

Massachusetts Jewish Ledger



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Conversation with... puppeteer Anna Sobel

By Stacey Dresner

SHUTESBURY – Anna Sobel is a puppeteer, storyteller, actor, director, and educator originally from New York City, who is now based in Western Massachusetts. A professional puppeteer since 1998, Sobel makes her own puppets and performs original children’s puppet shows throughout New England with her own puppet company, Talking Hands Theatre.



Anna Sobel with her "carnivale-style" set of Purim puppets.

She recently released “Animal Torah,” a storytelling CD featuring stories from the book of Genesis, told by an animal that is a part of the story. Klezmer music – performed by her husband, musician Brian Bender – bookends each story.

Sobel holds an MA in Educational Theater from New York University and a BA in English from Wesleyan University. She studied the use of puppetry for social change on a Fulbright Fellowship in India in 2003.

She has worked as a teaching artist at public schools around the New York area through Shadowbox Theatre and Brooklyn Arts Council. She and Bender live in Shutesbury. She recently talked to the Jewish Ledger about her new CD and her work as a puppeteer.

Q: You majored in English at Wesleyan and have an MA in educational theater from NYU. What did you learn through the NYU program and what was your career goal at that time?

A: I had already been running my own puppet company for five years when I decided to go back to school. I really love learning, and the subject I am most passionate about is the ability of theater to educate. I had been getting a lot of requests to teach puppetry and theater, so I went to NYU to develop the skills to do that, and the degree did end up helping me toward an adjunct professorship teaching a puppetry course at Hampshire College, and also led me to my current position as a staff teaching artist with the Holyoke-based non-profit Enchanted Circle Theater. I would say the most valuable part of my degree was my summer abroad in Ireland, when I learned theater techniques for peace-building between Catholics and

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Protestants, honed my playwriting skills, and met teaching artists who inspired my current work with disadvantaged populations in Holyoke.

Q: When did you become interested in puppetry, and what was it about puppetry that drew you to it?

A: I went to see the last big Bread and Puppet circus in 1998, and that's when I knew I had to be a puppeteer. The art form just seemed like such a perfect blend of all the things I loved: theater, art, writing, and working with kids. And most of all, it was a way to communicate an important social message. So, I just started calling myself a puppeteer, and figured it out as I went along, inventing designs for puppets for University productions, and working for Wesleyan's branch of Kids on the Block, using puppets to teach fourth graders about disability awareness. But it was my first job after college, working full time as an educational puppeteer at Blue Sky Puppet Theater in Maryland, that really taught me how to perform puppet shows (and make a living doing it!).

Q: What is your Jewish background?

A: I grew up going to Hebrew school and was bat mitzvah-ed in a Reform synagogue. My family celebrated Jewish holidays, but I was a deeply spiritual kid, and I wanted to know WHY we did these things, and nobody seemed to know. Then in late high school, I began a sort of Jewish spiritual journey, which started with taking Jewish meditation classes, and led me to davvening shacharit every day on my own. In college, I explored other Jewish spiritual practices. I began observing Shabbat, kept kosher, studied Hebrew for four or five semesters, and went abroad to Israel for six months to study on ulpan and even stay at a couple of different yeshivas. I'd say I've scaled back my observance significantly since Wesleyan, but being Jewish is definitely a major part of my identity and lifestyle.

Q: In what Jewish venues have you performed your puppetry locally and what are your Jewishly-themed puppet shows about?

A: We've got a thriving Jewish community here in Western Mass., so I've performed shows for different holidays at all the synagogues around here. I've also done storytelling shows with puppets at outdoor community events in the summer called "Shabbat Under the Stars."

Some of the shows I've done in the Boston area include my Purim shpiel for the MetroWest Jewish Day School, and my Passover show, "Moses and Miriam" (which highlights Moses's experiences growing up in the Pharaoh's palace), at the Leventhal-Sidman JCC in Newton.

I've done things in the other direction as well, such as at Anshe Amunim in Pittsfield and Hevreh of Southern Berkshire in Great Barrington, where I performed "The Mystery of Hanukkah Harry" (about a kid whose teacher has the whole class write to Santa, and assigns him to write to Hanukkah Harry, so he goes on a detective mission to figure out if there really is such a person...).

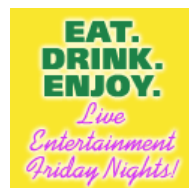
Q: Now you have released the CD "Animal Torah." So do you consider yourself a storyteller too?

A: I definitely see myself as a storyteller as well; always have. Sometimes a synagogue will ask me to do a puppet program for younger children, and a storytelling program for older children and adults. One of my missions in life is to resurrect the art of oral storytelling. At one point, I took a course with Jewish storyteller and writer Yitzhak Buxbaum of Brooklyn to become a "maggidah" or Jewish storyteller. There is kind of a spiritual art to finding the right story for the right audience.

Q: What inspired you to create "Animal Torah?"

A: My maternal great-grandmother, known to all as Bubbe, was a wonderful storyteller. My mother used to say, "And you know what stories she used to tell us? Bible stories." Indeed, the stories of Genesis are wonderfully entertaining. So, first of all I saw the CD as a tool for parents who want their kids to know those stories.

Another side to the story is, I often work as a Hebrew school teacher and lead a lot of children's services,



and I frequently start out by retelling the Torah portion to the children, sometimes in costume as one of the characters, sometimes with a puppet, so that we can then do some activity with it, whether that be having the kids act it out, perform it as a puppet show, draw illustrations, or just discuss it. I am always amazed at how much they are able to recall back to me after having heard the story just once. I've found that kids have an amazing memory for detail, especially if a story is presented in a way that they find interesting. I thought that having the parsha stories on a CD would make it easy for other Hebrew school teachers to just pop it in and play one track each week, and then draw upon it for other activities.

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