participants of the "This Big World" workshop in the creation of their puppet films. In addition, she completed three films of her own.

"This Big World" workshop was conducted in the Underground Puppet Works, a fabrication and miniature shoot stage, conveniently located one floor down from the Filmpool office. There, participants from Regina got to make their puppets and shoot their films, which some of them would then edit at the Filmpool. An equally important part of the workshop was the blog (puppetfilm.blogspot.ca) that accompanied studio works



IPUFF Puppet Exhibition at the Dunlop Art Gallery.

with relevant course material and resources, such as ideas and tips for films. The blog also chronicled participants' works in progress, as well as those of the Artist-in-Residence.

There were three different segments to the This Big World workshop, each lasting for three months and teaching a different puppet-making technique that resulted in three different kinds of puppet films seen at IPUFF. In the first workshop segment called "Paper & Shadow," Chrystene taught participants how to create two-dimensional puppet forms such as paper puppets and shadow puppets, and then put them in motion. The segment consisted of four different seminars that addressed four stages of production: preproduction, fabrication, production, and post-production.

The second workshop segment entitled "Sculpture & Objects" was the one in which participants were taught to fabricate three-dimensional sculptural puppets such as hand puppets and marionettes. The third segment named "Smoke & Mirrors" taught participants use of special effects such as smoke and green screen, and how to achieve image distortion.

All thirty workshop participants tried their hand at a different kind of puppet-making and got to find out what technique suited them best. As a result—and a reward—everyone who successfully completed their film at the workshop had it screened at IPUFF.

Diverse professional background of local puppeteers-filmmakers meant that they brought a different set of skills to the film set, which then, in turn, affected the look of their films. For example, visual artists spent a lot of time on the fabrication of puppets and sets, while filmmakers did elaborate storyboarding in order to ease the shoot. The IPUFF audience had a chance to see these elaborate works at the exhibition at

Dunlop Art Gallery, where sets and puppets for all the films were on display.

Equally diverse was the inspiration for these Saskatchewan puppet films. Several personal and family stories found their way to IPUFF screen: Tyler Banadyga's *We Remain Long After We're Gone* talks about the shocking discovery of petrified human remains in the process of building a new home in rural Saskatchewan; Kristen Smith's *My Great Grandmother's Flowers* is a lyrical story of her Ukrainian family's inception; Janine Windolph's *Joshua* depicts the story of a haunted residential school; *First Seizure* by Red Smarteez (partners Brenda Whiteman and Peter Stinson) is a poetic retelling of the couple's first coping with an epileptic seizure; Rowan Pantel's *Mike and the Goose* is a dramatic exploration of an interaction between a child and an animal gone wrong on a 1940s Saskatchewan farm.

Two filmmakers chose fables for their stories: Angela Edmunds' *A Place for You* is a warm-hearted story of an unexpected bond that occurs between a fox and a chicken on a cold winter night, while Sylvia Ziemann's *Saskatchewan Is Boring* reflects on Saskatchewan curiosities through the discussion of a crow and a prairie dog. Another film with an animal protagonist was Kelly-Anne Riess' *Scotty*, which imagines the life of the famous T-Rex from Eastend.

Two IPUFF films used popular film forms to portray their stories: Eric Kanius used conventions of the Western to depict the arrival of a new school principal in a 1960s small town in his *MacNutt: A Tale of Revenge*; similarly, Noelle Duddridge used the form of silent film with subtitles to depict a music-related quarrel that results in a duel in early 20th century Regina in *A Gentlemen's Quarrel*.

The festival featured a couple of films inspired by Aboriginal legends, such as Jessica Riess' *Love in Any Colour*, which depicts an Inuit legend about a quintessential story of love that transcends death and Jessica Generoux's *Qu'Appelle*—a retelling of local Cree legend about tragic love.

A group of filmmakers were inspired by stories they found at RPL's Prairie History Room: Chrystene Ells' *It Was a Circus* depicts a hilarious chance encounter of three men with a pig under the open night sky in Hanley; Amber Christensen's *Musophobia* is an eerie story of a young teacher's overcoming of fear of mice she encountered at her new job post at a Flaxcombe school; George Bessler's *Perpetual Motion Machine* is Berny Hi's exploration of a prairie man's attempt at an invention; Gerald Saul's *It's About Time* addresses the sometimes distorted perception of time on the prairies; Chrystene Ells' second film, *Kathleen's Diary* represents an ode to all the stories from the prairies that have fallen into oblivion.

There were also two workshops as part of IPUFF. "Bumps in the Night" was a shadow-puppet workshop geared towards families with small children were taught participants the creation of shadow puppets using cutouts from inexpensive materials such as paper and cardboard. Aided by two overhead projectors, young workshop participants got to bring their shadow creatures into life on the RPL's film screen; the result was a room filled with excitement and awe. Seventeen participants of different ages took part in the "Hands on Hands" workshop, in which Chrystene taught them how to make hands for mechanical puppets with simple materials, such as cardboard, straws, strings, and hot glue.

The IPUFF program concluded on Sunday night with a double-feature of Handmade Puppet Dreams, courtesy of its curator Heather Henson, daughter of the late Jim and Jane Henson, creators of the legendary Muppet Show. Handmade Puppet Dreams is a showcase of technically and stylistically diverse international puppet films, sometimes bizarre and often provocative in their storytelling.

Overall success of IPUFF was immense. In the words of the Filmpool's Gordon Pepper, "[IPUFF] has raised the profile of the Filmpool across the province by going beyond its traditional programming" while "providing local audiences with opportunities to experience the international appeal of live action puppetry emanating from their own people, history and culture." Furthermore, IPUFF managed to put Regina and Saskatchewan on the map with other related Canadian festivals such as the International Festival of Animated Objects in Calgary and Les Trois Jours de Casteliers from Montréal.

Puppets did rule Regina and they will do the same in 2015 during the next installment of IPUFF. Stay tuned for IPUFF, Take Two!



Sold out showing of Saskatchewan Puppet Films at IPUFF 2013.



"Hands on Hands" workshop with Berny Hi and Chrystene Ells.



Amber Christensen's *Musophobia*.

Puppets Around Town: IPUFF 2013



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1. Story boards from Sylvia Ziemann's *Saskatchewan is Boring*.
2. Gerald Saul's *It's About Time*.
3. Rowan Pantel's *Mike and the Goose*.
4. Angela Edmunds' *A Place for You*.
5. Video Club's *Spitly: A Boy and his Puppet*.
6. Tyler Banadyga's *We Remain Long After We're Gone*.



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