



ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS: Mundheim and the stars of *Currently Franklin: The Story of a Paper Boy*.

## No-String Theory

Inside the mind of mischievous puppetmaster Sebastienne Mundheim.

By Deni Kasrel

There's a scene in *Currently Franklin: The Story of a Paper Boy*, where the title character — our famous Founding Father, played by a puppet — leaves Boston and his tyrannical brother to pursue a new life in Philadelphia. And the soundtrack? The theme from *Rocky*.

"I like to take things seriously, but not too seriously, which I think is something to take seriously," says Sebastienne Mundheim, the show's writer/director/designer.

If that sounds like pretzel logic, well,

welcome to the mind of Mundheim, where seemingly incongruous notions converge in arresting and unexpected ways.

She has made a career of taking complex (and often academic) subjects — such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the Berlin Wall, and 19th-century French printmaking — and turning them into entertaining educational programs for kids. "I take these really sophisticated ideas and make them accessible through metaphor, objects, repetition and movement," she explains.

Mundheim's mad science laboratory is her workshop/studio/apartment, where she crafts characters and contraptions out of common materials such as wood, papier-mâché, pipe cleaners and cardboard. But her creative work extends to the stage (which could be a classroom, library or theater) where she designs playground-like settings for ideas to unfold in mischievous fashion. She enjoys making objects that transform

from one thing to another. In *A Potable Joyce: A Watered Down Version of Ulysses*, a boat turns into a loom, while in *Currently Franklin* (revived after its acclaimed run in this year's Live Arts Festival) sheets of paper hanging in a print shop become screens for shadow puppets.

Trained in writing and painting — she has a B.A. and B.F.A. from Penn — Mundheim is perfectly capable of making polished pieces, but she prefers a rough-hewn aesthetic, where "you can feel that a human hand was there." In *Currently Franklin*, shadow puppets are presented in plain view as simple paper cutouts held in front of an overhead projector. She wants her audience to see the mechanics of the puppets becoming shadows, because it's fun to see how things work, and it transmits, to children especially, a sense of wonder and possibility. "There's a lot of poetry to it," says

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Mundheim. "The important thing is that you walk away with a sense of magical possibility, because there's this set made of ordinary materials that are pushed to become all kinds of things. And then, not only is it a sculptural installation, but it comes to life."

According to Charlie Delmarcelle, who collaborated with Mundheim in the creation of *Currently Franklin*, and who also performs in the piece, "This style is fairly unique to Sebastienne. It's almost like bringing a little bit of avant-garde visual performance out to children."

Youngsters and adults get a kick out of watching these one-of-a-kind productions. The artist gains gratification in putting it all together: "I love using power tools, cutting things, and the way wood smells ... There's the pleasure of exploration of materials and ideas."

Mundheim's method combines storytelling and symbols that may be interpreted on different levels depending on one's age and outlook. Her works integrate high-minded metaphors, but that's to be expected from a self-described "super-intellectual type."

What's surprising is how Mundheim manages to convey abstract concepts in ways that hold the interest of people as young as 5. With *Under the Hat: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore*, presented at the Rosenbach Museum, Mundheim delved into a modernist poet. Jennifer Snead, a longtime friend

of Mundheim's, recalls how Sebastienne played upon Moore's attire to get kids excited about a poet whose writings are precise and erudite. "In her later years Moore always wore a black tricorne hat, so Sebastienne built this giant tricorne hat and the kids sat underneath it and met an actress sitting there as Marianne Moore. It was as if you were inside Marianne Moore's head. The piece introduced some of her poems, and then there was a very narrow focus on a specific object and how that can become poetry. There were activities afterward, where the kids would look at an object and write about it."

The see-hear-look-and-learn approach, developed during the many years Mundheim spent as an children's arts educator in summer programs, schools and the Fleisher Art Memorial, readily transfers to commissioned multidisciplinary performances, which are now her main focus.

Down the road, Mundheim would like to produce pieces based on her own ideas and imagery, as opposed to working from a topic that she's asked to address. Either way, she wants to generate performance that makes people think and have fun while doing so. "It's great to see what makes the 'a-ha' — what's going to be exciting to somebody. How you get there, that's what's interesting to me."

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**Currently Franklin: The Story of a Paper Boy**, Wed., Nov. 15 and 22, 7 and 9 p.m.; Mon., Nov. 20, 8 p.m., \$8-\$15, The Rotunda, 4012 Walnut St., tickets through Annenberg Center, 215-898-3900.