

HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD

Puppet Power: Unmasking Trafficking in America by Raven Kaljana

As a child, I drew and sculpted, but never dreamed of becoming a puppeteer...I couldn't quite picture myself as an adult. My family had trafficked me from the time I was a very small child – their property to be bought and sold. In between being rented out to pedophiles - in the neighbourhood, across state lines, and over international borders - to be victimized in sexual assaults which they photographed and filmed for profit, I lived with my family and attended school. My parents encouraged me to excel at my schoolwork, to divert suspicion about what they were doing to me. Dependent and vulnerable, I obeyed.

Keeping my grades up ultimately enabled me to escape from the claws of the criminal network, and to build a better life. University provided structure away from my family after I cut off from them. It allowed me some safety in which to recover from the trauma, build a new support system, and it helped nurture my potential, and strengthen my voice.

After graduation, I moved to San Francisco, which provided an amazing opportunity...Folkmanis Puppets hired and trained me as a puppeteer. Inspired by the founders - who love what they do - the company became a replacement family to me. My colleague Elaine Kollias would say, "Puppets can change the world, if only we will let them." She'd received letters from children's therapists who helped traumatised children work through their experiences using puppets. She had notes of thanks from refugee camps with photos of children playing with puppets the Folkmanises had donated. The interaction helped them learn again to reconnect with others, and find pockets of safety and caring in a world which had been turned upside down.

After a few years, it dawned on me that puppets might make the perfect medium to tell some of the stories from my own life. At university, I'd honed my art and writing skills, but paintings were silent, and it still felt too painful for me to put my experience together in the form of a book. I worried about my safety, should I tell my story publicly in America. However, I felt a social responsibility to bear witness to the atrocities I'd experienced and witnessed, in order to help facilitate change in the world. Puppetry represented a form of communication which could encourage people to listen with their hearts, and not shut down. After work, I'd give trainings on the topic of child sexual exploitation and human trafficking to charities offering support services to survivors. Some trainees became overwhelmed, hearing about the exploitation I'd experienced as a child. It's hard to accept that this sort of criminal activity happens in America. When I finished the presentations on the fact I'd become a puppeteer, some people cheered.

A turning point for me as a teen, trapped and unsure of whether I would survive to adulthood, involved an epiphany where I realised that my life was worth defending, that I deserved - and should find a way to build - a life that I would love. As an adult, working as a puppeteer brought me happiness that I never could access as a child, living in such fear. I loved performing puppetry for grownups - such a delight to see that spark of playfulness brighten the room - accessing imagination they may have forgotten.

Photo ©2013 Roy Robinson



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Seeing puppetry as a way to present my history in a way that might help change things for children today, I realised I needed to build my skills. I took courses on puppet-building, playwriting, improvisation, mask work, action theatre, and storytelling, and sought more practical experience. Wendy Morton (now at Folkmanis, formerly of ShadowLight and ILM) hired me through The Shadow Makers, to make some puppets for *The Little Dragon*, a shadow puppet project commissioned by Bose. ShaSha Higby had me help out with some puppetry during one of her shows, and for a few years I worked with Gitty Duncan's troupe, Puppets & Pie. I brought my first (overly expository) script to Lenny Pinna, dramaturg from The O'Neill Centre. He told me honestly that my script "would never work for puppets" but he felt that the story itself was "important," and puppets were the right medium for it. He told me it was imperative that I find a way to make it work.

I realised I needed structured training, and also safe haven from the organised crime networks which had abused me as a child, in order to tell my story on a larger scale. Accepted into the Royal Central School of Speech & Drama, I moved from California to the UK to complete my MA on a collaborative theatre course with a concentration in Puppetry.

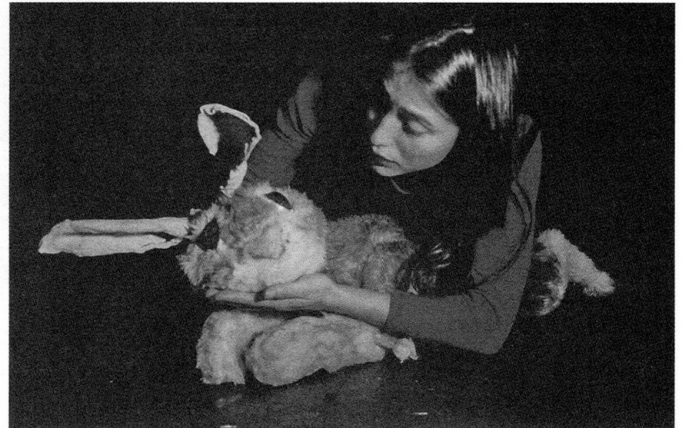
In Britain, I found enough safety, brave and brilliant collaborators, and a supportive environment in which to put together *Hooray for Hollywood* – a play about child sexual exploitation and human trafficking, based on the real events from my childhood. I created fragile-looking puppets to represent the child characters, tattered and worn, yet lit with an aura of innocence. Shadowy puppeteers demonstrated that children are utterly dependent on adults for survival, and therefore easily manipulated. As my collaborators and I developed the show, we met with some discouragement. I worried about how well we could communicate this challenging topic to an audience. Sarah Wright, daughter of the puppeteers who founded the Little Angel Theatre in London, reassured us about the direct style and social value of the work.



Hooray for Hollywood Puppets ©2008 Raven Kaliana/Photo ©2013 David Bull.

Before our first performance, I felt a powerful sense of meaning and purpose. Afterwards, the audience sat in stunned silence. I shared that the play was drawn from my own experience of survival. Using my training skills, I facilitated a post-show discussion, encouraging people to talk about the social issue of child pornography, and how those crimes affect the young victims. Cultural silencing, which arises from the discomfort we may feel about these issues, only helps the abusers – it does not help the children who are being victimized. Without discussion, there can be no change. People became emotionally involved when given permission to talk about this topic they'd never before considered, and some refused to give up their seats when the next audience arrived.

Peter Glanville, former artistic director at Little Angel Theatre, bravely included *Hooray for Hollywood* within a programme of puppet theatre for adults. It did strike up some controversy, and I received some harassment, which I found quite frightening. However, more and more people stood up to support the show. I involved Childline with the post-show discussions to provide an organizational perspective on the topic. My theatre company, Puppet (R)Evolution, was accepted for a year-long Residency with the Battersea Arts Centre and Puppet Centre Trust. This allowed us to continue developing *Hooray for Hollywood*, and to start on a new show, *Fragile/Sacred*. We performed *Hooray for Hollywood* at the Charleville Festival in France and *Fragile/Sacred*



Fragile/Sacred Puppet ©2011 Raven Kaliana. Actress: Karol Silva.
Photo ©2011 Tinka Slavicek.

premiered at the Suspense Festival in London.

During a run of *Hooray for Hollywood* in London, one reviewer asked if she could help me make the play into a short film. We launched the *Hooray for Hollywood* film and *Outspiral* at Amnesty UK, following with a panel discussion with several charities on human trafficking and child sexual exploitation.

Setting up *Outspiral* and producing the film made it easier for me to travel and provide trainings to charities, and to organise public awareness-raising events. Teaming with *Initiatives of Change* in London in April 2013, we presented a major public awareness raising event. This followed with a screening at London City Hall to help inform a report and policy recommendations for improving services for victims of trafficking in London. I've presented the film for events and trainings across the UK, *Copenhagen Puppet Festival* and *Bornholm Puppet Festival* in Denmark; *Almaty Puppet Carnival* in Kazakhstan, Oxford University; and a UN *Universal Children's Day* event in Geneva. I've been invited to screen the film at NYU, at the UN in New York, and in Puerto Rico for the Titeretada puppet festival.

The more we discuss these crimes, the better we can organise ourselves to prevent them, and break patterns which lead to their perpetuation.

With puppetry, a viewer can engage or disengage with emotionally difficult content to whatever extent they need to do. Heather Henson said the puppets in *Hooray for Hollywood* show a way to, "...Face our deepest fears, our unfathomable truths...lead us out of the darkness..." Puppets resemble children's toys, inviting audience members to personalize the show by investing their own imagination, memory, and emotions. A puppet reminds us of the children we once were, providing a different perspective which can allow us to see new hope and possibilities in ourselves, and in the world.

Raven Kaliana founded *Outspiral* and directs *Puppet (R)Evolution Theatre Company*. She freelances as a puppeteer, puppet maker, and workshop leader. She runs public awareness raising campaigns and trainings on human trafficking and child sexual exploitation, and is a survivor of these crimes herself.

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