

Malcolm Knight, founder of  
the Scottish Mask and  
Puppet Centre in Glasgow

Pictures: Kirsty Anderson



## Feature

# I was arrested for wearing a mask of Edward Heath in Sauchiehall Street

Susan Swarbrick talks to Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre founder Malcolm Knight as he reflects on a colourful career

**M**ALCOLM Knight spends his days surrounded by faces. There are wood-carved Japanese Noh masks, a Russian hand puppet of Petrushka and eye-catching Sri Lankan marionettes of a snake charmer and a hermit. Wander through his workspace and you will see the ballet dancer Anna Pavlova reimagined as a butterfly, alongside vivid pieces that celebrate Mexico's Day of the Dead and pay homage to Rangda, the demon queen of Bali. Knight, 68, has amassed an impressive collection of masks, puppets and marionettes from around the world. The Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre in Glasgow, which he founded in 1981, is a labour of love. Spend time chatting with Knight and he will regale you with fascinating stories, be it a brush with the law during the height of the 1974 miners' strike to his time working on the genesis of what would later become the popular 1980s children's TV show Button Moon.

His passion took root many years earlier as a child growing up among the famed potteries of Stoke-on-Trent. "Half my family worked in Royal Doulton and Wedgwood – I was surrounded by ceramics – and the other half were miners," he says.

"As a child I started making little creatures and animal figures, modelled straight out of the ground from clay. I was probably about five years old. Up until the age of 11, I spent most of my life outdoors playing in nature."

Things changed when he started secondary. "It was all boys and I didn't like the chauvinism, bullying and violence," says Knight. "I had

grown up in a family that was strongly matriarchal. That was how I viewed the world.

"I failed my 11 plus and absconded from school until I got caught. I managed to evade capture for nine months. Finally, my mum and dad woke up to what was going on and that I was hiding in the coal cellar for most of the day when I was meant to be in school."

Realising how unhappy their son was, Knight's parents enrolled him in a different school. "I had a series of wonderful teachers and ended up becoming head boy. It was quite a reversal. I started to get very involved in theatre, drama and amateur opera."

He went on to study English and drama at the University of Hull and honed his theatre skills at the Gulbenkian Centre, becoming good friends with Anthony Minghella, who directed The English Patient. Knight arrived in Scotland to begin an MLitt with a thesis on masks in 1973. "I did so at the invitation of Professor James Arnott at Glasgow University who had seen some of the masks I had made for a production of Noah by the French writer Andre Obey. Arnott was the external examiner for my degree at Hull University."

That plan fell by the wayside as Knight discovered the power of masks and puppets as a tool for political protest. "My research never got finished," he admits. "I spent most of my time running a street theatre group called The Fellow Travellers and getting into trouble. I was arrested for wearing a mask of Edward Heath in Sauchiehall Street at the height of the 1974 general election."

Continued on Page 8



## Continued from Page 9

Knight felt an affinity with the miners as they went on strike in February 1974 over pay and conditions. He devised a piece to highlight their plight and raise funds for the miners' families. "The miners' wives were having great difficulty making ends meet. People had it tough. Together with eight other people, I was out on the streets performing this show we'd written which used giant masks and puppets.

"We were getting crowds of 500 people. Then we all got arrested for 'displaying writings, signs and effigies, singing and playing musical instruments in a threatening and abusive manner' under a bylaw of 1894. All the puppets and masks were taken away. When it came to court the police were confused about who was wearing what mask and carrying out what activity. They claimed they had witnessed a demonstration, but we produced a script of the show and a film of the entire arrest which shows we were attacked unprovoked by the police.

"The whole thing got laughed out of court and we were acquitted. I never did get the puppets and masks back but what I learned from that was to just go off and make some more. I realised you could always make something out of nothing. If you had done it once, it was much easier to do it again."

Knight left Glasgow and after a stint working at Trent Polytechnic in Nottingham, he headed to London where a card in the window of an employment bureau caught his eye. It read: "Actor/musician required. Must be 5ft 8in tall, have a current driving licence and be a member of British Actors Equity Association."

Knight's interest was piqued. "I had none of those things," he says. "I'm 6ft 3in. I didn't have a driving licence and I wasn't a member of Equity, but something made me phone the number."

He was given the address for a Victorian house in London. "It had a costume room, a rehearsal room, a living room and a massive kitchen. There were two guys living there, Ian Allen and John Thirtle, who were the directors of Playboard Puppets."

The duo put on touring shows in theatres, arts centres and village halls around the country. One of their actor-puppeteers had fallen ill. "The reason they were looking for someone 5ft 8in tall was because that was the height of the playboard they were working off," explains Knight.

"They threw me in the deep end and asked me to stand behind the playboard. They asked: 'How are we going to do this? Even if we put a black mask on your head, it will still be seen.' I thought back to a lot of my early Shakespeare drama and training where the actor stands in a triangulated shape.

"All I did was bend my knees, triangulate my thighs and legs, to sink down seven inches, and put my hands above my head. The only catch was you had to stand like that for 45 minutes while the show was going on, swapping hands and voices. To their astonishment it worked, and I loved it."

Then came an intriguing brief for a new show: make puppets from household materials. "That was the origination of Button Moon, the famous TV show," says Knight. "I was involved in that for about 18 months. I played Reggie Veggie, Small in the Bleach Bottle Army and the Banana Birds.

"On a couple of occasions, I had to stand in and operate Mr Spoon as well. That was while it was still a live show and they hadn't yet piloted it with Thames Television."



Knight also began to explore the international mask and puppet scene. "I realised it was a huge economic sector in its own right," he says. "Instead of being a branch of the theatre, it was actually a root; one that was older than the wheel, the bow or the harpoon. Over 15 years, I travelled to puppet centres and puppet museums all over the world. I did a British Council survey of puppet theatre in the USA and worked with a TV company in Norway."

Knight was commissioned by John McGrath of the 7:84 theatre company to design masks for The Trembling Giant which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1977. "Harriet Walter was playing Margaret Thatcher, whose face I had to cast, and Jim Broadbent played the giant."

In 1979, he decided to return to Glasgow. "I came back to Scotland because I was sick to death with what I saw happening to the decimation of the subsidised theatre movement and all the experimental theatre groups by the Thatcher government," says Knight.

"She was determined to crush the life and freedom out of everything. I fled back to Scotland with my memories of Matt McGinn, Hamish Henderson and all the socialists that I had met up here in the cultural world. By the time I got back, all the deskilling and demanufacturing process had started in engineering and shipbuilding. It was a changed environment from what I remembered."

Over the next decade, Knight formed the Gorbals Diehards Theatre Company ("the actress Libby McArthur was one of my proteges during that time"), worked as an adult education tutor at the University of Glasgow and ran drama classes on Bute.

He put on Italian playwright Dario Fo's famed performance piece Mistero Buffo at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1981 as a solo mask and puppet show. "I found his radical reinterpretation of the Bible and the Mystery Plays fascinating," he recalls.

That same year, Knight decided to forge what he envisaged as "a creative, hands-on space, free from interference and censorship." He rented the upper floor of a former whisky bond building on Otago Street in Glasgow and the Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre was born.

"I converted half of the floor into a 35-seat experimental theatre and the other half into a workshop with a tiny office. I built the whole thing from skips around the West End, including the lighting box.

"At first it was just me, but it grew to 11 members of staff through YTS and the Manpower Services Commission. In 1985, I turned the organisation into a charity because I had worked out by then that while money was important to get things done, I really wasn't interested in profit-making."

A friend told him about an empty building on Balcarres Avenue in Glasgow, previously a

cleansing department depot, that was on the council surplus list. The Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre moved there in 1989 – 30 years ago next month – where it has remained ever since.

Funding is a challenge. Knight is trying to raise close to £1 million to open a museum and add facilities such as 107-seat theatre, two artists' studios, a study centre and a children's community garden. He believes more could be done to support his work.

"I feel frustrated by the blinkered vision and failure to appreciate the significance of this art form to not only educate, but as a medium which can play across cultures, social agenda and racial lines," he says. "The power of masks and puppets to unite as an art form is massive."

Last year, Knight began putting together a catalogue and accession register as part of the accreditation process required by Museums Galleries Scotland. It is hoped a new gallery space within the centre will be up and running within the next three years.

He and his wife Sarah Lee spearhead the public programme, which includes masterclasses, children's birthday parties and an annual festival each October. Alongside many rare and antique puppets and masks, Knight has a collection of 6,000 books.

"We have a marionette woodcarving and repair workshop, a mask-making studio and Grant Mason FX special effects, who did the baby for Trainspotting, is on site. We are the only puppet centre in the UK that has this range of facilities and resources.

"What I hope to do is create a mask-making and leather apprenticeship scheme. When I was in Italy in the 1980s, that is what I learned to do. I would love to be able to share those skills."

■ Visit [maskandpuppet.co.uk](http://maskandpuppet.co.uk)



Malcolm Knight, founder of the Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre in Glasgow . Photograph: Kirsty Anderson

## - EXTERIOR WALL PROBLEMS SOLVED -

Book your **FREE** survey til **30 September 2019**

**GUARANTEE UP TO**

**50% OFF**

**2018 List Prices**

(subject to location & property type)

PROTEKS exterior wall applications have over **45** years of excellence

- ✓ Protect and waterproof your home
- ✓ Damp proofing colutions
- ✓ Long lasting
- ✓ Unique anti-fungicide treatment
- ✓ Add value to your property
- ✓ Maintenance free
- ✓ Over 100 finishes available

### What our customers say...

*Brilliant job. Very well carried out. Great stuff. Enjoyed the canter!*

**- Mr Tarrant, Dunoon**

*Stopped internal damp in our 19th century home - It's now warm & cosy*

**- Mrs Carter, Newton Stewart**



PAINTED EXTERIOR WALLS



RENDERED EXTERIOR WALLS



WEATHERPROOFING



BEFORE



AFTER

**ADVANCED  
WALL SOLUTIONS**

[www.advancedwallsolutions.com](http://www.advancedwallsolutions.com)

**0800 085 2564**

QUOTE REF  
HER19

Take advantage of our **SUMMER SALE** and beat the Brexit price rise. Schedule work any time during 2019  
Call today for a **FREE** no obligation survey & quotation