



**Tyler Bunch (The Muppets, Sesame Street, Bear in the Big Blue House) - Under The Puppet**

**Grant Baciocco:** Tyler Bunch is the very definition of a working puppeteer. He works for Sesame Street. He works for the Muppets, was on the amazing show Bear in the Big Blue House. Was Grampu on the show Oobi, and on the upcoming Jim Henson Company Show Julie's Greenroom, you're also a puppeteer on there, and Tyler welcome to the show.

**Tyler Bunch:** Thanks so much, Grant. Happy to be here.

**Grant Baciocco:** It's excellent to talk to you especially for this topic because we are talking about building a career through puppetry, and it is something that you have certainly done. What was the very first puppet you remember seeing or puppet that inspired you as ... To get into this profession.

**Tyler Bunch:** Wow, the puppet that I remember the most I guess being amazed by my own connection to was Boober on Fraggle Rock because I'd always made an assumption as a communicative human being that you needed certain facets for the human brain to kind of look at and absorb emotional communication from. And Boober has no eyes. Boober's got bangs-

**Grant Baciocco:** Right.

**Tyler Bunch:** ... but I still knew where he was looking, why he was looking there, when his eyes were quote unquote downcast because he was upset or what ... Like I could still pick up every expression necessary from that character and as a teenager that kind of blew my mind. I was like, "Why? Why does that work? What's happening there that makes me identify with every emotion that that character is trying to put out."

And I hadn't done that much puppetry at that point, but I remember being fascinated at that moment. I didn't try it until some years later. But just as a performer being struck by the absence of these tools for communication, yet I still understood every moment that was being ... It was emanating or being translated, just really, really struck me.

**Grant Baciocco:** You and I've talked before that you have a big theater background, an extensive theater-

**Tyler Bunch:** Yes.

**Grant Baciocco:** ... background. Do you feel that your theater background has helped you, your acting in theater has helped you with the puppetry?

**Tyler Bunch:** Oh, most definitely, most definitely. The informational set is effectively parallel there's no difference in terms of ... I've always kind of called puppets, mimes with a voice because that's ultimately what they are. The strongest expression from a puppet comes when it's coupled with the physical characteristics that we would identify with whatever the emotion is that it's trying to convey. We just also have the luxury of being able to speak while we're doing it. So the idea that this very physically demonstrative entity has the added bonus of having this really interesting voice that can come out of it with all of the emotional values that can be laden. Everything that you would need for all those kinds of expression like mime right off the bat, physical movement in general through dance, understanding composition as you would on stage and how to draw the audience's eye.

The vocal instrument that a puppeteer can utilize when that type of puppetry is available to them. Being trained in all the muscles necessary to give a consistent performance and a consistent character voice. They go hand-and-hand plus just the general breakdown of a script, an emotional intent, and all of your subtext that you would deal with in any other scripted narrative, be it stage or screen are all going to apply to whatever the narrative is that you're trying to relay with a puppet.

**Grant Baciocco:** So you would recommend that if someone wanted to be a puppeteer to take some acting classes.

**Tyler Bunch:** Definitely.

**Grant Baciocco:** Yeah.

**Tyler Bunch:** Definitely. And again it's not about your comfort level in front of other people. It's about what you bring as an individual to that relationship with the audience. Whether you know it's your sense of comedic timing, or you know it's your sense of empathy with the character, or the fact that you're going to take words off a page and say it differently than anybody else would. All of that is going to be informed by a basic acting course, by any level of acting course. The more that you get into it the better that you'll be and the more quickly you can access the emotions and the intents necessary to help that character really resonate with any given audience.

**Grant Baciocco:** Well and I was in a class that Kevin Clash was teaching and he said, which is something, which I knew but when he said it, it was like, "Oh yeah."

Is, "Your arm, you hand is the actor."

So if you know how to act, like if you know, "Oh, how do ... When I'm sad, okay I know that my body posture is like this, and my movements are like this," now you've got to translate that through your hand. And I think you kind of have to do know that about your own body, and of course everybody knows, "Oh, this is a sad face and a happy face," but to really break it down like that in an acting way, really helps you with your puppetry as well.

**Tyler Bunch:**

Most definitely and then truthfully, even to this day whether I myself or seeing partners that I'm with and anybody that I'm doing work with if there's some moment that we're having a difficult time relating to the audience because puppetry is always an illusion. It's taking something that doesn't do, or is intended to do one thing and making it do something else. You're taking an inanimate object, you're giving it thought and expression and that illusion takes a strong point of view.

You need to be able to specify whatever it is you're wanting to translate for the audience. And sometimes when you get lost in that moment and, "I don't know how to do this," there's literal times where I'll just kind of drop the puppet and go, "Okay, what do I do now? What would I be doing with my body? What would be the subtle expression of my head if I wanted to say something outside of the lines that I've been giving if there's a moment that I feel would help a transition between the words that are on the page of a tertiary expression that I can do in some subtle way physically." I would literally think about what I would do in that moment. Physically, what would I do? Where would my head go? How would my eyes turn? What would my body be doing? In order to emulate that with as you said my actor, my arm, so that, that infinitesimal moment can be isolated and done as cleanly as possible.

**Grant Baciocco:**

Yeah, now you are somebody who the bulk of your work is sort of [pence 00:06:57] and style puppetry I would say you with the foam and fleece variety, but I also know that you have a background and you did some marionette work and other styles of puppetry. Do you recommend that puppeteers look into those other styles and learn or try to master those other styles as well?

**Tyler Bunch:**

Well most definitely because I have yet to be involved with a long term project, and again if your goal's to be involved in continued narrative. If you want to be involved in some [ep-sci 00:07:29] television show or characters that live past their one moment in time, whether they're created for film or whatever.

Invariably some other style of puppetry will be involved in the illusion. You'll either be doing some sort of shadow moment, or you will need to marionette something because the arm, or the tail of the piece of the puppet that needs to do something can't be controlled by a human directly because of the set up or the scenic limitations so you wind up having to marionette. You wind up having to do some sort of raw puppetry. You wind up having to throw your hand in a leg and make it look like the character's tap dancing so any kind of theatrical expression, or movement expression, or puppetry style, you should at least

familiarize yourself with so that when you're called on in those moments it's not a learning curve. It's not a, "You have to figure it out in order to get the moment done." It's, "You have to figure out how to best apply the knowledge that you already have to achieve the moment."

**Grant Baciocco:** All right now going in for auditions, which I'm sure you do regularly, to go in and audition for things. What is, what is one thing that you always prepare like before you go into an audition? To get you in the right mindset to get in there?

**Tyler Bunch:** The first thing I try to remember is that any production worth their weight so to speak, anybody who cares about what they're doing, they're going to direct you in the audition. They're going to ask you to do something more than what you've prepared. Therefore, it is your duty to not devote your entire preparation to your take on the character. You don't want to memorize the moments that you're going to do. And again this is my take, other people may disagree but I prefer to be flexible. I prefer to have an outline for what I want to do with the idea that if they give me a conflicting direction I can throw out everything that I've done. It's not memorization and rote.

I almost look at the people auditioning as another partner in the scene and try to pay attention to how they're reacting so that what I'm bringing in and the preconceived notions that I bring to the table as part of my audition prep can be flexible and suit the needs of the moment and not just me saying, "Here's what I want to do, you like it or not, bye." It's more of the dialogue with whoever's auditioning you so they can hopefully push you in the direction that they want you to go if you're not there for some reason.

**Grant Baciocco:** Now I'm not asking to, for you to name any names or anything like that, but what is the worst audition experience you've ever had? Either somehow you didn't do as well as you thought you should have in the audition or just the overall experience like you got in there and it was crazy. What's the story there?

**Tyler Bunch:** Oh, I have two answers to that question. The audition that I felt the most inappropriate about so to speak, I think was the amazing group of professionals that needed to keep the energy going when things went down so to speak at Sesame Street with Kevin Clash. It became necessary to find someone else to fill the ridiculously large shoes of Kevin Clash and the character Elmo.

I don't even come close to doing an Elmo voice. I do cute high pitched voices, but it ain't no Elmo. And I knew that, and I hesitated even going in for the audition and kudos to Ryan Dillon who has since done amazing work with having to follow in Kevin's footsteps. And all of us wishing that it weren't necessary to do so, but wanting as much as Kevin would for the character and the whole entity to survive. To have the people on the other side of the camera laughing at your audition, like literally out loud [defawing 00:11:52] and then I was too. It was so bad. Just not good at all, it sounded more like Gollum from you know-

**Grant Baciocco:** But you do that audition, right?

**Tyler Bunch:** [crosstalk 00:12:03] Yes.

**Grant Baciocco:** Like if you get that audition you go do it even if you're like, "This isn't me," but you go do it, right?

**Tyler Bunch:** Most definitely. You commit to what your thing is and if you know that it stinks, make a character of whatever that thing is. And yeah, sure it's not going to be the character they're looking for, but it will be memorable.

**Grant Baciocco:** Right. And maybe it will turn into something else, right? Whatever.

**Tyler Bunch:** Exactly.

**Grant Baciocco:** Yeah, and do you have a second story? I-

**Tyler Bunch:** Yeah, well the second story was more to do with one of the facets of this art form in general and monitor puppetry and the different folks who find ways to create projects that involve puppets that don't necessarily have any experience in the world of puppetry for television, which is fine, more people throwing money at puppets on TV is fantastic. But the kind of hubris about, "Oh well this is puppets, we can do this."

And then even in terms of the audition having a choreographer for human beings come in and try to give you choreography that they want you to emulate with the puppet, which you know with the way they're going to be shooting the show and what's been described to you, it will never ever be necessary to do anything like what this person is asking you to do with the puppet when you actually do the job. There will be nothing that you are doing on the audition that will ever appear on the camera, or any narrative to do with this project but you have to do it anyway because it's being asked of you. It feels like such a ridiculous waste of your time and you want to look at the person on the other side and go, "You've never ever done a puppet show and kudos to you for wanting to push the envelope, but why are we doing this?"

**Grant Baciocco:** Yeah.

**Tyler Bunch:** There's so many other things you could be testing me on right now that would be so much more helpful to your production, this is not one of them.

**Grant Baciocco:** Now I know that you regularly attend the O'Neill Puppetry Conference.

**Tyler Bunch:** Correct.

**Grant Baciocco:** And do you feel that's a worthwhile experience for puppeteers to check out?

**Tyler Bunch:** I'll qualify the ... I am fortunate enough to be a staff member at the O'Neill and have been for a while. And to be there and watch as artists have this amazingly distilled growth period in a three to 10 day stretch of their lives where they are pushed and asked to create outside of their comfort zones in this almost butterfly, break in the confines of a chrysalis way. So hard to describe unless you experience it. Yes, I would recommend it to everyone to go to the O'Neill.

I would caution everyone who goes to the O'Neill to go there open to the experience. Do not go there with expectations of, "When I go there I'm going to learn this."

It's more the thinking to yourself in the same way that you would go camping in the outdoors. Yes of course you'd love for it to be lovely and sunny the whole time, but it's not necessarily going to be that way. You're going to have the deal with what the outdoors brings to you. Go there with the mindset of what you'd like to achieve. But be open to the experience because the professionals that congregate there and the artistry that goes on there in that amazingly short amount of time is pretty phenomenal.

**Grant Baciocco:** What is one skill that you feel that every puppeteer needs to have?

**Tyler Bunch:** I don't know if I'd call it a skill so much as a quality and that is focused flexibility. Almost the same thing that I just described in your question about the O'Neill in that you need to know what you'd like to achieve, but be open to the fact that no matter what you're doing, you are part of a whole energy. Even if you're a solo performer in a theatrical setting, what you are doing is reliant upon the audience's suspension of disbelief.

They have to want to go on the ride with you and believe that that thing that you are manipulating has thought and expression. They are informing as much of your performance as you are. It's going to be resonating with each individual in that audience differently. So being open to the fact that what your engaging in is a collaborative effort on every sense of the scale. There is never puppetry in isolation. That makes no sense. It does nothing for the artist. You have to have that feedback of the audience and that collaboration when you are trying to help that illusion take life with other artists, be on stage, or in front, or behind the camera. You have to be open to the idea that your expressiveness in the moment is exactly that, it's in the moment. And it needs to be flexible and adaptable to that specific moment every time.

**Grant Baciocco:** Excellent. Who is a puppeteer that you feel every puppeteer should watch and study?

**Tyler Bunch:** Oh wow, that's a good one. I might have more of a list than an individual.

**Grant Baciocco:** That's fine.

**Tyler Bunch:** I think if I ... The first puppeteer on my list in terms of everyone at least looking at all the different roles that they've played. Again, I'd have to go to Dave Goetz. His work is always filled with such joy and such attention to detail.

One of the moments that I consistently point to is in Muppets Christmas Carol. It's just a transitional moment but Gonzo and Rizzo are climbing a rope. There's a rope on the side of a house, and dangling on the rope ... Just that phrase right there. Gonzo the puppet being held by a human being with rods stuck to a rope if they are rodged. He's dangling from that rope. So there are so many things at play here in terms of cheating gravity, cheating weight, cheating the whole idea that that thing kicking its legs means it's swinging in different directions, and the rope is twisting in such a way because Gonzo is spinning around it and the life like ...

And there's this amazing moment of puppetry where you're not in any way shape or form conscious of the fact that there's a human being dangling or attached to that thing that you're watching who's feet are actually on the floor. But in your brain this thing is literally challenging gravity and swinging back and forth on a rope. That's not happening but your brain says that it is-

**Grant Baciocco:** Right.

**Tyler Bunch:** ... but what? But what? It's amazing, it's an amazing moment. And you would ... The average audience member is going to pay that no mind because of course that's what's happening. Gonzo's dangling on a rope, but he's not.

**Grant Baciocco:** Right.

**Tyler Bunch:** Besides again his character work and having worked with Dave his best moments are always grounded in this joyful what the character's experiencing right then. Dave never looks at it as, "This is what I want to do as a puppeteer." Even when he has a good moment, he always talks about it in this way, "Well, that's what the character wanted to say right then," or "That's what he wanted to do right then."

He talks about it in this way that like, "Isn't it so funny that Gonzo just said that? That just is so funny that Gonzo said that thing." As if it's somehow removed from him in that he really completely commits to the moment every time he's in front of the camera, it's awesome.

**Grant Baciocco:** Yeah, one of the biggest lessons I've learned about this and it was also, it also comes from Dave Goetz, but it comes more not necessarily puppetry but being professional, and being a professional person was I was on the set of a Muppets commercial. And I watched Dave build this little rig for Gonzo that was going to be like he was balancing this food on his finger. And he spent about an hour working on this little rodged peanut with a coke can balanced on top of it with

an apple balanced on top of it. And it was just something to kind of upstage that classic Mupstage, Muppet upstage thing in the background-

**Tyler Bunch:** I like Mupstage. I think-

**Grant Baciocco:** Yeah Mupstage, that's it. Coined. I'm going to buy that website right now, and then get sued by Disney.

But and then they tried it in the shot and it just didn't work and he was just so like, "Oh, okay. It doesn't work," and just tossed it aside this thing that he had worked an hour on.

And to me that was such a lesson of like you just talked about flexibility just a moment ago, and it's like you got to be flexible and yeah you may have a great idea. It may not work. And you got to move on, because that's the job you got to do it. So I agree with you that Dave is very inspiring.

What is one thing that you always bring with you to the set? Not necessarily to help you with puppetry, but just something that you throw in your bag, take with you to a set or maybe it is something to help you with your puppetry.

**Tyler Bunch:** Recently it's always been a red sharpie. I like circling my lines in red. I find that whenever I want to put my name on the water bottles as they come around or my letters, red always stands out, and red isn't one of the Sharpies that the typical set personnel carry around. It's usually black, so if I need something that's personalized or whatever.

I try to always have my own couple of strips of toupee tape, which for those of you who don't know it's the tape literally that is made to attach gentlemen's toupees to their scalp, but it's one of the few tapes that is flexible enough and does not leave a residue so that it can be used on just pretty much anything. And is powerfully sticky and helps puppets and other things look like they are attached to one another when necessary, or a puppet picking up a prop.

But one of the things I personally try not to bring to set is any sort of cellular or mobile device. I do my best to leave that as far away from me as I can. When work comes around, even if that means I have two minutes of my break to wherever it is. I find my most creative moments come in those times when I'm not being immediately utilized and can sit back and look at things from an unfocused point of view.

So that when I am not as engaged I can think outside the box and approach things differently whether it's with a line read or what character would do in that moment, or, "Wouldn't it be fun if." Or, "Hey so and so who's doing this thing, maybe if you tried that, that might work for you," or, "Hey, I have an idea for your character," or whatever it is.



The whole collaborative energies are easier to access when you're not primarily focused on the individual thing you have to do when you're open to what everyone has to accomplish and looking outside of your goals. Again still be aware of your goal set but kind of think, "Well how can I help other people do their jobs right now?" And to me that's always easier to do if I'm not distracted by this self absorbing thing, the device around nowadays.

**Grant Baciocco:** Like checking your email?

**Tyler Bunch:** Yeah.

**Grant Baciocco:** We work in a profession that while we would love every single television movie production to have puppets in it and be puppetry related, unfortunately it's not. So the work is not as plentiful as say if you were a plumber or something like that where there's always something going on. So what do you do when during those dry spells when there's no work?

**Tyler Bunch:** That's interesting that you asked that because I've kind of kicked my own rear for the last decade or so in that one of the things that I believe is absolutely necessary as the scope of entertainment in general is morphing into the direction of digital consumption and the huge number of platforms that are available. Everyone should be trying to be develop their own content period. There are no ifs, ands, or buts, whatever that form of product conception takes and it doesn't have to be specifically puppets. Just always trying to be making something or be part of someone else's making something.

And there's a difference between knowing your worth and acceptance of what you will do for the specific recompense. Because investment has as much to do with time and energy as it does with money coming in your direction. So the idea that while I was going to do "So and So's" thing, but they don't have any money.

You have to start sharpening your skills of observation in terms of what other things can you grow from when involving yourself in someone's project or even your own. I kind of ... This is something of rhetoric I've used, a lot of people. I picture my artist whatever it is I want to do with my life creatively. Kind of existing in this Escheresque environment. Weird 3D world where there are stairs just like Escher and the goal is to go up. And there are three different staircases that will take you up. And they work independently and in concert. One is exposure. The other is artistic fulfillment or artistic advancement in terms of knowledge. And the others, the third is financial. You have to make sure in weighing with yourself what's worth your time, whether it's a personal venture or someone else's venture that you ... You want to make sure you never take a step down. Or that if you do at least one or two steps up in on one of the other staircases. Make sure that that your little artist in that world stays on a plateau or goes up, never goes down.

So if it doesn't pay real good, does it give me some exposure? Are you going to learn something or are you going to work side next to someone that you really want to learn something from or it's gonna just be awesome to be in their presence? Because you never know what's going to happen you know having that kind of creative energy around.

So you're going to have to weigh with yourself two steps one, one step down, I take two steps up. To make sure that again your artist just keeps at the very least staying on a certain plain, if not advancing.

In an idea world every decision you make keeps you advancing. So a round about way of saying, "Stay busy," but for me personally I had my own goal of trying to keep my other artistic adventures on par somehow with whatever advancement puppetry was giving me, be it financial exposure or the like. So the combination of my other endeavors, acting in the voice over world and consulting or directing just trying to make sure that everything that I needed to do to keep bills paid and food in my mouth had some sort of artistic component, something that made me feel like I was growing artistically or something along those ways.

It didn't necessarily have to be as a puppeteer, but again that was a specific direction I gave myself, which I wish at this point I had given a little more emphasis in like I said creating product and actually making new things as opposed to just playing in other people's sandboxes. Not that I'm in any way disparaging of the good fortune I've had in those realms because I feel some of my best work has come out of playing in other people's sandboxes. But I wish I had exercised the muscles of self-generated product sooner in my life than I had at this point.

**Grant Baciocco:** Yeah. Now recently you had a bit of an injury-

**Tyler Bunch:** Yeah.

**Grant Baciocco:** And I sort of went through a couple years ago, I broke my arm. How do you keep going when you get an injury like that and maybe you can't do all the puppetry stuff you want to do. How do you keep a positive mind while you're waiting that six to eight weeks before you can do it again?

**Tyler Bunch:** Well the first ingredient with me specifically is that I'm an idiot and I'll try to do it anyway. But a lot of what we do is as much mental preparation as it is physical. Yes, obviously you can't necessarily be a puppeteer without some sort of physical possibilities. It doesn't matter what the style of the puppetry is you're still manipulating something in space. Again for me, there are other ways to express yourself creatively or get your mind around the tasks that are or will be at hand.

For some of the earlier questions about acting and the like, I practice vocal work. Whether it's trying to find new character voices within myself, or practice new dialects, to find YouTube videos or recordings online of specific accents and try to emulate them. They've been several times where I've given myself the task of only speaking in a certain dialect for a day and really analyzing the sounds that are coming out of my mouth in order to get more under my belt.

If you're lucky enough to be gifted at creative writing, sitting down and doing that, just so that you keep some artistic part of yourself moving forward while you're doing it. And at the same time pay attention to your body and don't do things with your body that it's not gonna want to do. There's a difference between pushing limits and pushing your body too far. So you want to rehab quickly but give yourself the freedom to heal.

In my case I was fortunate enough that the people that I had worked with were happy to be patient as my convalescence became more necessary, and found ways to allow me to perform parts of a puppet as opposed to the whole and have someone else come in to do the parts that I couldn't do or mark through a rehearsal process and only do what was necessary for the few moments that it was necessary either on stage or in front of the camera to again allow more down time. So communicate with people, let people know when you're injured and don't push yourself to the point that you can't recover because of some fear of not getting to do the work because you're injured. Because if someone has elected to have you part of their creative process it has more to do with what you're bringing to the table as a creative person than just some specific physical ability.

**Grant Baciocco:** What aspect of your puppetry are you most critical of?

**Tyler Bunch:** Knee jerk reaction would be rod work. I wish I was better with hands when they're manipulated by rods, but in an overarching sense ... Those moments of thoughtful specificity. Wanting to make sure that I'm expressing what I precisely need to express when the puppet is not vocally communicating. Those in between moments that have a sort of open to interpretation presentation because again you don't have the support of dialogue. I find myself watching things that I've done and realizing that the moment that I wanted to non verbally communicate was not necessarily as clear as I had hoped, and trying to work on that as often as possible.

**Grant Baciocco:** Well as we wrap up here I would love to ask of your career so far, what do you think your highlight has been of your puppetry career?

**Tyler Bunch:** I was ridiculously lucky to be involved in Bear in the Big Blue House as my first foray because it was such a well done show and it touched so many people. And the cast was so strong, and what it taught and presented was so beautiful in terms of content and ... I was just really, really lucky to have been a part of that.

And the opportune, in general the opportunities that just puppetry has given me to see the world and get paid to do it. I mean that's not a job specific point but I've been so fortunate in having these opportunities that have taken me to other places and experience other cultures in a way that most people wouldn't because our art form in general it becomes necessary to understand how the people that you are around are communicating so that that puppet can do it the same way. And being able to do that on a cross cultural platform is just a really beautiful experience.

**Grant Baciocco:** Excellent. Well, people want to connect with you online like around Twitter and stuff, can they do that?

**Tyler Bunch:** Yes, Tyler\_Bunch on the Twitter and IMDB's there and you can find me on Facebook.

**Grant Baciocco:** Awesome, well Tyler thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today. I really appreciate it.

**Tyler Bunch:** Certainly. Certainly. Thanks, Grant.

*TRANSCRIPT ©2017,2023 SATURDAY MORNING MEDIA/GRANT BACIOCCO  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED MAY NOT BE REPUBLISHED WITHOUT PERMISSION*