

Episode 2 – Making the Puppets

Introduction: Welcome to our Smoking Apples podcast as we get ready to release our first ever digital tour of our show *Flux*. In this series, we bring you an exclusive behind the scenes insight into our theatre company, including embarrassing stories, feminist chat and all sorts of puppet related content. Enjoy.

Hello, good evening, thank you for joining us for our podcast. It could be evening, it could be daytime, you could be on a walk, who knows? But lovely to have you back again. Today, we are joined by our lovely producer, Sofia. But before we kick off with the questions, we are going to describe ourselves for those of you who are listening, Matt, do you want to start?

Matt Yeah, sure. So I am Matt, as Hattie just said, and I am a five foot eight male, I would say I was fairly good looking. I've got a well groomed beard. I am in need of a haircut, though, as many of you may will be. I wear glasses. I've got a face that's got a few scars from an outdoor childhood and falling from trees. And tonight I am wearing a blue zip up comfortable jacket and I'm sitting on my sofa,

Hattie Lovely, for a moment there I thought you were going to say, and tonight, Matthew, I'm going to be...

Matt And tonight Matthew I'm going to be...

Hattie That's a bit of a retro reference for anyone our age.

Sofia For the older ones.

Hattie Yes, brilliant. And so I'm Hattie. I am about six foot tall or thereabouts. So I have long hair. It's got really long during lockdown. And I now have lots of lovely, great silver rates because I am wise beyond my years or something like that. If you have seen me, I'm usually falling over as you'll hear from regular podcasts. But today, sometimes I am sitting down in my very cluttered office with lots of files, bits and bobs, some stationery and a bit of another office chair in the corner. And this evening I'm wearing my lovely festival blue jacket, which has some sparkly sequins on it because I'm feeling a bit fun. So there we go, Sofia.

Sofia Thanks Hattie. Your one was good. So I'm Sofia. I have long brown hair, so long you can't quite see it on the screen, it sort of cuts off and goes right down to my hip. I am wearing a light blue sort of tank top with a silver headband in my hair. I have brown eyes and I have brown filled in eyebrows, I actually put on some makeup today with a bit of mascara on. And that is me. And I'm sort of shaking on my office chair, rolling around in it, sitting down against a white background.

Hattie Lovely, thank you very much. So, Sofia, you're going to be asking us the questions for this one so I will let you take over.

Sofia Great. So I'm going to ask, so shall I actually, I'm going to introduce the sort of title of this podcast series. So, it's making the puppets, why we've chosen them as they are. And so first question for Flux. Can you tell us about the characters in Flux and who we will meet?

Hattie Yes. So the puppet characters are sort of the main characters. And then there's a few ensemble characters around that. And there's one other named character, I think that's it, in the show. So we've got Kate, who is our main character and our full sized puppet woman with a big curly wig. And then we've got Alan who's puppeteered by Matt, do you want to describe Alan?

Matt Yeah, Alan is a head, shoulder, so he's not a full bodied puppet like Kate is, but to give the illusion that he is, he has got a head, shoulders and one arm and is operated by one person and yeah.

Hattie Yes. And then the other sort of named character that I'm thinking of is Dr Charles Bagshot, also played by Matt when he's using his excellent acting skills so that character isn't a puppet.

Sofia Great. So what comes first for making the puppet and who designs them?

Matt Oh, it depends really sometimes is the idea that comes first. So I dunno, like, for example, Arbor, the idea of a giant tree came first and then, then it was obvious we were going to use a puppet. But with, with, I think with Flux it was more where it first started from was, I think it was Sherry, our lighting designer. I said, oh, why don't you make a show with a female protagonist? And we were like, woah, OK. And it wasn't because we consciously chosen the shows before that to be, to be male characters. That just happened the way it was. But it was I think. Yeah, that that's I'd say that's where it came first for with Flux and then. Yeah. And then and then we started talking about what kind of puppet Kate would be and then that's when we were like, well let's go kind of human size, you know, full sized puppet.

Hattie Yeah, absolutely. And we had a workshop where we were trying to look at how she moves and how we make her move in a way that feels like she's a woman rather than a man. But, you know, all those gender stereotypes are very complicated and confusing. So it's, it was quite an interesting one for us, having unconsciously never made a female puppet before in that way.

Matt Mmm, just add to that. I think with like Ted in CELL. We knew he was an old, an old man. So, you know, the joints were made to be kind of stiffer to help form the character. But with Kate when we were making her then became a very detailed conversation about, OK, well, then we need to think about the way that the hips move and add in an extra joint between the hips and the stomach so that we could we could have that movement as well, which was which was quite interesting. And to just touch on, like, who designs your puppets? It it's it's kind of both me and Hattie. We've got quite a good set up in terms of I look at the mechanisms and, and Hattie then works on what the face will look like and also. Well, with Kate, we actually, Kate was three prototypes, I think.

Hattie Yeah. Because she's so, because she's full size. I just couldn't hold her when we first made her. She wasn't she only weighed like four kilograms or something. But I couldn't lift her up.

Matt Yeah four point six kilos she was. But you know, if you're holding that for an hour hour long, you know. Yeah. That's, that's an intense so, she was made from like foam really like high density foam, wasn't she, the first time. Yeah. We had to go back to the drawing board and I think she ended up being. She now weighs one point six kilos which isn't a lot, but still holding that and Hattie having to hold her arm in that well and having to

hold her arm in that, that length of time is, you know, we had to really take the weight into consideration.

Hattie What it ended up being was that we tried using plastezote, sculpting for that so that there was more air than foam on her. So I had done a little bit of that with another brilliant company, Significant Object, a while ago. So we kind of took that knowledge and worked together to create Kate's body. But you were very much still on the mech, the mechanism side of things on her Matt, and you did all the head rod. And yeah, things that I don't quite understand yet.

Sofia Is there a particular reason that you decided for Kate to be a human sized puppet? Like because it sounds like especially if she was really heavy and like was quite you know. Took some time to get the weights right. Why did you make a full size so I didn't make a sort of half size, but that particular artistic choice.

Hattie Well, there's a few reasons for me, like one of them is that we wanted her to be big. We wanted her to be visible, in our previous show In Our Hands, we had real life size puppets, but they were just the head and the hand. So there wasn't a weight issue there. But we wanted to have, we wanted to play with the movement and really enjoy the puppetry side of moving her around, manipulating her. But then there's also the level of looking at this story about women trying to find their voice. I mean, she's a physicist, but it really could be any woman in any job. And so looking at the way that she's manipulated in looking at how the puppeteers react to her and when she's got when she needs three people to hold her up, when she can just be moved with one person. I don't think we would get that if it was just a head in the hands again, we wouldn't be able to play with her in that way. I don't know if you want to add. Yeah.

Matt Yeah. I mean, ultimately. I mean, yes, Hattie can hold Kate on her own, but I think she looks her most powerful when there's three puppeteers, so there are only female puppeteers on her manipulating her. And suddenly you've then got this kind of like there's this, like, strength and kind of unity of feel about it. And yeah, so. There's that and there's the fact that. When when when you've got, I don't know, an actor, actor or actress playing that part, they'll watch the face, they'll, you know as a as an audience member, you watch the watch the person walk around the stage. As soon as you swap that for a puppet, everything becomes magnified. So you'll look at the way the leg moves and the hip and the elbow and the hands. And so you can really draw attention to specific things. So you watch an actor pick an apple up and you don't really think anything of it, but you watch the puppet pick a, pick an apple up. And what you see is actually three people and a puppet working together to pick that object up. It's such a like a complicit moment that it's, yeah, it kind of yeah. You can, you can highlight things. And then the other thing you can do with her being a full sized puppet is a lot of other lot more things than you could do if it was just an actress, for example, flying through the air in a moment of surreal chaos.

Sofia Wicked. And so how do you choose the aesthetics of the puppets like fabric costume? How does it all sort of come together to the final, final piece?

Hattie It takes a bit of a while, really, doesn't it?

Matt And this is definitely the longest, longest part of the process, I would say.

Hattie Yeah, I think one of the things that we always find really difficult is choosing what kind of material we want for their skin. And I know you were sort of asking about fabric and

maybe that was the way you thought that was going to go. But the the fabric or the texture of the skin always feels really important. And it's such a strange thing to, because, so Sophia is giving me a very strange look.

Sofia Sorry, so I'm just like, huh? So what do you use? Like what, yeah. What do you mean elaborate. What do you mean by the skin?

Hattie One of the first shows we did back in the day, The Word Catcher, for example, we the story was about a character who didn't speak and she read those books. So her skin was made up of Tyvek fabric, which had loads of words written all over it. And then her skin was a patchwork of words, which was really lovely and really worked for that show then In Our Hands, so Alf's skin. So Alf's a Trawler Fisherman, his skin is made of chamois leather that has been dyed in coffee and tea and a bit of pain and really, really smell during the workshop process. Warm, warm coffee and chamois leather not not good.

Sofia So the best type of smell.

Hattie Yeah but we wanted his, his skin to look like it was made out of natural fabrics because he's working very much with forces of nature as a fisherman. So then when it came to Kate, we were kind of going, wow, she's working in science, she's working with equations. She's like, it's all very. It's all very fact based, and then you kind of go, well, but then what what would her skin be made of? And it sure underneath she's sort of polystyrene and bits of clay and things, but you don't always want the final look to look like clay. And we don't we haven't really sculpted in wood yet, which is a whole other sort of aesthetic. So, yeah, choosing what fabric her hands, like the bits of skin that show, what that's going to be for me does influence things a bit because that, that adds to her character, and we in the end chose a sort of off white. Very kind of clean fabric for her, which which is just what her skin is all over and in the show, the set is white and like all, everything is just kind of clinically white in the show, whereas her costume is jazzy 80's fun time chosen by Molly because Molly's kind of takes care of the costume side of things. And I feel like I given a really long answer to that but,

Sofia No it's so interesting. So I guess that the, the puppets character is really built into it, would that be?

Hattie Yeah, absolutely.

Sofia I'm going to sidetrack and ask another question. So all of these puppets who are so individualistic, what happens to them? Do you do you repurpose any of the puppets or do they just sort of like stay in boxes after? I mean, obviously some puppets you reuse when you take a show back out on tour. But is there any point when you retire a puppet and then what happens to the retired puppets if they ever retire?

Matt So we have a big ritual burning.
(laughter)

Sofia Wow okay!

Hattie Oh Christ, that would smell awful.

Sofia Especially the fisherman one, I wouldn't want to smell it

Matt So the short answer is they never retire. They're used in workshop settings. They're used time and time again, I would say. Harry, who is from our very first show, Seemingly Invisible. Yeah, he's still used in workshops. And actually we use him as a basis to make another five workshop puppets or well Lydia did. And then yet otherwise there are a few puppets that just live in a suitcase. But I don't think you can chuck away a puppet.

Hattie No, like is really it's really hard to do, I think.

Sofia Do they sort of get the, well, I guess they end up having their own personalities in the room like you could have, just like.

Hattie Well, logically, they don't.

Sofia Well, of course, the puppet with a personality, this is Chucky. Oh, God, no.

Hattie But you've put so much into that, like you've made them, which is one thing. But then you've you've projected so much character into them. And like with Flux, we've spent sort of three or four, four years developing it on and off. And after that much time, there's there's no way that I could, I could, like, deconstruct Kate in that way. But then. Yeah, but then also when we made her first prototype to her second prototype, to her third like it, that in itself felt weird because then you sort of do have to let go and you have to take bits off and cut bits out and um. But, yeah, I think the the main part that we could never kind of do anything with is the head, and lile when when we CELL abroad, the head went in hand luggage with us because we were like, well, we can recreate everything else, but you can't you just can't recreate a head in exactly the same way.

Sofia That must have been so strange to go through the airport with just a puppet head. In your luggage!

Hattie Yeah, but then also we have like in R&D for Kinder that we just did. Ben from in our hands made a little appearance because we need needed we didn't have all the finished puppets we were still working out what we needed. So then we wanted something there that we could use. He won't be in the final show, but in the rehearsals, it's really useful to have something that's almost right. And so, yeah, they, they, they're part of the team.

Sofia Part of the team. I like that. How long does it take to make a puppet like Kate? And then I'd like to know some aedvice about how you would build her. But lets answer the first question first.

Matt Very good question. And well, we've all three combined prototypes. And, you know, the thing with the puppet is it's never quite finished. You're always adding or fixing or etc.. But yeah, I would say, like, if we're putting in hours or days, let's say, I don't know, maybe four or five weeks easily of all three of those prototypes and changing them and, you know, quickly cutting in one rehearsal with the second prototype of Kate, she was too long and there was too much foam in the middle. So I literally sawed her in half and then took out three or four panels and then we stuck her back together again to make her shorter.

Hattie I have a picture of Matt with a saw going through Kate as well.

Sofia Oh, my God. Great. I need to see this. Send it to me.

Hattie Yeah.

Sofia So what advice would you give someone who wants to create a puppet? Like what should they be thinking of which they look out for. Obviously factoring things might change, but it's like, what's your top tip?

Hattie I would say don't worry about trying to use fancy tools or fancy materials to put her together. Like a lot of, a lot of the joints can be done with pipe work and like little wooden balls or we've used deodorant rollers as sockets before and kind of just play with putting things together and seeing what movement they have and what movement that fits in a body, because like, you don't want for example, you don't want the legs to be able to bend both ways of the knee. The puppeteer can control it, but it's a lot easier if they don't do that on their own, especially for moments when I'm left alone with her. So, thinking about where you want the joints to move is, is really important. What would you say Matt?

Matt So I'd say, weight, weight is a massive thing to take in. There's no point trying to make a full sized puppet out of carved wood because it's just going to way so much, you won't be able to operate it. And I would say, look at your own anatomy or a human's anatomy, like Hattie, anatomy, like Hattie was saying, like, you know, the elbow your elbow joints can't go the wrong way. So, you know, there's a bone there that's stopping that. So how can you recreate that so that you don't have, you have that exact same movement and fingers and hands as well? Dexterity in a puppet is really important with that sort of size.

Sofia Great. And so we meet a character called Alan in the show why has he got no legs?

Matt We knew that and genuinely we didn't have enough puppeteers on stage available to operate another life sized puppet. So then we said, well, why don't we try and develop that concept further and add in shoulders and one full arm. And actually the way that he's, Alans operated, in certain angles, my body as the puppeteer, so my lower torso and legs fill in that gap. He's also always, he's always also in relation to Kate so you look at Kate, you see a full body, you look at Alan, you see a full body. There is no body there. But it's also kind of like a trickery of, you know, you, you ask in the audience, fill in the gaps. We've, given you a bit of him. You can fill in the gaps of what he might look like and might be that people people think that he takes on the rest of my body.

Hattie So, yeah, narratively, he is also always in relation to Kate as well. Like, he he doesn't really have his own storyline. He kind of, his character, is always existing in relation to what's happening to Kate, so it makes sense for him to not physically be there as much in that way as well.

Sofia Cool. So we're going to go back a little bit in time. What was the first puppet you ever made?

Hattie The first puppet I ever made is up there actually called Mildred, yeah, I've got some puppets in boxes on the shelf behind me.

Sofia Now, I'd like to see Mildred,

Hattie Don't worry, they don't come out at night

Sofia So who is, Mildred?

Hattie She is a little Punch and Judy style puppet who looks a little bit like a witch. The idea was that she was a teacher, but she was secretly a witch. So she's like wearing a black outfit and kind of and a white blouse. But then she's got grey hair and a big pimple and hairy legs and all of these things.

Sofia That sounds great.

Hattie I mean, she is she is great. There all kind of little things that you sort of stereotype as a witch to look. But that was when we were on ERASMUS in Prague, and that was me and Molly and Matt and a chap called Haffi. So we all went and study there back in 2009, I think it was, when we were doing our degree and we learnt how to make puppets when we were there.

Matt And that's also where I made my first puppet. Similar to Hattie. We were taught by this guy called Carol Vostarek was his name, and he taught us how to make these kind of Punch and Judy – esque type puppets. And my one was a pirate called Captain Thorri Snorrison

Hattie That was definitely an Icelandic influence. And yeah,

Matt Definitely. Yeah. And he had kind of a yeah eyepatch and dreads and a wooden leg with a bow and arrow stuck out of it. Yeah. It was good fun,

Hattie Although actually it's a shame she's kind of not on this one because Molly's that she made there is the only one of the three that's actually made it into one of our shows.

Sofia Oh who was Molly's puppet and what show?

Hattie it her puppet was this lovely, strange looking character with really cavernous eyes called Noah is that right?. Yeah. He's got little little ears and big cavernous eyes, just tiny little pupils at the back. And he kind of has these really pouty lips and looks sad all the time. So he was in the sort of first experiment of a show that we did.

Matt Whispers from a Wandering Tent. Yeah.

Hattie Yeah.

Matt Good timing. He sort of looked like, I don't know, like Dobby. Yes. Dobby the House Elf from Harry Potter.

Hattie Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sofia I now want to see all of these puppets so you owe me photos with these puppets. So if money was no object, what puppet would you like to make and what would it show. What would the show be about?

Hattie Go on then Matt.

Matt Yeah. So it wouldn't be a puppet, it would be puppets plural. And basically it would be. Called The Ark of Noah, and it's basically the story of Noah's Ark, except all of the animals are puppets to the scale of what the so full, an actual giraffe. Oh, wow. An actual

elephant puppet. Lions, tigers, snakes, birds. I've got it all planned out. Just about half a million pounds.

Sofia We'll do it, great. Easy target, raise half million like that. Yeah. I'm going to surprise you all one day and learn how to make a puppet in my own time. And I'm going to, at the end of the year, go and show you my puppet.

I have one more question for you both. So you sort of mentioned it a little bit. But overall, if somebody wanted to do like what Smoking Apples, do, what would be your top tip be for puppeteering like as in terms of making I know we touched on that a little bit. But even performing like as puppeteers what would your top tip be?

Hattie It's hard because there's things that I want to say that don't feel like they're that helpful, like just try things out, you know, just just have a go have a play. And it's like, yes, that that is genuinely true. And that is something that you should do. But also where do you start? So, I mean, a lot of companies like, you can get in touch with them, ask if they can come and watch one of their R&Ds like. I would go and see stuff, before we went to Prague, right before we started doing puppetry. We'd all fallen in love with it already. It wasn't that we were there and we happened to do it. We were like, I've already seen so many different kinds of puppetry. And I knew that that was something I really wanted to do. So I would, I would just sort of see as much as you can and speak to people, ask questions and drop us, drop us a line on Twitter or Facebook or anything. And but not just us, speak to everyone because we've got one way of doing it, but everyone's got their own way of doing it.

Matt My top tip would be don't choose to work with a puppet because it's going to replace an actor or something like that, because the process of working with puppets is a lot longer. And actually, the more you work with them, the more work you need to do with them, whether that's building or whether that's actually, you know, if there's three people working on a puppet, you need to work together for a long time before you find that kind of in sync, complicit way of working. But when it is done, you know, well from seeing other shows and stuff, you know, it can be super, super... You know, I always say you can watch a magic trick and you don't know how it's done and you go, wow, that's really cool. You watch puppetry, you see how it's done, and you go, wow, that's really cool. So one is hiding the mechanism and one is not hiding the mechanism of how it's done. And that's that's where I love puppetry the most, is, is, is when you see three, four, five, one person doing it really well, it's that moment of magic of like, that is that is an inanimate object that 100 percent believe is real.

Hattie And speaking as a former professional magician that is high praise indeed.

Matt Yeah you can buy my DVD, you can buy my DVD.

Hattie Brilliant

Sofia Thank you. Those those are all my questions for you for this episode.

Matt Okay, so you've been working with us. Sorry, you haven't been working with us for that long, but now we have you. We don't want to go back to life without you. True story. So what is your favourite Smoking Apple's moment from the last year?

Sofia Oh, that's a good one. I have a few, I think, so when I first came and saw Arbor, I can't remember the month. It was last year.

Matt August?

Sofia Yeah It was August. Yeah. It was the outdoor performance, seeing Arbor for the first time was something else. Well, I've seen images of Arbor online, but I didn't realise, I didn't realise how big he was going to be, he's huge. And I remember, I remember feeling just as excited as all of the children who were seeing Arbor for the first time. And then, and then actually my my favourite moments are our general meetings that we have weekly.

Hattie Really.

Sofia I still like mainly because you say that it's going to be an hour and it turns out to be like an hour 45, to two hours. And I love the fact that they're just mainly chatting. And there's something actually quite, quite lovely about it, even though because, again, it's been like a whole remote year for so many people. There's something quite nice in the consistency of it, because it really made me feel super part of the team really quickly. And being in those meetings each week, knowing that I'm going to have that time with you all remote and one day in person, is a favourite moment because it's when I get to to chat you.

Hattie Well, thank you very much, Sofia and Matt and me, can I thank myself?

Matt Hattie

Sofia Thank you Hattie. Thanks.

Matt Thank you

Hattie Brilliant so yeah. Tune in for another podcast all around puppets and our show Flux, which will be touring virtually online through, through most of June. So look out for it. Check it out. Thanks very much.