

NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR, JIM MORROW

For two weeks in June 2005 I worked with two performers, composer Steven Naylor and Mermaid's production team on concepts for the adaptation of Leo Lionni's **Swimmy, Frederick and Inch by Inch**. For me, this was an opportunity to play with ideas I've been considering for over a year.

Each time we begin a workshop, we do so armed with considerable experience in story adaptation, a script in the form of a storyboard, with ideas concerning process and a number of performance, music and technical options to explore. We then set about solving the multitude of problems associated with turning much loved stories into a piece of theatre that entertains children as young as two years old.

One of the greatest challenges inherent in the process of adapting well known story books into theatre is defining an interpretation which best represents the author's original intent. We are fully aware of the responsibility involved in bringing these much loved stories to life. Because many children have well established relationships with the books, from having them read repeatedly, when he or she is sitting in the audience in anticipation of seeing a favourite story come to life, it's very important that an immediate connection is made. One way to achieve this is to make sure that all the characters and objects look like those in the books and move as a child has imagines them moving.

During the workshop, we were able to advance our knowledge of character and movement substantially and are now in a position to begin construction of all the puppets and props. In conjunction with puppet and object movement, we were also able to evolve sound and music concepts by creating signature music references as well as play with some initial lighting options.

OUR PLAY

The production will be approximately 45 minutes in length and intended for children between the ages of 3 and 7. It will be a fairly large production, physically, with set dimensions including a width of 30 feet, depth 25 feet and height 14 feet. Many of the larger props and set pieces will be designed to collapse for the purpose of storage in special packing crates. We will use two and three dimensional puppets and props manipulated by two performers. There will be a mix of conventional theatre lighting and ultraviolet (black) lighting for special effects as well as a 15 x 12 foot rear projection screen unit. The show will be tightly choreographed with seamless transitions in between the stories. The music will be all originally composed and used to both underscore general moments as well as highlight specific movements. All the narration will be prerecorded, unchanged from the original text, and mixed appropriately with the music and the rear screen video images. The music, narration and screen images will be placed on a DVD which will run continuously from the beginning of the show until the end. At the end of our show we will add a ten minute period for questions from the audience and answers from the performers.

We feel that **Swimmy** is a very good story to begin our play because it's very active with a variety of creatures of interest to our child audience. **Frederick** will be a longer story and slightly more dense, perfect for the middle of the production. Because **Inch by Inch** is upbeat and slightly humorous, it will be an ideal piece for the conclusion of our play

SWIMMY

I imagined, from the very beginning, that **Swimmy** could be told as a beautiful shadow production with two dimensional puppets floating through their watery world as colored shadows. This, we discovered, could be best achieved by constructing the puppets from colored plastic film and projecting a light from a rear projection unit on to a large screen. The objects floated beautifully and looked exactly like the pictures in the book. To achieve the water texture we placed on a DVD, scanned images taken directly from the pages of the book. All together it was a remarkable floating world of translucent colored Lionni images.

We also created two low chairs, on wheels, which the performers used to roll themselves from place to place when performing with the puppets. The chairs were designed so the performer could efficiently move about while remaining under the light source. All the shadow puppets were supported underneath by thin wires. Many of the puppets had articulated parts like tails, jaws, and claws.

FREDERICK

I remember during a visit to Eric Carle's studio in Northampton Ma. seeing an original Frederick, created out of felt by Leo Lionni and presented to Eric as a gift. It was simple, beautiful and elegant. Our desire with the adaptation of **Frederick** is to create a show as simple and as elegant. During the workshop we experimented with two dimensional mice, covered with felt fabric, moving across a raised surface of grass fabric and in and around two dimensional rocks. By manipulating these rocks we discovered simple ways to change location while, at the same time, keeping the action fluid and purposeful. We projected white onto the screen for our general background and scanned images from the book for specific locations. This worked very well. For added special effects we projected ultraviolet (black) light into the set which lent a brightness and crispness to the objects.

For this performance, the performers will be dressed in light colored costumes and visible to the audience when moving puppets and props around the stage. This is a technique based loosely on the Japanese Bunraku puppetry style and a convention we are very familiar with having used it in many of our previous productions.

INCH BY INCH

Issues of scale were foremost on my mind as we began work on the adaptation of this story. In the book, the inchworm is very small relative to the characters he encounters. In order for the audience to see the worm from the back of a 1500 seat auditorium, he has to be a certain size, however. We discovered that a two foot long worm meant that the support characters would have to be so large as to not fit in our set. A six inch

worm was too small to see. We finally settled on a worm about a foot long. All the other characters were still imposing but a size we could manage.

To set this story apart from the other two, we decided to experiment with three dimensional puppets, some as wide as the opening of our set. This discovery was a surprise to me but one I was quite happy to have made. As a result, this show will be visually, very impressive.

As with Frederick, the background will be mostly projected white except for the Heron's legs which will also be an image scanned from the book. The performers will also be visible to the audience during this show.

THE NEXT STEP

Currently we are assessing all aspects of the workshop including construction, tech, narration, music and performance. My first job will be to organize all the information. I intend to begin by creating a storyboard for **Frederick** and **Inch by Inch** to accompany the one already created for **Swimmy**. The storyboard will act as a visual script for the next workshop period. We will identify and purchase the materials needed to construct all the sets props and puppets and then begin the building process. Steven Naylor will continue to work on the show's sound towards having some workable ideas for the next workshop. We will devote much of the next four months to developing all aspects of the production before we meet for a second three week workshop planned for mid November.