

Sandglass Theater, Sovanna Phum and the Redfern Center for the Arts

The Story of the Dog

Case study by Kathie deNobriga

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The puppet is the embodiment of a world no longer ours, an abstraction of a memory, a dream which is recalled. It is other than us, but it lives through us. We grasp it, and in grasping it, it takes hold of us. In dancing with the puppet, we are dancing with our more secret side. We are integrating parts of ourselves.

From Sandglass' Artistic Statement

In 1980 Eric Bass and Ines Zeller were both successful solo puppeteers, working the European festival circuit, he with *Autumn Portraits*, and she with *Punsch*, bread-and-butter works that remained in their repertoires for many years. Shortly after they met in Munich, they were at work on their first joint venture. Then, as described in Sandglass' 20th Anniversary commemorative book by Andrew Periale, "Their French agent informed them that without being established as a legal entity somewhere else, they would be liable for taxes in France – no small matter. A transatlantic phone call and several signatures later, and they were a legal company in the state of New York."

Eric, Ines and their two daughters eventually moved to Putney in 1986, a village of 2,000 in Southern Vermont. Two years later they mounted an international puppet festival in nearby-Brattleboro, giving them a heightened presence in their new community.

Relationships forged by years of European touring gave Eric and Ines opportunities to direct and perform in Germany, Finland, Switzerland, Poland, Norway, Australia and Canada. In all, the company's productions have toured 24 countries, performing in theaters, festivals and cultural institutions and winning numerous international prizes.

In addition to touring and performing their work at home, Sandglass Theatre is engaged in a diverse set of activities: presenting, teaching, and producing festivals.

Artist as Presenter

Sandglass procured a little 60-seat home of its own in 1996, and began to present their own work and that of guest artists in a century-old, charmingly-renovated livery stable (barn) theater. A tiny office shares the former upper hayloft with a large multi-use room for puppet construction, rehearsals and board meetings. When Sandglass opened their own space, officially becoming a non-profit organization (Sandglass Center for Puppetry and Theater Research), they began to identify more with the physical space. As Periale relates, "...it became clear to them that a theater needs to service its community...though it didn't happen overnight, this realization brought with it a fundamental shift in the way they saw themselves – from artists who primarily did international touring to an

organization with a growing sense of community. ‘Now, when we tour internationally,’ says Eric, ‘we think of ourselves as representing Vermont.’”

A presenting series brings artists of significant stature to Putney; Sandglass’ commitment to its peers in the Network of Ensemble Theaters has resulted in consistent presenting of other ensembles. Participation in the National Performance Network provides a modest subsidy for at least one (sometimes two) performance residencies a year; NPN has also enabled Eric and Managing Director Leslie Turpin to cross paths with artists from across the country. Through the home seasons and the biennial international puppet festival, Sandglass has presented over 75 guest artists and companies.

In 2007, Sandglass Theater introduced a new series for four weekends in spring -- Voices of Community: Theater as Social Activism. Acclaimed world-class performers, from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds, including Anisa George, Lynn Manning, Anida Yeou Ali, John O’Neal, Shishir Kurup, M.U.G.A.B.E.E., Cultural Odyssey, Coatlicue, Lyena Strelkoff and Robert Karimi, have performed and conducted a range of residency activities with diverse constituencies.

Teaching

In addition to conducting workshops and classes as part of their touring, each summer Sandglass teaches a three-week intensive training program, now located at the University of Connecticut. Known across the country to puppeteers as “Puppet Boot Camp,” the camp attracts serious artists from across the country to hone their craft.

Festival producers

Drawing on their friendships with European artists, in 1988 Eric and Ines mounted an international puppet festival, developed in collaboration with Mara Williams, a local arts producer and former museum director. The event grew into The Green Mountain Puppet Festival, which has been held every other year since 1996. Every September, nine or ten puppet companies, both domestic and international, fill halls in Brattleboro, Marlboro and Putney.

Collaborative work

In addition to creating their own pieces, working with a handful of ensemble members who come and go depending on the needs of the piece, Eric has a strong career as a director, working with puppet companies primarily in Northern Europe. Eric also works with local youth, for example directing a production of *The Conference of the Birds* in 2000 with eight local youth, ages 13-17, and later *The Good Person of Szechuan* with the New England Youth Theater. Beginning in 1995, Eric developed a relationship with nearby Marlboro College, as a guest director and adjunct faculty, creating six large-scale pieces with students. This collaborative work, besides providing needed income, has raised Sandglass’ local visibility and succeeded in thoroughly weaving Eric, Ines and Sandglass into the cultural fabric of the area. In particular the 2003 collaboration with Nimble Arts and Rob Mermin of Circus Smirkus on the circus-based *Between Sand and Stars* was a landmark performance: designed as a large-scale work at Landmark College,

it drew hundreds of people to three sold-out performances, catapulting Sandglass into greater local visibility.

Creation

Sandglass continues to create exciting new work. Their latest work is a collaboration with a health care training institute to develop a new work on the creativity of people living with dementia. The research for this project included twice-weekly visits to a local assisted-care facility where they learned a technique called 'Time Slips' to evoke memories, inventions and creativity from the elderly residents.

The core ensemble of three (Eric, Ines and currently Kirk Murphy, formerly an intern) is supplemented with guest artists (such as Bob Berky for the current *Richard 3.5: Light Ruminations on Murder*) or larger casts as needed, as in the frequent community entertainments such as *An Almost Victorian Christmas*.

Since 1982 they have created 18 original productions within the ensemble (and another dozen with other companies and local youth), mounted regular international tours, and garnered numerous accolades and awards for its artistry and vision of co-founders Eric and Ines Zeller Bass.

Collaboration with Cambodia: *The Story of the Dog*

To understand Sandglass' collaboration with Cambodian puppet company Sovanna Phum, one must first truly grasp the scale of the endeavor.

Sandglass has the equivalent of 2 full-time staff members, with a typical annual budget of about \$100,000 (although it doubles during the biennial Green Mountain Puppet Festival); a contribution of \$1,000 is considered a major gift. How did this small-scale company, living and working at a grassroots level, successfully complete a multi-year, international exchange project with a company halfway around the globe, costing over \$165,000? The answers are time, relationships, and more time.

The origin of the collaboration lay in a tour organized by Cambodian Living Arts in January 2003 when Sandglass Artistic Director Eric Bass traveled, along with about 20 other artists and potential donors, to meet Cambodian artists. A dedicate group of artists, Sovanna Phum presented one of their productions, which combined traditional Cambodian dance and shadow puppetry in non-traditional ways, and Eric was instantly drawn to the company's aesthetics and forms. When he approached Sovanna Phum director Mann Kosal about a possible collaboration, things clicked. Sovanna Phum saw an opportunity to mount *The Story of the Dog*, a script that dealt with the unpopular theme of war and needed significant resources. Sandglass obtained a grant from the Asian Cultural Council to bring Kosal to Putney in May of 2004; when Kosal saw *Between Sand and Stars*, the artistic relationship gelled even further. Then in June, a 2-week period of initial mutual artistic exploration allowed the two ensembles to learn about each other. This initial visit built a foundation for a continued relationship, and developed an equitable working process that transcended the limitations of language.

Both companies combine puppets, visual images, movement theatre and circus arts to tell stories, but techniques, skills, cultural attitudes and approaches are very different. For example, Sovanna Phum is master both of giant shadow puppets (the “Big Skins” which traditionally tell the epic story of the Ramayana) and the “Small Skins.” Mann Kosal is master at integrating the two. By contrast Sandglass artists are acknowledged masters of the hand-and-rod puppet style inspired by Japanese puppetry traditions. Sandglass uses improvisation as a rehearsal technique: the word ‘improvisation’ doesn’t even exist in Cambodian -- the closest equivalent is “keep rowing.”

Eighteen months later, in November 2005, four members of Sandglass returned to Phnom Penh for a seven-week residency, to actually produce and rehearse the work, followed by a 3-week tour to three sites across Cambodia, performing in villages and cities alike. An engaging documentary (*The Story of the Dog: A Journey of Collaboration* by Robin MacArthur and Gabriel Castro Rivera) provides some glimpse into the two companies’ joint working process: the crafting of the scenery, costumes and the puppets, cross-training and composing music in multiple musical idioms. The exploration of different aesthetics is clearly revealed in two scenes: Eric explaining how breath and focus imbue the puppet with life force; later in the film, the Sovanna Phum artists coaching to their American counterparts in the full-bodied and vigorous movement required to animate the shadow puppets. The documentary also includes excerpts of the performance itself and the rapt response of Cambodian audiences.

In August 2006, Sandglass was able to bring Sovanna Phum and *The Story of the Dog* to the U.S. as originally planned, after receiving a grant from the Ensemble Theatre Collaborations for \$35,000, about one-third of the project budget. Their partner was Redfern Arts Center at Keene State College in Keene, New Hampshire. Sandglass and Redfern already had a history: in 2005 Redfern had supported a two-week residency enabling Sandglass to complete *Between Sand and Stars*. Redfern director Bill Menezes had accompanied Sandglass, at his own expense, on part of the Cambodian tour. Utilizing Redfern facilities, the two companies re-mounted the production in a two-and-a-half week rehearsal period and then gave ten performances in six states: arts centers at Fitchberg State College (MA), Stony Brook University (NY), First Works Providence (RI), as well as Redfern Arts Center (NH), Willimantic’s arts magnet high school (CT), and the Green Mountain Puppet Festival. Two or three significant New England presenters backed out, feeling that it was ‘too risky’ to present a work about war to family audiences – a strange concept to the Cambodian company whose audiences are targeted by age.

Working with Redfern allowed Sandglass and Sovanna Phum to realize their vision by having a space with the size and technical capacity to make *The Story of the Dog* a full-scale, fully-produced work, raising the quality of the final production. Menezes and Redfern also provided critical services, advising on booking and touring logistics, offering significant technical design and support, and providing housing. One success factor was the “clear division of responsibilities, to maximize efficiency...clarifying what each of us could do best...that was vital.”

Menezes, Sandglass and Sovanna Phum also arranged a series of residency activities that were deemed to be very successful, with high attendance, fully engaging the intended audiences (whether school groups, adult learners, or Cambodian refugees and émigrés). Menezes reports that the residency was “the most satisfying and successful residency we have ever hosted.” Cambodians living in the U.S were happy to re-connect with their own culture, and attended the performances and workshops in large numbers. At one point during a standard post-show discussion, the elders began discussing the play in Khmer, the native Cambodian language. A teenager stepped up to translate the conversation into English, perhaps illustrating the central role that immigrant youth play in community and cultural life.

Critical to the artistic success was, in Eric’s opinion, the nature of the collaboration between the artists. From the outset of the project, there was a mutual agreement to make all decisions together. One reason it worked was that “We just said yes to everything. Whatever anyone proposed, we said, yes, we’ll try that.” They committed to developing a truly bilingual piece, with neither group directing the project; Mann Kosal said, “at times I forget that we were two different companies.”

Sandglass’ artistic practice has shifted as a result, in addition the obvious (though not easy) process of learning a new style of puppetry. Eric says they now have a clearer way to talk about what they do and a deeper understanding of their own practice. “Teaching the cross-cultural workshops in dance, puppetry and music helped us to realize what we had actually done, sometimes by instinct. Communicating the process to others made it even clearer to us...it raised the bar on our own standards of artistry, and gave our cross-cultural mission new legs....We have always been a collaborative company but this project has set a new tone for collaborations.”

Eric says, “The project raised the visibility of our company in our community as well as among colleagues nationally.” But at the same time, the project did not have the reach that the partners had envisioned: several venues which had expressed strong initial interest in the tour pulled back, either because of the subject matter, the scale or (in one case) a new opera with a similar theme had already been booked. Sandglass searched in vain for an agent to assist them in the booking, and speculates that this would have been extremely useful.

Sandglass and Redfern later realized a basic flaw in their touring strategy. Accustomed to booking tours with university presenters and theatre departments, they overlooked a potential interested sponsor, the Asian Studies Program at Stony Brook, which has their own venue and who asked, “why didn’t you call us earlier?” This was a key learning: “We now know better what questions to ask: like, who *should* we be talking to?” Their assumptions about who should book the work were challenged, and the touring approaches may shift as a result.

At least one snag cost the collaboration considerable time and money. Sandglass was instructed that visas for all the Green Mountain Festival performers, including the

Cambodians, had to be filed at the same time. The visa applications for the Swedish company were “lost,” and Sandglass had to replicate the labor-intensive process. Then the Cambodian visas were inexplicably delayed: Sandglass could not buy the airline tickets until the visas were approved, costing them thousands of additional dollars. Menezes recalls the uncertainty of the process: “... we didn’t even know if Sovanna Phum was going to be granted visas to come into the U.S. until six days before their arrival. But we kept working as if it was going to happen. One almost felt we were willing it to happen.” A well-placed call to Senator Leahy’s office seems to have been effective.

Since the U.S. tour, *The Story of the Dog* has passed into the hands of Sovanna Phum, which is still performing it in Cambodia, sparking conversations about war and about this new style of puppetry. Sovanna Phum is one of the few theatre companies remaining in Cambodia, following the 1970s genocide when thousands of Cambodian artists were killed. “Touring” as we know it, is not possible -- there are no theatres and few sponsors. But every Friday night, Sovanna Phum performs in their own theatre, or hosts visiting artists; Cambodians attend for free. Their basic source of income is the sale of shadow puppets in their little shop. Although curious to know if the piece has changed, Eric did not feel territorial about it, although he would like to visit Cambodia again and see how the show has evolved. “It feels good to know that they have a tool for their own sustainability, that their capacity has grown too,” in part as a result from making their first trip to the U.S. Additionally, they learned three-dimensional puppet techniques. They got experience in booking a tour and learned the associated skills; usually an NGO who commissions the work handles the arrangement. Finally, Kosal was intrigued by the recycling ethic in the States, and wants to bring this message back to his country. Eric feels that experiencing deeply another’s culture is itself capacity-building.

The project was a huge stretch for the company, in terms of time, money and human resources, and there were long-term consequences. “We put everything into this project,” said managing director Leslie Turpin, “we didn’t really have a plan for what to do afterwards, how to pave the way, or position Sandglass for the next thing. All our resources went into finishing the piece, not as much into promoting, booking.” Sandglass is now more committed to planning and has gained invaluable experience in the areas of fundraising, international collaboration, aesthetic integration and marketing. Eric says that he personally feels more capable to raise funds for and organize a large-scale project.

The scale of their home space requires that Sandglass tour in order to survive, but the time and effort needed to successfully book a tour (much less a large-scale, bilingual production) is a weak link in Sandglass’ economic model. Furthermore, Eric reports a shift in the touring climate. Even before the current economic crisis, presenters were more risk-averse than in the days when a Sandglass tour would raise enough money to fund its next creative period. Previously, presenters familiar with the quality of the work would book Sandglass’ latest show before it was even finished; now they need to see the finished work first. Booking takes an inordinate amount of time, and with Sandglass’ small scale, the additional effort needed to book a tour detracts from its other administrative and creative tasks.

Eric acknowledges, “we have no shortage of ideas, we just haven’t been able to translate them into sustainability. Over the past five, six years, we’ve quadrupled the amount of programming we’ve done, but our income has not increased at all. We’re achieving more on less.”

A challenge for Sandglass, and many of its peers, is balancing its roles as producer and presenter. As a Partner in the National Performance Network, Sandglass has been motivated to expand its presenting and residency activities. Yet the energy put towards presenting is that much less energy devoted to creating and touring, which is the company’s financial and artistic lifeblood. “If we don’t tour, our educational programs suffer and our relationships with other artists suffer.”

Inspired by the cross-fertilization of ideas and mutual support from the Network of Ensemble Theatres, Sandglass is pursuing the development of a regional mini-network. In 2009 Sandglass, Heartbeat and Touchstone did a pilot project, co-presenting Robert Karimi’s *Kaotic Good* in Putney, New Haven CT and Bethlehem PA. “NET inspired us to think differently, to change our expectations, to plan for long-term.”

The three partners evaluated the pilot project in a spring 2009 meeting, and noted many benefits. Beyond the mundane sharing of travel costs, grant-writing and consolidation of tech information, promotional materials, etc., the theatres each created their own unique workshop opportunities, giving the other theatres new insights about segments of their own home communities where “we could forge new relationships and discover audiences.” Funding has been secured from the NEA for a second tour, while plans are to expand next year with 4-5 ensembles in the Northeast.

“We have to start our own booking agencies and talk to other theatres, creating an artist-to-artist network.” Sandglass is not interested in replicating the product-focused touring framework, but more interested in a touring framework that is process-focused, which “puts the artists in the driver’s seat.

There is also a desire to create a touring model that is driven by the unique process through which ensemble theatre is created,” specifically the relationship-driven, collaborative dimensions which are rarely utilized in traditional touring models. The mini-network emerging in the Northeast will also create a touring structure that can provide supportive and critical dialogue between artists who value and understand ensemble theatre and its processes. This artist-to-artist connection and the “Do It Yourself” sensibility carry a lot of powerful energy and sense of self-agency.

Kathie deNobriga is a founding member of Alternate ROOTS, a service organization for community-based artists in the South; she served as ROOTS’ executive director and planning/development director for ten years. During that time she co-edited an anthology of new plays from the southern theatre and initiated a consortium to create the Community Arts Training Directory, now available through www.communityarts.net. DeNobriga was a Fellow in the Rockefeller Foundation’s Next Generation Leadership program, and is serving a second term as

mayor pro-tem on the City Council of Pine Lake, Georgia, where she is an advocate and practitioner for arts and community development. She is an independent consultant for numerous grass-roots arts organizations, state arts agencies, and foundations interested in building organizational capacity.