

BIO



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Carmela Lonetti is currently employed as an Object Conservator at Arts Centre Melbourne, where she works in the conservation team caring for the Australian Performing Arts Collection and the Public Art Collection. Her interests include the conservation of modern synthetic materials and sustainable approaches to conservation practice. Prior to her current role, Carmela worked for several years as an Object Conservator at the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, Commercial Services, University of Melbourne.

ABSTRACT

Puppets in Wonderland: Developing Mounts for Alice in Wonderland Marionette Puppets to Create an 'Animated' Atmosphere and Showcase the Puppets' Performative Past

How often have you heard curators saying that they would like 'the objects to appear animated'? What does that mean in the context of trying to create mounts to support fragile collection items? In this paper, I discuss these questions in relation to the development of a display of Alice in Wonderland marionette puppets from the Pilgrim Puppet Theatre's 1978 production of Alice in Wonderland. These puppets, acquired in 1996 by the Australian Performing Arts Collection were displayed in the foyer of Arts Centre Melbourne to coincide with The Australian Ballet season of Alice in Wonderland in early 2024.

This project was an opportunity to create mounts that would enable the display of the puppets in a way that would help patrons appreciate the puppets' performative past. The 'act of performance' was highlighted by ensuring all the working components were clearly visible so that the functionality of each individual puppet as dictated by the hand controllers and strings could be understood. Integral to this approach was a workshop with a professional puppeteer early in the planning stages, so that we could understand how the marionettes were constructed and manipulated during performance. This session informed how we would design our mounts to orientate hand controllers and strings that would support the puppet in a natural stance provide options to create animated poses.

This paper will outline the methodology for developing, prototyping, and fitting the display mounts. We worked through the challenges of safely supporting the material aspects of the puppets whilst preserving their whimsical, floating qualities. An assessment of the puppets' condition, in particular the strings and attachment points made it clear that although the original strings would not be used, the original attachment points and the fabric around those points were sufficiently robust to support the puppets during the 5-month display. I discuss the mental shift required to eschew the use of traditional mounts to support the weight of the object from below, but rather rely on the strength of the original material to suspend the puppets.

The installation environment and constraints around time for preparation and installation were a major consideration. Together with our mount maker and display co-ordinator, the mounts were designed so that they could be fitted to each puppet prior to install day. Adjustability was built into the design to enable finessing poses and positions of the puppets relative to each other once inside the display case. The preparation included setting up a facsimile display case so that each puppet's strings could be adjusted to the length required prior to installation. This preparation was time consuming but essential for an efficient installation process. The challenge of limited space for the storage of hardware was also address during this project as the mounts and hardware components are flat pack and can be re-used in the future.