

Wanzen und Waffe - A Bug in Suit of Armor

## **VOLUNTEERING: FREIWILLIGE ARBEIT**

by Pam McNaughton

### **WANTED:**

A director's assistant (M/F) to volunteer with a playwright/director and a puppet troupe on the development of a new play.

Please contact the [Puppentheater Plappermaul](#) in Heidelberg-Pfaffengrund.

As an American living in Germany I am looking for ways to interact with the local population, so I am intrigued by this request (completely in German, of course!) on the web site of a nearby puppet theater. Should I respond? I am not a native speaker of their language, and I know relatively little about this theater, but I have seen some of their productions and am impressed by their energy, imagination, and rapport with children.

The repertoire of this nonprofit club is based on Kasper plays, traditional shows

with a standard set of characters similar to Punch and Judy. They typically use hand puppets with some rod and shadow puppets included. They work behind and under their fixed stage, housed in space rented in a church community center. Their location and style of performance will become issues as we begin to work together. This new play, *Ich bin eine Wanze - was bist du?* (*I'm a bug - what are you?*) will be the first professional offering, the beginning of a new repertoire.

Soon I meet the three people who will work together to create the play:

- Stefan Mensing, playwright/director, originally a storyteller. Stefan has many years of experience writing for and directing both human actors and puppets.

- Winfried Hildenbeutel, who founded the puppet troupe with a single puppet, the

flippant, heckling raven Jakob.

- Elke Thomer, experienced in voice work and music, a yoga instructor, and a dedicated member of the puppet troupe.

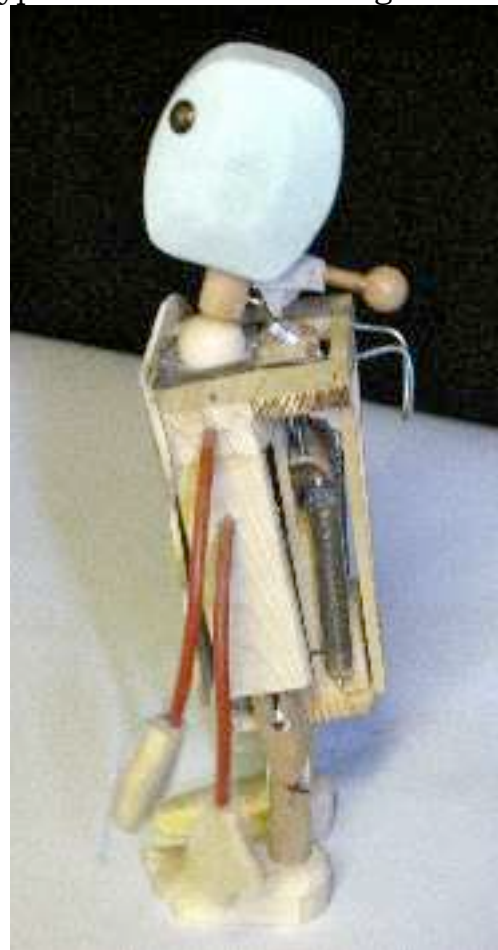
Stefan arrives with the first two or three pages of script and ideas about its subsequent development. As we begin to work together I come to understand that this is like painting a picture, that each decision taken is another brushstroke on the canvas and influences the overall effect. Stefan applies his “paints” that include the text, the puppeteers' voices, the physical nature and appearance of the puppets, the design of the playing surfaces, the few props, the sound and lighting, and the appearance of the puppeteers. My role is to capture on paper each of these decisions as it coalesces during rehearsal.

The text of the play takes shape as we work together. After each day of rehearsal and discussion Stefan heads back to his hotel room to write the next scenes in longhand. My task is then to type these on the unfamiliar German keyboard, with its characters ä, ö, ü and ß. Early on I print out a revised script at home, only to see that it's difficult to integrate the American pages with the German ones because our standard paper sizes differ. One issue in the text generates prolonged, somewhat tense discussion: Stefan has included a creation myth that presents insects as the masters of the universe, and his use of language paralleling Martin Luther's translation of Genesis, familiar to everyone who knows German, worries Winfried and Elke. Will the pastor of the church that houses them object? Or members of the congregation - will they find it unseemly?

Stefan has a keen interest in testing the puppeteers' voices for the four speaking parts. A particular challenge in Germany is the way that local dialects affect the pronunciation of standard German. These dialects are more encompassing and stronger than the regional accents we're familiar with in the U.S. The test for me is to understand what's said when one of

them slips into dialect; learning standard German is only the beginning of communication here. Stefan encourages Winfried and Elke to select core sentences for each character, so that they can practice those specific voices. One of Winfried's voices is low, rumbling and rolling. When he uses this one he has to be careful not to invoke the voice of an infamous 20th century German leader.

Stefan, Winfried and Elke spend a good deal of time and energy discussing the characters of the puppets and the capabilities they will need. These will be table puppets, standing figures with a handhold on the back and a knob to control the head. Proportions are discussed. I try to capture the details as they ricochet around the room, then Winfried builds a prototype for our next meeting.



Prototype Puppet

This first model, raw and unfinished, a body with eyes as the sole feature, has an

expressive power that establishes a connection to us on the other side of the stage. Stefan wants Winfried and Elke to experiment with different types of movement for the puppets, to take them home and become very familiar with them. His eyes shine with enthusiasm as he emphasizes that the puppets are not bound by the laws of gravity as human actors are.

The stage is very minimalist. Stefan would like it to be abstract, a table surface covered in black to suggest the forest floor, simple columns swathed in black to represent trees. Winfried decides to add large black leaves with muted silver veins. Some of the leaves appear partially eaten - perhaps the audience will wonder from the beginning who, or what, might have bitten them.

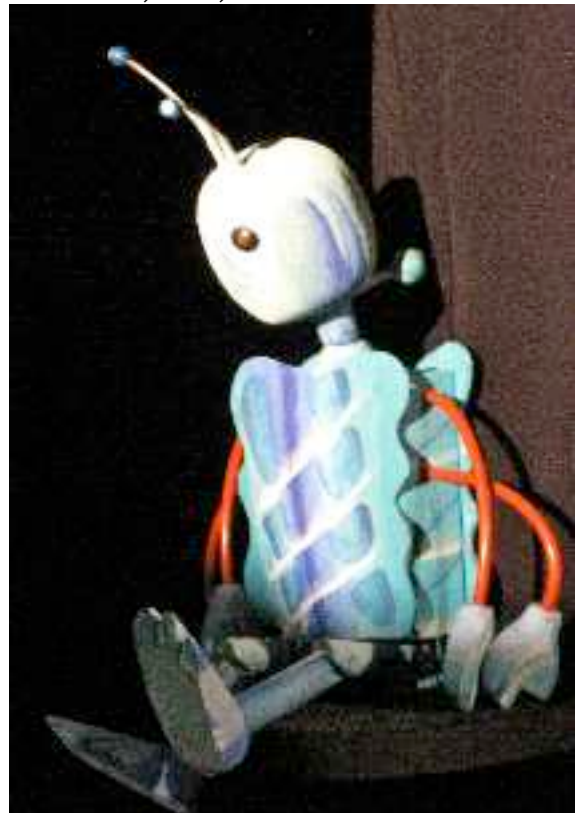
Now the discussion turns to props. One puppet will don armor for an important scene. Ideas are discussed and discarded, tested and refined, simplified. What items could a bug find in the woods to adapt for battle? A rusty, dented tin can for armor? An acorn cap for a helmet? A discarded plastic fork with a tooth broken off, yet serviceable as a weapon? Winfried builds the suit and helmet and Elke practices removing them smoothly from the puppet. Stefan encourages her to have the puppet turn directly to her and ask for help, momentarily breaking the fiction that the puppeteers are invisible.

Winfried is excited to use a new hardware/software package that enables the two puppeteers to handle all the sound and lighting without needing someone at a control board. The system looks promising, the developer responds fairly quickly to Winfried's concerns, the effects of gradual fade-ins and fade-outs are wonderful, but the system is somewhat temperamental.

Stefan gives Elke and Winfried strongly worded guidance on their own appearance. Until now they have been accustomed to performing out of sight of the audience, but for this production their upper bodies,

arms and faces will be in full view. Stefan urges them to dress in black shirts and gloves, to remove all watches, rings, jewelry. If he could, he would have Winfried use contact lenses instead of glasses and shave off his mustache, but these last two changes are more personal than Winfried is prepared to accept. Fortunately I don't have to change my appearance, but in solidarity I often find myself wearing black tops and pants to rehearsals.

For me the rehearsals have become a seminar on puppet theater, as the discussions range from technical details on sound and lighting issues to the psychological underpinnings of the text and the developmental stage of the audience they want to address. Stefan tells them that they will understand the play quite differently by the time they reach its hundredth performance. Sadly, I must leave Germany before the premiere on November 20, but I am delighted by the experience of working with them across the months and I look forward to watching the DVD of their, our, work.



The Completed Bug - Farbwanze