

THE HEART OF THE MARIONETTE

By Cindy-Lou Dale

Entering the workshop of Di Filippo Marionette is like stepping into the pages of *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, but instead of Tuscany, this workshop is based in a small hilltop village called Offida, in Italy's Marche region. Think floor to ceiling marionette paraphernalia, festival posters, postcards, old photos, overstuffed drawers filled with trade tools, molds for making miniature heads, old suitcases, cluttered workbenches, and awards from around the world.

Finding Inspiration at the Workshop of Pepe Otal

Remo Di Filippo (PhD, theater history) studied at Commedia dell'arte in Venezia, learning to make leather masks and working on voice and onstage movement and pantomime. He worked as an actor in Barcelona, Spain, and in 2010, he happened upon the world of puppetry when he entered Taller de Marionetas de Pepe Otal (House Workshop Marionettes of Pepe Otal), a spellbinding theater laboratory secreted away in the heart of Barcelona.

"The late Pepe Otal was a sailor and a puppeteer, who had created a workshop space where people from around the world go to learn about and share skills on building puppets, especially marionettes," says Remo.

Remo visited Pepe's workshop frequently and began building his first marionette, Gino. He learned many techniques and styles in the making of marionettes, including the differences in the types of controls to use. He learned about woods used to make body parts, the use of metal wire in articulation of movement, and using saws and sanding machines to clean and shape the wood. He made the torso of wood and covered it with papier-mâché, which added to the rustic demeanor of Gino.

"The most magical moment is when I made the holes for Gino's eyes; it was like he could see for the first time, and it was very moving for me," shares Remo.

Remo soon found his drama school training and experience kick in, giving him an extra touch: the ability to convincingly extend his movement, and life, to marionettes.

"Everyone at Pepe's Workshop said Gino was too big and too heavy," recalls Remo, "but I went ahead with my vision. To this day, Gino is the marionette that audiences always ask about after they've seen the show."

"When I started to practice moving the marionettes, I would go out with Lope, a friend from Pepe's Workshop, to perform in the street, especially with the violinist marionette Niccolò, named after the famous Italian violinist Niccolò Paganini. We often made enough money to pay the rent."

After attending *Antropologia*, a show created by Jordi Bertran, a highly regarded Catalan puppeteer, Remo was surprised to learn what many first-time puppeteers discover: that marionette performances are not only for children but can be poetic, challenging, inspiring, and thought-provoking renditions aimed at adults. After building more marionettes in his free time and spending hundreds of hours practicing, Remo designed a show and presented his first official theater performance of *Appeso ad un Filo* (*Hanging by a Thread*) at the Teresa Pàmies Theatre in Barcelona. It went better than he could have imagined.



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Securing International Gigs and a New Partner

Remo's life as a touring artist began in 2013 when he and Putxa, a friend from Pepe's Workshop, organized their first European tour, each acting as the other's technician. They loaded up Putxa's small car and set off for Germany to perform at



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the Puppetry Festival in SchaubudenSommer. They progressed to the Sarnico Busker Festival in Italy, followed by a show in Vienna, Austria.

Enthused by this success, Remo sent 600 emails to festivals and theaters around the world, presenting his work. He received

five invitations: New Orleans in the USA, Épinal in France, Vlissingen in the Netherlands, the Canary Islands in Spain, and Montegrano in Italy.

Remo recalls his experience in New Orleans as genuinely eye opening, including a moving and energetic encounter in a gospel church, which left him feeling like he was walking on air. He enjoyed the novelty of sharing his marionetting skills in street shows and meeting other artists. When he received a standing ovation for *Appeso ad un Filo* at the New Orleans Giant Puppet Festival, he knew he had found his calling.

Remo performed at the Festival Artisti in Piazza in Pennabilli, Italy, one of the biggest street theater festivals in the world, then returned to Italy to set up his own marionette workshop in his hometown, Offida, closer to his parents. He watched the performance by The Sirens, an Australian musical trio: a double bassist, an accordionist, and a ukulele player-singer named Rhoda Lopez (BA, music theater). Filipino born, raised in Zambia and Australia, Rhoda was experiencing the international touring artist lifestyle for the first time and loving it. Her training in performing arts; experience in theater, TV, and film; and a fair amount of travel had prepared her for this.

The first time she'd seen marionettes in real life was when she watched Remo. They met after his show, Remo speaking little English and Rhoda no Italian. But it was love at first sight.

"Where are you performing next?" was what everyone was asking one another," recalls Rhoda. "Remo said that he was booked to perform in Peru, Venezuela, and Mexico. He turned to me and asked if I wanted to join him."

That summer, they stayed in touch and in between their respective gigs, they met in different cities across Europe. All the while, Rhoda was practicing and perfecting her puppeteering techniques on one of Remo's marionettes. Soon they started working together, Rhoda as Remo's show technician. Later, Rhoda began making her own marionettes, using the techniques that Remo had learned in Barcelona.

Improving Marionette Movement Through Better Design

When making marionettes, Remo and Rhoda write a phrase on the heart of the marionette before covering it with

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papier-mâché. “It’s like a soul message of the marionette,” Remo claims. “We write a phrase focused on the character we want to bring to life; then we forget what the phrase is for each puppet, but we know that it’s there. It helps us feel more connected with each of them.” Every marionette they’ve made is named after someone important or an idea that they want to express.

“We make different types of string puppets,” says Remo.

“The 40-centimeter-tall marionettes are simple to make as they don’t need a sculpted head, and the body can be made in a couple of days. The 60-centimeter-tall marionettes are generally more complicated; even though the body can be made in a matter of days, the head needs to be sculpted first in clay, then a mold is created over it for the face and the back of the head, and in those molds, we put premade papier-mâché paste.”

Once dry and removed from the mold, holes are created for the eyes; then the face and the back of head are joined, which needs to dry still further. Should there be a mechanism that needs to be added to make the eyes or mouth move, this needs to happen before the head pieces are joined. This is followed by sanding down and smoothing the skin. Then comes the hair, face coloring, creating the neck, and attaching it to the body. The marionettes’ clothes are designed and made by Remo’s mum, Daniela Sergiacomi. “The first costume she made was the frac suit for Niccolò the violinist. The second was an exquisite classic ballerina’s tutu, a marionette created to celebrate the life of German prima ballerina Pina Bausch, complete with embroidered beading,” Remo smiles.

Building Characters

Remo and Rhoda choose to lean into the cabaret style of marionette performance, where the audience meets each character one after the other, with each sharing their story in some way. They make shows without dialogue; thus, the use of movement, choreography, and music becomes fundamental. Rhoda often sings live during the show, using sounds instead of words; Pink Floyd’s “Great Gig in the Sky” forms part of marionette Gino’s act.

Some characters are designed to do just one thing—for example, play the violin. Their first show, *Hanging by a Thread*, begins with Niccolò the violinist. The marionette enters limping (he has only one string on one leg) and hides away behind Remo’s knee, showing his shyness in front of the audience, needing their encouragement to play his violin. Once he

starts to play, we see his mischievousness as he scratches his back with the violin bow, does the splits, sits on Remo’s foot to take a break while the music plays on, and responds when the audience applauds him.

“To enrich the story being told, it’s crucial to give voice to characters,” explains Rhoda. “It’s not all about puppet movement; it’s about engaging the audience and seducing them into a real make-believe world where every sound underwrites the storyline. As a professional, you need to engage with viewers, evoking emotional retorts, making each performance unforgettable. The ability to connect with the audience defines your success as a performer and puppeteer.”

“Then there’s audience adaptation,” Remo points out, “which requires the puppeteer to understand the psychology of the audience. What works for a group of children in a library may not land the same way for adults at a theater festival. You need to pick up on the subtle nuances and tailor your performance, like finding the right music to evoke emotions. We spend countless hours searching for the music we want to accompany the show. The choreography too and deciding how we want to interact with the marionettes, and each other. It’s a multisensory experience that constantly evolves, and which we rehearse daily in front of a large mirror at our Offida workshop.”

Some puppets are inspired by objects. One of their marionettes, Molly (the lady with the broom), was created thanks to a miniature broom gifted to Remo by a gentleman in Offida, who claimed it was a girl’s toy from 70 years ago. This inspired them to create a character who wasn’t famous but instead is based on women who are important in our everyday lives, the ones who take care of those around them but who are often invisible. In the show, Molly teaches Remo to pick up his trash. During this story, there is a lot of tenderness and there are many meaningful moments.

Keep the Production Simple, and Travel

During the COVID pandemic, Remo created a 50-minute show with just one marionette. This show was later modified into *Variations*, where Proto the marionette can do a myriad of things, including taking a selfie with the audience. There’s a moment in *Variations* when Proto goes on a sea journey and barely survives a storm, which raises awareness of conflict and immigration, and the lives risked in search of a safer and better life.

“We’ve performed shows and run workshops in various prisons in Italy and in Spain,” says Remo. “We’ve worked with maximum security detainees sharing the value of theater,

Di Filippo Marionette Shows

- 1. *Appeso ad un Filo* (*Hanging by a Thread*) is a cabaret-style show presented using only music and sharing diverse philosophies on life through each marionette. It has toured to 30 countries and has received 10 international awards. The production showcases a violinist; a graceful ballerina who celebrates the beauty in life; and Zufolo, a clown with no eyes who laughs a lot and who wants to fly. Then there’s tap dancer Fred Astaire, who shares the fun in life; Molly, the old lady with the broom; Sub Limen, two acrobatic hip-hop brothers; Costante, inspired by Costante Girardengo, a famed Italian cyclist who demonstrates the importance of trying; and Gino, who lives in a box and comes out to smell flowers.
- 2. *Variations* and Proto the marionette toured across Europe and Australia. The message of the show is not easily definable; it could be deep or light and depends on individual audience members. One of the messages is that in life, we can face many challenges, including self-isolating with technology, but we must make the effort to connect.
- 3. *Piuma* (Feather) is their smallest puppet. The show is designed for very small children. *Piuma* has traveled across Europe and Australia, and its message is teamwork, the ability to ask for help, the strength to accept it, and then make things happen together, enriching life.

Their storylines are inspired by the marionettes themselves. They create inspiring characters, then music to improvise, allowing the puppet to guide them.



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even building their own marionette, which they’d sent to their families. Bringing our work to institutions like prisons, hospitals, schools, and nursing homes reminds us how fragile life is, how important it is to look for and see the good in others, that art and theater are a form of education and healing. We receive so much in return, connecting with people who are often forgotten about or judged, or don’t have the possibility to experience theater. “We plan to open a marionette museum and run a school



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and create a performing arts or puppetry center where people can learn to build, create, construct, invent, and explore the creative arts, and share with others who have the same energy. But if all this fails, and if interest in marionette shows dwindles, I think I have sufficient experience to open a travel agency.”

Learn more about Remo and Rhoda’s work at www.difilippomarionette.com