

PUPPET **notebook**

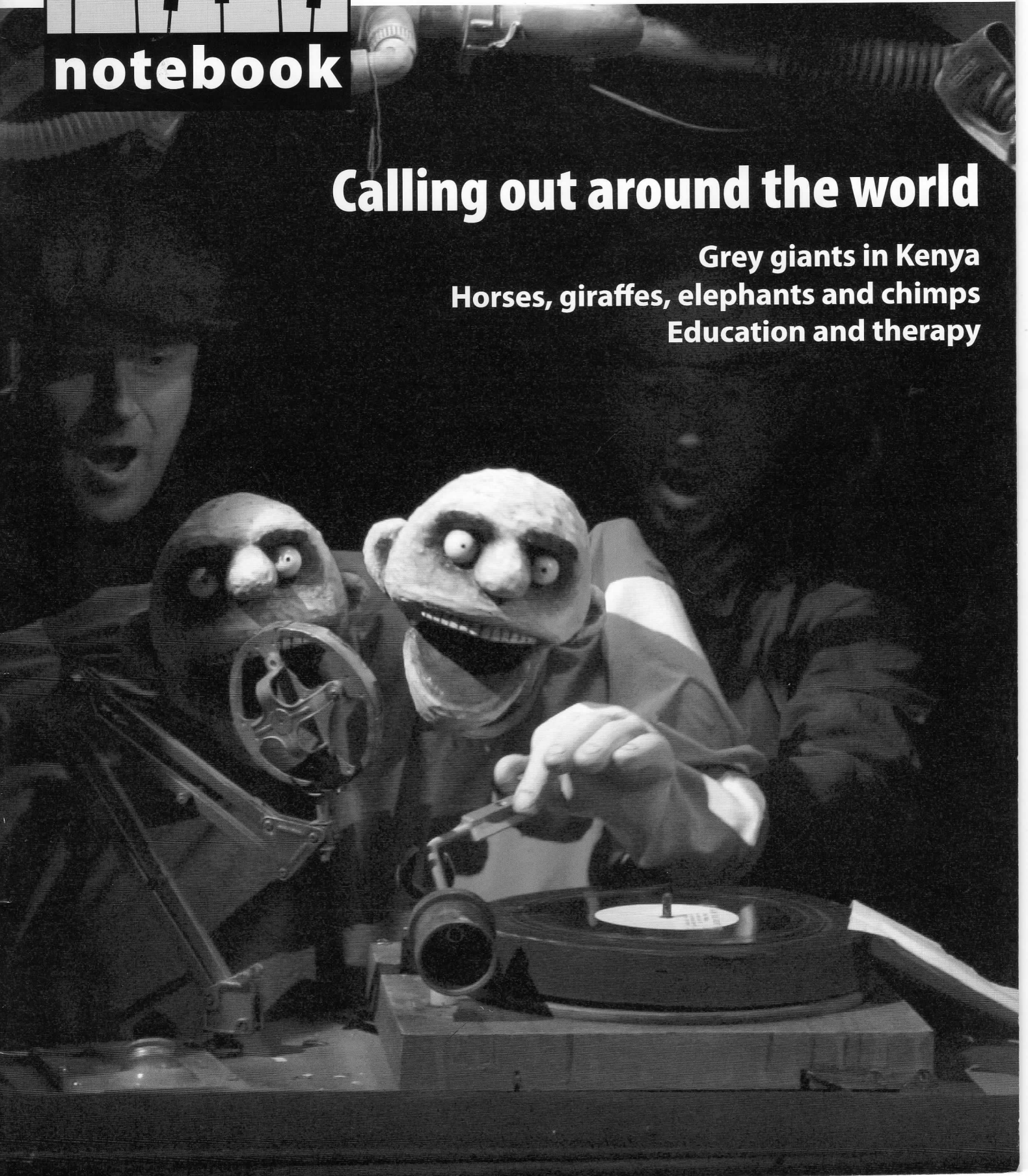
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Calling out around the world

**Grey giants in Kenya
Horses, giraffes, elephants and chimps
Education and therapy**



FOLLOW THE GREY GIANTS

A new medium for health awareness in Kenya

THOMAS RICCIO

The Family Planning Private Sector (FPPS) programme introduced puppetry for health education to Kenya in 1994. The FPPS programme, Community Health Awareness Puppeteers (CHAPS) trains community-based puppeteers. Over 480 puppeteers have been trained and more than 48 puppet troupes created.

Shoeless children in tattered clothes scattered, helter-skelter, running down compact, unpaved and garbage-strewn streets. Their screaming was a blend of fear and excitement, their faces going from shock to beaming smiles as they turned, their runs alternating between flight and leaps of playfulness. Infants wailed in spasms of tears, adults stood curious, amazed and bemused. All of the action on the street came to a halt as an eight-foot-tall figure with an enormous cartoon-like grey head shocked the grim reality of the slum into the surreal, with a perfect

equatorial blue sky as backdrop.

The 'mobilization' puppet stooped to shake hands with shop-owners who were selling everything from live chickens to herbal medicines to used clothing. The puppet performer hugged grandmas, chased children, greeted unsuspecting shoppers, pushed carts, and directed traffic: it did what it was supposed to do, namely, cause a stir and draw an audience to see a performance by CHAPS – Community Health Awareness Puppeteers.

This Nairobi-based puppet company has pioneered the use of puppets to convey vital information to the semi-literate and uninformed masses of Kenya. This March 2002 performance was their third at the notorious Korogocho slum outside Nairobi, and dealt with HIV/ AIDS awareness and prevention.

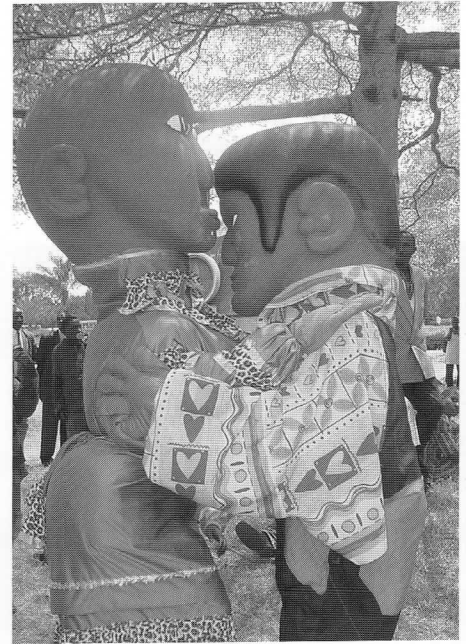
The 20-year-old Korogocho slum, one of many illegal settlements on outlying Nairobi City Council land, was occupied primarily by refugees fleeing the ongoing Sudanese civil war. Although the residents of the slum were considered Kenyans, the slum was essentially self-governed and a world unto itself. Because of the Sudanese connection the slum was known for the availability of black-market guns and criminal activity. 'The police don't come here,' CHAPS puppeteer Simon Musau informed me as we drove down a maze of dusty streets.

The play begins with two smaller Muppet-inspired puppets (named Edupuppets) celebrating a wedding. A traditional song, accompanied by drumming, made it easy for the cast to encourage the audience to join in the celebration. Sofia and Tom, wearing clothes similar to those worn by the audience, and with carved Styrofoam

heads, were married by the narrator, who stood in front of the draped puppet booth. To counter the street noise, the narrator used a microphone plugged into a public address system powered by an automobile battery.

The puppets were created by Kenyans with the assistance of Gary Friedman, a South African puppeteer who has used puppetry to serve education and social change throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

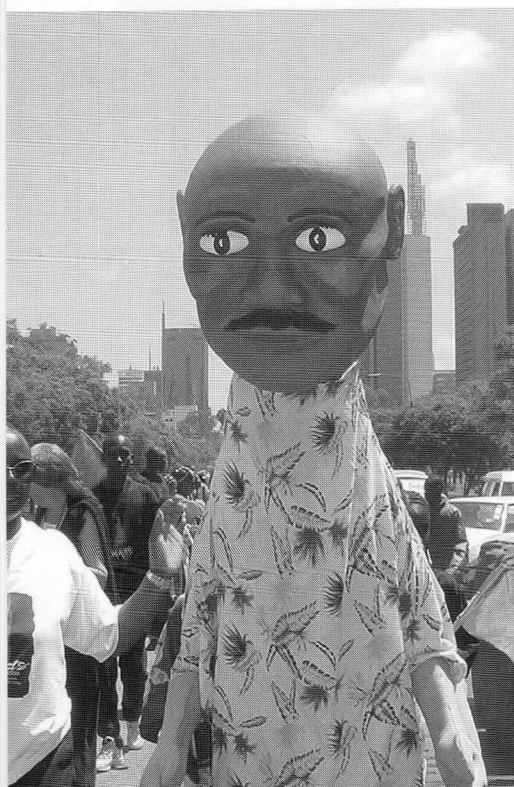
'Large grey puppets can be seen by huge crowds on a busy street and are a sure way to gather people to watch the show. Their grey skin-tones rid the



All photographs by Gary Friedman, courtesy Thomas Riccio

performance of any racial and cultural stigmas and taboos associated with AIDS being transmitted from one particular group of people to another,' Friedman told me.

Friedman trained Kenyan puppeteers in the use of Muppet-style figures, glove and rod puppets. Although the puppets had their origins in a Euro-American tradition, Kenyans quickly adopted and transformed the form to suit local aesthetics: 'Kenyan puppeteers are





not passive and accepting of puppetry models and modes of performance. They must consider local conditions, traditions, and audiences; they are evolving the art form of puppetry,' Friedman said.

Puppetry in Kenya has flourished because it is non-threatening and has the uncanny ability to entertain and communicate simply and directly.

A NEW WAY TO TELL STORIES

Curiously, puppetry, or the animation of figures within a narrative context, never developed into a performance tradition in Africa. Puppetry is not indigenous to Africa except for a few West African traditions, most notably the thousand-year-old 'kotébe' from the Niger River area of Mali. The absence of puppetry from the otherwise vibrant and varied African performance traditions is most likely due to Africa's use of totemic, fetish, and mnemonic figures which have been associated with witchcraft in a number of ethnic groups.

Puppetry was introduced to Africa during the colonial era and has been used sporadically, in combination with Theatre for Development activities, since the 1980s. However, the fact that puppets have no history or tradition in Africa is a part of its success. Because there are no preconceived notions, expectations, taboos or traditional contexts attached to puppet performance in Africa, puppets remain a novelty, neutral and free to define their own place, expression and function.

In Nairobi, which has seen massive urban migrations from Kenya's rural areas, puppetry has become an ideal way to communicate across potentially

contentious ethnic identities. Rural areas have similarly experienced traumatizing economic, health and political disruptions, alongside the long-term demise of traditional cultural practices. The role of puppetry has grown to such an extent that Simon Karaija, from a Riff Valley group, saw puppetry as 'a way to preserve traditions and our stories'.

Globalisation and technological modernisation has made its presence felt in Kenya, a country dependent on international commerce and tourism. Young people are eager to be a part of the world community: the cell phone, international television, and the internet are ubiquitous. This eagerness, however, also bespeaks Kenya's urge to free itself from the spiral of corruption, poverty, and an impending AIDS catastrophe. Kenya was once the shining example of Africa's future and potential. Being the most stable, prosperous and well-educated of countries in the sub-Saharan instilled a pride and sense of nationalism that still burns in the hearts of Kenyans.

Each one of the dozens of puppets built by CHAPS was decidedly African

"Large grey puppets are a sure way to gather people. And they carry none of the racial and cultural stigmas associated with AIDS transmission."

in aesthetic with recognizable features depicting, for example, a Masai, an old man, a young woman, and sad children. Similarly, play content, language, narrative structure, and use of traditional and popular music reflected local tastes. 'They know us in the slums, they know we are like them and understand their problems. We are almost like relatives,' remarked Michael Mutali, a diminutive and proudly forthright CHAPS puppeteer I accompanied to Korogocho.

All the CHAPS puppet plays were created from interviews and the personal

experience of the puppeteers, many of whom came from or still lived in one of the many slums surrounding Nairobi. 'Each show is different and I adjust what I say and do according to the location, the crowd and atmosphere,' said Peter Mutie, the narrator. 'We have also presented performances on sanitation in this slum,' added CHAPS puppeteer Fidelity Wanjirm, 'because they have a problem with flying toilets here. Since this is an illegal slum the people have no toilets, only a few holes here and there. At night they use a plastic bag and then send it flying. They don't care where it lands as long as they get rid of it. That is why it smells so bad.'

SUSTAINABLE TRAINING

CHAPS is sponsored by FPPS (Family Planning Private Sector), a local NGO (non-governmental organisation) that was founded in 1984 on the principles of community-based and participatory development and self-help. The CHAPS programme was part of a folk media initiative which included a neighbourhood mural and educational calendar programme. In addition, FPPS has also sponsored community clinics and planned parenthood programmes dealing with issues such as diabetes education, living with AIDS, HIV/AIDS testing and counselling, sanitation, social-economic empowerment, and human rights awareness.

In 1993, before the AIDS pandemic had manifested itself in Kenya, Eric Krystal, the director of FPPS, travelled to South Africa to investigate HIV/AIDS education/prevention programs. It was there that he was introduced to Gary Friedman. Friedman, along with Muppets creator Jim Henson, had the idea of making a documentary film on indigenous puppetry and mask theatre in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, once in the field he saw the spectre of AIDS at first hand and formed a touring puppet company to simultaneously entertain, educate and conduct research on AIDS.

Eric Krystal invited Friedman to Kenya to train a core group of puppeteers who in turn became trainers in a nationwide programme of puppets against AIDS. This remains a community-based training programme which has resulted in the establishment of forty troupes throughout Kenya.

'Sustainability is the key to our success. Many programs are started but are unable to sustain themselves. FPPS provides the infrastructure essential to support CHAPS activities, things like administration and funding procurement,' stated Krystal, a gentle, soft-spoken man in his seventies. CHAPS receives ongoing support from international charitable foundations, while other charities have used the regional puppet troupes as part of their extension work.

The primary topics remain HIV/AIDS and reproductive health, particularly adolescent fertility and contraception, violence against girls and women, and drug addiction. Other topics have included sanitation, conservation, and most recently, a campaign against corruption.

TOO MANY IDEAS TO SLEEP

CHAPS also facilitates ongoing workshops and training of regional puppeteers. The Edupuppets: International Puppetry Festival,

held in February 2002, was FPPS's largest undertaking to date, bringing to Nairobi over three hundred puppeteers from Kenya and East Africa to participate in workshops with international puppeteers, who also gave performances in a wide range of traditions, from Javanese Wayang Kulit to Punch and Judy in a variety of venues including hospitals, clinics, hotel conference rooms, city parks and the National Theatre of Kenya.

For Brenda Togo from Kisumu it was an overwhelming experience: 'The festival was very good for me and my company. We have learned much and we have so many ideas that it is hard to sleep at night.' Lawrence Keboga echoed her comments, 'The Kenyan puppeteers know now that they are a part of an ongoing puppetry tradition that is international. We have a place and we are not only participating in this art form but also contributing to it. Now they will not feel so lonely when they return home.'

Superstition, poor education, denial, socialized machismo, and cultural stigmas have all contributed to the need for large-scale HIV/AIDS education programs in sub-Saharan Africa. Though the HIV/AIDS pandemic has spread throughout southern Africa, infecting rural and urban Kenyans alike, its cause and prevention has remained a mystery

to many Africans. 'Many are not aware of how it is caused the symptoms and how to recognize it,' Lawrence Keboga said, as we walked in the downtown streets of Nairobi. 'Many still think it is witchcraft, others will not even talk about it for fear of evoking the disease.'

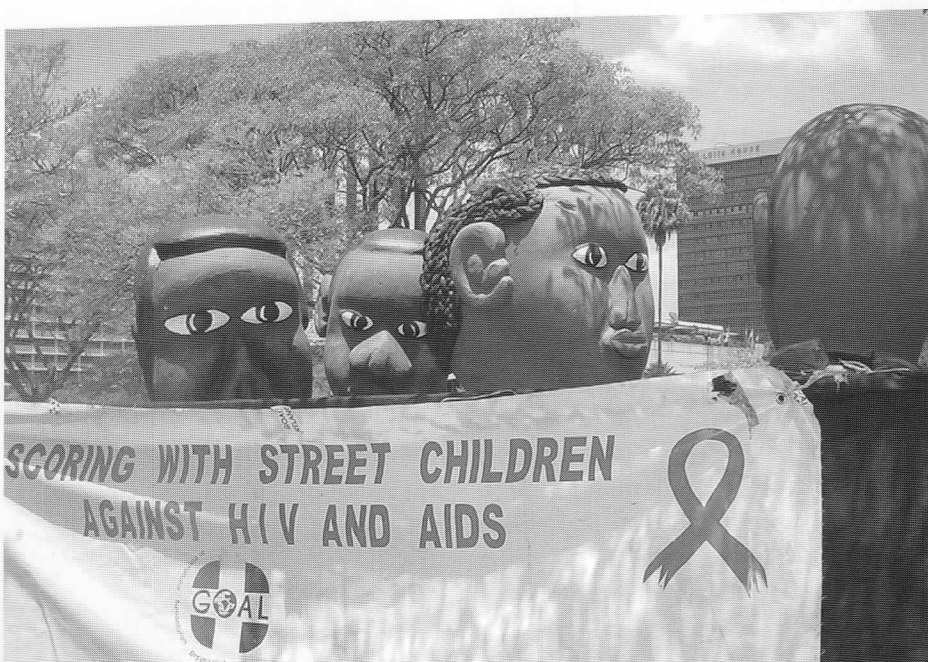
A group of rag-tag street children approached us, their dirty hands outstretched for coins. When I reached into my pocket Keboga stopped me. 'Don't give them money. They will only fight and buy glue with it.' The unfocused eyes of the street children were swimming in a yellow murk, their movements languid, disoriented and erratic. At their mouths were plastic bottles partially filled with tan-coloured industrial glue. The street children lived in the nearby city park; by day they begged, sifted through garbage, and did what they had to in order to survive. Numbering in the thousands, they were mostly AIDS orphans. Many were the children of prostitutes, born with or later contracting HIV/AIDS. To survive they formed 'families' with other children. Several young girls had given birth to children while living on the streets.

FATAL MACHISMO

Kenya has forty-two major ethnic groups, most of them holding to patriarchal traditions originally shaped by hunter-gathering and warrior identities. Although many groups shifted to agricultural and herding lifestyles, culturally inscribed identities still provide the touchstone for many Kenyan men. A socially codified machismo identity is at the core of Kenya's HIV/AIDS epidemic and is the major obstacle for awareness programs.

'We are fighting a deep tradition in Kenya. Traditionally, men can have many women but women can have only one man. This was and is expected. Even today a woman is not allowed to question. This is why we have so many people infected,' Keboga asserted.

FPPS recognised long ago that it must direct its efforts to Kenyan men in order to develop awareness and facilitate



CLASSROOM ETHICS

Training Kenyan teachers in puppetry

TONY MBOYO

changes on issues such as family planning. 'For Africans, sex is for men. The man's job is to dominate and the woman's job is to bring forth children.' Keboga spoke to me in his cramped office, 'We are not afraid to speak to men about the difficult issues like vasectomy, abstinence, same-partner sex and safe sex. We must speak to them.'

Manhood and wealth in a traditional Kenyan context was linked to the number of wives and children a man had. It doesn't take much to make the connections between male identity and HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. Following in turn are the issues of over-population, poverty, environmental degradation, family planning, violence against women and children, corruption, and drug and alcohol abuse. Almost all of the major social, political and economic issues confronting Kenya today can be linked to traditional male roles and the reluctance to adjust in the face of emerging situations created by modernity. Kenyan males, like those in other traditional and non-traditional societies, are reluctant to change for fear of the unknown. Traditions are by their nature conservative, meaning they conserve and hold on to an essentially patriarchal social-cultural matrix. They do so at the risk of self-annihilation.

The second part of this essay will appear in the next issue of Puppet Notebook.

Thomas Riccio is a Professor of Performance Studies and Artistic Director of Story Lab at the University of Texas at Dallas. This is an abridged version of an essay which originally appeared in *Performing Arts Journal* 76 (2004). *Performing Africa*, a collection of Riccio's African performance essays, will be published by Peter Lang Press next year.

In Kenya, puppetry is used for raising awareness and community mobilisation. The art form has metamorphosed and sprouted in various directions. To mention but a few examples, puppets have been used – and continue to be used – to fight corruption, to encourage gender equity, to promote road safety, to confront HIV/AIDS, to kick polio, to ridicule, to stimulate and even just to entertain.

Of particular interest is the recent introduction of puppetry to the classroom. Picture this. A smartly-dressed social studies teacher is carefully arranging objects on a table: a window-shaped cardboard box, a vase of brightly coloured flowers, a miniature ladder, an eggshell, a torch and a portable music player. The pupils are in an unusual silence; the suspense is evident. She switches on the player and a soft, mellow tune fills the air. Almost simultaneously, a small puppet character appears at the cardboard window, singing along. It is only then that everybody realises that it is time for Puppets in the Classroom! The teacher has decided to use puppets to discuss ethics.

Forty-eight teachers from both government and private schools in and around Nairobi were recently invited to participate in a five-day intensive training on the use of puppetry in schools. The teachers, mostly from kindergarten and primary level and having, in the main, no previous experience in puppetry, went through the processes of design and construction, use of local materials and discarded materials, manipulation, story creation, lesson planning and finally performing with puppets. After the workshop, the teachers continue to utilise the art form in various aspects of their teaching.

One notable example is the use of puppetry to improve the students' mastery of language and the arts. The teachers use puppets interactively to intensify the children's learning abilities through stories. They have noted a higher levels of interest and concentration in the subjects that they teach using this methodology.

FPPS intends to extend the programme to more schools in and around Nairobi, with particular emphasis on the use of puppetry to promote the teaching of ethics, civics, social behaviour and morals. Another aim is to stimulate learning among children with difficulties such as low levels of interest and concentration, hearing disabilities and other mental and physical challenges. The project also aims to enhance children's imagination, creativity and promote the use of cultural legends and stories.

One of the programme's outputs will be a puppetry curriculum for schools that will be developed in collaboration with partners from the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE), the Ministry of Education and the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE). The project's long-term goal is to establish puppetry as an innovative, creative and effective medium and introduce it into the curriculum as a tool for Kenyan teachers. A classroom-based learning session will eventually become a more real, concrete and interesting experience for pupils and students.

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