

For Zimmerman and the Paperhand group, the strings of these puppets tie their community together.

Creative outlet



Photos by Sam Roberts / Times-News
Above: Donovan Zimmerman works on assembling a robot while preparing for the Paperhand Puppet Intervention production titled "Love and Robots" a puppet rock opera.



Left: Donovan Zimmerman, left, and R.J. Dobbs, right, shorten an old vacuum tube that will be used for a robot's arm while preparing for the Paperhand Puppet Intervention production titled "Love and Robots". Zimmerman along with Jan Burger (not pictured) started the PaperHand Puppet Intervention 12 years ago.

Saxapahaw's Paperhand Puppet Intervention entertains and enlightens

PAUL BUSBY ZIMMERMAN
Special to the Times-News

SAXAPAHAW — Donovan Zimmerman approaches what would normally appear to be a hopelessly tangled heap of metal and begins dancing it over a table in the old Saxapahaw community center. It was for a show called "Love and Robots" in February.

"I thought this already looked pretty robotic. Maybe it could be robot guts," he says.

The vibrant masks of elemental spirits, African animals, sun goddesses and trees all stare sleepily from the walls of the former 1950s gym, quiet and somber as the rain outside pours steadily on what has now become a puppet studio.

Zimmerman, a puppet-maker as well as the man behind his masks, paces the worn wooden court and explains his creations. He breathes life into the entities with small movements of his hands, while he talks about the jumbled piles of work that have earned him a living for going on 12 years.

"Jan and I made this old man's face for our 'Hungry Ghost' performance last January," Zimmerman says. "It's based on the traditional Asian religious idea that people who are greedy in this life will return as insatiable ghosts in the afterlife."

Zimmerman and his puppeteering friend, Jan Burger, are co-founders of the Tri-

angle area's Paperhand Puppet Intervention, a company headquartered in Saxapahaw. The two started their first show together in 1998 for a festival that promoted environmental awareness about the Haw River, along whose bank their new studio rests.

"The idea came about to make a puppet show for the Haw River Festival to support their ideas, which seemed like a good fit," Zimmerman says. "It got a lot of great feedback so we just kept working together."

THEIR PROJECTS have since taken them to protests in Seattle about the practices of the World Trade Organization, and also to the nation's capital, where the company invigorated thought about the repercussions of oil drilling in Alaska. These demonstrations are known as interventions to the Paperhand group and its followers, who believe that it's easy for people to forget the natural world around them when they go about their day-to-day business.

"The idea of an intervention is sort of like making our art a wake-up call to live from the heart, rather than from these other human conditions that take over like greed," Zimmerman explains.

As far as their own business goes, they maintain this consciousness by watching the materials they use. They carefully collect recycled products like cardboard, fabric scraps, and paper bags for the masks' bodies, and

utilize a cornstarch goop to bring them all together.

Zimmerman says the majority of their income comes from doing gigs at festivals, fairs, or parades, in addition to receiving commissions from museums and businesses that want to use the company's art.

Music and sound effects are an integral part of each show, and the group uses its own band to amplify the visual art.

food and driving around," Zimmerman says. "I didn't start doing this thinking, 'Oh yeah, we're going to get rich.'"

Their biggest annual income comes from the six-weekend show they put on every summer at the Forest Theatre in Chapel Hill. The show runs from August through September, and their latest run brought in a total of 12,000 people.

The show is a demanding time of year, requiring the efforts of up to 30 veteran Paperhand puppeteers and musicians. The diverse cast even includes three family members: local potter Sarah Howe, and her two children Alicia Best and Alan "Pickle Dude" Best, so-named for his affinity for eating pickles.

ALAN BEST got involved with the Paperhand group

at its very beginning, when he was only 7 years old. Zimmerman was looking for a small performer for one of their first Haw River Festival shows, and Best showed interest. Afterward, he continued to go to rehearsals with his mother.

"I'm going to be driving back and forth so go ahead and throw a stick in my hand," Howe told Zimmerman.

Both Howe and Zimmer-

man stress the importance of collaboration in their performances. Music and sound effects are an integral part of each show, and the group uses its own band to amplify the visual art.

"The music is what stirs the emotion," Zimmerman said. "The expressions and the body language of the mask-wearer do that, too, but sound effects and music are really a huge part of what we do."

For Zimmerman and the Paperhand group, the strings of these puppets tie their community together.

"Really I'm in it just as much for that, to create an opportunity for creativity," Zimmerman says. "I'm not doing this work to be like, 'I made this. Look at me, look at me.' It's more just about wanting to provide this platform for people who work with us to shine."

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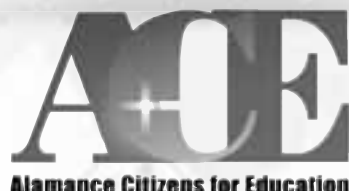
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Saturday, April 17, 8:00 AM - 12:00 PM
Burlington Outlet Village-1317 Plaza Dr.
(Near Hanes Outlet) (Booths for sale- contact our office)

STAGE STRUCK
Showcase of performing arts in ABS Performing Arts Departments
Saturday, April 24, 7:00 PM
Williams High School Auditorium
Tickets \$5.00 Students, \$7.00 Adults, \$10.00 Reserved

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Admission \$2 includes 2 raffle tickets
Burlington Outlet Village- next to Burlington Brands

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