

The New York Times



Mr. Johnson and several of the characters he speaks with, and for, in “The Two and Only.”
From left, Bob; Amigo; Darwin, Spaulding and Nethernore.

Broadway for Dummies (and Ventriloquists)

By Jesse Green

Published: September 17, 2006

ALTHOUGH Bob was the first to say hello when I entered the crowded room, he wasn't especially pleasant. Cute, yes, with apple cheeks and glossy brown hair, but he seemed to smirk at me. And was that a touch of condescension in his voice? Still, I felt compelled to respond: barely three feet tall, with huge, imploring eyes, he was clearly hungry for company, like a lonely child. I later found out that Bob is pushing 30. Still, he's had so much work done that you might assume he was a stunted 'tween, were it not for the guy with an arm up his back.

That would be Jay Johnson, similarly glossy-haired but blonder, taller and human. He too seems youthful, if not as strikingly boyish as he was three decades ago when he and Bob first appeared on the television satire “Soap”: Mr. Johnson as Chuck, a shy ventriloquist, and Bob as a character sometimes called (but not to his face) Bob the Dummy. (The preferred term is “puppet,” or “wooden-American.”) The show, which ran from 1977 to 1981, made them stars of a certain sort: the sort that appears most often in reruns, on cruise ships, in comedy clubs and at annual meetings of textile workers.

But now the duo, if that's the right term for the collaboration between a 57-year-old man and a glorified log are in town to star in, of all things, their own Broadway show. It is a sign of how far they've come, and how far Broadway has, too, that “Jay Johnson: The Two and Only!” — which starts previews Tuesday — has an open-ended booking in a theater named for the first lady of the American stage.

Sure, their Off Broadway outing at the Atlantic Theater Company in 2004 received ecstatic reviews, but that house seats 165, while the Helen Hayes seats 600. And though Off Broadway has recently done well with aerialists, clowns, synchronized percussionists and other refugees from Novelty World, the uptown climate for such performers has not been exactly balmy. Just ask the Hayes's most recent tenants, Kiki and Herb.

That pair of boozy losers joined a litany of recent acts, including such formerly dependable perennials as Jackie Mason and Dame Edna, who have come and gone without making a profit. But Mr. Johnson isn't deterred. “Entertainment is entertainment,” he said. “We have the same chance as any other show that opens its doors. Remember, this is the town that embraced ‘Puppetry of the Penis.’ I would think our show has more universal appeal than that art form.”

Still, Mr. Johnson and his various characters (he voices 11 in the show) are grabbing every publicity opportunity that comes their way: singing “New York, New York” with Martin Short and Donny Osmond at the open-air “Broadway on Broadway” concert last Sunday; agreeing to appear this Tuesday as part of Ventriloquist Week on “Late Show With David Letterman,” despite concerns that the gig might prove undignified.

Dignity may seem a strange thing to worry about when you play with puppets for a living, but Mr. Johnson, despite having appeared on “The Love Boat,” sees himself as part of a noble tradition. He was pleased to reveal that Bob — well, a former and slightly more ethnic-looking Bob — was in negotiations to be inducted into the Smithsonian’s popular entertainment collection.

That might explain why the puppet was so haughty when I met him, taping a public service announcement for the League of Women Voters. But Mr. Johnson, who said he is dyslexic, “like 100 out of 17 people,” kept flubbing his lines, while Bob, who was strangely letter-perfect, seethed. “I can get another ventriloquist, easy,” he snapped. It was at this point that my brain started knotting up, as when faced with a logical pretzel like “This statement is false.”

Ventriloquism (the word roughly translates from the Latin as “belly speaking”) is creepy. So why is it — at least as Mr. Johnson performs it — so powerful? It takes about a nanosecond to accept the illusion: to think of Bob as a separate entity and to look at him when he speaks.

During the early tapings of “Soap,” Mr. Johnson recalled, the boom operator kept turning the microphone toward the puppet for his lines. I too fell into the trap, at one point congratulating Bob on being a better ad libber than his partner. And when Mr. Johnson accused another co-star (Spaulding, a tennis ball) of harassing the makeup woman, I couldn’t figure out who was behaving badly.

As he does for everything regarding ventriloquism, Mr. Johnson has a good explanation for these phenomena. (He’s a doctorate waiting to happen.) Basically it boils down to the supremacy of the senses over the intellect. We believe what we perceive, not what we know. In “The Two and Only,” which is part autobiography, part club act and part dissertation on the history and psychology of the form, he reveals all his best tricks. But that doesn’t matter. His complete demystification of the process does nothing to derail, or decreepify, it.

People want to believe the impossible. Though the show is being marketed in self-affirmative, Oprahesque terms — it’s said to be about “throwing your voice, and finding it” — the emotions that really animate the enterprise are murkier: dread (that unliving things might start talking) and desperation (that they might not).

“The history of ventriloquism comes from necromancy, which is talking to the dead,” Mr. Johnson told me later. He suggested that many people who have claimed to communicate with the spirit world — the oracles at Delphi, Drosselmeyer in “The Nutcracker,” the Wizard of Oz — were just throwing their voices.

Actually, Mr. Johnson explained, the trick at the heart of ventriloquism isn’t “throwing” the voice but “treating” it. Thanks to a throat-muscle manipulation that opera singers call a coup de glotte, the amplitude of the emerging sound waves is constricted in a way that the human ear misinterprets as distance. Keeping the lips immobile and shifting focus supports the illusion. To demonstrate, Mr. Johnson took a hotel keycard from his wallet and carefully rubbed the magnetic strip with the cap of my pen. “Open the door,” the card clearly whispered. No matter how well I knew it was Mr. Johnson making the sound, my brain wouldn’t process it that way. “It’s pure physics,” he said. “And indirection. And once you add a puppet, you’ve got yourself an act.”

We were having a normal, nonventriloquized conversation, without Bob, and in that context Mr. Johnson

seemed uncommonly mild. Perhaps it was from a long habit of playing the straight man, or perhaps because the puppet becomes the repository for the wilder drives its master can't master. Certainly Bob looks capable of violence; his head, with its metallic innards, is often mistaken for a bomb at airport security checkpoints. But Mr. Johnson points out that a calm puppet just isn't very interesting; the creators of "Soap" told him to lose his first professional sidekick, a sweetheart named Squeaky, because they wanted a more ribald tone. They understood that to compensate for a lack of physical expressiveness, most puppets must be endowed with extreme dispositions. They're pretty much smart alecks, imbeciles or hags.

Though it takes a lot to make them interesting, Mr. Johnson said, it doesn't take much to make them seem real. Since the invention of the telephone, a voice alone is enough to imply a body, sufficient proof of existence. How much more alive is a talking manikin, which we can see as well as hear? In any case Bob gets mail, and not from children. When fans come backstage, they do not want to hear that he's been put in a box; Mr. Johnson has to say he's in the shower.

Even for ventriloquists the suspension of disbelief can get out of hand. Some answer the phone in their puppets' voices or include them in family pictures. Candice Bergen, in her memoir "Knock Wood," suggests that her father, Edgar Bergen, unconsciously instigated a rivalry between her and her "brother," Charlie McCarthy; his bedroom was bigger than hers.

Several times I caught Mr. Johnson engaging in what I thought was similar behavior: calling a puppet's face-paint "makeup" and speaking of its skills as if they were independent of his own. When working on television, he admitted, he's gone even further. "Don't tell me to have Bob look into the camera," he instructs directors. "Say, 'Bob, look into the camera.' "

But these were merely shortcuts, he explained, adding that he disdains anthropomorphic antics; he once broke up with a girlfriend because she sent Squeaky a birthday card. The only time he has ever used his skill "for evil" was in playing Marco Polo in the pool with his kids. Ventriloquism as he sees it is nothing more or less than an art: he is part vocalist, part instrumentalist, part dramatist. Despite this division of roles, he dismisses the split-personality theory as a vestige of more superstitious times, exacerbated by novels like William Goldman's "Magic" and to some extent by "Soap," in which lonely, repressed souls act out through their art. Instead of voicing the puppet, the puppet voices them.

At any rate, Mr. Johnson said, he was never lonely or repressed. (He now lives with his wife, Sandra, in a sprawling, gated four-bedroom ranch in the Encino area of Los Angeles; Bob lives in a carrying case in a closet.) What drew him to ventriloquism was merely the fun it seemed to offer. It began with the telephone, with the sound of his hard-of-hearing grandmother yelling across the wires; why couldn't he have voices like that to play with? Obliging, his mother disconnected the receiver, and Jackie and Gaga (who still appear in Mr. Johnson's act) were born.

They were not, from the evidence, exceptionally fascinating, except perhaps to a 5-year-old whose imagination was quickly outstripping his family's. "To buy a doll for a boy from Texas," he says in the show, "you might as well just send him to New York and be done with it."

Not so fast; first he had to learn not only the coup de glotte but also how to manipulate real puppets with movable heads, mouths and eyes while sustaining the interaction between real and unreal characters. (Mr. Johnson believes that his dyslexia actually helped in this regard.) Next he needed stage experience, which he got working summers at sweltering theme parks in Texas and Georgia, 10 shows a day. His partner by then was Squeaky, whom he had adapted from a cousin's Jerry Mahoney toy. Mr. Johnson found the work invigorating, and even after performing the same bit 918 times wanted more. But Squeaky, less sturdily built, was a wreck.

nd so at 17, when he'd saved up enough money, Mr. Johnson scoured the puppet makers' catalogs — “a high school annual for wooden kids,” he said — and contacted a master ventriloquist named Arthur Sieving. Then 70 and living in retirement with Harry O'Shea, his (nonhuman) companion of 50 years, Mr. Sieving believed that a puppet was not a toy or a homunculus but a fine instrument, and should be treated as such.

When he judged Mr. Johnson's intentions to be sufficiently high-minded, he set about carving a new Squeaky, on the condition that it never be put away without a black cloth over its face. “So that the life you had given him,” Mr. Johnson explained, “would be there when you came back.”

No wonder people roll their eyes (even more than Bob does) when they think of ventriloquists. And — no offense to “The Two and Only,” which is thoughtfully shaped and ultimately touching — the idea of a tarted-up hand puppet succeeding at the Helen Hayes portends a terrifying future in which the next stars of “Phantom” are Topo Gigio and Madame. Already magicians seem to be colonizing the Broadway margins, and by his own admission Mr. Johnson is a step down that ladder. The pecking order among variety acts, he said, goes from magicians to ventriloquists to jugglers to prop comedians and, scraping the bottom, to mimes.

But ventriloquism is more complicated than any of those. Though it involves, like a card trick, the production of awe through indirection, it does not depend on keeping the audience in the dark. With magic, the achievement of the illusion is the end of the story; with ventriloquism it's just the beginning, a means to an end. What is the end? It seems ludicrous to say it's the same as in any kind of drama: conflict, empathy, catharsis. Especially when the “art” is so often limited by its stock characters. They are, finally, wooden.

But it's amazing what your brain fills in when it wants to: from only three moveable parts, expression suddenly appears. From a few changes in pitch come recognizable voices. The desire to make that happen, Mr. Johnson said, is powerfully, and universally, human. Certainly he makes it seem so, toward the end of “The Two and Only,” when he describes visiting Mr. Sieving's widow a few days after his death in 1974. Grieving, she asks Mr. Johnson to operate Harry O'Shea and have him “talk” to her just one more time.

Is there any doubt that the voice she heard when Mr. Johnson complied was her husband's? The act may have been flim-flam, but her tears were quite real.
