

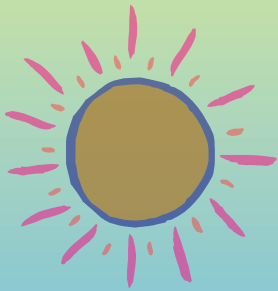


# OPAL

Summer 2011

A Newsletter for Members of the Ontario Puppetry Association

The Ontario Puppetry Association is a strong advocate for the art of puppetry in Ontario. It supports the work of puppeteers of different styles and at all levels of expertise.



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## Get up to Puppets Up!

It's that time of year again...

Mark off your calendars for August 6 - 7 for the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Puppets Up! International Puppetry festival in Almonte, Ontario. Puppeteers and puppet enthusiasts will once again flock to this quaint village west of the City of Ottawa, where there will be fun, laughter, dancing, singing, food, and many other events to keep you busy.



This year's theme is puppets 'Great and Small' (however all puppets are welcome to attend). Make sure you look out for puppets that flip, hop and slither, or leap, hop and run... because on stage are inspiring shows including Frog Prince, Bugtown Follies, and Nanabush and the Ducks. One show you should not miss is "Toopy & Binoo... Live!" puppeteered by Frank Mescheluit. On Treehouse TV, Toopy & Binoo is an animated series based on a collection of French stories of two friends, Toupie et Binou.

**Also on hand this year is the VIP Puppeteer's Lounge, sponsored by the Ontario Puppetry Association (YAY!). Make sure you stop by to say hello and check out the spacious sofas and a place for puppeteers to relax... with complimentary cookies of course! Our OPA VIP area will serve as a "Greenroom" for festival puppeteers and will display some of our promotional materials including issues of the OPAL, and membership forms.**

The OPA will once again be hosting a street booth, showcasing their own talents of David and Muriel Smith, and anyone else of the OPA wishing to perform. OPA President Mike Harding will be joining the legendary Balcony Puppeteers. Be on the lookout for BlueInk Puppetry as they will be selling one-of-a-kind miniature sock puppets, where a portion of each sale will be donated to the OPA.

With the summer at its best, enjoy a fun-filled weekend at Puppets Up! And find yourself lost in a maze of puppetry and puppeteers alike.

For more information, log on to [www.puppetsup.ca](http://www.puppetsup.ca)

**"We appreciate assistance with the OPA VIP area! We need people to people the booth, bake cookies, or offer help in a number of other ways."**

Contact: [mike@applefun.ca](mailto:mike@applefun.ca)

From the President



Mike Harding

Ahoy Mates!

I hope that you are all having a successful and busy summer. May all of your puppet shows be air conditioned (or at least in the shade!). I look forward to seeing many of you at Puppets Up! in Almonte.

Random Tip:

Set your cell phone ring tone to an animal sound, this way when you forget to turn it off the ring can become part of the show!

Hello Puppeteers and Puppet Enthusiasts!

WOW! So many new and exciting events. With Puppets Up! Just around the corner, I can't wait to see some of the new and exciting shows. Puppets Up! is an event that is not only fun and good times, but also an opportunity to learn and adapt from other puppeteers, share ideas, and ask questions. Don't forget, come visit the OPA's VIP Puppeteer's Lounge.

See you folks there!

From the Editor



Teddy Dong

**OPA Board Members, 2010-11**

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# Serving It Up Right for Artists and Audiences: Fresh Ideas Day

By Jamie Ashby

Photos taken by Dahlia Katz

Puppetry is certainly not new to Canada: evidence of it can be traced back to the sixteenth century, even further back if one takes into account traditional Aboriginal uses of it. Just as importantly, this country remains a locus for innovative puppet theatre work. Canadian puppet artists perform regularly for both family and adult audiences in almost every type of space imaginable: libraries (of course), community centres, museums, private homes, bars, parks, churches, actual theatres, and so on. They find themselves participating in all sorts of events: cabarets, birthday parties, corporate events, school-break programmes, community festivals, Pride festivals, theatre festivals, children's festivals, assorted other types of festivals, and so forth. Sometimes they are paid; sometimes—too often, in my opinion, but I will have to devote a separate article to this problem—they are expected to work for nothing or next to nothing.



Whatever the event, whatever the venue, whatever the pay, most of these performances are presented with the aim of entertaining and perhaps

educating the audience, which is just as it should be. The puppet artists themselves definitely “get something” out of these performances. It can be in the form of a sense of satisfaction, the thrill of performing, a new discovery, that one might find at a more traditional conference and those that one would probably associate with a festival. The panels and presentations were informative and, for the most part, useful.



A particular highlight—in part because it brought together such an engaging variety of puppet artists, making it something of a microcosm of the very idea of the puppetry conference-festival—was the discussion panel on training puppeteers. Panel members included David Anderson, founder and artistic director of Clay & Paper Theatre; Marthe Adam, founder and director of the contemporary puppet theatre programme at l'Université du Québec à Montréal; Heather Kent and Paul de Jong, puppetry instructors at Humber College; Jamie Shannon, a Toronto-born puppet artist known best for his work on television; and facilitator Anne Barber, co-artistic director of Shadowland Theatre. It was

especially encouraging to see artists from both Ontario and Québec participating in a critical conversation related to the art that means so much to us all, a conversation that continued, albeit in a different context, in the annual general meeting of UNIMA-CANADA, which was



held on site. The coupling of these two events was yet another sign of the Ontarian puppetry community's renewed interest in UNIMA.

If experienced artists dominated the daytime programming, emerging artists stole the show at the evening cabaret, which was hosted by none other than Ronnie Burkett, Honorary Member of the OPA. Humber College students and graduates had an especially prominent presence, which evidenced the quality of teaching offered by Kent and de Jong.

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I am not sure who submitted performance proposals, of course, but the prevalence of Humber-affiliated performers, as talented as they were, drew attention to the fact that a greater diversity of artists needs to be sought out for both the daytime and the evening portions. My only other major criticism would be that the daytime programming was lacking in interactive workshops. Only one truly participatory workshop was offered, Teaching How to Teach Puppetry to Beginners Using "What's on Hand," which was offered by Grey Muldoon and myself (co-artistic directors of The Bricoteer Puppetry Project). Surely more experienced artists would have had even more to share. Once again, however, such proposals have to be submitted in order to be selected.

The Fresh Ideas Day was undoubtedly a success, however, and built on the tradition established by Ann and David Powell, the brother-and-sister team known as Puppetmongers Theatre. For more information on the Day, please visit:

<http://us2.campaign-archive1.com/?u=f6872d1e8e1a78eb3f24f2076&id=d942475a26>.

To stay in the loop about what is being planned for next year, please visit:

<http://www.eventbrite.com/contact-organizer?eid=1161481021>.

## It was those guys with the beards

By Mike Harding

My parents knew how much I loved puppets, which is why they took me to The Ontario Science Centre to see "The Art of the Muppets", a behind the scenes look at the work of Jim Henson and his cronies. Seeing photos of those bearded puppeteers, and other creative adults, playing with puppets changed my perspective: being an adult didn't have to be boring. Those puppet people looked happy.

I was 11 years old, and right then I knew that I wanted to be a puppeteer, but had no idea how to do it. So, I spent 15 years thinking about puppets. I got some unrelated, but useful, education and still didn't know how to become a puppeteer.

A friend of my mother, an event planner turned judge, gave me some advice: "I want to be a puppeteer" I said. He replied, almost threateningly, "Then go and be one. Find someone who will let you perform". This man's wisdom was shocking, and I had to take it. I told a friend who worked in a bookstore and she set up my first gig. Ever since, even when I am doing other things, I always call myself a puppeteer.

*Mike Harding is the President of the OPA in Mississauga*

We look forward in reading your story on

**"what puppetry has got me into"**

Submissions for the Fall OPAL is **September 15...**  
just in time for Thanksgiving and Hallowe'en!



## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: PANDORA'S SOX



By: Jay Wilson



Pandora's Sox...in the beginning there was chaos, and no fun at all. Everyone took their work very seriously,

cubicle, desk, computer, phone, a chair for visitors, brown walls, florescent lights: an office. The work being done was meaningless.

"Think outside the box", I heard someone say as I dozed in and out of a staff meeting. Something about a new shipment that arrived at the office? Something about a box...

"Open the box" a female voice shouted inside my head. "Open the box! Open the box! Open the box!"

"Are you alright?" said Julie, my boss, as she eyed me suspiciously.

"Open the box!" I shouted in a voice sounding oddly like Maggie Smith.

"Open the box ha ha, Open the box! Open the box! Open the box! I squealed. Then quickly I followed with "Sorry," in my best regular voice. "I've got to leave."



That was the winter of 2009. Since then Pandora's Sox has employed clients from The Career Connection, an employment service for people with disabilities, to **build** puppets, **assemble** sock puppet kits for educational workshops, and **manage** a data-base of clients.



Approximately 7000 sock puppets have been assembled and now reside in homes across Ontario, with 10,000, mostly kids, enjoying the new theatre

skills they have learned. Another 5000 or so people have enjoyed a lesson in meditation having watched **Pandora's Box-The Puppet Show** at libraries or events in Ontario.

Adults and seniors are just now being exposed to "**Pandora's Tour of Hope**" another show about the power of breath on the state of mind.

McGregor Socks endorses and supports the company.

There is still chaos, but now there is a lot more fun. The offices, desks, cubicles, florescent lights, brown walls and chairs are gone. Alas the computer and phone are still essential and oh... we've got to go...time to open another box.

If you like having fun check us out at: <http://pandorasbox56.blogspot.com>

We'd love to hear from you. We can use all the help we can get!

*Jay Wilson is a Member of the OPA in Shanty Bay*

## A New Technique for Shooting the Legs of a Puppet

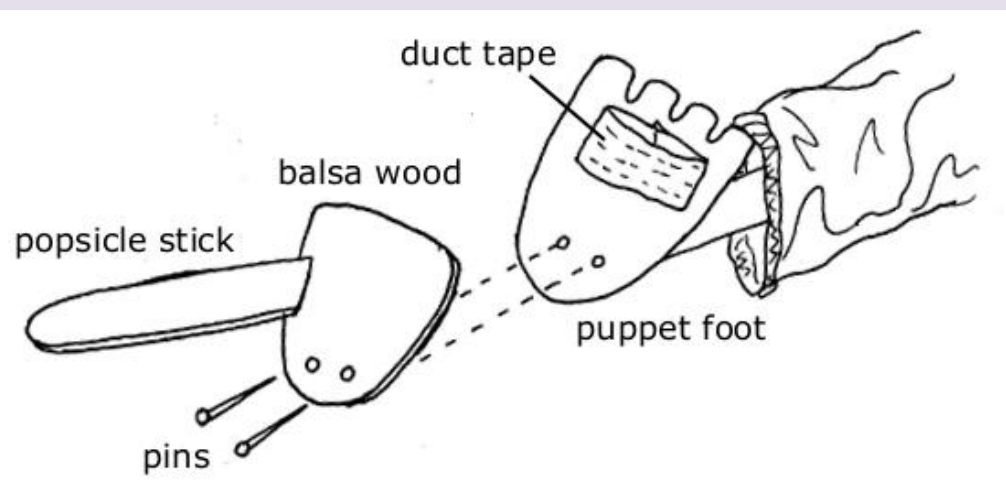
By Grant Harding

Films and television shows that feature hand puppets will occasionally enhance the realism of the characters by cutting to a shot of a puppet's feet walking along the ground. The classic example is the shot of Kermit the Frog's feet, clad in cowboy boots, as he walks out to confront the villain at the climax of *The Muppet Movie*.

I have never found these shots to be convincing. For one thing, the movement of the legs is unrealistic, mostly because the knees do not bend. This leaves the legs locked in one position and only able to move from the hips. A second problem is that the movement of the legs does not match the movement of the puppet as it is seen in other shots. Hand puppets have a distinctive way of walking, with a considerable amount of bobbing and swaying; shots of the legs do not reflect this, making the cut from one to the other extremely jarring.

Other techniques, like switching to a shot of the puppet controlled as a marionette or manipulated bunraku-style, solve the first problem but not the second; the walk is more realistic, but the style of movement remains fundamentally different.

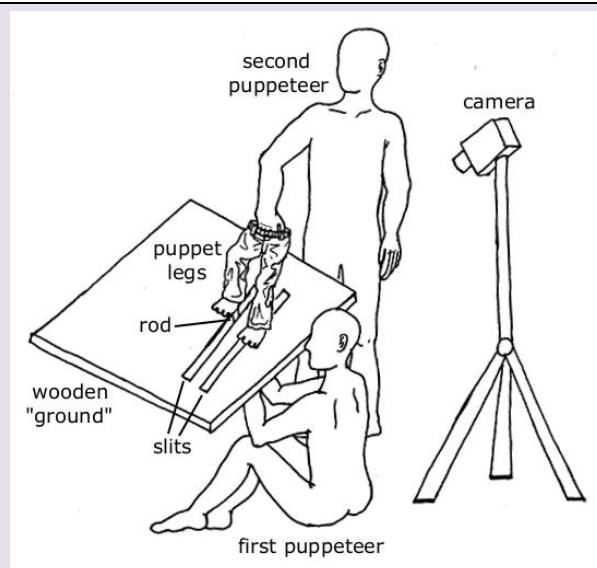
Here I describe a new technique that eliminates both problems. In this setup (Figure 1), one puppeteer controls the puppet's feet from below, using rods that extend through two long parallel slits in the wooden "ground". (This idea was based on the Sy Snootles puppet in the original *Return of the Jedi*, whose dancing feet were



controlled this way in full-figure shots.) Meanwhile, a second puppeteer holds onto the puppet's hips, supporting the legs from above and imparting the necessary bobbing and swaying motion. The legs are jointed not just at the hips, but also at the knees, so that they bend when the feet are raised.

The slits in the ground are hidden because the ground is covered with fuzzy carpeting (an idea inspired by Arthur Ganson's kinetic sculpture *Inchworms*). At the correct camera angle, shooting over the head of the first puppeteer, the rods that control the feet are hidden by the feet themselves.

I designed removable foot controls, each consisting of a popsicle stick glued at a right angle to a piece of balsa wood (Figure 2). The popsicle stick served as the rod to control the foot; it was thin enough to pass easily through the slit in the ground, and broad enough to always keep the foot in its proper orientation. The balsa wood, attached to the sole of the foot with two pins that extended up into the puppet's leg and held tightly in place by a piece of rolled-up duct tape at its front edge, reinforced the foot and kept it from bending or twisting; the toes were unsupported by wood and thus able to bend. The popsicle stick was attached to the balsa wood on the far side of each foot so that it would always be hidden from the camera.



It was essential that my puppet's walk be both realistic, and consistent with established movement. I consulted biomechanical references, including the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge, and took observations and measurements of the puppet's own usual style of movement. This would have to be repeated for any other puppet.

Hand puppets often lean to the left and right as they walk, and this is an exaggeration of a natural human movement: our upper body tilts *down* toward the foot that is being placed on the ground. At the same time, our hips swing *up* to the opposite side, the side of the leg we are lifting. Thus, as the first puppeteer moved the feet, the second puppeteer swung the hips in a smile-shaped arc away from the foot that was on the ground.

I determined the puppet's stride length – the distance between two successive placements of the same foot – by putting the puppet on my arm over a piece of Bristol board, "walking" it forward, and marking where its left foot fell at each step. I found that a hand puppet, with its side-to-side swaying, is actually taking very small steps, its stride length only slightly longer than the length of its foot. This stride length was adhered to by the puppeteer who manipulated the feet.

I plugged the puppet's stride length and leg length into an equation that palaeontologists use to estimate an animal's speed from its footprints. This yielded a step frequency of two steps per second, which agreed with previously shot footage of the puppet. A metronome was used when shooting the legs to ensure that the pace remained constant.

Taking small steps means that the feet do not have to be lifted very high. Scaling the numbers in my references down to puppet size revealed that when the heel is at its maximum height, the toe should be barely off the ground, and vice versa. In the middle of the foot's forward kick, the whole foot should barely clear the ground.

My references indicated that the puppet's feet should be shoulder width apart, which in turn dictated how far apart the slits in the ground should be. The slits themselves were five millimetres wide, small enough to be easily hidden by the carpet. The whole carpeted area was about eight square feet, but only about half of it appeared on camera. The final shot can be viewed here: [www.theabstractions.com/newtechnique.html](http://www.theabstractions.com/newtechnique.html). I welcome anyone who wishes to build on this technique to do so. Special thanks are due to Gordon and Suzanne Harding, Julie Cruikshank, and Frederick Blichert.

*Grant Harding is a Member of the OPA in Ottawa*

## Audrey 2 Takes Over the World Again

by Dan Wood

It is great to see that the general public's fascination and enjoyment of puppetry endures. Another production of Little Shop of Horrors hit the stage at the Alumnae Theatre in Toronto this June and the puppet Audrey 2 was applauded and thoroughly enjoyed by the packed house. It is always good to see a puppet front and centre of any production.

The production was mounted by First Act Productions. This is a group of enthusiastic young and not so young talented performers and producers who have developed a team capable of putting on top quality musical theatre productions. They rented the puppets and props from the Canadian Stage Theatre so the production elements of the show had a professional look. The pit band was great and the singers put in a great performance. Lighting, sound and special effect were all good too.

I had a chance to meet with the puppeteer who played Audrey 2 before the Friday night performance. Kirsten Sixt is an Occupational Therapist by profession who knows first hand the power of puppetry. Her work with Teaching Awareness Through Puppetry (formerly known as Kid's on the Block) has shown her how puppetry can reach out to people, especially children to build empathy. She works to train and coordinate volunteers for the program as well as working on new scripts. The group visits 70 schools per year and builds awareness of differently abled young people.



Her work with that group led her to be asked to jump inside a person eating plant and work up a sweat. And work up a sweat she did. This being her first major theatrical role she said the biggest challenge was the physical demands. "Luckily I have done a few canoeing portages and knew if I focused I could make it to the end" I asked her if she did any physical preparation for the role and she said "No, not really but I wished that I had"

Another challenge was synchronizing the lip-sync to the wonderful offstage voice of Terrence McCallum. The two used little cues to work together. Terrence worked from backstage viewing the puppet on a monitor but Kirsten could only rely on audio cues. Terrence provided some growls and preamble sounds to let her know when the words were coming up.

Although Kirsten has no ambitions to tour the world as Audrey 2 and puppetry is a passion not a profession her dream job would be to work on Sesame Street because it combines her love of puppetry, sense of fun and her ideals of using puppets to communicate ideas which foster a better society.. Every few years a puppet comes along that captures the imagination. Audrey 2 is still out there demanding to be fed.

Kirsten Sixt and Terrence McCallum as Audrey 2 in First Act Production's Little Shop of Horrors just after the show

*Dan Wood is a Board of Trustees for the OPA in Toronto*

## For the eyes

### **Being Elmo: a puppeteer's journey**

Screened by Teddy Dong

To every puppeteer is an aspiration. To every aspiration is a dream. And to every dream followed comes achievement and success.

During Hot Docs, a documentary screening festival in Toronto, the life of Kevin Clash was followed in a documentary titled, "Being Elmo".

From his dreams to be a puppeteer, the film brilliantly highlights Kevin from his upbringings in a older neighbourhood in Baltimore, to the gradual transformation to becoming a muppeteer. From his early beginnings as a puppet builder, Kevin lived in an ordinary house in an ordinary neighbourhood experimenting with his puppet designs and creations. Performing as a volunteer with community groups, Kevin remained faithful to his aspiration of being a puppet master. From each level of work, Kevin built his experience at each level... seizing every opportunity available. Again and again he got gigs to perform here and there... until one day, he was spotted by a member of the local community television station.

Following his dream, he snatched an opportunity to work on a television series, originally not in the realm of puppetry, but as an actor! Within time, and meeting all the right people, Kevin managed to get a tour of the Henson studios where he met the cast of the Muppets on Sesame Street. WOW!

For Kevin, things seem to have gradually fallen in to place. But as he noted in the film, "follow your dreams. People may tell you that you won't make any money with it... but do it if it makes you happy"

Although this video is not yet available to the general public, be on the lookout when/if it becomes released!

Being Elmo. Definitely a documentary that **every** puppeteer can relate to.



# Announcements

## Get involved!

Are you planning on attending Puppets Up! In Almonte, Ontario on August 6th and 7th? Interested in helping with the OPA VIP area? Please contact us. We need people to people the booth, bake cookies, or offer help in a number of other ways.

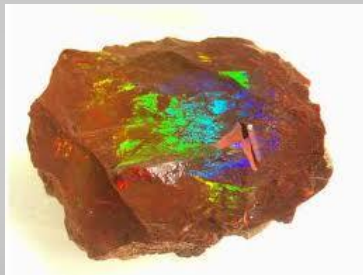
At the next AGM in November we will be looking for a member to become our new treasurer. If you are interested in this, or any other, board position please let us know.

Finally, the OPA will be launching a new website in the very near future. Please send in any images or announcements that you would like included on the new site.

Contact Mike Harding at [mike@applefun.ca](mailto:mike@applefun.ca) for more information and to get involved!

Earth's heat and pressure made this opal. (pretty!)

Members of the OPA made this OPAL. (extra pretty)



OPAL submissions can be sent to:  
**OPAL Editor**  
**c/o: Teddy Dong**  
**106 Hastings Avenue**  
**Toronto, Ontario**  
**M4L 2L2**

Or through e-mail:  
[puppeteer@live.ca](mailto:puppeteer@live.ca)

Your OPAL submissions are the way to keep other members in touch and smiling!

Share something today!

**Due date** for the Fall OPAL is

**September 15,**

### Have you made the switch?

Your OPAL is also available in digital format; to cut down on postage costs and unnecessary paper use. Several internet service providers offer free e-mail accounts. Also, with the digital format, members can print off several copies or electronically forward the OPAL to interested individuals. Register today by sending an e-mail to: [puppeteer@live.ca](mailto:puppeteer@live.ca) and enjoy your OPAL electronically.

This space is reserved for members of the Ontario Puppetry Association



## Oh My Gosh! What did I get myself into?

by Teddy Dong

Like many of you, I started my puppeteer career with store bought puppets. I did not come from a wealthy family so most of my belongings came as hand-me-downs or from the nearby second-hand store. One summer day, I recall purchasing a marionette ostrich for a mere 25 cents! Although it served its purpose well (as in its fun-factor), it did not last long in my possession as I quickly came to dislike untangling strings every few minutes!

Years passed as I focused mainly on costume charactering (or human puppets). Macro-puppets were simple and easy to manipulate. But its fallback was their size: bulky.

It wasn't until my second year of university that a not-for-profit group came to the Student Centre and displayed their mission and cause: Kids on the Block.... Disability awareness through puppetry.

Interesting!

I took notice. I spoke to a lady. Then I took a brochure showing my interest.

I didn't phone back.

=====

A few years later, I was looking for something to watch at around midnight. I wasn't interested in purchasing a Slap Chop, or phoning a Dating Hotline, or catching up on the world's Bru-ha-ha... but what -did- catch my eye was a show called "Wimzie's House". I have to admit, I was blown away by the level of puppetry as well as the storyline.

I thought, "Gee, I should have called that puppet troupe. Puppetry is amazing!"

=====

Weeks passed, exams were passed.

Now, in a new residence where the house is heated by a wood-stove, I didn't have a television. But I -did- have an over abundance of newspapers! (or fire starters!)

One day as I was sifting through newspapers, something caught my eye. There was a yellow-orange ad stating a need for puppeteers. Flexible schedule and full training is provided. It was THEM! Here's my chance!

I called the number.

=====

In a matter of weeks, I was trained for lip sync, memorizing lines, improvising, and then full manipulation of hands and body. I got to learn about both puppeteering and disability awareness... AND have fun!

To make a long story short, I eventually became fluent with most of the puppets; be it female or male, handicapped, accent, or a two-person puppet. Within a year, I moved up and took some of the lead roles, and then began to train some of the new puppeteers. In 2 years, I took the opportunity to be the assistant co-ordinator .

When the recession hit and I lost my job with Ontario Parks, I started BlueInk Puppetry – an environmental awareness puppet troupe. Indeed, I found it both challenging and rewarding to operate my own troupe. Using the skills from the past, I now do puppet shows in schools, churches, and of all places... in provincial parks!

*Teddy Dong is a Member-at-Large for the OPA, currently in Terrace Bay*



# *Ontario Puppetry Association*

## **Membership Form**

One Year Membership is \$30 Cdn. Please make cheque or money order payable to the Ontario Puppetry Association and mail to:

Ontario Puppetry Association  
c/o 301-570 Eglinton Avenue West  
Toronto, Ontario M5N 1B7

Name:.....  
Company / Group (optional):.....  
Address:..... Phone: (.....).  
City:..... Prov.:..... Fax: (.....).  
Postal Code:..... E-Mail:.....  
Website:.....  
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### **Contact the OPA**

**By Phone:** 1-800-379-0446      **On the Web:** [www.onpuppet.ca](http://www.onpuppet.ca)

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