

## Gordon MacRae Award – Winner's Questionnaire

**IAN AND JILL PURVES**  
**2007**

**1. How did you first get involved in puppetry?**

During the War, toys were very hard to get, my Mum and Dad made a Victorian-style toy theatre for me when I was five – complete with coloured torch bulbs and scenery.

**2. Who or what has been the biggest influence in the development of your own style and techniques in puppetry?**

The work of Michael Meske the Swedish puppeteer. His company appeared in the early days of the Edinburgh Festival with actors and puppets mainly in U.V. lighting, and I saw a whole range of possibilities in using large stages in such a flexible and magical way.

**3. Are there any specific puppetry companies or productions that are particularly important to you?**

Our company's work has been influenced by so many – Whanslaw's books which were amazingly serious, wide-ranging and professional for their date, Jan Bussell and his pioneering work on BBC TV with Anne Hogarth, Muffin the Mule and many more ambitious works. More recently the work of the new Czech puppeteers and the great range of worldwide DVDs which are now available.

**4. What has been the single most artistically fulfilling moment for you in your own work?**

Our first major festival abroad. Through the SAC we were invited to Poland, and a wide range of companies appeared. And lo and behold, the media took us really seriously in interviews for TV etc and asked probing questions which showed that puppetry was an equal branch of theatre in their eyes – how different from the general media attitudes in Britain.

**5. In terms of your career development is there anything you would do differently if you had the chance?**

We would love to have done more experimental pieces but the financial risks for a permanent theatre, without regular funding or subsidy, have made us rely on tried and tested methods of production – although we try hard to push the boundaries.

**6. Do you have one great comment or story about an audience member at one of your productions?**

We were doing a Russian folktale at the old Byre Theatre, St Andrews, where the audience were very close to us, but since in UV we are invisible to the children out front, they forgot we could hear all the whispers. Anyway, there's a scene where the sausages rise off the table and are eaten by an invisible giant. The sausages slowly disappeared, munch by munch, in an awestruck silence. Suddenly, one child whispers – "Who's eating all the sausages?" and another little voice says – "Sssh – it's God!"

**7. What's the best thing about being a puppeteer?**

I think the best thing is the creative freedom you have over the whole production – the script, the design, the music, the acting - everything. And you can change it over and over until it's really right. Personal control like that is rare in modern theatre.

**8. And what's the worst thing about being a puppeteer?**

The worst thing is the widespread public attitude that puppets are meant for little children only! So many older children and adults miss shows designed for them, it's hard for puppeteers to be restricted in this way.

**9. What single piece of advice would you give to aspiring puppeteers?**

Listen to your audiences. If they don't respond to something – change it until it really works for them. It can be very hard to scrap something you've really laboured on, but the audience is a fifty/fifty partnership with you, and without their response your work may be very clever – but it won't be theatre.

**10. Sum up what is unique about Scottish puppetry?**

Celtic tales, languages and music. Scots puppeteers have a huge inheritance from this unique culture, and audiences respond at so many levels, humorous and serious.

**11. If you had one wish for Scottish puppetry in the next 5 years, what would it be?**

Some core funding for established companies, so they can take some more risks without going bankrupt!