

Yolande: Hello Noel, thank you for being with us today.

Noel: Thank you for having me.

Yolande: Really great to chat with you over the last couple of weeks and discover puppetry and for me it's a real passion. And I know for lots of teachers out there it is the same. How did you get into the business of puppets?

Noel: Many years ago, we purchased, well we opened, or purchased, a toy shop and we decided we'd move into puppets because there were very few and far between stores that stocked puppets - and that was about fifteen years ago. Over time I've developed a real love and passion for puppets. Something very unique, there's special needs children and kids just seem to have a connection with puppets where they can express their imagination and learn through them. And it's just become a real niche, fun, enjoyable career I suppose, for me.

Yolande: Did you do any puppetry at school or anything?

Noel: No not at all, the only fascination or the initial start with puppets came through the stores. Because we had a few toy stores, it just grew from there.

Yolande: And then from there you created Creative Play Puppets.

Noel: Yes. Quite embarrassingly I set up a website as a little bit of a side hustle. It wasn't a major thing years ago, (ten years ago) we had a 3- or 4-year-old child and the kindergarten teacher said, "Oh your husband does toys and puppets.", and my wife said yes, and the teacher said, "Would he do a show?" and she said yes of course! And she came home and asked me, and I said, "Not on your life, no way!" My wife, being my wife, won that argument, so two or three weeks down the track I was booked in to do a show at kinder with no performing knowledge, no set play, no script. So quickly I put together a script. I thought, well they're only 3-year olds I can't be too embarrassed. I went and introduced 5 or 6 different puppets and I thought we'll do *Old Macdonald*, so I sang that with the worst singing voice in the world. Anyway, two weeks later I got a call from another kinder and the lady said, "I hear you do puppet shows," and I said, "No, I do not do puppet shows", and she said, "No, I've spoken to the kinder and they said it was fantastic!" I said, "Well I don't know about that", I said, "Thank you, but no thank you". And she said, "You know we pay". I said, "What? Pay?" She said, "Yes, incursions get paid." I said, "As a matter of interest how much?" And she said, "Oh, between \$300 and \$400," I said, "What!? Ok next week? No problem!" So, from there I did a few, maybe a dozen or so, and that's where we really got into some personal development days and went and did some displays and sold puppets and Creative Play Puppets just grew from there.

Yolande: Amazing. I know you've been in the puppet business for a long, long time now and supply lots of different schools and educators and I know you've spoken at libraries as well and your knowledge has just grown from this passion which is amazing. The other thing that I became very aware of is that you source your puppets from all over the world. So really targeting very specific things, and you're a global traveller. Tell us about this global puppetry.

Noel: Well, I have chased puppets all around the world. When we started, we pretty much had one or two suppliers and I knew that if anything happened to those suppliers, we were going to be in trouble with supply, so I took off around the world I went to San Francisco, the **big German toy fair**, Thailand, all looking for different puppets but once I got to Europe, and Germany in particular, where the big toy fair is held. I was staggered with the way puppets are perceived or used in European culture. Puppets are very, very big overseas. We have next to no culture of puppets here.

The German toy fair is probably 20 or 30 times bigger than **Jeff's Shed** (local Melbournian's nickname for the Melbourne's Convention and Exhibition Centre) around 70km if you walk up and down each aisle. There were probably 30 or 40 exhibitors with puppets, so we were able to source and look at different styles of puppets. It was quite an eye opener because we had nothing here. I found a company out of New York that does a Muppet-Style puppet called a **Silly Puppet** that has a moveable mouth, moveable hands, and that's where we really started to grow because teachers and educators, libraries, churches they wanted those semi-ventriloquist dolls. That was just amazing to go to that show, and I've been back 3 times over 15 years to look for different things. We found a UK company and they have a wonderful, wonderful range of puppets as well. They're two of our biggest suppliers. We chase a few through Germany and some boutique ones from here and there.

Yolande: What's your criteria, what are you looking for when you are puppet shopping?

Noel: Anything! Because there's no puppets in Australia puppet craft, ventriloquism. There's a couple of risqué puppets in America. One in particular is called **Jeffy** (recommended for 18+) and every kid that walks into the shop looks up at the puppets and screams out Jeffy, and they're suitable for an older child. But he's a bit naughty, he shoves a pencil up his nose and picks his ear and things like that. But we haven't been able to source the exact one but we're able to replicate that one from the ones that we have. It's just basically anything that can grow our portfolio of puppets is what we're after.

Yolande: I know you've got a couple of global stories where you've turned up to speak to supply and work through different puppet styles they have, tell us about that.

Noel: Just a couple of quick stories, on my very first trip I went to San Francisco and people had told me about this puppet stall on the pier of San Francisco which was meant to be famous. So, I emailed this fellow, and we had a dialogue on email, and we agreed to meet and as a gift I was going to take him a dozen Australia animal puppets. My trip was San Francisco on to Germany and I detoured to San Francisco, so I get there, and I find my way down to the puppet stall on the pier and he's gone to the dentist, he's completely forgotten the appointment. So, his boss rang him, and he said I can't come back I'm in the dentist chair, so I left the puppets and moved on. So, then I went to Germany and after Germany I went to Prague. I was looking for a couple of different marionettes, and in Prague I went to a puppet show in a theatre and it was probably the most memorable thing I've nearly ever done. The theatre was over 500 years old, and it was an old classic style theatre. Wooden chairs, velvet drapes, just a small seating of probably 100-150 people. The setting was incredible but they performed an opera using marionettes and different puppets and the marionettes were probably 5 foot tall so they were actually on the front of blacked out human bodies and it was absolutely staggering it was just like going back in time and you could just see how evolved puppet culture was in Europe. Absolutely fantastic, and in the middle of the show one of the puppets picked up a cup of water and threw it out into the stage and half a dozen people got wet and some were saturated but you completely forgot that they were people performing, you just watched the marionettes as though they'd come to life.

Yolande: How many different types of puppets are out there?

Noel: There's a heck of a lot. We start with very small finger puppets and even in your finger puppets every animal can be done in a finger puppet – cats, dogs unicorns there's even puppets that you just put the feet on your fingers and walk along like you create a puppet. Puppets that you put your fingers in the back of the legs and walk them along like a walking animal or person marionettes, string puppets, cone puppets, hand ventriloquist dolls the list is endless, glove puppets but in Australia we just don't have the range.

Yolande: And then we move to those large-scale marionettes where the mechanics and the operation and the people on the ground that are operating them look absolutely dwarfed.

Noel: When I went to Prague and I was walking the streets and you see people really busking with puppets and I vividly remember one had a horse and the horse, he was making the horse run and move and you couldn't even imagine that there were strings attached to it and as I walked I found this marionette store and the marionette store had some incredible puppets like skeletons, horses and dragons and the horse that the fellow was performing with in the street would have been \$10,000AUD. And the work, the work that would have gone into that puppet would have been astronomical - I would say months and months to make that. I also have bought a puppet home that I love. And it's a jester and he's got the beautiful clothes all velvet, and the hat, but he has eyes. And there's probably about 6-8 strings that are moveable, and he has eyes that move side to side and a tongue that darts in and out and even he was \$600 or \$700AUD. I have teenage boys and two or three of my middle son's friends used to refuse to be in the room with the puppet. It absolutely freaks them out. And there's been a number of times I've come home, and this fellow's moved the puppet to another room because he doesn't want to be in the room.

Yolande: That might be something to do with watching those movies! (laugh) As you say the puppetry and the depth of puppetry in culture overseas is just amazing. In Australia, we're probably a bit behind in that understanding and depth of culture and hence there's great benefits for puppet play and creative play and imagination that children of all abilities can work and develop. I see puppetry as a really important part of development, as you said you started with kinder, and it starts from there. What are your thoughts about the benefits of puppet play for kids?

Noel: Look there's many outtakes and benefits I suppose. In the school room the buzz word or the key outtake at the minute is social and emotional well-being. It's very important that we look after kids' emotional side as much as the intellectual side. And I need to stress here that I'm not an educator I'm simply a fellow that has a passion for puppets. Over the years I've spoken to many, many teachers and they've rung and spoken about their needs and how puppets fill a void and how puppets help those special needs and children who just need something else to help them connect. I mean there's many outtakes - English as a second language. Teachers tells me that kids need to be able to speak clearly and they use puppets to help them voice their words. A couple of teachers who are friends that I've spoken to say they'll often give a child a puppet, and the puppet will help with the mouth movement the puppet will help them sound their own mouth. There's a lot of things that have disappeared over the years in the curriculum and there seems to a bit of, regressing back to old fashioned play, getting children to use their imaginations. I mean children don't even know nursery rhymes anymore and that's something that's disappearing.

We have numerous puppet-sets that tell nursery rhymes and teachers often say that they need that to teach nursery rhymes and it's just a basic simple learning step. The oral language and retelling a story in sequence, I believe that's part of the curriculum. Starting with once upon a time and moving through in sequential order and puppets help do that with the steps through the stories. A couple of teachers have spoken about explicit teaching through language skills so again using the puppet to specifically teach kids to speak better. One story a teacher told me was she had a selectively mute child who refused to speak, and they were able to get the child to speak to through a puppet. So, a child had a puppet as their aide, - of course not paid, but the child was able to open up and talk through the puppet.

Yolande: Oh, that's just beautiful.

Noel: And it's just those unique, very small percentage of kids that just need that assistance and that's where puppets come in handy. The other thing of course are gross and fine motor skills. Larger puppets moving your arm, your shoulder, your head, and things like that for your gross skills. but the

fine motor skills; little finger puppets on the finger twisting in and out, curling your finger, making the puppet move. That's where the benefit of puppets is. Lots and lots of things in the curriculum and lots of benefits to kids that need it.

Yolande: The first time I personally came across creative play puppets is my niece who is right into musical theatre and storytelling and writing her own scripts and stories. She's in primary school. One of the things under the magical Christmas tree was one of your puppets and from there I've gone away, I've been desperate to meet you since that squeal of happiness in unwrapping on Christmas morning when everything else was forgotten and it was all about her first (which I think she'll have with her whole life). Her animated face. As I watched her progress and work with her ventriloquism, which is what she's interested in. The movement of the head and the synchronising and what story we're telling. And just to watch her go through that process and just be completely animated with her own stories. And of course, we'd get shows quite often in our household and it's her storytelling and her script writing and her understanding of the manipulation, and as you say, how to work with this puppet and how things work together. As she's discovering this path it's really beautiful.

Noel: If you strip it all back - it's the beauty of imagination. I'm a very anti-screen person - I think children are on their screen far too much - and adults for that matter. But the ability to write scripts to imagine - and the other thing is its absolutely intergenerational. You can have a 5-year-old child and a 90-year-old great grandmother that can all play the same game. Grandma can have a puppet, and the mum and the dad, or uncles, aunts and you can really bring everybody together with puppet play. It's got something - its magic to me because it's something that connects people and I think we're in big strife in society without connection.

Yolande: Most definitely and it gives another avenue and I do find that like you were saying the way that it helps tell stories and the way it stimulates creativity and when you see a child who might not have as much confidence feeling like they can come into that classroom dynamic. It builds that inclusiveness; it builds that confidence and the broad range of puppetry you have and what children have to choose from is incredible. I know in the business of puppetry you work with professionals as well when someone needs a custom puppet or is looking for something in particular, you seem to be the go-to for that.

Noel: Yes, sadly with Covid that's become very difficult. We've done some customisation overseas. The problem we have is when you do manufacture overseas you have to have feet on the ground, and I had somebody there who was able to quality control the whole way but with Covid we haven't had the ability to do that. In the past we have done that: characters for books, prototypes are very expensive to make as a one off but when you get into bulk production, they are doable. Covid has sadly stitched us up on that front, but we certainly hope to restart that, but the world is a crazy place at the minute. We're not sure how that's going to progress over time.

Yolande: And it is, exactly that, it is going to take time and I think a lot of us feel very much in that same seat. The past two years has presented a number of challenges that we have all worked through and how that reconnection and whatnot happens as well and with the making of the puppet I don't think people understand the intricacies of the dynamic and operations to move that puppet and what strings need to be attached to what to make that and to tell that story. The years of practice that people put in to master this, whether that be from a design and build side, or whether that be from be from a performance side.

Noel: Yeh you look at an animal and go oh that's easy you take the stuffing out of a stuffed toy put the hand in and there's our puppet. But you do that, and the neck falls straight down, or the legs don't move, or the wings don't flap. It is quite intricate in the way some of them are made I think people's basic perception, the general public's, is a puppet is a sock with two eyes on it. But there is some serious design and manufacture that goes into them to get them to work.

Noel: This is just one of my friends - so this is a living puppet, you can manipulate the mouth to smile, frown, and then all of a sudden, so you can put the hand inside the glove and we are able to manipulate and nearly gesticulate smiles, frowns, covering the eyes, and the details in this puppet are absolutely beautiful. You know finger in the mouth, pensive shy, curious, all the emotions. This is a soft mouth puppet where you can actually create emotions throughout the puppet. I've had psychologists and speech therapists that use these. This is a premium top end puppet, but absolutely beautiful in the way that they can function and there's many different characters, dark skinned, light skinned, mid skin, boys, girls, occupations. They're actually made in Mauritius, but they come out of Germany. When I found these puppets on my travels, I was absolutely gobsmacked I really wish I had a way of showing hundreds and hundreds of them in one go because they are remarkable.

Yolande: Favourite performances. It's interesting I was at a show last year full of parents and teachers and children and they were all there to see Bluey so puppetry's there in some shape or form and it's a different show it's about the character and the animation, but I think it also does a lot in those kinds of performance through to what we see in Europe.

Noel: Look go back to Sesame Street and the way they educate and teach and the success. I think that's 50 years and still going. There's a place in all different fields for puppetry. You know I've seen different shows and I heard of a fellow who uses the living puppets that I just showed you he signed a show in Vegas for multi-multi millions of dollars. So, whether it's a commercial on television or stage shows, if you're good at it, there's a great career for you and it's so niche. Everybody goes and sings and dances on a talent show but very few people use puppets. There was that young girl Darcy Lynne on *America's Got Talent*, well she was the best thing that ever happened to me because everybody wanted a puppet when she won that show.

Yolande: It has been an absolute pleasure to speak with you today Noel and we are very grateful for your time. We look forward to further connections with you down the track. I just want to say to everybody out there listening, please reach out to Noel and his team at www.creativeplaypuppets.com.au . The broadness that is available whether you are a beginner, or whether you're looking for something more advanced. I don't think it matters what occupation it is. Whether it be education that your focused in, it might be health and wellbeing. There is something there for everybody. I just can't thank you enough for your time and I look forward to learning more from you.

Noel: It's been an absolute pleasure, As I said pre-recording, I'm just a humble fellow who has a passion for puppets. I have talked to a lot of teachers, educators, speech pathologist, churches, and libraries over the years and I've garnered a bit of information and knowledge on puppets. But it's just such a wonderful connecting product, item, I just think there's so many benefits in life and life skills with puppets and puppet play. Thank you for having me, I hope your listeners and followers and members have learnt something. Thank you for your time.