

Storytelling through Shadow Puppetry on the Southwest Coast

Final Report

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Harris Centre Thriving Regions
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Project: Storytelling through Shadow Puppetry on the Southwest Coast

Primary Investigator: Dr. Jamie Skidmore

“Storytelling through Shadow Puppetry on the Southwest Coast” is an artistic means to increase tourism in the area. We were able to largely follow our original plan for this project, although we hit a number of speed bumps along the way. We worked with four groups in the area: the Isle aux Morts Theatre Festival (IAM), the Codroy Valley Marshland Interpretation Centre (CV), the Port aux Basques Heritage Railway Museum (PAB), and the Rose Blanche Lighthouse (RB). I hired local Isle aux Morts playwright and storyteller, Dylan Farrell, to travel to each community and find three stories from each locale. We then examined the tales, and through communication with the various organizations, selected a story for each one. For CV, we helped them tell the story of Mary Sandy, a local matriarch, who was saved from a near death experience during a wild winter storm. In PAB, we received permission to use the Sherry Ryan song “Stop the Trains,” about human weathervane Lauchie MacDougall, and how he would control the trains moving through Wreckhouse, NL. In Isle aux Morts we told the Ann Harvey story, of how she rescued survivors from the shipwreck of the Despatch; and we told of another shipwreck, the Dorothy Edwards, and the rescue of the crew by locals in Rose Blanche.

Our original plan was to travel to the Southwest coast for two weeks with four workshop leaders. We would split into two groups of two, and then each group would go to one community for a week. Then the second week, go to a different community. Before departing for our workshops, the Port aux Basques Heritage Railway Museum and the Rose Blanche Lighthouse communicated to us that they did not get enough Summer students, and would not have enough staff to participate in the workshop. We recommended to them that we could create a show for them, which we would present at their facility, and then teach staff the following Summer. They agreed this was the best plan, so we carried out it out. We also lost one of our workshop leaders a week before departure, due to a dying parent. In the end, I headed out with two very experienced puppeteers/educators, David Lane and Baptiste Neis.



David Lane, Leila Procter, and Baptiste Neis in Grand Falls - Windsor, NL

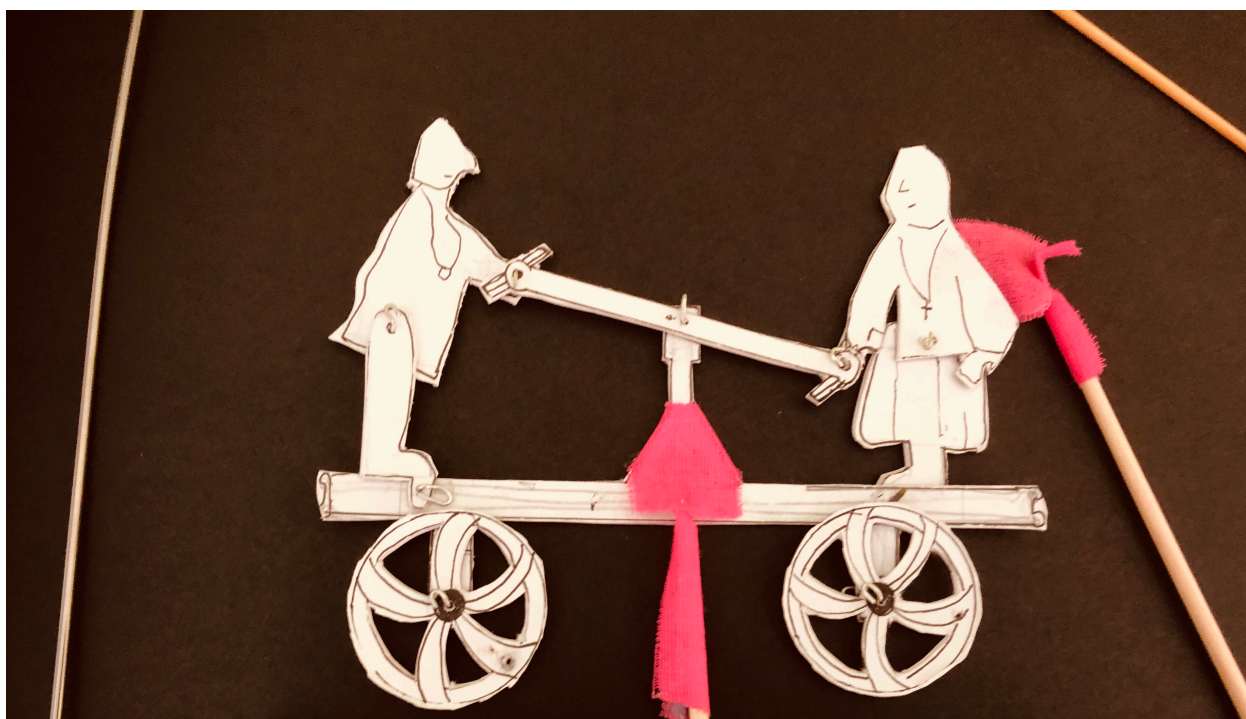


Baptiste Neis, David Lane, and Jamie Skidmore in Margaree, NL

With a wagonload of pre-built puppet theatres, we headed to the Southwest coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, stopping at the Hong Kong restaurant in Grand Falls-Windsor, along the way. Our home base was in Margaree, which has Isle aux Morts and Rose Blanche to the East, and Port aux Basques and the Codroy Valley to the Northwest. Our first week was spent at the Codroy Valley Marshland Interpretation Centre, working with their staff creating the *Mary Sandy Story*.

Here's an excerpt from the tale:

“Codroy Valley has had many a great story to tell throughout the years, but no story is as miraculous or astounding as the story of Mary Sandy. One stormy April day in 1951, 32 year old Mary MacIsaac, better known as Mary Sandy, was feeling quite sick. Her brother in-law who had been visiting her said she looked as if she was going to die. She had hot flashes, cold chills, more than just the average flu. Since there was no highways, a doctor and a priest had to travel to her house on a Speeder to see her. She was so sick that she couldn't hear a sound. Another doctor was paged and had to travel from Port aux Basques on a Speeder to come and view her condition. Dr. O'Brien declared to the Port aux Basques doctor, Dr. LeGrow that they had to operate on her right that second or else she may die. They determined that she had internal bleeding, and the only thing saving her life was the clotting of the blood inside her. If they didn't begin to operate that second, she would have just three hours to live.”





3D printed shadow puppet Speeder



Some of the staff of the Codroy Valley Marshland Interpretation Centre with the workshop leaders.

David Lane and Baptiste Neis worked with various staff members to tell the story without narration. Mary Sandy's family members dropped by with pictures to work from, but also with homemade bread, freshly churned butter, and more. Other research on Speeders, planes flying out of the Stephenville Airforce Base in the 50s, and more was carried out online. Everyone joined in to design, draw, cut out, and assemble the various puppets for the show.

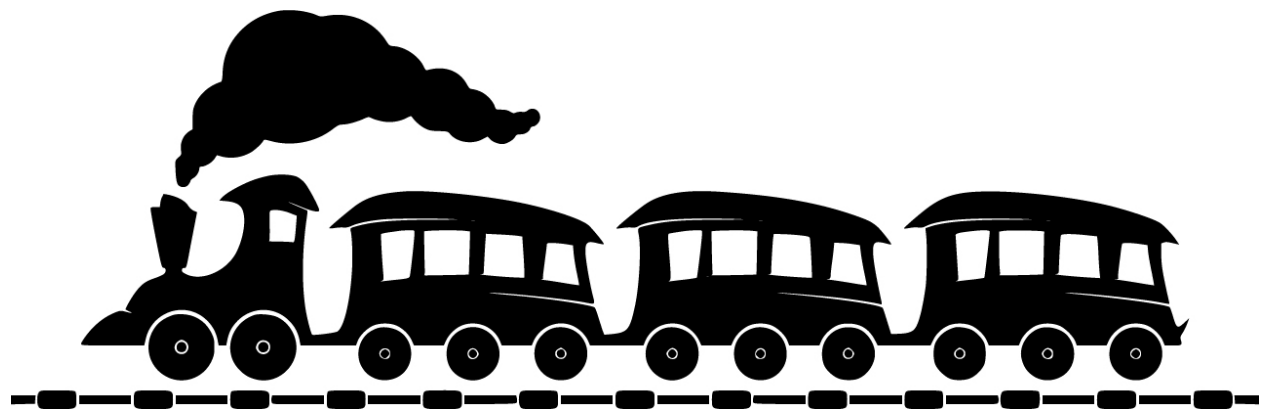
Meanwhile, I was working on my own that week to put together a show for the Port aux Basques Heritage Railway Museum. After Dylan Farrell consulted with PAB, we decided to go another route and work from the Sherry Ryan song *Stop the Trains*. Of course, someone in our group knows Sherry, so it was easy to get in touch and negotiate royalties for performances over 3 years. Here are some of the lyrics:

“I was a railroad operator in my early days
Nineteen fifty-seven or fifty eight I’d say
A call came on the crank phone with a message to relay
The Southeast winds were baffling down the mountain range

I knew nothing of the winds out there and I was all alone
I could hardly hear the stranger crackling on the phone
It was Lauchie MacDougall the human weathervane
Direct line to the station telling me to stop the trains

Stop the trains, from going down the track
The Wreckhouse winds are blowing and they’re blowing mighty fast
Stop the trains, you don’t wanna let’em pass
Hold them at Riverview and Port Aux Basques”

I created some original puppets, working from images of Lauchie MacDougall, for instance, but I also found silhouettes of puppets I required as copyright free .PNGs and .SVGs¹. I used a Cricut printer to speed up the puppet making process, printing out pre-cut puppets on heavy card stock. I also cut some puppets by hand, using matt board or foam core, and an Xacto knife.



After creating the required puppets, both groups staged them as shadow puppet plays. Part of the plan was to show our play, *The Brass Button Man*, alongside the local shows. The intent was to show more possibilities that could be worked into a shadow puppet play, with more time and resources. We presented *Stop the Trains* and *The*

¹ Scaleable Vector Graphic

Brass Puppet Man in Port aux Basques in the early afternoon of the Friday of the first week, and then presented *The Mary Sandy Story* and *The Brass Button Man* in the Codroy Valley later in the day. I should note that *The Brass Button Man* is also a local story, originally scripted by Dylan Farrell, and then adapted by the various puppeteers working on the show. It tells the legend of the Brass Button Man from Burnt Islands, the next community over from Isle aux Morts. We had a smallish audience at the Railway Museum, but a huge crowd in the Codroy Valley, including many of Mary Sandy's descendants.



The Brass Button Man



The Brass Button Man



The Brass Button Man



The Brass Button Man



The second week, David Lane and Baptiste Neis worked with Dylan Farrell and Anna Harvey of the Isle aux Morts Theatre Festival to develop the puppets for *The Ann Harvey Story*. Here is an excerpt from the script:

“17-year old Ann Harvey and her 10-year old brother Tom were on a beach near their house when they found a keg washed up with a straw bed that Saturday evening. They told their father, George Harvey, about their findings and he went out to see for himself. Passing multiple pieces of the ship that had happened to wash up in the surrounding area, George came across six men who informed him of what happened to the brig. Along with four other men, George, Ann, Tom and the family dog, Hairyman, helped to save the remaining survivors left at the wreck site. That Sunday night, the three boats at George’s command managed to save a total of 60 men, women and children. The next day, the team rescued 30 people from the wreck. Hairyman would swim out to the ship and haul a heavy rope to shore. Once people who were already rescued secured the rope on land, the crew created a breeches-buoy system to bring survivors across, one by one.”

The same process was followed, as the previous week, to create this puppet show, and *The Dorothy Edwards Story*. Here’s a portion of this script:

“We were returning home from the Rose Blanche fishing banks when the winds hit. We headed for port in Harbour Le Cou, but the engine failed us. We tried to shelter in the “Neck”, but when we weighed anchor the cable wrapped around my leg. The crew came to my rescue, as I was being pulled into the sea, cutting the anchor cable. Set adrift around 3 am, the stormy seas pulled us towards Winging Rocks. Neddy Parsons raised the alarm, summoning his neighbours, and together they tied salmon net moorings into a rope. They attached this lifeline to a small dory, which to our great fortune drifted out to the Dorothy Edwards. We climbed aboard, and the men ashore pulled us to land.”

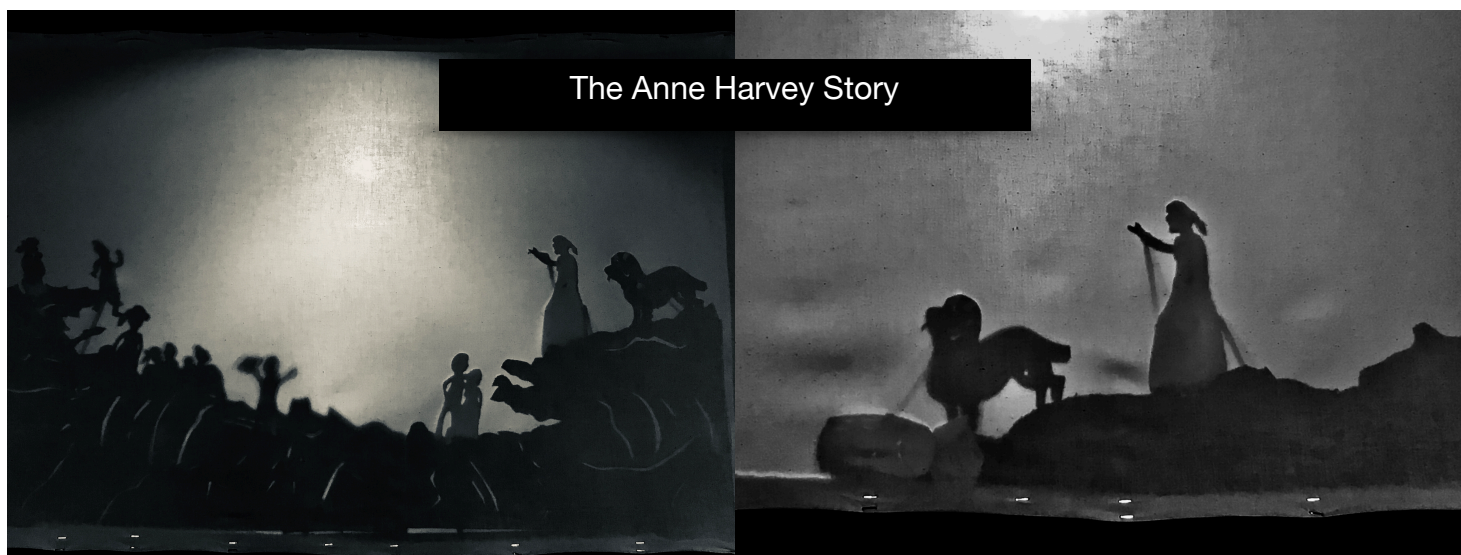
The one exception is that I also incorporated some scenic pieces that were designed by Mike Feehan for *The Brass Button Man*, but were never used in the production, including the Rose Blanche lighthouse and houses on the rocky coastline.



The Dorothy Edwards Puppets



On stage in Rose Blanche



The isle aux Morts production had a good house, and we had another huge audience at the outdoor stage at the Rose Blanche Lighthouse on a beautiful Summer evening, "raising the curtain" as the sun set. All ticket sales for the various shows went directly to the community organizations.

After returning to St. John's, the original puppets have been turned into 3D puppets. Three of the shows' puppets are printed, and the fourth show is ready for the printer. This Summer in July 2020, I will return to the area with the new puppets, and work with each community to re-stage their shows, and consider future productions. As you can see in the attached expenditures budget, there is still \$2,149.73 remaining from the original budget to be used towards this next stage.