



# SANDYSPIELER

2014 DISTINGUISHED ARTIST

THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION



She changes form. She moves in between things and in between states, from liquid to solid to vapor: raindrop, snowflake, cloud. She orients. She refreshes. She transforms and sculpts everyone she encounters. She is a landmark and a route to follow. She quenches our thirst. **We will not live without the lessons in which she continually involves us any more than we could live without water.**



## INTRODUCTION

When a *MinnPost* interviewer asked Sandy Spieler why she had chosen puppets as her medium, Sandy replied that “

**PUPPETS** HAVE NO

LIFE OF THEIR OWN, AND YET, WHEN YOU PICK THEM UP, A BREATH COMES INTO THEM. And then, when you lay them down, the breath goes out. It's the ritual of life: We're brought to our birth, then we move in our life, then we lie down to the earth again.”

For Sandy, such transformation is the very essence of art, and the transformation in which she specializes extends far beyond any single performance. She and her colleagues and her neighbors transform ideas into spectacle. They transform everyday materials like cardboard, sticks, fabric, and paper into figures that come to life. And through their art, Sandy and her collaborators at In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre (HOBT) have helped transform their city and our region. Their work—which invites people in by traveling to where they live, learn, play, and work—combines arresting visuals, movement, and music to inspire us to be the caretakers of our communities and the earth.

Main-stage performances at the Avalon Theater in Minneapolis, home to HOBT since 1988, are only the beginning. HOBT tours regionally, nationally, and internationally with shows that both educate and entertain. Sandy and other HOBT artists conduct residencies and puppet workshops in K-12 schools around Minnesota. Hundreds of children attend summer camps created by HOBT in partnership with other arts organizations. And, of course, the annual MayDay Parade and Festival draws more than 50,000 revelers and hundreds of participants, who help build and operate the parade's giant puppet centerpieces, into HOBT's neighborhood every spring.

As a pre-med college student, Sandy chose Minneapolis as her destination for a required semester off campus doing social-justice work. She landed—and decided to stay—in the Phillips neighborhood, then as now an economically challenged part of the city. For more than four decades, she and her fellow artists and her neighbors have come together there to create art designed to make us think about a wide range of topics that need the world's attention: water stewardship, immigration, government-sanctioned violence, racism, colonialism, and many more.

“I feel endlessly grateful to be able to share this place in this neighborhood with such deep-thinking vision,” she says. We Minnesotans feel endlessly grateful too. As it turned out, Sandy—painter, sculptor, performer, designer, director, teacher—didn't need a medical degree to practice her healing arts.

TED STARYK

Chair, The McKnight Foundation

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An enormous **THANK YOU!** to The McKnight Foundation for this sudden gift. I am humbled and immensely honored. When I was told of the award, I buckled over, crying and shaking in **disbelief, joy,** and **dread.** Disbelief because it was a total surprise. Joy because it is wonderful to be appreciated for one's life's work (and my bones know how hard I've worked). And dread because of being chosen as an individual while much of my work has been collectively created at In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre. I accept this award only with immense gratitude for my brilliant co-workers who have been part of my life for so long: walking with me, working, wrestling to find that deepest image, crying with me over the state of the world, papier-mâchéing, defying me, finding ways to keep the work alive during lean times, sharing so many moments of connection, love, and joy. This award would not happen without them—their skill, their wisdom, their patience, their energy. I want anyone who happens upon these pages to know this.

—Sandy Spieler

# SHE MOVES LIKE WATER: DIVINING SANDY SPIELER

BY COLLEEN SHEEHY

Sandy Spieler looks at the world with an exclamation mark and a question:

**WONDER!** and **WONDER?** These are the philosophical poles that infuse her work. Exclamations arise in response to the unfathomable beauty of the universe and our human ability to comprehend and admire it; questions come out of perplexity over human weakness that results in greed, injustice, violence, and suffering.

For more than 40 years, Spieler has offered those exclamations and questions to us—her neighbors in the Powderhorn and Phillips areas of south Minneapolis and the larger community; residents of small towns and big cities along the Mississippi River; British townspeople; South Korean citizens; and many more around Minnesota, the United States, and the globe. Along the way, Spieler herself has become a Wonder and a Marvel.

Spieler is an artist of unusual complexity and elusiveness in artistic disciplines and methods. On the surface, you can say that for four decades she has been the artistic director of In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre (HOBt). She is a visual artist who makes sculptures from clay, paper, wheat paste, paint, and fabric, and who creates graphic design of dazzling simplicity and power. She is a performer. She directs theatrical performances for the street and the stage. She works collaboratively with theater artists, musicians, dancers, visual artists, and community members.

In sounding her depths, you might say that Spieler moves like water more than most artists do. **She changes form. She moves in between things and in between states, from liquid to solid to vapor: raindrop, snowflake, cloud. She orients. She refreshes. She transforms and sculpts everyone she encounters. She is a landmark and a route to follow.**



**SHE QUENCHES OUR THIRST.** These qualities of water, a subject of long exploration for Spieler, also serve as rich metaphors for this artist's way of working and her impact on people and communities. We will not live without the lessons in which she continually involves us any more than we could live without water.

Spieler embodies both the ancient and the contemporary in art. She is the sort of artist as teacher and catalyst that the German artist Joseph Beuys championed from the 1960s until his death in 1986, harking back to the role artists played in prehistoric, ancient, and traditional societies. An artist is someone who helps to transform and heal others—and, by extension, society. An artist may sculpt physical materials, but some also work on invisible matters like relationships, attitudes, personal insights, emotion, and spirit. These kinds of artists make “social sculpture,” as Beuys termed it. They view society and the world as their mediums.

Today, when socially engaged art, or “social practice,” is a growing area of contemporary art internationally, Spieler has quietly been an exemplar and leader of this work—as much as organizing an annual parade involving tens of thousands of spectators can be considered “quiet.” Many younger artists could follow her for cues about community engagement, a process that is not easy or faddish but that requires enormous wells of patience and generosity and commitment. Spieler lives her values in admirable and inspired ways. And at the same time, she retains an equally strong commitment to making art that is visually riveting, relevant, and physically and psychically involving. The success of this combination is a rare achievement.

Rooted on and around Lake Street, where HOBt has been housed since 1988 in the Avalon Theater, Spieler has ministered to the community, inviting people of all races, income levels, and educational backgrounds—along with the wounded, the needy, old and young, and families of all configurations—to create one family, especially for MayDay, that magical Sunday-afternoon parade and festival each spring. Displaying the deep devotion to community that’s more commonly found in an activist’s embeddedness in place and cause, or in a minister’s calling to a parish, or in a visionary’s large view of time and space, Spieler has found her **wellspring of creativity** along Lake Street. That place led her to all of humanity and the world. She understands that to work in a microcosm transforms the macrocosm, just as all the properties of water are contained in a puddle, a pond, a raindrop, or ocean.

### SOURCE, UNDERGROUND, RESERVOIR\*

What **deep wells** has Sandy Spieler drawn from to drive and sustain her arts and 40-plus years of work? What **rivers have given life** to her dedication? “I didn’t come from either the art or theater worlds,” she has said. Yet some sources can be found in her childhood, when she loved art, sculpting, making faces, and sewing. She taught herself how to sew to make clothes for her dolls. Though she had little formal training in art, she remembers being fascinated watching her father lettering signs, perhaps one influence on her distinctive hand lettering, a signature aesthetic of HOBt posters and other graphics. Spieler recalls being grateful that her father agreed to fight a high school requirement for girls to take typing so that instead she could take a dearly desired art class. Despite having modest means, her parents took Sandy and her siblings to classical-music concerts and other cultural events. She, her sister, and her two brothers all grew up to be artists: a puppeteer, a fiber artist, an animator/video artist, and an indie-rock musician.

Her father’s Lutheran ministry took the family from Ohio to Michigan to Washington, DC, and to western Pennsylvania. She came of age in the 1960s and was in Washington when many great marches for civil rights and against the Vietnam War took place. Arriving in the capital just before the 1963 March on Washington, the occasion of the most famous speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., Spieler’s family plunged into the civil rights issues of their new home, inviting the first African American family into their parish, which caused many white families to leave—a stark lesson in racism for the young Spieler. Her family was still living in the Washington area in 1968, when Dr. King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated.



Tree of Life, MayDay 1991. Photo © Salvatore Salerno

King’s philosophy of social justice for all, including economic justice, deeply influenced the young girl. During that period, her values took shape, infused with King’s concept of “**a beloved community**.” It was a vision to strive for—a community where all were cared for, clothed, housed, fed, body and spirit tended, and where everyone made community together.

With her ethic of social care, Spieler thought she might want to be a physician, and in the early 1970s went to Beloit College in Wisconsin to pursue a pre-med course of study. But her path followed a tributary that brought her to Minneapolis in 1973. Needing to choose a field-term experience as part of her college requirements, she decided that she wanted to gain knowledge in social justice and ethical decision making. She considered interning at the United Nations, but instead decided to work with Joe Bash, a Lutheran minister whose writing and ideas on civil rights she admired. She moved to Minnesota to work with him at a church-sponsored organization in Minneapolis.

Following her field term, Spieler traveled to Denmark to gain insight into how socialized medicine worked, then returned to Minneapolis, where she worked in a hospital to gain experience in a medical environment. She was a member of Almond Tree, a collective in the Phillips neighborhood located next to a new housing development for Native Americans—Little Earth of United Tribes. The household members practiced their own unique ritual of pausing every 40 days for contemplation: of where they had come from, where they were, and where they were headed. Sometimes,

\* These subheads describing properties of water are words generated by people gathered to meet and learn from Sandy Spieler in July 2014 at Plains Art Museum in Fargo, ND. Spieler was an artist in residence for *Living as Form (The Nomadic Version)*, an exhibition about socially engaged art and artists.



the contemplations were personal and interior; sometimes they were public celebrations that brought the household together with its neighbors.

During these ongoing years of the Vietnam War, Spieler shared with many the dispirited attitudes about mainstream institutions, which many saw as complicit in perpetuating war and inequality—or at least irrelevant to making social and political change. Returning to college also did not seem compelling when Spieler was immersing herself in the creative communities emerging in Minneapolis. When a new feminist theater, Circle of the Witch, asked Spieler to make a large figure for one of its performances after hearing about her artistic abilities, the company members loved it. One member told her that it reminded her of the work of Bread and Puppet Theater in Vermont, led by German artist Peter Schumann, and recommended that Spieler connect with a small group in Minneapolis that was making puppets.

That group, the Powderhorn Puppet Theatre, was started in 1973 by David O’Fallon (now president of the Minnesota Humanities Center) and Ray St. Louis. They both had left Alive and Trucking Theater Company to invent new ways of telling stories through

puppets, inspired by O’Fallon’s visit to Bread and Puppet Theater. They set up a small studio workshop in the basement of Walker Community Church near Powderhorn Park and used the park as their performance space.

Sandy Spieler joined O’Fallon and St. Louis in 1974, instinctively attracted to the aesthetics and tenets of the grassroots art form of puppet theater, whose sensibilities aligned with hers. In the experimental, open cultural climate of the early to mid-1970s, Spieler’s creativity blossomed. Her natural instincts toward dance and music flourished in the puppet theater and youth culture of the Powderhorn neighborhood, where dancing to live music was “what we did,” she says. What she loved about puppet theater was its embrace of so many different art forms: movement, music, image, object, and story. Spieler’s innate talents for precise and graceful movement made her a natural for breathing wordless life into puppets. **Even outside of performances, her conversations are punctuated by the riveting, expressive gestures of a DANCER.**

Working collaboratively, Powderhorn Puppet Theatre created performances like *The Grass Will Grow and the River Flow*. This show mourns the colonial mindset that leads to ecological distress, taking the form of an epic pageant/circus, an approach that has remained a hallmark of the theater. Early on, Spieler suggested that the troupe perform *La Befana*, based on an Italian folktale about an old woman searching for a holy child, a piece that remains a beloved part of the repertoire rotation of HOBT.

In 1975, the small group performed the first MayDay, which happened to coincide with the end of the Vietnam War. They had made an Earth puppet and a Water puppet for *The Grass Will Grow and the River Flow*. They added some birds and, accompanied by accordion players, the group processed to Powderhorn Park and danced around a maypole. (What seeds that simple ceremony sowed!) In 1979, the group changed its name to In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre, inspired by a poem by Cuban poet José Martí. The phrase called for people to work where they live to liberate the world. In the most difficult places, where change is needed, great things can arise.

### FLUID, LIFE GIVING, LIFE SUSTAINING

Spielers became the theater’s artistic director in 1976. Little did she realize then that the theater would become her life’s work. Yet the artist’s headwaters in south Minneapolis flowed outward, carrying her to many other places where she and other company members shared their knowledge and skills and learned about other cultures, histories, and artistic traditions. They created a reciprocal stream of ideas, approaches, images, and stories from south Minneapolis to the wider world—traveling up and down the Mississippi, out to schools and towns for ceremonies and residencies, to puppet festivals in the United States and abroad, to South Korea.

Guided by Spieler's inclusive vision, the theater absorbed performance styles and techniques from across time and geography—Balinese shadow puppets, Japanese Bunraku, medieval Punch-and-Judy routines, Sicilian marionettes—along with innovative techniques such as stick puppets, suitcase shows, tabletop shows, and the mammoth puppets from carnival parades that tower over streets and stages, requiring many people to carry and perform. The company worked to reflect and welcome people and artists of all cultures, responding to the diversity of Native American, African American, Latino, and Asian American residents in the Twin Cities, and applying influences from around the globe to what was happening in their own neighborhood. Puppets speak across language barriers, a useful quality in light of the growing diversity of HOBT's community.

Though consistently taking on difficult subjects—war and violence, racism, colonialism and its ongoing impacts, and environmental destruction, Spieler and the theater also know the saving grace of comedy. Many HOBT stage shows and MayDays include the zany, the silly, and the slapstick. Stilt walkers 15 feet above the ground are part of their spectacular repertoire. And then there are the simple, beautiful images and figures that can take your breath away: the River puppet embracing the stage and the performing troupe with its expansive blue arms. In so many ways, **Spieler's sensibility is to acknowledge atrocities and painful histories and current dilemmas but to find hope and a way forward—working together, inspired by wonder and generosity.** Spieler's practice insists that contemporary artists do not just reflect the world around them or reach deep inside for personal insights but also actively investigate, research, and propel new ideas. Unlike the standard repertoire of most theater companies, HOBT productions are created as original work that grows out of contemporary concerns and experiences. Spieler keeps her finger on the pulse of the times and asks and listens to what colleagues and community collaborators are paying attention to, while also understanding how deeply human rhythms and rituals still hold meaning today.

Though research-based art is now a common part of contemporary artists' approaches, this investigative work was not widespread during the years that Spieler spent studying water issues for *The Circle of Water Circus*, a 1983 production that saw the HOBT company (including 25 adults, five children, and two dogs) navigating the Mississippi River for four months from Brainerd, MN, to New Orleans. The tour included residencies in river towns, helping locals create parades to accompany the company's circus sideshows and larger ring show that celebrated the river.



Laurie Witzkowski and Esther Ouray in *The Reapers' Tale*, 1989. Photo © Salvatore Salerno  
*The Reapers' Tale* event poster, 1989

Other productions that grew out of extensive research included *The Reapers' Tale* (1989), which recast the story of Columbus's arrival in the New World as a Day of the Dead performance, with all characters as skeletons. The theater explored the history of colonialism in the Americas over several years, culminating in *Three Circles of 500* (1992), a pageant that reckoned with the quincentenary of Columbus's arrival. Many of HOBT's works required the deep diving of a scholar, surfacing to create performances of stunning insight into stories that are not being told elsewhere in contemporary theater or visual art, as in *Befriended by the Enemy*, a 1993 play based on the true story of a Ku Klux Klan member who was taken in and cared for by a Jewish couple whom he had been harassing.

## DEPTH, SOOTHING, NECESSITY, SYSTEM

In 2003, Sandy Spieler's creative channels flowed to England, where, with support from a Bush Foundation Leadership Fellowship, she was able to devote a year to academic study combined with visual art and performance projects while earning a master's degree in cultural performance. In the University of Bristol's program, which incorporates anthropology, philosophy, theater, visual art, and community studies, Spieler synthesized the knowledge she had gleaned from years in theater with theoretical and global cultural studies. It was a pivotal experience, linking her work in south Minneapolis with expansive contemporary ideas and deep cultural traditions of ceremony, procession, parade, and ritual.

She also learned from British artists whose work spoke to her, such as Welfare State International, which stages large celebrations, and Platform, a group whose long-term research and activities aim to "unravel the carbon web." Inspired by her experience with Platform's "carbon walk" of London, Spieler created a participatory art installation piece, *Museum for the Age of Oil*. Its centerpiece was a car containing the history of oil from the seven-generation sustainability perspective, which holds that the current generation is responsible for living sustainably to benefit the seventh generation into the future. The car was painted entirely white and offered a place for people to comment on oil by writing on the car, inside and out.

Spierer's graduate work deepened her longstanding commitment to promoting

awareness of humans' interconnectedness to **NATURE**, harking back to her early 20s when she heard Native American leaders and elders speaking about water and uranium mining in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Building on her history of working on water issues and exploring relationships with other species and natural systems, Spieler grounded her graduate studies in a drive to create a paradigm for a theater of "inter-being." In this formulation, influenced by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, humans would not label other humans as "other" nor would they regard other species or natural elements like water as distinct from us. We would see ourselves as one with the natural world and understand that our survival depends on our care for the world.

In the English town of Ulverston, Spieler learned that a small river, called the Town Beck (*beck* means river; "It didn't even have its own name!" she exclaims), had been covered over to provide more space for parking in the city core. Seeing this physical obliteration as a reflection of our lack of regard for our water, Spieler designed and directed a community performance, *Voicing the River*, that re-engaged townspeople with the Town Beck to uncover the forgotten essence hidden in their midst. As part



Performing within the Origins of Corn shrine, *Table, Table*, 1987. Photo © Warwick Faraday Green

of the performance, Spieler and others used divining rods made of wire to find the river hidden under the town's streets and plazas. "The attraction was so strong, anyone could feel the force," she says. They used special paint to draw the contours of the river through the streets and parking lots; then, ritualistically, performers dressed all in white carried water in bowls along the route. They invited townspeople to listen to the water's voice and write down what the river was saying, thus creating an engrossing collective poem of gratitude for the river. This project and Spieler's reflection and conceptual framework for it became the subject of her master's thesis, "Toward a Theatre of Inter-Being: Excavating the Undercurrents of Colonial Legacy."

# INTER-BEING



I always have many questions, and often feel that the older I get, the less I know. The only thing I know for sure is that I wish to contribute my work as an artist toward the invigoration of the reality of "inter-being." The mentality of separateness disconnects humans not only from each other but also from all of creation; I consider this to be one of the most devastating constructs of the Western mind. Hence, I've started wondering how to enact a "Theater of Inter-Being."

Maybe the Theater of Inter-Being is a theater where listening prevails, a theater quiet enough to hear the heartbeat of a sparrow, and empty enough to hold the sorrow of unborn death. Maybe the Theater of Inter-Being is slippery enough to cross the borders of language, colorful enough to catch the attention of a bee, and as slow as the growth of hairs on my head. Water sings in this theater, that is for certain. The Theater of Inter-Being exists in the footprints of each minute, and my task is to live it as fully as possible, though sometimes a distracting stinging ash falls upon the portals of its stage.

*Terror* is the buzzword in the news and on the screens. But terror is born of the lie of separateness. All life is born of Water and the Earth, and my task is to celebrate the sensuous, funky, interconnected diversity of this lusciously divine living world.



Teachers and Studiers, painted banner honoring women's work, from *Illuminations*, 1998

## BUOYANT, TRANSFORMATIVE, REFRESHING, REFLECTIVE MIRROR

In the buildup to the 40th MayDay Parade and Festival in 2014, Spieler took the time to review all the past MayDay tabloids—programs that the theater produces to elaborate on each year's parade themes and sections. **"I realized what an accomplishment this had been—40 years,"** she says. **"All the people who had been part of it, some no longer with us. All the generations."**

The MayDay Parade and Festival is an act of **RADICAL AUDACIOUSNESS**. A small theater company taps the community and world zeitgeist each February, gathering and talking. From those conversations, Spieler and the HOBT company deliberate and dream on a parade theme, language emerging that directs the story and key images that structure the parade sections. **Just the sheer poetry of past themes rings out: Voices of Trees. I Am Another Yourself. Wheel of Change Ever Whirling. In Honor of Seeds: Awesome Vessels of Power!**

Then, hundreds of people flock into the theater to help build the parade, an amazing collaborative act among a handful of artists and the community. And then the parade day arrives, brought about by thousands of decisions and plans laid by the theater and friends. Parade watchers are dazzled and delighted. The "Join In/Free Speech" section following the main parade always holds surprises. And then—the ceremony in Powderhorn Park, after a lull that allows spectators to settle on their blankets on the grass. Then come more revelations, always ending with the Sun returning and the Tree of Life rising. Always the song "You Are My Sunshine," and the exhortations: "The Tree of Life, gift for us all!" and "Happy MayDay!" The whole event always strikes me like the miraculous multiplying of sustenance from the Biblical story of the loaves and the fishes—that one small theater group can create and direct an outdoor event for tens of thousands that rivals official city parades! Spieler calls herself, simply, **"a midwife of MayDay."**

Even after all of those earlier MayDays, Spieler spoke of the 40th annual event with fresh energy: "I just loved it so much," she says. Themed "Wonder? Wonder!," the celebration revived, renewed, and reconnected the community after a long, cold winter. "It was so great to see the patient relationship-building coming to fruition," she reflected later. "It's the long haul. It's the choice to be in a neighborhood for the long haul. It's like the water work. I'm dedicated to it for my life."

# THEATER OF HOPE

BY DAVID O'FALLON

I have a vivid memory from early in the life of the Powderhorn Puppet Theatre: Several of us are at work in the basement of Walker Community Church with a few tubs of clay, some planks for workbenches, some torn-up brown paper. We are making puppet heads and masks of clay that we will cover with papier-mâché. I am slapping into my clay head all of my anger at greed and corruption, at public lies and pollution of the air and water and . . . well . . . all of it. Slap! Punch! All that is wrong will be slapped into this clay head I'm forming. I look to my left. A young woman is shaping the clay into a face, a mask that is graceful, kind, even sad. A witness. My mask is full of confused anger. Hers is alive.

## That was Sandy.

When we started the puppet theater in 1973, the question my co-founders and I had was: Could a theater truly and authentically *belong*? Could it be a living part of a community and not just a venue with a passive audience? To really belong, we thought, a theater must come from the aspirations and fears, the longing and dreams, the daily work and striving, of those in the streets and homes, the churches and shoe stores and restaurants and mercados.

Sandy became artistic director of the theater in 1976, and since then she has kept it firmly grounded, rooted in its place. It belongs to its neighborhood, to its people. She and In the Heart of the Beast have traveled the nation and the world but kept Lake Street and the Powderhorn and Phillips neighborhoods as home. She has formed HOBT into a constant *YES!* to the value of that unique and special place, to the lives lived there. Her commitment to place is one of the reasons that HOBT has lasted.

Another is her capacity for inspiring hope. In 1999, I wrote:

In the late 1960s and early 1970s a debate was raging between those who thought the arts could directly revolutionize society and those who did not. . . . We thought our plays and artworks and songs could support and hasten a new society into reality, that art itself was a powerful antidote to lies. We believed as well that art, and theater especially, as a public action could stir people to other public actions. We debated how artmaking could directly confront the abuses of power, the lies, the perversions of institutions and restore health and some balance to a turbulent, non-nourishing culture. We believed that the stakes were high. We were right.



Spieler initiated a puppet workshop for emerging puppeteers, titled **WITH JOY**, and began signing her emails with that closing phrase, which came to her after a period of depression from which she emerged with renewed energy. She says that she has made a conscious choice to face the challenges of our current world with the best she can muster. "If I am to do this work in the face of so much adversity," she says, "I have to do it with joy." She wrote a reminder that she keeps close at hand in her studio: "The mantle of responsibility is heavy. Please, please, take it, carry it with joy, so joy is what is given."

In honoring Sandy Spieler, The McKnight Foundation also honors In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre's dedication to collective and generative work; all the generations and the hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions by now) who have built and cheered MayDay Parades and Festivals for the past 40 years; the people of south Minneapolis; water and all life; the constant striving for a better world that she inspires in all of us who have been touched by her work—and her joy.

*Cultivators of the Soul*, painted banner honoring women's work, from *Illuminations*, 1998

Colleen Sheehy, PhD, is director and CEO of Plains Art Museum in Fargo, ND. She and Sandy Spieler co-curated the 1999 exhibition *Theatre of Wonder: 25 Years in the Heart of the Beast* at the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis. Sheehy edited an accompanying book of the same title, published by the University of Minnesota Press. She has worked in art museums for 30 years and shares Sandy's commitment to social engagement; art, music, and dancing; and changing the world.

SANDY ON

# PUPPETS

I was initially drawn to the world of puppet and mask theater because I liked to sculpt and I liked to move. David O'Fallon was primarily interested in theater as a means of building community—so from the very beginning, my work included encouraging community participation as well as sculpture, music, movement, painting, and the graphic arts. What has deepened over the years is my respect for the lineage of this work from ancient times as a way to live purposefully in both activist and ritual vividness. The first puppeteers were perhaps shamans articulating the mythic mysteries of human existence within the rituals of community life. Puppeteers have also been street wanderers for hundreds of years, able to offer social commentary about local intrigue and injustices with their puppet performers that human performers would be jailed for. I take inspiration from these lineages.

As it turned out, Sandy was able to sense and bring forth a

**NASCENT SPIRITUALITY** that was part of Powderhorn Puppet Theatre but not at the forefront of its work—and I think that is one of the keys to HOBT's survival. Her spirituality shows up in the gracefulness, the slowness, the almost meditative nature of some of HOBT's performances, which can seem more like rituals than theater (and, of course, theater may spring from the same roots as ritual). It shows up in a perpetual return to hope, even when direct political action like street theater seems without result.

It's true that the work is sometimes sad, angry, fierce. A herd of buffalo wanders through a crowd, ponderous and graceful, evoking a lost time and place. And we are there to witness and to contemplate the future without them.

But Sandy's spirit always guides us back to hope. Who could watch or walk with the MayDay Parade and not feel a sudden lift? The giant puppets, the raucous music, the strange and wonderful beasts, the thousands lining Bloomington Avenue and thousands more in Powderhorn Park. **The rising of spring and fire and life from the long winter as the Tree of Life is uncovered, lifted, and celebrated. Hope is not just possible; it is an essential force for change.** And as an artist, Sandy sees and brings forth the images and emerging myths that connect and heal and promise hope.

HOBT grew with Sandy and grew because of her; her capacity, skills, and knowledge grew as well. That young woman in the Walker Community Church basement was just 20 years old, so the theater and Sandy grew up together. Under her guidance, HOBT not only stands with us—it is us. For more than 40 years, it has built on what Powderhorn Puppet Theatre began, coming to embody a few basic values: **That we are all part of a common existence. That we are all responsible for this life. That we can and must engage and together go through the rising cultural and political and environmental and economic crises that we face.**

David O'Fallon, president of the Minnesota Humanities Center, was one of the founders of the Powderhorn Puppet Theatre. He was formerly the CEO of MacPhail Center for Music, the executive director of the Perpich Center for Arts Education, and the education director of the National Endowment for the Arts.



Sculpting heads for *Oh! River!* in the basement workshop of the Gustavus Adolphus building, 1980

# IN THE HEART OF THE CITY

BY HARVEY M. WINJE

The nearly two-mile midtown section of Lake Street between Interstate 35W and Hiawatha Avenue has always been unique along this thoroughfare that spans the entire six-mile width of Minneapolis. A main public-transit line in the early 20th century, it was the heart of the neighborhood that came to be known as Phillips, and was a connecting link to jobs, entertainment at amusement parks and theaters (including the Avalon Theater, an 850-seat movie house), and shopping both at small family businesses and at the gigantic million-square-foot Sears retail and catalog headquarters.

Changes were probably inevitable, as they are in every city. A strip mall replaced a streetcar yard; a big-box retailer replaced a tractor manufacturer; and family theaters, including the Avalon, morphed into porn theaters. In the 1960s, the area was disrupted by two government projects: the construction of I-35W, which boxed the neighborhood in, and Minneapolis officials' division of the city into community areas for planning purposes. Squabbles over government funding erupted and Phillips eventually seceded from the Powderhorn Community, becoming more insulated from surrounding neighborhoods in the process. In the 1970s, when Sears began to move its local operations to Chicago, its shrinking presence on Lake Street became a catalyst for blight.

That was the soil onto which Sandy Spieler stepped when she arrived in Minneapolis: **fertile but hardened by decades of ethnic, religious, and racial segregation; divided by geographic and political boundaries; succumbing to the changing economy.** Sandy was well aware of anthropologist Margaret Mead's observation that for 99 percent of our time on this planet, humans have lived in tribes, extended families, and small villages, an idea that suggests a universal inclination toward community and communication. Indeed, fueled by the remnants of antiwar activism and concerns about civil rights and women's rights, many people in south Minneapolis were yearning for community cohesion. After the end of the Vietnam War, many residents hoped that resources and work could shift to constructive peacetime efforts. But in spite of this urge, we were still riven by divisions.

Sandy moved into Almond Tree, a collective household in a former Dominican convent, a grand old building illuminated by 40 arched windows in a shape reminiscent of the Hebrew letter *mem* (מ), a symbol both of the number 40 and of water. The household members recognized the spiritual significance of the number 40—the number of days in Lent, the number of days and nights the great flood lasted, the number of days Jesus wandered in the desert. Forty represents a cycle of incubation and change, struggle and waiting, watchfulness and new beginnings. In fact, “almond”



With giant river head sculpted by Gustavo Boada and Malia Burkhart

and “watchful” share the same root in Hebrew; surprises happen in our lives just as almond trees surprise us by blooming before all other trees in the spring.

Every 40 days, Almond Tree members took a conscious moment to contemplate the intertwined and enriched meanings of these symbols. They affirmed their openness to surprise, the possibility of fulfillment of dreams, and the need for celebration, even during times of hardship and struggle. And they held periodic gatherings for celebration of that journey and of life.

Many of these ideas—the **essentialness of trees and water, the importance of coming together to celebrate**—became embedded in the dialogue and work that Sandy created. She began to break down divisions and cultivate community in her new hometown by reviving the ancient arts of masks and puppetry, echoing bygone civilizations' practices of communicating with line drawings and figures, telling stories through characters' faces shaped in clay and papier-mâché, and bringing the stories to life through community actors wearing these masks. **Her engaging spirit, magnetic artistry, and appreciation for all living beings, along with her gregarious**

ability to shape community at the same time she is shaping clay, created a place for neighborhood residents, students, audiences, and other artists to participate in storytelling together. She modeled sustainability by using commonly found objects in her work, underscoring the belief that every object has redeeming qualities as does each and every person. And she patiently helped to overcome the naïveté of those of us who had long associated masks and puppets only with Kukla, Fran, & Ollie and Howdy Doody.

Sandy's original intention of bringing together the people of the Phillips and Powderhorn Park neighborhoods with the MayDay Parade and Festival grew and grew. The crowds increased every year, eventually drawing vast numbers of people from many neighborhoods and cultural communities across the metropolitan area to gather and satisfy our innate need to celebrate together. With Sandy's help, a community that had suffered from many divisions and separations was finding a new way to unite.

Lucinda Anderson, In the Heart of the Beast's company manager at the time, understood that the silver lining of the neighborhood's declining property values was the opportunity for small businesses to move into vacant storefronts—including HOBT moving into the Avalon Theater in 1988, filling the empty space left after neighbors' years-long protest against the theater's porn-film repertoire finally worked. HOBT staked a claim for art and community, collaboration and respect. More positive changes took hold, slowly. Today, the Midtown Exchange occupies the formerly boarded-up and blighted Sears building, with residential units, more than 40 small businesses, and a 1,500-person corporate headquarters that have all helped to rejuvenate adjacent housing and businesses. Lake Street now teems with dynamic public art that represents residents' resilience and optimism: painted murals, mosaic murals and sculptures, stone and metal sculptures. And this year, as it has for the last 40, the MayDay parade assembled alongside the former Almond Tree at 18th Avenue and 25th Street.

Though Sandy's work as a visual artist and artistic director is compelling, the real miracle of her work lies beneath it all in the trust and community-building that happens on the way to the theater. Sandy invites the broad community to walk alongside her to tell their stories, to draw and shape their visions, to make art that creates change and gives hope, and to dance their celebration of new life every spring and every day, knowing that—as the HOBT production of *La Befana* tells us—**every child, every person is holy.**

Harvey Winje was born in 1940 in the area that 20 years later would be named for abolitionist Wendell Phillips. He is an American by virtue of his father's immigration; a Norwegian and a Bohemian by birth; a seeker of balance and justice by virtue of being born on the cusp between Virgo and Libra; a carpenter by trade; a father by the miracles of adoption and birth; the senior editor of *The Alley* newspaper; and an inveterate keeper of history and building parts.

SANDY ON

# VITALITY

At the time we were moving into the Avalon, I had a dream in which throngs of wounded people lined up on Lake Street—standing with crutches, being carried on stretchers, all waiting to go into the Avalon as a sanctuary, a place of healing. I had just researched Avalon's place in English lore: at the center of the island of Avalon there was a mountain that healed wounded warriors with the Water of Life. This dream spoke to our intent that our new home on Lake Street be a place of vitality for participatory community creativity.



# BIGGER THAN OURSELVES

BY PAM COSTAIN

*Tenders of the Land and Animals, painted banner honoring women's work, from Illuminations, 1998.*

Every community needs its spiritual leaders—those who call us to our better selves, who remind us that our relationships to one another are at the core of being human, that there is enough on this good, green earth for everyone to share and that by working together we will survive. For 40 years Sandy Spieler has been the “pastor” **to our passionate, wildly diverse, headstrong, and independent-minded Powderhorn community**. Her poignant visual imagery, giant puppets, ritual ceremonies, and celebrations of place have knit us together. They have spoken to our fears and anxieties while evoking our longing for a world in which wealth is shared and the earth is honored.

Many of my family’s most powerful memories are connected to Sandy and In the Heart of the Beast, and we are not alone. I first made cornstalk puppets with my oldest daughter three decades ago, and now she makes butterfly wings with her young son. We have immersed our arms in wheat paste and torn newspaper; sewn beautiful costumes out of scrap material; stilted our way down Bloomington Avenue; and been blades of grass, big-lipped fish, sea serpents, and wood nymphs. We also inhabited giant puppets of Paul and Sheila Wellstone after their tragic deaths, walking the length of the MayDay Parade route with reverence to help our community heal from their loss.

MayDay is our family’s high holy day, a ritual we would not miss. No matter where we have scattered, we come home for the parade and ceremony, rising at 6:00 a.m. to lay our blanket on the hillside, **joining others to make a patchwork of color**. Three generations of us gather on the blanket hours later to sing and shout and bring the sun back across the lake. Each year we exult in the resurrection of the Tree of Life as it rises once again. At day’s end, we leave the park exhausted, but also with a deep sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves.

Many thousands of people make MayDay. That is its magic. And Sandy would be the first to say that it is a **COLLECTIVE EFFORT** born of a belief that together we can be the change we seek in the world. But despite being owned by all who prepare it, participate in it, and watch it, MayDay would not have endured without the vision, love, and hard work of Sandy Spieler. Year after year, Sandy selflessly gives this gift to our community, renewing our spirit despite the world’s woes. **We are so grateful for her patience, stamina, sense of wonder, and outstanding artistic vision that binds us all together. And we honor her.**

Pam Costain is the president and CEO of AchieveMpls, the strategic nonprofit partner of the Minneapolis Public Schools. She was formerly the state director of Parents United for Public Schools, director of education and training at Wellstone Action, and executive director of the Resource Center of the Americas.

# MAYDAY

## COLLECTIVE BRILLIANCE

MayDay is a collective endeavor: While it thrives on oodles of individual artistry, it is impossible to trace its collective brilliance to any one artist. Over the years the individual work of artists shines forth, and those who follow MayDay for many years are able to pick out the stellar contributions and individual styles of the various artists who have evolved the character of the celebration. It is wrong to call MayDay the work of any one artist—it is built, enacted, and supported by many artists, staff, organizers, board members, and hardworking volunteers.

I am one of the people who helped to found MayDay, and over 40 years I have worked with teams to set MayDay's path (navigated with imperfection!) and to protect it as a community-built, community-enacted, and community-supported event that receives multiple generations of people who work together. Somehow.



MayDay ceremony rehearsal with puppets designed in collaboration with Alison Duddle, 2000

# LIFE'S FORWARD MOTION

BY LAURIE WITZKOWSKI

When I contemplate the adhesive that has bound me to In the Heart of the Beast for these last 30 years, the first word that comes to mind is *faith*. I've always thought of faith as Sandy's best offering to me. She carries it with her as an aroma. She has irrepressible faith in herself; she embodies the pre-flight mandate "When using oxygen, put the mask on yourself first before helping others."

There is so much to be done, so much reparation and redemption, so much small daily devotion. It doesn't matter if your efforts are imperfect or uncomfortable, just that they proceed from your heart. That you show up. **Our girl shows up, each day and then the next. Willing to stumble and to shine, to connect, to try.**

Her persistence and self-confidence attract others similarly endowed, and also others who have less faith in themselves but tremendous faith in the truth of artmaking and the shared vision of a circle where love weathers all. Sandy and the circle generate faith that extends to me. I in turn place my faith in the circle. We make each other's work better.

Making theater that is original and collaborative is a messy, disorderly, inspired process. When you really show up for it, it brings out the best and the worst in you. It can be so awkward. It can feel so impossible. The only thing that can pull you through it is knowing that underlying it is a process, a pattern that will prevail, just as mating rituals and giving birth are mysteriously convoluted and dangerous . . . yet inevitable, directed by the pull of life's forward motion. **You have to remember that there is something that needs to come forth through you; the task is to hear what that is.**

And when you draw in all **COLLABORATORS**, the immediate community, the larger one, the world, the plants, animals, and minerals of the earth—oh, what a tangled web holds you! But you needn't be afraid or limited by this if you are a part of it. You open your eyes and ears wide. When you're directing, you are the eardrum of the song. You've got to make your own sense of the energies at play.

You make calls based on your reading of the waters.

It is early spring, early enough that it's hard to believe the snow will finally melt. A group gathers, a council of dreamers for MayDay. The circle is large, bulging into the edges of the theater's lobby. Everyone speaks from their own heart and motives. Many observations, needs, images, wishes, mandates. Big expanses of paper are filled with words, and the room tastes of grief and hope.

All of this expression must somehow be wrestled into a theme and a story for the parade and ceremony, or perhaps ignored. Sandy insists on directing this enterprise. We gracefully and grudgingly (we are all jumping up and down with ideas!), with relief and trepidation, grant her this duty, and it begins.

We each bring our best inspirations; they may not prevail. We fume, we pout. We go away. We come back. We analyze, we justify, we mediate. We breathe, we listen, we laugh. We dream, we undermine, we support, we defend, we concede. We try to dominate, we collapse in defeat. We fool ourselves, we are honest. We return to the table always. We say yes again. Sandy is at the helm, willing to conjure, infuriate, shudder, encourage, tweak, chop, contradict, bless.

Who are we but a bunch of animals dancing in the moonlight? A flock of lumpy warty beautiful people trying. We believe in this! In life and its assertions. In the power of each and every heart and blade of grass to overcome. In a hand and a bowl of water.

**It is May. There is a morning, there is light and a contagion of color, sound, children, and joy. We come with our flawed stupid brilliance and lay our gift on the grass.**

HOBt is family that I dance and wrestle with and lean into. Here I give breast and I suckle. **I show up. We all show up.** And Sandy turns out the lights at night and rings the breakfast bell in the morning.

Laurie Witzkowski is a creator of theater, music, ceremony, and gardens in both English and Spanish. She has been a staff and contract artist at HOBt for 29 years.



SANDY ON

# DIVINING

Self-portrait, 1986

I like that the dictionary defines *divining* as “perceiving through some inexplicable perceptive powers,” because I’ve come to see my image-finding process as divining—a rather messy wrestling match between my ever-present self-doubt and some restless inarticulate something that wants to speak, that asks me to channel it into tangible form. But, dang! “It” never gives me a defined path, only a sly hint rising from beneath layers of things, saying, “DO SOMETHING, DO SOMETHING!”

Against my fear of beginning I force myself to pick up a pencil, to lay my hands into clay, or to ask my co-workers to improvise a scene with frighteningly little direction. It is always an act of faith to begin, and an act of faith to continue.

Thank you, loyal pencil, for translating the “something” into the figure that appears on the paper! Thank you, blessed clay, for finding the curve that allows the light to fall just so! Thank you, brilliant colleagues, for wrestling with me to find that moment of soulful truth! It is because of you that I begin again and again, against all doubt.

# FORTY YEARS BLOOMING

BY NADJA REUBENOVA

“Bloom where you’re planted.” That’s something Sandy says, referring to an adage on a framed print that hung in her mother’s kitchen when she was growing up. Sandy speaks with appreciation about the everyday wonder of dandelions that push through cracks in cement, resilient even in harsh environments. This is an appropriate metaphor for In the Heart of the Beast, a company that has bloomed even in very difficult conditions.

I worked with Sandy in the early years of HOBT’s tenure in the Avalon Theater on 15th Avenue and Lake Street. I started as financial manager in 1988 and became HOBT’s first executive director, serving from 1991 to 1996. During that time, I witnessed—

and contributed to—HOBT’s **TRANSFORMATION** from small puppet company to cultural institution. Those were difficult and powerful times. Working intimately with Sandy for five years to navigate HOBT’s daunting transition and continuing our friendship since then, I see the influence Sandy has had both on Minneapolis and on me personally.

For much of those early years it felt like we were creating *terra firma* from chaos. When I started, HOBT had just moved into the Avalon. Internally, most parts of the space—the administrative offices, the lighting grid, the stage—were makeshift. Functional spaces existed in our minds only, to be actualized as time, resources, and inspiration allowed. Our financial-management system had to be overhauled to meet the needs of a growing organization; other operating necessities, such as personnel policies, needed to be created from scratch. Externally, the demographics of our neighborhood were in flux. Prostitution, drug sales, and gang violence were on the rise on Lake Street, but so were waves of newcomers from across the country and the world. We recognized that we were located at a great cultural crossroads, and we welcomed the influence this would have on our work.

Money was incredibly tight. For every dime available there was at least a dollar’s worth of need. Meeting payroll was at times doubtful. In 1989 I witnessed most of the staff agreeing to forgo pay for eight weeks, gambling on a grant award that might come through. (It did, and they all received back wages.) I’ve never encountered more sacrifice and faith in what they were doing than I saw in the staff at HOBT.

It was in this context that Sandy and her art staff created the fall show, the holiday show, the experimental series, and MayDay each year. When we secured school residencies, we wove them into the calendar, and the team worked as teaching artists in classrooms, Sandy on the front lines working alongside her team. In addition, she shouldered leadership responsibilities such as orchestrating commissioned works, managing production budgets, reporting to the board, and raising money. The hours were staggering. Sandy told me one summer that she had enjoyed working only a 40-hour week during her vacation—it felt so easy!

Sandy is humble, warm, encouraging, and unflappable; she works in collaboration with others, always seeking the wisdom of the group. This can be seen in how the MayDay theme is shaped each year by scores of ideas collected at community meetings, and by the way in which staff artists often collaboratively develop a script, build the set, make the puppets, and perform in productions. Indelibly etched in my consciousness is that no matter what the circumstance, Sandy always, always, has stood for artistic quality and integrity.

One of the things I appreciate about Sandy is her capacity to create an organizational culture where magical thinking is accepted. To wit, there was the time in the summer of 1989 when the Avalon building apprehended armed thugs and made a citizen’s arrest. And there was MayDay 1991, when Turtle Spirit, responding to its place of honor in the MayDay theme, Return to Turtle Island, blessed us with such heavy rains that we had to reschedule the festival. (Upon reflection, it makes sense that a turtle would consider an overabundance of water an appropriate gift.) We once spent the better part of a staff meeting interpreting the meaning of a dream a staff member had in relation to the success of MayDay that year. I thank the gods that there is a Sandy Spieler in the world, that **she welcomes the odd view, and that she attracts freethinkers.**

That HOBT and MayDay survive are a testament to Sandy’s leadership and her tremendous stamina and faith. Others have come, contributed greatly, and gone; resources have flowed in and out of the company purse, and all the while Sandy has been the midwife and mother to HOBT’s vision. Like that dandelion that bloomed where it was planted, Sandy did too. She and the theater grew a strong taproot in the soil of Lake Street. The “blooms” have included 40 seasons of productions, artwork that graces public spaces, a revitalized Bloomington-Lake business district, and a next generation of artists who have honed their puppeteering chops at HOBT.



# SHE LOVES THE WORLD SO MUCH!

SANDY SPIELER 33 - 34

BY FLORENCE CHARD DACEY

We are working on the production of the opera *Lightning* in 1985, rehearsing at the Southern Theater in Minneapolis. Sandy goes onstage to demonstrate to the women who are handling the tall grass exactly how it should be done. From my seat in the darkened theater, I watch as she coaxes two stalks of grass, which are cloth and stick, taller than herself, into undulating. Such a simple act, but revelatory for me. For suddenly the wind is shimmying through the grass and I am seven years old, perched on a hill, awake to some mystery that wants to make a path straight into me.

I don't remember what scene it was or why that grass was in the show, but I remember Sandy's [grace](#) and [earnestness](#). The intent look on her beautiful face. How I felt and what I recognized. I am not very knowledgeable about the art of puppetry, but I know the creative act when I see it. Sandy was paying attention to what was in her hands, identifying with it yet remaining separate, respectful. She forgot herself, even as she brought her whole self to bear. Then the magic happened. The object became subject, grew larger, illumined the space around it so the viewer suddenly saw with the imagination. That's a holy trinity I can put my faith in: the artist, the material, and that third thing, the creation as apprehended by the other. I realize that even those few minutes on the stage required Sandy's skills born of years of practice and perseverance, all bound up with a huge desire to alter the world, one blade of grass at a time, if that is what it takes.

Over the decades I have witnessed [Sandy's artistry in action onstage and off](#). I have sat with her at a meeting where she coaxed a structure out of the eclectic ideas and artistic passions of a MayDay team of artists, watched her hands bring a sorrowing puppet to life for a new production, collaborated with her to fashion lines of poetry so they might reflect the depth and wisdom of the mythic, urgent figures who first emerged deep in her imagination.

I want to say I don't know how she has sustained her enthusiasm, her commitment to the common good, and her ability and determination to fashion beauty and joy out of what remains a world fraught with intractable troubles. But then I think about that moment with the grass and about what that revealed about her spirit and her gifts, and I suppose I do know, at least in part. She loves the world so much she lets it move through her, be illumined, move us. Her artmaking is essential and highly evolved. Like the movement of the earth's water she wants us all to protect. Like the prairie grass rising again and again, to bow in the Minnesota wind.

My love for Sandy is deeply rooted, too. [Her influence permeates my being](#). The marigolds in my garden are grown in her honor. Spieler art hangs in nearly every room of my house. [There are moments of Sandy's exquisite puppetry that still bring tears to my eyes just in the remembering](#). Sandy's work on water issues inspires my own activism. I've become aware that at the bottom layers of my dreaming, there is a MayDay Parade going on with masked characters dancing and horns blasting. I think the party is continual; I just catch glimpses every now and then in deep sleep.

It makes perfect sense to me that Sandy has received the McKnight Distinguished Artist Award. She deserves it. Absolutely. But let us also bestow on Sandy a new award: the Distinguished Dandelion Award, for blooming so masterfully where she was planted.

[Nadja Reubenova is an arts coach, facilitator, collaboration specialist, and a co-owner of PossibiliTree LLC.](#)

[Florence Chard Dacey has published four poetry collections, including, most recently, \*Rock Worn by Water\*, poems about our place within the natural world.](#)



SANDY ON

**COMPASSION** AS I STEP INTO THE SKIN OF A PUPPET OR A MASK, I ENCOURAGE COMPASSION FOR THAT BEING OR ENTITY TO GROW WITHIN ME. The process actually feels like melting, or becoming naked, as the boundaries of my own skin and ego dissolve into empathetic understanding of the soul of another. Points of nakedness are openings to other worlds, a vital integration of realms not present in the analytical thinking world: birth, death, those times when flesh amasses and dissolves. There is something about the dissolution and re-remembering of skin that brings me into the most intimate experience of the interconnection of my bodily cells with the cells of the universe. I find that moment of compassionate recognition to be a place of healing.

# WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

BY SHEILA REGAN

These days, the arts world is abuzz about “creative placemaking.” Defined by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as what happens when the public, private, nonprofit, and community sectors come together to shape the physical and social character of a community around arts and cultural activities, creative placemaking has inspired many Minnesota arts organizations to initiate programs that serve their communities in deep and meaningful ways. Spurred by new funding sources (e.g., the NEA’s Our Town grants) that encourage audience participation, public and accessible programs, and collaborations among neighborhood groups, government entities, and businesses, a renaissance of arts projects that are more about process and relationships than a final product is occurring.

While placemaking is au courant, it’s nothing new for an artist like Sandy Spieler, who has spent her career creating theater for and with the community, from the ground up. Under Spieler’s care, *In the Heart of the Beast* has grown deep roots in its south Minneapolis community, forging connections with a diverse array of neighbors, community organizations, faith groups, businesses, and more.

It’s difficult to separate Spieler from HOB.T. Because they take such a collaborative approach as a company, often there’s not a single creative force behind a particular project. As HOB.T’s artistic director, however, [Spieler deserves credit for nurturing an environment where so many people have taken ownership of the art and community that HOB.T creates.](#)

The best example, of course, is the beloved annual MayDay Parade and Festival, whose spirit reverberates through the life of the community all year long. HOB.T’s Phillips Project, a partnership begun by the company’s education director, Bart Buch, to engage neighborhood kids in arts activities, is another innovation. The project gives underserved children the opportunity for immersion in media such as puppetry, photography, video, music, and poetry, but it does much more than that: participants learn about the neighborhood’s physical and social history, interview current residents, and use what they learn to create art that explores many facets of their neighborhood.

Spieler’s leadership has also molded HOB.T into a company that has inspired and influenced innumerable other Minnesota arts organizations devoted to forging tight bonds with their communities. HOB.T alumni have gone on to create companies such as

the Minneapolis-based Open Eye Figure Theatre, whose “driveway tours” take puppetry into neighborhoods, and the Magic Smelt Puppet Troupe in Duluth, presenters of the annual winter-banishing Run Smelt Run Parade & Party that culminates in the presentation of the Smelt Queen.

BareBones Productions and Bedlam Theatre, both in the Twin Cities, have long shared HOB.T’s spirit of participation and community building (as well as the talents of many artists who work on productions at all three companies). HOB.T’s signature use of spectacle and public performance is evident in Bedlam and BareBones events, such as the latter’s annual Halloween pageant. More recently, organizations such as Pillsbury House + Theatre and Pangea World Theatre, both of which have a history of doing grassroots work, have taken steps to strive even further in the direction of placemaking, where performance not only happens out in the community but also is often co-created by the community. Many of their successes bear signs of influence by the work of Spieler and HOB.T.

The far-reaching cultural influence of Spieler’s work has happened because the [work itself is so viscerally affecting](#). In 2006, I performed in HOB.T’s *La Natividad*, which presents the Nativity story as a metaphor for the U.S. immigration crisis. Mary and Joseph, as undocumented immigrants, were forced to leave the country. I always teared up at the part where the audience walked with Mary and Joseph from the Avalon Theater to St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, where they were stopped by a blockade. Performers, with “Welcome” signs in hand, tore down the barrier.

That moment’s profound resonance came from both the powerful metaphor of breaking through the walls that surround us and the participatory nature of the action. And it illustrated what I love so much about Spieler’s vision: The show was political, but not limited by its political point of view. Instead, it mixed strong messaging with spiritual and communal ritual, creating a thrilling experience. The effort, like many of HOB.T’s other productions, required an enormous number of volunteers working in different groups. There was the angel choir, the consortium of animal puppeteers, children like me performing as angels and shepherds. While each group had its own leader, Spieler was ever present, overseeing the whole production.

She’s a small woman with a rather angelic demeanor, especially when you speak to her one-on-one. In a large group, however, she’s a power to be reckoned with, bringing all different kinds of people together toward a common goal. [Her work is about reaching toward the whole—where people, animals, plants, the wind, the water, and the earth all meet as one in search for unity.](#)

Sheila Regan is a Minneapolis-based journalist and theater artist. She contributes to the *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, [martists.org](#), *City Pages*, *Vita.mn*, and Classical Minnesota Public Radio, among other media outlets.

# FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES



With Susan Gust, best friend since 1970

It was 1970 in a high school in Ambridge, PA, a small town on the Ohio River named after the American Bridge Company, owned by U.S. Steel. The mills were beginning to lay off workers in droves, young men were returning from Vietnam in body bags, events connected to the civil rights movement were making the nightly news, and there seemed to be a huge gap between the generations in how we reckoned with a tumultuous and changing world. Sandy had arrived in my town midway through junior year. I was told to show this minister's daughter around the school, and it was a task I did not want.

I can still vividly remember the day Sandy moved from being an albatross to being a friend with whom I wanted to share my deepest fears and feelings. She asked our homeroom teacher if she could decorate the barren blackboard at the back of the room. When we came to school the next day, bright-colored construction-paper quotes and images of a sun adorned the blackboard, critiquing the Vietnam War but compelling us to envision peace and giving us words to inspire us to do so together.

Even as a girl, Sandy was already skilled at using images to wrestle with and understand our residence within the heart of the beast—and at doing this work with a profound spirit of love, forgiveness, and hope.

SUSAN GUST  
COMMUNITY ACTIVIST AND SMALL-BUSINESS OWNER  
MINNEAPOLIS



Over the last 40 years, Sandy's work has given voice to the unseen and overlooked people, places, creatures, and forces that shape our lives. Her puppets, be they tiny finger puppets or giant, parade-style puppets, stand in witness to our interaction with the natural world. Here is an artist who could have gone anywhere on the strength of her talent, yet has chosen to stay rooted here—in the heart of a Midwestern city, in one of the state's most economically challenged and diverse neighborhoods. Through good times and bad, she has just kept doing her work. Her iconic figures have a power to move us in ways that go beyond language, silently challenging us to do better, to be better stewards of the earth, to be kinder to each other, and to stand up for justice. Working alongside her for 20 years has been one of the great honors of my life.

KATHEE FORAN  
ARTS ADMINISTRATOR; HOBT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 1996-2010  
SAINT PAUL

I joined In the Heart of the Beast for *The Circle of Water Circus* tour because I already knew about Sandy and loved her work. We might have been riding on a houseboat, but working with Sandy was like skiing behind a powerboat: **Hang on.**

We were working with a beautiful, 20-foot-tall puppet. I was the right hand.

"The eyes. Follow the eyes."

"But I'm a hand!"

"Do it."

"Oh, now I get it."

The next day: a finger puppet.

"Your knees. You're not using your knees."

"It's a finger puppet!"

"Do it."

"Oh, yeah. Huh."

One show in Hastings, Minnesota, it must have been 98 degrees. Two Mormon missionaries came by. In no time, Sandy had them inside this burlap buffalo. She worked them, but after the show there they were, huge grins, sweat-soaked in white shirts and ties.

**I marvel at her heart, her passion and artistry.** When you honor the work you honor yourself and those who come before and after you.

Things I learned from Sandy that I carry:

Art is community.

Art is a verb.

Good art moves people, physically and emotionally.

Art is on purpose.

Everyone can make art.

Everything can be art.

But not everything is art or everyone an artist.

The world is art waiting to happen.

Give it your all.

Work from the knees.

Follow the eyes.

KEVIN KLING  
ACTOR  
MINNEAPOLIS

We were all growing up together, coming of age—In the Heart of the Beast, At the Foot of the Mountain, Alive and Trucking, Orréa Mime Troupe, Circle of the Witch, the Palace, the Illusion Theater. There were more. We came and went. But we all saw one another's work and shared our dreams and our mailing lists and our duplicating machines and our publicity files and our opinions and our venues. At the Foot of the Mountain's first full-length play, *River Journal*, was housed in Walker Community Church, where HOBT and the Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre (later to become the Palace) were first located. And we shared our lights, our glue, our papier-mâché, our frustrations, our successes. When MayDay first began and the parade was small, we all donned masks and brought our instruments, clay pots, and bamboo sticks and walked the route to the park . . .

On July 4, 1976, we all climbed into HOBT's huge buffalo-head puppets in my backyard and slowly walked across the street and through the park before the fireworks began as a testimony to the great creatures of the land that have been slaughtered or caged by those of us who celebrate our freedom on this day. We were always pushing the envelope. We were rebels and we were ardent visionaries, determined to have our voices heard and to make the world a better place for everyone.

Today, most of us still stand clustered in our isolation and our ignorance, desperately hoping for the release from all this suffering which we have brought upon ourselves. But with Sandy and her expansive vision at the helm, HOBT remains true to **the dream of a peaceful world, inviting us through song and dance and magnificently beautiful giant puppets to notice how filled with blessings our lives are, if we will only take the time to see.**

MARTHA BOESING  
FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR (1974-1984), AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN  
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA





When we were growing up, our mom always had something up her sleeve for dinner, and we're not just referring to the food. Whether it was sitting around husking corn with the neighborhood kids while discussing the life journey of a single piece of corn, or reading the "I Have a Dream" speech on Martin Luther King, Jr., Day while fighting back tears, mealtime was a place where she could teach and **share her values with whoever was lucky enough to be around.**

Of the many dinners that stick out in our minds, one particular story took place on a cold December's eve. We were young teenagers at the time, and we happened to have a couple of friends over for dinner that night. As we all sat down at the table, we realized that someone was missing. "Where's Mom?" Rose asked.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Our dad jumped up to answer it. "Oh, my," he exclaimed as he opened the door, "come right in!"

Hobbling in from the cold night, a masked old woman entered the dining room carrying a sack over her shoulder. We recognized her right away—it was La Befana, the Italian equivalent of Santa Claus. Our faces turned red with teenaged embarrassment as we both giggled nervously at our friends. Unfazed, La Befana proceeded to pull out all sorts of goodies from her sack. A toothbrush, some dental floss, an apple. She silently limped around the table, giving us each something special before blowing us a kiss and retreating toward the door.

A couple of minutes later, our mom appeared at the table. "Where were you?" our dad asked. "You missed La Befana!" She expressed her disappointment at missing our visitor, but shrugged it off and led us in a brief prayer for the food we were about to eat. Our friends, still reeling a bit from the earlier commotion, asked if it was some kind of special occasion that prompted La Befana's visit. We assured them it was no holiday. Just a normal night around our dinner table.

MICAH SPIELER-SANDBERG  
PROUD SON  
SEATTLE

ROSE SPIELER-SANDBERG  
PROUD DAUGHTER  
ASHLAND, WISCONSIN





Sandy is my mentor, my friend, and my inspiration. I studied my craft by sensing the contours of her sculpture, hands wet with papier-mâché paste. She taught me the importance of leaving space for imagination, for mystery. She showed me how to bring form out of the darkness with the absolute simplest of materials and tools. She showed me, through her art, that it is possible to take a complicated, multilayered idea and create an image that encapsulates all aspects of it, clarifies it—like a poem, an icon—so that it speaks directly to the heart. She has always shared her knowledge and her discoveries; she isn't one of those artists who wraps herself in an air of mystery. I am one of hundreds of artists who over the years have learned from Sandy, been encouraged along their path by her, and in whose work something of her influence shines through.

Perhaps because of being a minister's daughter, Sandy possesses an amazing ability (is it learned or innate?) to charge the simplest of objects and actions with profound meaning, with significance. She understands better than anyone I know the importance of **ritual both in theater and in our everyday lives, made all the more meaningful because of the unpretentiousness and quirky humor that are as much a part of her work as deep thought and artistic skill.** To my complete joy, in 2004 Sandy agreed to officiate at my wedding. I couldn't think of anyone I would trust more to mark such an important moment with reverence and care yet with the lightest touch.

ALISON DUDDLE  
PUPPET- AND MASK-MAKER AND DIRECTOR  
JOINT ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, HORSE + BAMBOO THEATRE  
LANCASHIRE, U.K.



One of my favorite images of Sandy is her inimitable lecture demonstration moment of showing a group of schoolchildren how anything can be a puppet. She'll seize a black garbage bag and, whirling it into a fury, scream: "A tornado!" And it is. Truly, in Sandy Spielers' hands anything can be a puppet. And is, and was, and has been.

What I cherish in her work is the same thing I'd find when we would stop to share lunch in the middle of a workday—the joy she takes in slicing an apple, her deep appreciation for the orangeness of a carrot, sipping a glass of water as if it were a fine wine. Clarity and simplicity, what has been called naïveté but is also known as wonder, joy, amazement at the small, the fearlessness to be enormous, finding the profound in the everyday. **Sandy walks the earth with the heart of a child, her eyes wide open to all its beauty and despair. And then she pulls it into her hands to create something beautiful, important.** This is the work of the artist, and Sandy does it every day.

STEVEN EPP  
ACTOR  
MINNEAPOLIS

Sandy's particular magic is somehow creating an image or a theatrical moment which seems like a collective déjà vu: something you didn't even realize you forgot, but when **you see it, it makes your heart sing.** It's something like nostalgia.

This might be in the proportions of the facial features of a mask, the elongation or angle of a puppet's fingers, the transformation of a set, or the quiet grandeur of a giant. As a theater-maker, I know how hard it is to find this grace . . . but it is undeniably present in so much of Sandy's work. This is one of the reasons so many artists have come to learn from Sandy over the years.

The strange thing is, Sandy doesn't necessarily know how she does it, but she knows when it's not there. This, I believe, is what drives her. I've seen her sculpt a perfectly decent mask and discard it because it didn't hold an essential quality of a character. And she didn't know how else to find it but to try and fail. This drive for that essence sometimes made for long, difficult rehearsals if you were in a giant puppet or holding a glove puppet above your head.

I worked with Sandy regularly for about 10 years, from 1992 to 2001. I have since worked with several other puppet and mask companies and started a few of my own, but Sandy will always be my first puppetry mentor. So much of what I now know about the power and poetry of this ancient and ridiculous craft of puppetry, I learned working next to Sandy; for this I will always be grateful.

ANDREW KIM  
FORMER HOBT STAFF ARTIST;  
FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THINGUMAJIG THEATRE AND HANDMADE PARADE  
WEST YORKSHIRE, U.K.



The holiday production *La Natividad*, directed by Sandy, evolved from an earlier show called *The Hunt*, which was my first show with In the Heart of the Beast in 1979. When we performed *The Hunt* one year on the stage at Plymouth Congregational Church, I puppeteered the Virgin Mary. (During the run I discovered I was pregnant, a phenomenon that happened with three different women who played Mary in three consecutive years!) My puppet was primarily cardboard and fabric; the image of baby Jesus was an unseen lit candle inside a painted cardboard box, creating a glow from within the faux cradle.

As Mother Mary leaned over her newborn, I smelled something odd. My puppet's body had caught on fire! I threw her to the ground! Flames were rising from the stage! And because we all performed barefoot, no one could stamp the fire out!

Sandy, resourceful person that she is, hurried to center stage and called out very politely, "Does anyone have a shoe?" From the audience, one was offered up. Sandy whopped poor Mary with the shoe. The fire was stifled and the show, of course, went on.

ESTHER OURAY  
ASSOCIATE ARTIST, HOBT  
MINNEAPOLIS

I remember being 18 years old and seeing *The Reapers' Tale*, created by Sandy Spieler, Laurie Witzkowski, Martha Boesing, and the company at HOBT.

I was mind-blown. I had seen some theater by that point in my life, but nothing prepared me for the visceral pageant I witnessed. Larger-than-life sculptures came alive telling the story of Christopher Columbus "discovering" America. I can still hear the sounds of hundreds of aluminum cans being dumped down the aisle of the theater to accompany a procession of skeletons as tall as the ceiling. It was so abrupt a theatrical moment that it was like the screech of chalk on blackboard. The whole performance was like that: events to be experienced, much more than a play to be observed.

It **changed me**, changed what I have come to expect or want from a theater experience, and changed how I want my own work to be perceived.

I have seen Sandy create so many gorgeous, heart-filled puppets and pageant moments over the last 20 years—a beautiful, compelling history of work.

ALISON HEIMSTEAD  
PUPPET THEATER ARTIST AND DIRECTOR;  
PERFORMANCE CURATOR AT HOBT  
MINNEAPOLIS



In the summer of 1980, I was a 21-year-old hippie from Baltimore attending the Black Hills International Survival Gathering, where a coalition of Indians, ranchers, environmentalists, and peaceniks was trying to stop uranium mining in the Black Hills. There were antinuke scientists and American Indian Movement leaders and powwow drums and antiwar veterans and community activists and poets. There was a dense daily schedule of very serious workshops and panel discussions.

Then I came across a puppet show: a miniature theater with hand puppets performed by a few kids, and a young woman playing the harmonica. A bad man named Mr. Plutonium, ruthless, greedy, and evil, was causing lots of problems. A superhero character named No Nukes, wearing a cape with a large N on it, struggled with Mr. Plutonium, but Mr. Plutonium was too strong, a formidable foe. No Nukes was persuaded by his supporters to appeal to Mrs. Plutonium. This strategy worked. As I recall, Mr. and Mrs. Plutonium were in bed when Mrs. Plutonium finally got through to Mr. Plutonium and he pledged to stop making nuclear weapons and destroying the earth.

I was especially delighted by the interplay of the boy who wore the No Nukes hand puppet and the woman playing the harmonica. Their performance was so joyful and skillful that I convinced myself these two must be mother and son. Afterward, I learned that Sandy had hosted a workshop during which kids and volunteers had created this show in a few days, and that she had not known any of the kids before the gathering. That show was a revelation to me. It was so many things at once: **mythology and slapstick and education and humor and reality and nonsense and resistance and encouragement**. It was absurd and beautiful. I could see that this was a powerful art form, and I loved it!

My girlfriend was in graduate school in Florida studying theater. I wrote to her about the puppeteer Sandy Spieler and her company in Minneapolis. Within a year, we had settled in Minneapolis and had become HOBT company members.

JIM OURAY  
PUPPETEER AND FOUNDER OF THE MAGIC SMELT PUPPET TROUPE  
DULUTH



I was drawn into the basement of Walker Community Church after singing for a show that Sandy created about Anna Mae Aquash. What a creative world expanded and contracted in and out of the little workshop behind the vinyl accordion doors on the west side of the basement! The beginnings of MayDay, as well as many small shows, were created out of that space: burlap, white sheets, Rit dye, old sewing machines, fringe, fringe, fringe, cardboard, clay, Vaseline, trips to Butler Drug on the corner of Bloomington Avenue and Lake Street for sewing notions. Then there was the hazardous material, celastic dipped into acetone; rubber gloves and a ventilator for breathing.

For the next production I was in, *The Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly*, Sandy created the mask of Sophie the Gorilla. I was Sophie, wearing dyed-grey long johns, a red polka-dot dress and a felt hat, playing opposite Esmeralda (Sandy), her exacting and continually disappointed trainer. My puppetry career started in the beauty and pathos of the Anna Mae Aquash story and the silliness of Sophie. I am one of so many recipients of Sandy's passion for her art, and one of the beneficiaries of her holding the vision so strongly.

MARGO MCCREARY  
PUPPETEER  
MINNEAPOLIS



Among the artists/activists who organized the first MayDay Parade and Festival were a group of people, including Sandy and me, affiliated with the Almond Tree Household. The household members were engaged in community activism rooted in spiritual beliefs, and in exploring the role of ritual and ceremony in re-creating the future. It was our desire to connect with the artistic, political, social, emotional, and spiritual aspects of our lives. Sandy had the genius and tenacity to make that vision real, to create ceremony that unites across culture, creed, and race.

It is the embrace of our whole selves in community with one another that I believe distinguishes Sandy's work, work that is exemplified in MayDay. There are many thousands of people for whom MayDay is a spiritual highlight of the year, a high holy day of confession and absolution, joy and wonder, anchored by the Tree of Life, a unifying icon that is part of every culture's sacred story.

**Everybody in, nobody out.**

DAN NEWMAN  
MAYDAY TREE OF LIFE PUPPETEER AND HOBT BOARD MEMBER  
MINNEAPOLIS



Four years ago, I suggested to Sandy that Communities of Light Cooperative—a nonprofit dedicated to improving the physical, mental, and spiritual health of residents in several Minneapolis inner-city communities—participate in the MayDay Parade. As part of its mission, Communities of Light sells solar lanterns and portable solar electric generators; we wanted to showcase solar energy in the parade, along with our idea of Pangea World—a world united.

When the MayDay workshop began at HOBT, I perched at one of the tables four to five days a week for six weeks, working on our Pangea World contribution to the parade. It was a grueling task because I had limited resources and volunteers, but one of the HOBT staff came to the rescue with ideas for building a world by papier-mâchéing yoga balls. It worked!

Communities of Light has returned to the workshop table and to the parade every year since. Sandy understands that it is crucial that Black and African American community members be represented in the official parade—and that building community can happen as long as you continue to work at bringing community into the process. In 2014, Communities of Light was featured in the parade, represented by more than 80 community members from a wide range of cultures.

**Sandy Spieler proves, and keeps on proving, that a consistent community effort will work!**

DEE HENRY WILLIAMS  
CO-OP MEMBER, COMMUNITIES OF LIGHT;  
FOUNDER, ART FOR HEALING & CELEBRATION  
MINNEAPOLIS





In the summer of 1981, I was sitting at a picnic table with Carol Bly and Meridel LeSueur in the shadow of a Gustavus Adolphus College dorm. We were in St. Peter for “The Gathering”—a convocation of radical and political theater companies from across America. It was a chance to meet each other, to see each other’s work, to affirm that in the post-Vietnam era, the art we made still mattered (or, perhaps more accurately, mattered more than ever).

Sitting at the end of the table was, as Meridel would say, “a thin slip of a girl, a beanstalk with bright eyes and a table of curls on top,” Sandy Spieler by name.

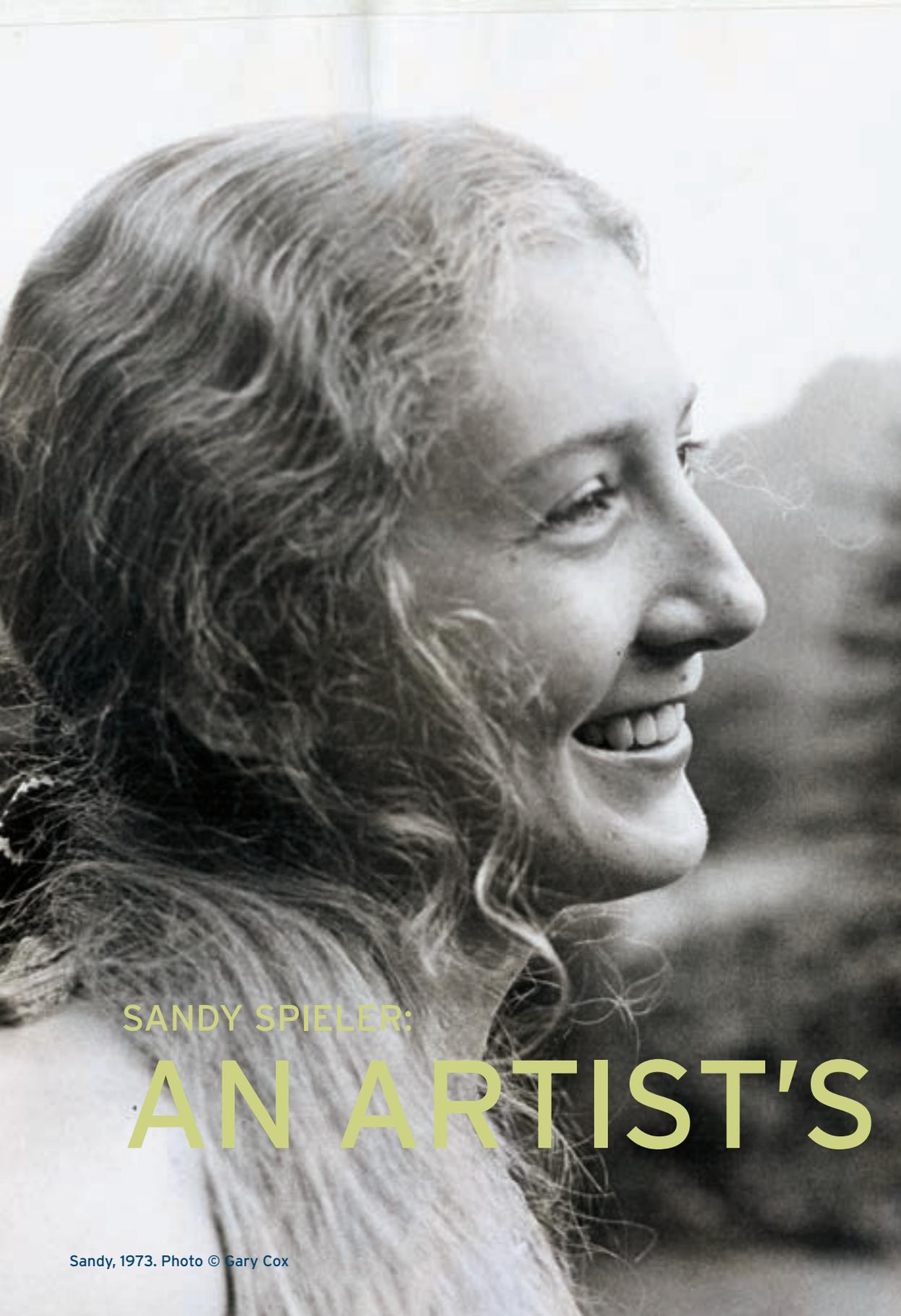
Sandy and I began a conversation that soon turned to her spinning out a dream of taking a circus from the headwaters of the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. A circus that was a theatrical performance of the history of the Mississippi River and the waters that flowed into, within, and through it to the wide ocean. I listened and thought to myself, “That’s pretty ambitious.” I wondered how it would work, how you would pay for it, who would do such a thing. Somewhere along the line she asked me—or I offered—to help make it happen.

So began my 33 years of conversations with Sandy Spieler about what is and what could be.

LOREN NIEMI  
STORYTELLER; HOBT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 2010-2014  
MINNEAPOLIS



Rehearsing for *The Prairie Circus and Wild West Show*, 1978



1953

Born in Columbus, OH, the second of four children. Father, Robert, is a seminary professor of theology and German; mother, Shirley, is a secretary and homemaker.



SANDY SPIELER:

# AN ARTIST'S LIFE

**1957 - 1958**

The Spielers move to Brighton, MI, where Robert serves as pastor of St. George Lutheran Church. Family includes siblings Krista, Bob (Robert), and Jim (James).



Top: age 4, 1957. Lower left: age 5, 1958. Lower right: James, Robert, Sandy, and Krista Spierer

**1959 - 1961**

Robert has successful brain surgery that affects Sandy deeply, "giving me interest in hospitals, in bodies, and in the reality of death." A teacher encourages Sandy to draw and write poetry, and casts her as the Pied Piper in a school play.



At a rally in Washington, DC, 1968

**1962 - 1969**

Family moves to Maryland for Robert to serve as pastor of St. James Lutheran Church in Washington, DC. Robert welcomes the church's first African American parishioners, sparking hate mail, threats, and the departure of 70 percent of the white congregation. Sandy becomes active in the antiwar committee at her junior high and attends numerous protests in the city.

**1970**

St. James sells its building to an African American congregation and the Spielers move to Ambridge, PA. With Susan Gust and Fred Just, Sandy helps to organize a county-wide Walk for Hunger and open a youth drop-in center.

**1971 - 1972**

Enters Beloit College in Wisconsin as a liberal arts/pre-med student. Spends a semester in Minneapolis doing event and convention planning for the youth department of the American Lutheran Church and living in Almond Tree, a collective in the Phillips neighborhood across the street from the new Little Earth of United Tribes housing complex for Native American residents. "Without my being aware, I am called to make this community of Phillips a core of my life," she says. Spends four months in Denmark and afterward returns to Minneapolis instead of going back to college.



### 1973 - 1974

Creates first full-body sculpture for Circle of the Witch theater company. Takes a class at Powderhorn Puppet Theatre and is hired by the theater. Performs in a small touring show and helps create and perform *The Grass Will Grow and the River Flow* and *La Befana*.

First mask ever sculpted, for *The Grass Will Grow and the River Flow*, 1974

### 1975

Works with members of Almond Tree, Powderhorn Puppet Theatre, and other neighbors to create the first MayDay Parade and Festival to bring people together in defiance of how the war in Vietnam disrupted bonds between neighbors.



With fifth-graders during a residency in Brookings, SD, 1979

### 1976 - 1979

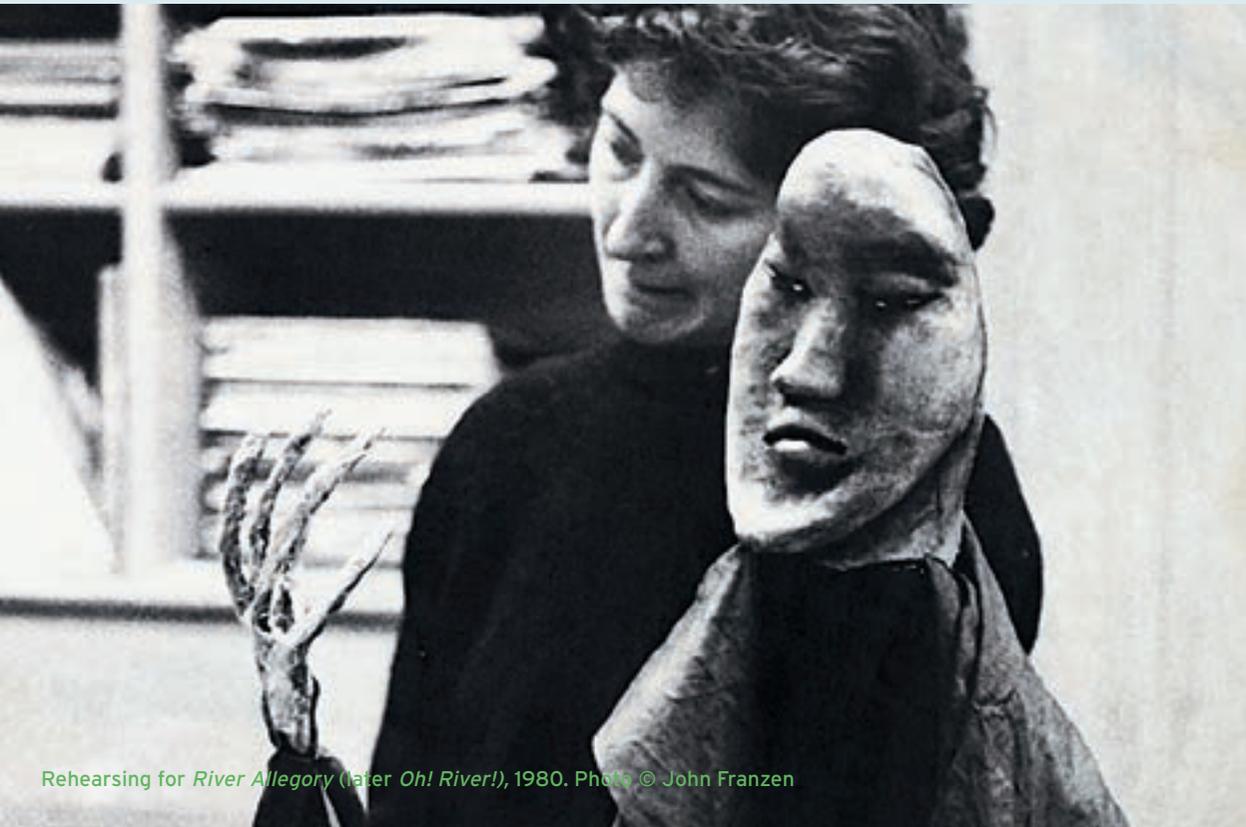
Begins creating residencies to teach puppetry to children and adults in schools and community centers. Becomes artistic director of Powderhorn Puppet Theatre. MayDay celebrations continue annually, and the group of collaborating artists grows; other pageants and productions include a Buffalo Procession for the U.S. bicentennial; *The Prairie Circus and Wild West Show*; *Wake Up!*; and participation in the Continental Walk for Disarmament and Social Justice. Forms the Almond Tree Choir. Creates *The Story of Anna Mae Aquash* in honor of a Native woman brutally murdered. Spends three summers working with Bread and Puppet Theater. In 1979, Powderhorn Puppet Theatre becomes In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre (HOBT) and moves into the Gustavus Adolphus building on Lake Street in Minneapolis.



Performing *The Love of The Moon* and *Oh! River!*, 1980

### 1980 - 1982

Attends the International Survival Gathering in the Black Hills and is inspired to build shows and residencies focused on stewardship of the water commons, including *Oh! River!*, *Water, Whose Choice?*, *War for Water*, and *Round About Water Tale*. Company work expands with *Shoes of Infant Light* and *The Hunt*. Studies Balinese masked dance at New York University.



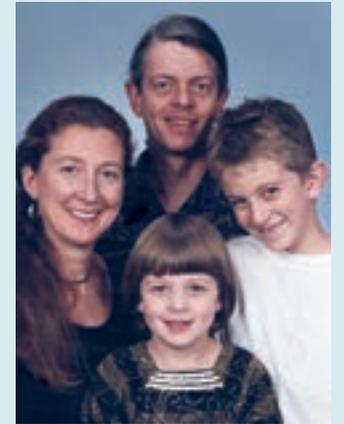
Rehearsing for *River Allegory* (later *Oh! River!*), 1980. Photo © John Franzen

1983 - 1990

Major works include *Dusk Til Dawn*; *Lightning*; *The Nightingale*; *Table, Table*; and *The Reapers' Tale*. Water-focused pieces include *A Life of HOH* and *The Circle of Water Circus*, which tours nationally in 1983 and to Sweden and Denmark in 1985. Marries Steven Sandberg; welcomes son Micah Spierer-Sandberg in 1987 and daughter Rose Spierer-Sandberg in 1990. In 1988, HOBT moves into the Avalon Theater on Lake Street. Conducts numerous local and national residencies for special events. Sabbatical year includes travel to Mexico to study pre-Columbian art. Studies Greek theater in Epidavros, Greece.



*The Circle of Water Circus* company after the final performance in New Orleans, 1983



Spierer-Sandberg family, circa 1995



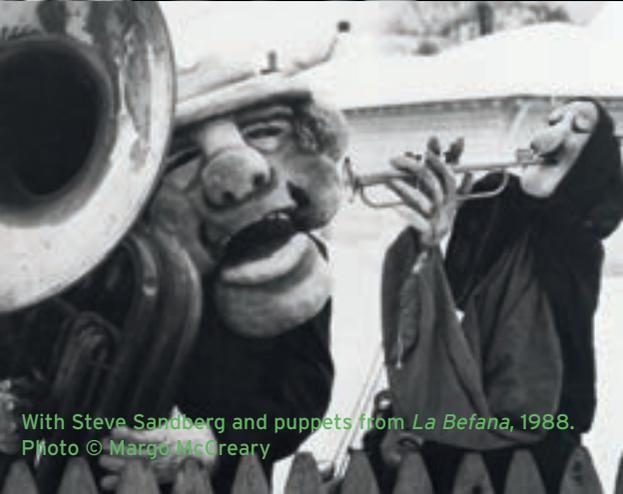
With grass mask for *Lightning*, 1985. Photo © Michal Daniel



MayDay ceremony, 1981. Photo © John Franzen



Performing a puppet made by brother Jim Spierer, *Table, Table*, 1987



With Steve Sandberg and puppets from *La Befana*, 1988. Photo © Marge McCreary

**1991 - 1994**

*Three Circles of 500*, an epic quincennial ritual pageant, examines the USA's multicultural roots. Designs dream sequences for feature film *Tarantella*. With Esther Ouray, co-creates *Befriended by the Enemy*. Creates the first Dia de los Muertos event in Minneapolis with CreArte and Intermedia Arts.



*Prayer*, a collaboration among Iraqi, Korean, and American artists in South Korea, 2003

**1995 - 2002**

*Befriended by the Enemy* awarded Citation of Excellence by Union Internationale de la Marionnette (UNIMA). Restages *The Hunt* in support of the local Mexican immigrant population. Journey with Beth Peterson to explore Goddess sites in England, Ireland, and Germany informs creation of *Illuminations*, with a torch-lit path of performance installations to honor feminine spirituality. Other works include *Gyre: Song for a Millennium* and *DMZ 2000*, an epic theater ritual in the demilitarized zone in South Korea. *About Peace: Tree of Life* is performed in South Korea just after 9/11, and again in the Dominican Republic the following month.

**2003 - 2004**

Water-focused works include *We Bow to the Water/Water Connects the World*, a commissioned installation for The McKnight Foundation; and *Theater of the Everyday Miracle: Homage to Water*, a video collaboration with Will Hommeyer. Creates opening ceremony for Gwacheon Hanmadang Theater Festival in South Korea, collaborating with Korean and Iraqi artists. Earns a master's degree in cultural performance from Bristol University in England; as part of thesis, designs and directs a community performance, *Voicing the River*, in the town of Ulverston. Other works created in England include *An Act of Gratitude*; *Room of Divining*; *The White Car*; and the first "What If?" toy theater workshops for community dreaming.



With Jim Koplín, longtime colleague, MayDay morning 2012.  
Photo © Nick Lethert

**2005 - 2010**

Major works set within the context of HOBT's neighborhood include *Lake Street Excavations*, a walking performance/site-specific tour in the neighborhood; and *La Natividad*, a bilingual version of the Christmas story. Initiates Invigorate the Common Well, an ongoing investigation of the water commons, with works that include *Come to the Well*; *Beneath the Surface*; *Somos Agua*; and *Decorate the Well in Gratitude*, a street fair to christen the reimagined drinking fountain in the Avalon Theater lobby. Conducts major water residencies in Winona, Bemidji, Ely, and Fargo-Moorhead; *Are You Thirsty?* emerges as a touring show for schools and communities.

**2011 - 2013**

Collaborates with the Minnesota Orchestra on *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Magic Flute*. Performs *Wonder of Water* at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Puppetry Conference in Waterford, CT. Creates *La Guadalupana* with the Kalpulli KetzalCoatlucue Aztec Dancers and the Basilica of Saint Mary in Minneapolis.

**2014**

Conducts community workshops about oil, sand, and water in Minneapolis and in Fargo, ND; paints the cantastoria *What the Frack?!*; and creates the toy theater *Its Substance Reaches Everywhere*. The 40th annual MayDay Parade and Festival brings together neighbors in celebration of community and the coming of spring.



SANDY ON

**INTERCONNECTION** MY WORK CELEBRATES THE GLORIOUS, YET OFTEN UNNOTICED, INTERCONNECTION OF ALL THINGS, THE ASTOUNDING INTRICACIES OF BEAUTY AND DIVERSITY, AND THE ETERNAL CYCLE OF BIRTH, DEATH, AND BIRTH AGAIN. My work also mourns and questions the poverty of soul and body perpetrated by hatred of self, of "the other," and of the earth, seeking to untangle the artificial constructs of racism, classism, sexism, and the linear fear of death that manufactures systems of genocide, ecocide, and inexplicable greed.

**2014**  
 MayDay: Wonder? Wonder!  
*Its Substance Reaches Everywhere*  
*What the Frack?!*  
*La Natividad*

**2013**  
 MayDay: See the World  
*Between the Worlds*  
*La Guadalupana* (at the Basilica of Saint Mary, Minneapolis)  
*Wonder of Water* (Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Waterford, CT)

**2012**  
 MayDay: The End of the World as We Know It  
*La Natividad*  
*Hansel and Gretel* (with Denver Orchestra)  
*YES! Dancin' in the Street!*  
 What If? and Water Blessing

**2011**  
 MayDay: Caws to Unite  
*La Natividad*  
*Hansel and Gretel* (with Minnesota Orchestra)  
*Sleep Will Come*  
*The Magic Flute* (with Minnesota Orchestra)

**2010**  
 MayDay: UPROAR!  
*La Befana*  
*Water, Water Everywhere* (Fargo-Moorhead)

**2009**  
 MayDay: Our Common Treasury—Dig It  
*A Path Home*

*¿Tienes Sed?*  
 Drinking-fountain mural for Minnesota State Fair  
 Water promenade on Semers Beach (Ely, MN)  
 Water Circus residency and performance (Bemidji, MN)

**2008**  
 MayDay: A New Bridge: Infrastructure for the Future Beings  
*Beneath the Surface*  
*Decorate the Well in Gratitude*  
*Are You Thirsty?* (touring show through 2014)  
*La Natividad*  
 Our Water Commons (yearlong; Winona, MN)

**2007**  
 MayDay: Somos Agua  
*Come to the Well*  
 Invigorate the Common Well (events through 2008)  
*We the People, Wake!* (Puppeteers of America National Festival, St. Paul)  
*La Natividad*  
*Gift of Seeds* (sculpture for public library in Maplewood, MN)

**2006**  
 MayDay: The Time Is Now! to Come Together for the Common Good!  
*Gotama: A Journey to the Buddha*  
*La Natividad*  
 Design for Lutheran Youth Gathering national convention (San Antonio)  
 Public art for Bloomington-Lake streetscape, Minneapolis

**2005**  
 World Peace and Prayer Day (Paha Sapa/Black Hills, SD)  
 MayDay: Where Do We Go from Here?  
*Lake Street Excavations*  
*What If?* (Ulverston, UK)  
*Voicing the River* (Ulverston)

**2004**  
 MayDay: LEAP!  
*Room of Divining* (Bristol, UK)  
*Museum for the Age of Oil* (Bristol)

**2003**  
 MayDay: This Is Our Child  
*Theater of the Everyday Miracle: Homage to Water* video  
 Opening pageant, Gwacheon Hanmadang Theater Festival, South Korea  
*An Act of Gratitude* (Bristol, UK)  
*Water Connects the World* (sculpture for McKnight Foundation offices)

**2002**  
 MayDay: MAYDAY! MAYDAY!  
*The Nightingale*  
*Befriended by the Enemy*  
*Between the Worlds: Stories of Dark and Light*

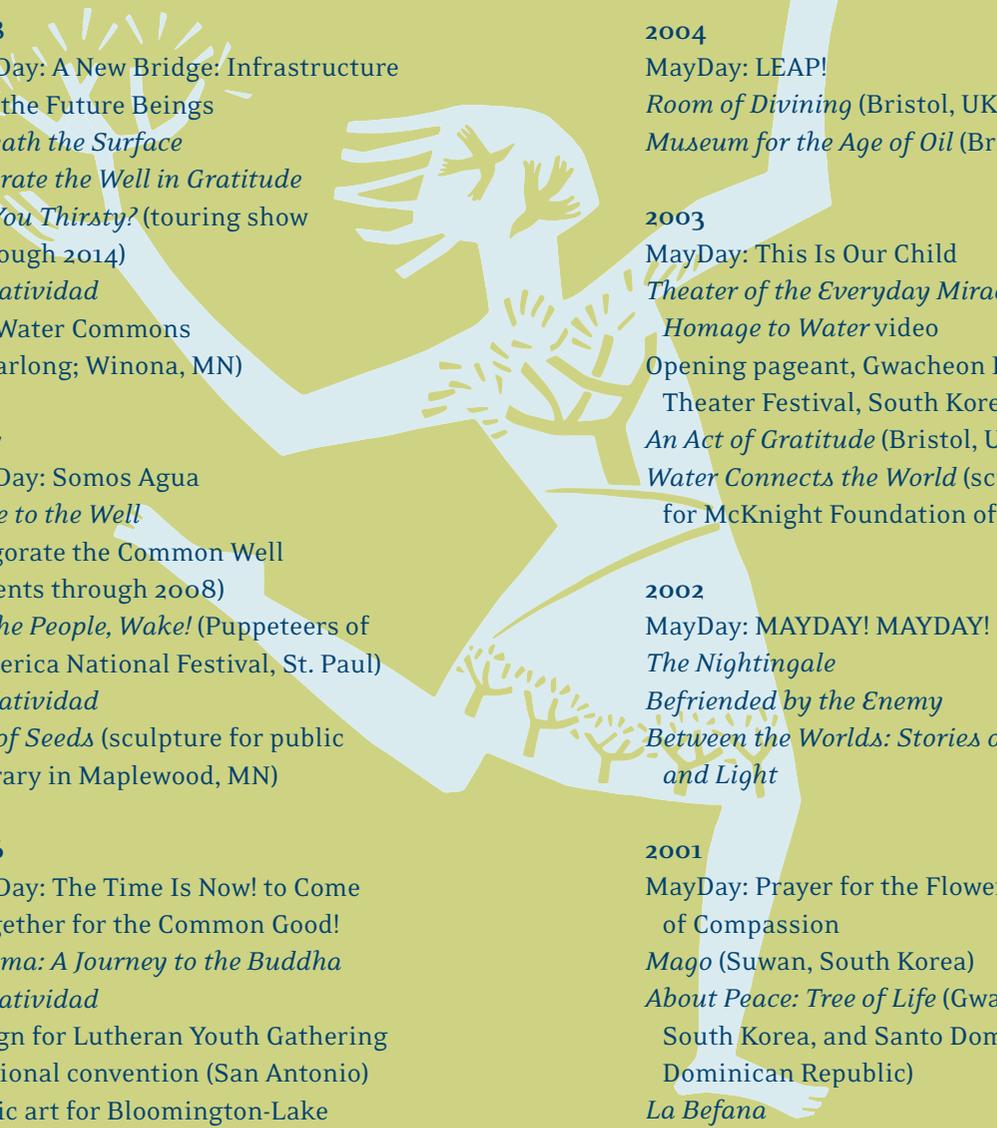
**2001**  
 MayDay: Prayer for the Flowering of Compassion  
*Mago* (Suwan, South Korea)  
*About Peace: Tree of Life* (Gwacheon, South Korea, and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic)  
*La Befana*  
*Born of Dreams: Celebration of the Sisters of St. Joseph*

**2000**  
 MayDay: Divining Economy  
*DMZ 2000* (Imjingak, South Korea)  
*Seed: Awesome Vessel of Power*  
 Residency and performance for 20th anniversary of Music Center of Los Angeles

**1999**  
 MayDay: Somos Uno  
*Gyre: Song for a Millennium*  
 Easter service at Guthrie Theater in collaboration with Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church  
*Theatre of Wonder*, exhibition and accompanying book by Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum

**1998**  
 MayDay: Sing!  
*Illuminations*

**1997**  
 MayDay: May Abundant Blessings Flow  
*A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*  
*The Hunt*



# WORK WITH WATER

MY WORK WITH WATER WAS PROPELLED BY TWO EVENTS IN 1980:

- A Japanese friend sent me a booklet, *Give Me Water*, that is an account of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of people screaming as their cities burned, their trees, houses, bodies on fire—running to the rivers screaming, “Give me water, give me water!”

For me, this was a cry for the water of life, a cry into the center of the heinous pain of war.

- In July of 1980, I attended the Black Hills International Survival Gathering, organized by Lakota activists to protest the U.S. government’s proposal to mine uranium for the nuclear power industry out of the sacred land of Paha Sapa (the Black Hills). Understanding that the mining would severely deplete the water table of Paha Sapa, the Native elders spoke astutely about issues of environmental genocide as parallel to issues of human genocide.



Details from *Water Connects the World*, installation at The McKnight Foundation offices, 2003.  
Photo © Camille Lizama



## WORK WITH WATER

The conference was outdoors. It was hot, really hot, and dry. I was thirsty. As the elders spoke I remembered the photos of charred trees and bodies, and something became completely clear to me—in my mind, yes, but mostly in the cells of my body. My thirst is the thirst of the earth, of all life connected by a dependence on water. How we share the water is primary to the peace of the world.

I thought of how I lived so close to the Mississippi River, how this great lifeline was becoming a great sewage line, of how many nuclear power plants were being placed in close proximity to this river. I went home from this conference and got to work! Many big and little shows; paintings; *The Circle of Water Circus* and its Mississippi River tour; my work in Ulverston, England; and various installations on the banks of the river emerged over the next 25 years.

Then, in 2006, I stood looking at the drinking fountain in the lobby of our theater in Minneapolis and had one of those “aha” moments.

The fountain was decorated, as it had been for many years, with an “Out of Order” sign. Rather than invest in the repair and maintenance of our public drinking fountain, we had instead started selling water in plastic bottles. We had entered into the privatization of water without even thinking! I suddenly recognized this fountain as a sad emblem of our public care of the water commons.

At that moment, Invigorate the Common Well arose; it later evolved into an ongoing initiative about water quality, quantity and “ownership” questions—starting with a performance series using our broken public drinking fountain as an emblematic lens to focus on the stewardship of our water commons. At once a civic project, a sacred project, and a communal health project, Invigorate the Common Well has encompassed performances, MayDay ceremonies, street fairs, panel discussions, community residencies, and more. Always beginning with deep reverence for the water itself, the goals are to affect people’s everyday practices of water stewardship, to build experiential-education curriculum about water for students of all ages, and to affect public policy in ways that nurture the water commons.

1996

MayDay: Be a Bridge  
*Between the Worlds: Songs of Light  
 and Dark*  
*Befriended By the Enemy*  
*Song for a Millennium*

1995

MayDay: Gorgeous Fever of Consciousness  
*La Befana*  
*Tree of 1,000 Leaves*

1994

MayDay: In Honor of Seeds:  
 Awesome Vessels of Power!  
 Dia de los Muertos procession  
 and installation  
*My Other Heart* (Northlight  
 Theatre, Skokie, IL)  
 Design for Lutheran Youth Gathering  
 national convention (Atlanta)  
*The Miracle Play of Our Lady Of  
 Guadalupe* (Gustavus Adolphus  
 College, St. Peter, MN)

1993

MayDay: Let the Sleeper Awake!  
*Befriended by the Enemy*  
 Creator and director of puppetry  
 for *Tarantella*, a film by Helen DeMichiel

1992

MayDay: I Am Another Yourself  
*Between the Worlds: Songs of Light  
 and Dark*  
*Three Circles of 500*

1991

MayDay: Return to Turtle Island  
*On the Day You Were Born*  
*La Befana*  
 Design for Lutheran Youth Gathering  
 national convention (Dallas)

1990

MayDay: Wheel of Change Ever Whirling  
*La Befana*  
*Lake Street Mambo*  
 Illustrations for *Winter Prairie Woman*,  
 Minnesota Center for Book Arts  
 Winter Book

1989

MayDay: Voices of Trees  
*The Reapers’ Tale: A Celebration in the  
 House of the Dead Featuring the Grand  
 Feast of the Skeletons and Their  
 Reenactment of the Great Voyage of  
 Christopher Columbus in Honor of the  
 Life of the World*  
*The Invisible Child*  
*La Befana*

1988

MayDay: When the Dragon Speaks  
*La Befana*  
*House of Mysteries*

1987

MayDay: We May Be Family After All  
*Prayer for the Life of the World*  
*Table, Table*



1986

MayDay: Corn  
*In Our Backyard*  
*The Nightingale*  
*The Hunt*  
*Rio Carnival*

1985

MayDay: Our World Home  
*Lightning*  
*La Befana*  
*The Circle of Water Circus*  
 (Sweden and Denmark)

1984

MayDay: In Honor of Time and Change-  
 bringing of Hearts, Hands, Minds  
*The Hunt*  
*Dusk Til Dawn*  
*Earth Circus*  
 (St. Louis, and Chattanooga, TN)  
*Water, Water Everywhere*  
*La Befana*  
 Parade for opening of education wing  
 of Walker Art Center  
 Gala opening of Civic and Convention  
 Hall (Lima, OH)

1983

MayDay: Water #2  
*La Befana*  
*The Circle of Water Circus*  
 Mississippi River tour  
*A Life of HOH*  
 River Faces arts and humanities event  
 (St. Louis)

1982

MayDay: Water #1  
*Round About Water Tale*  
*Oh! River!*  
*The Story of Anna Mae Aquash*  
*Let the Bird of Earth Fly*  
*La Befana*

1981

MayDay: In Honor of Change  
*Shoes of Infant Light*  
*Oh! River!*  
*Water, Whose Choice?*  
*The War for Water*  
*The Story of Anna Mae Aquash*  
*Let the Bird of Earth Fly* (St. Peter, MN)  
*La Befana*

1980

MayDay: The Year of the Child  
*Sarah Laughed*  
*River Allegory*  
*The Hunt*

1979

MayDay: Wake Up!  
*The Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly*  
*The Ever-Wanting*  
*La Befana*  
 In the Heart of the Beast Valentine's Day  
 show in honor of company name change

1978

MayDay: These Things Are Free!  
*Song Cycle*  
*La Befana*  
*The Prairie Circus and Wild West Show*  
 (Brookings, SD)  
*In the Beginning* and *The Descent of Ishtar*

1977

MayDay: Seasons  
*The Christmas Story*  
*The Prairie Circus and Wild West Show*  
*The Red Show* and *The White Show*

1976

MayDay: The Ark  
*The Valentine's Day Show: History of Love*

Buffalo Procession (Minneapolis and  
 Washington, DC)  
 Buffalo Story and Feeding Procession  
 (New Orleans)  
 Design for Lutheran Youth Gathering  
 national convention (New Orleans)

1975

MayDay: Bring Us Back Together  
*Feast of Fools*  
*Magnificat*  
*La Befana*

1974

*La Befana*  
*The Grass Will Grow and the River Flow*



PAST **DISTINGUISHED** ARTISTS

- 
- DOMINICK ARGENTO 1998  
WARREN MACKENZIE 1999  
ROBERT BLY 2000  
DALE WARLAND 2001  
EMILIE BUCHWALD 2002  
MIKE LYNCH 2003  
STANISLAW SKROWACZEWSKI 2004  
JUDY ONOFRIO 2005  
LOU BELLAMY 2006  
KINJI AKAGAWA 2007  
BILL HOLM 2008  
BAIN BOEHLKE 2009  
SIAH ARMAJANI 2010  
RANEE RAMASWAMY 2011  
JOHN CADDY 2012  
WENDY LEHR 2013

The Distinguished Artist Award recognizes artists who, like Sandy Spieler, have chosen to make their lives and careers in Minnesota, thereby making our state a more culturally vibrant place. Although they have the talent and the opportunity to pursue their work elsewhere, these artists have chosen to stay—and by staying, they have made a difference. They have founded and strengthened arts organizations, inspired younger artists, and attracted audiences and patrons. Best of all, they have made wonderful, thought-provoking art.

McKnight is committed to fostering an environment in which all artists are valued leaders in our community, with access to the resources and opportunities they need to succeed. This award, which comes with \$50,000, goes to one Minnesota artist each year. Nominations are open to everyone, and those received by March 31 are considered the same year. The panel that selects the recipient is made up of five people who have longtime familiarity with the Minnesota arts community.

Our thanks go to panelists Philip Bither, Walker Art Center's senior curator of performing arts; Graydon Royce, theater critic at the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*; Stewart Turnquist, former coordinator of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; 2001 McKnight Distinguished Artist Dale Warland, founder of the Dale Warland Singers; and 2002 McKnight Distinguished Artist Emilie Buchwald, founder of Milkweed Editions. Their high standards and thoughtful consideration make this award a truly meaningful tribute to Minnesota's most influential artists.

#### VICKIE BENSON

Arts Program Director, The McKnight Foundation



#### THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

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##### ABOUT THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based family foundation, seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations. Through grantmaking, collaboration, and encouragement of strategic policy reform, we use our resources to attend, unite, and empower those we serve. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William and Maude McKnight, the foundation had assets of approximately \$2 billion and granted about \$86 million in 2013, of which about 11% was directed to support working artists to create and contribute to vibrant communities.

The McKnight Foundation is committed to the protection of our environment, a philosophy that underlies our practice of using paper with postconsumer waste content and, wherever possible, environmentally friendly inks. Additionally, we partner with printers who participate in the PIM Great Printer Environmental Initiative. This book was printed with soy-based inks on recycled paper containing 100% postconsumer waste.

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Martha Boesing testimonial on page 42 excerpted and adapted from *Theatre of Wonder: 25 Years In the Heart of the Beast*, Colleen Sheehy, ed. Copyright © 1999 by the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum. Used by permission of University of Minnesota Press.



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