

Transcript of Interview with Andy Gaukel by Ellen Balleisen

Interviewee: Andy Gaukel

Interviewer: Ellen Balleisen

Date: 06/05/2021

Location (Interviewee):

Location (Interviewer):

Abstract: Puppeteer Andy Gaukel had carved out a comfortable niche for himself in the Early Childhood Center at Bronx Community College. Then Covid-19 hit, and he had to find new ways of connecting with the college's smallest students. In this oral history, he explains how he learned new skills to teach online while maintaining his rapport with his pre-schoolers and engaging their parents in a way that he hadn't before the pandemic.

Ellen Balleisen 0:01

Hello. I'm Ellen Balleisen, and I'm here with Andy Gaukel, who's a puppeteer who works with the early childhood Center at Bronx Community College. He is going to talk about his experiences during the pandemic. So, Andy, could you just start by explaining your professional background and how you ended up working with the Bronx Community College Early Childhood Center?

Andy Gaukel 0:28

Yes. First of all, thanks for having me, Ellen. This is really an honor. So I got my start as a puppeteer when I was in graduate school, actually, just before I went to graduate school for acting. I got my MFA in acting from Trinity Repertory Company, or Trinity Rep Conservatory, Rhode Island College. I actually did my undergraduate work at University of Kentucky, I got a degree in theater and a minor in English. When I got out of college, I auditioned for a company called Madcap Puppetry in Cincinnati, Ohio. They are a children's theatre puppet company that tours around the country doing original shows doing the old style Muppet kind of puppets, they still are. So I had this sort of training in professional work and those style of puppets. And when I went away to graduate school, I studied acting, as I said, to get an MFA, Master's in Fine Arts. And in my final year, my third year, there was a playwright, is a playwright, named Paula Vogel who wrote *How I Learned to Drive*. She's an incredible playwright who won the Pulitzer Prize for that play. She was writing a prequel to that piece called *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, and Trinity Rep was going to produce that. As part of it, Paula wrote in these puppet parts into the play and me being a third year student, I kind of begged to audition because then I found out there was a really famous puppeteer named Basil Twist, who's like one of the most incredible puppeteers alive today and in our country, and he was going to be doing the puppets for it. And

I- so I begged to audition, and I'm trying to find this puppet, sorry. They said yes. And I couldn't believe it. I was like, "Oh, wow." And I auditioned, and I'm a big guy. And- and they had another- they had one of the one of the puppet characters was like a six foot, leather bound puppet that was- came in on a giant thing and I had to hold it, it was like 100 pounds. And, and I puppeteered it, and I just really hit it off with Basil. We became really good friends. And then my sort of- that kind of kick started my under- my underwater, that's the next thing. Kick started my puppetry career, because when I moved to New York City, I worked and worked with Basil a lot. And I was in his underwater show, Symphonie Fantastique, which was a big underwater play, which is a giant 1000 gallon tank of water. And I was one of five puppeteers, and we sort of slowly, not even started, we slashed a bunch of puppets very tight. choreographically sloshed. And it was really cool. And then, um, yeah, and then, you know, as a professional puppeteer, sometimes work comes and sometimes work goes, and you have to make ends meet. And as part of- I wind up, you know, waited tables for many years and did all that stuff and had odd jobs. And then I always had this, this sort of connection with education and wanting to work with young people and teach puppetry. Or you know, my wife and I had, to make a long story longer, my wife and I moved to New York City again, we moved away, we got married in Scotland and lived in Kentucky, in Louisville, and then moved back to New York City. And when I moved, we moved back, I really just Googled puppetry jobs, and the first thing that came up was this little company called Puppetry and Practice at Brooklyn College. And I, I applied and they called me like, right away, and I was like, "wow." I had this- it was actually to teach stop motion animation because I had some experience doing paper stop motion animation as well. And, and I- yeah, so I started working for them as a teaching artist, so I would go into different schools, mainly in Brooklyn, some in the Bronx. And I would teach stop motion animation. And they also had a contract with the, with the Bronx Community College Early Childhood learning center or Early Childhood Center. And so they- because I lived right across the river, I guess that would be the Harlem River from from BCC, I lived over in Washington Heights; I had a really quick commute. And I started teaching there for them. And I was teaching storytelling and puppetry. And then I did that for about a year and a half under, under Puppetry and Practice. And that's where I met the incredible Jitinder Walia, who is also goes by Judy. And we just also hit it off, then became friends. And she's really great. And at one point, she and I were talking, and I've always wanted to have my own company, and she really encouraged me to start my own puppetry education company called Atomic Arts. And then she hired me to work at the Bronx Community College. And it's funny I, I call her my agent because she, she really helps me find other people through other CUNY schools to to work with other early childhood centers, which is really awesome. Yeah, and that's how I came to Judy and the Bronx Community College. And it's been wonderful. It's like, they're just an incredible, incredible center with an incredible leader and incredible teachers and incredible students; it's been life changing and incredible.

Ellen Balleisen 06:11

Before the pandemic, what did you do with the children at BCC?

Andy Gaukel 06:17

So before the pandemic, I mean, it was all, because you're a person, you get to do a lot of movement-based exercises with your whole body. And so you know, we would do a, I love to start off with my lessons with, with, with full warm up like movements and sort of incorporate like different animal styles and gestures and use the whole body and then that kind of goes into doing like, puppetry with your body, like different hand puppets that can be a bunny, or a dog or a bird. So that was always the first part of my lessons, and then it would go into, and then I would go, then we go into like, a lesson that's based on what their their curriculum is through the DOE, the Department of Education, in New York City. And, you know, for example, it could be plants, and we would do a little talk about plants. And you may look at videos, you would look at videos, and when I would take my- I always took my projector with me wherever I go, when I go to the schools, and I connected to my computer, and I project giant images of plants or films- or not just plants, but anything, if you're studying when you're water, or fish, or, you know, babies even like, we're doing now. I would, I would find like baby animals or, you know, and like project them really big up onto the wall of their classroom, we could watch them and we could emulate them. And then we would read a story based around it. And then we would spend the last half of the class and usually last half hour, building a little puppet that would be made out of something, you know, like paper, or I would usually have to, this isn't interesting, or I would always, I would always prep everything. So I would cut the pieces, ad also, I would- so I would bring all the things that we would make the puppets with to the class. And then so, which is interesting, and then they would use those pieces to like, form their own one. And then, so yeah, so remember that for the next part of this conversation, because that's how things- things will change from there. So go ahead. That's what I used to do with them.

Ellen Balleisen 08:30

And when you first heard about the pandemic, what thoughts went through your mind?

Andy Gaukel 08:37

Well, let's see. That was, I mean, "holy cow, what's going to happen?" Because, I mean, first of all, the first thoughts were like, "you're safe, everyone's safe." You know, just how do we remain, you know, healthy, how's my whole family, my, not just my wife but her family in Scotland and my family in Kentucky? How are we all gon- you know, worried about everybody, not- And then, you know, then I got the calls over the weekend. That was like Friday, the 13th was the day that it happened, getting enough, and that everything sort of felt like it was going under, and um - And then on by that Sunday, I had heard from almost every school I work with, not even just through my Atomic Arts, my own company, but I worked for another company called Arts Connection and also a Yellow Audience in New York and everything had been canceled. And- and so the prospect of, you know, staying in the New York City area didn't seem very feasible or anywhere for that matter, because my wife works in theater, and she- her theater closed. Luckily, she was able to keep her job throughout all of this as a manage- or a marketing director. But also, yeah, so also, I think that it was just shock and what's going to happen, what, what, what are we going to, you know, what are we going to do? We're not going to have that income. And so I think just like millions and millions of people around the world, billions of people around the world, we've all- we were in that same sort of position of shock and bore, and "oh, no." Yeah. And like what you know- and so yeah, that was, that was the first thing that went through my head. The next thing is like, where can you know- Yeah, that was it.

Ellen Balleisen 10:20

And then you started working to create online lessons for the children at Bronx Community, right?

Andy Gaukel 10:27

So actually, Judy from Bronx Community College Early Childhood Center was the first person to contact me, and she- Because I lost all the contracts I had through my company were gone, seemed like- they were gone. But they were on hold, or, you know, there was nothing we could do. So there was no income. And about a week after it all went down. She, she called me and she said, "Hey, I have this idea. I want to pay you the rest of your contract." I'm like, "Wow, that would be amazing. You know, can- what about- what about making like online videos that we could put on our YouTube page?" And I'm like, "Whoa, that sounds kind of interesting." So I, so we just talked back and forth. And I was like, "Okay, I'll do that." And she was like, "Yeah, maybe you could, like, you know, speak right-" You know, she's so great at like saying, like, "Speak right to the children." And I'm like, "Of course," you know, like. And, and so I went out with my phone, I have my phone right here. I went out with this old phone and I, I filmed myself, I went on the trails, we were living up in Westchester County, and we live right by the, right by the aqueduct, the trail and an Old Croton Aqueduct. And I went out with my phone and filmed like, myself in nature. And I was- before everybody was talking about masks and everything, even though there was no one around me or like staying inside, we didn't know what was going on. So I just took that phone out, I was like, "Well, kids aren't going outside right now. So I'm going to go out and I'm going to, I'm going to do all these," so I went and filmed like trees and animals and got like an hour and something worth of footage. And then- and then I, and that whole thing that I, I was filming, I was going to culminate, I was going to finish it off with like a, like a puppet idea. So I was going to teach the students how to build a puppet based on the plants that they- that we were looking at. And I think at the time the curriculum was was plants in March, April time. And so and then I went back to my apartment and went into our little spare room and made a puppet, a shadow puppet show, I created a shadow puppet of a plant and I built like a little table like- a like a shadow, shadow table. I showed them how to do that as well with just like a little stool and like a sheet. And I put like a little real pot like, a clay pot on top of it. And then I would make the plant grow in the shadows. And then what was really- so, so yeah, I had all this footage really fast. And then so I was learning, I was trying to figure out what to- how to, how to, to make these videos. And I knew that that an hour and something was gonna be way too long. So I had to like, edit these down as well. And that was another huge learning adventure was how do I create these videos like, that young people, three to five year olds are going to be able to sit and watch. So I was able to like dwindle them down to like 20 something minutes, which was kind of fun and interesting. And- but the cool thing is like when, when we would share them on YouTube, the kids would then send me photos or parents would send me photos and teachers would send me photos of the stuff that they were doing at home. So they would send me pictures of themselves with their puppets or videos with their puppets, which was really cool. And then I would use those in the next episode, it seem like kind of episodes that we were making. And it was kind of neat. So I got to share with them what they were doing at home. And it was like a way that they could connect, was before the whole Zoom teaching experience happened. So it was a way to sort of connect each other through the videos of puppetry and stuff. So that was really cool. Yeah.

Ellen Balleisen 14:10

And when did, sorry go on.

Andy Gaukel 14:12

No, no, no, go ahead, sorry.

Ellen Balleisen 14:15

When did you start using Zoom? And how did that change what you're doing?

Andy Gaukel 14:19

So I started using Zoom during- well, during the summer, when- so I well, I had made all these other videos. I think I made like 12 little videos or something crazy like that for BCC. And then also, Judy got LaGuardia Community College, who I was also working for their, childhood center. They actually contacted me, and Judy contacted them to say, "Hey, this is what we're doing." And then they contacted me and I did similar videos for them, which was really great. So I was being, once again Judy was my agent and she was helping me and- so she was able to really help me finish that contract as well, which was great. So starting to use Zoom would have been not for Bronx Community College until we started back up in September, October time of 2020. And just, you know, this, this beginning of the school year, it's now may 2021. So and this- or sorry, September, October, time, late September, early October, I started teaching on Zoom with them. And it's like live in person, which is really interesting. So, not live in person, sorry, live on camera with every, all the students either at home in their own little squares, or there's also a classroom, there are students that are in the classroom with teachers. So I will Zoom in with them. And it's like, I'm a little like, head in a box and they take me around the classroom, I feel like, I don't know if you remember Max Headroom, but I feel like, I'm like, this like, little TV screen with my big head in it. And I go around, and they show me what they're creating. And I tell it, read them stories and stuff. It's kind of funny. Yeah. That makes sense.

Ellen Balleisen 16:05

So you've got the kids in their Zoom boxes, at the same time that you've got the kids in the classroom?

Andy Gaukel 16:11

Two different classes. So we start on Monday, we do- we do an in school, we do the in school students, and I Zoom into their classroom. And then after that session, I hop on another Zoom with the students are at home. So, so yeah, that's, that's a good point. So yeah, it's like two totally different, still the same lesson plan, but two totally different feelings. So which is interesting, because, you know, you're, you're teaching a group of students, and there's, you know, a lot of distractions happening in the classroom, and you're, you can't reach out to help anybody. And so you're, it's- you're relying, you have to use, you know, creative, descriptive language to really help, you know, get things to work during those settings. And whereas, like with Zoom, when they're at home, usually their parents will join in, which is really great, very rarely, they're not there, the parents, and the parents will help build their own, you know, build a puppet and the kids will build a puppet. So it's a really nice kind of interaction in that way. And also you have your own little world that you can, you know, you know, the students can play with puppets up to and do, so it makes it- Yeah, it's a totally different experience.

Ellen Balleisen 17:36

So, what new skills did you need to learn to do all of this?

Andy Gaukel 17:42

Wow, so the main one is video editing. I had never really, I had a little experience in video editing, but I really had to teach myself how to make these videos look a little bit professional and like, and have a sense of like, you know, like, and how to really sorry, like, edit them down, pare them down to where, you know, obviously, you can tell, I like to talk a lot and go on a lot of tangents. So click how to edit a lot of tangents out and figure out how to slice the film, you know, the, the digital film, you know, like how to cut and fade and look at, like, you know, some- I just use iMovie and iMovie is amazing, it's like really easy, and it's almost teaches you as you go, which is really great. Once you dive in, it'll just, you know, it really is easy. And I know that sounds like a- that's like a precursor to the bigger ones like Final Cut Pro and Final Cut or whatever and, but like what's really great, even like editing sound, like it'll give you a like, a little meter at the bottom of where like your- like your voice is and where the sounds are. So you know, getting into that whole like, getting so detailed and like learning how to do like cut like little pieces of sound out if I say something that I wasn't, you know, didn't want to say or you know, cut the film to know exactly where to do it, all that stuff. I really had to learn how to do that, fade, how to like bring in different like, layer films on top of each other with sounds, and, and so yeah, it was a real learning adventure. Yeah, now I feel like I can do it in my sleep, and it's like it would take me hours to to edit these things at first; now I'm like, I, you know, even just this morning, I edited a little episode- a little lesson for a Bronx Community College to post to their YouTube, and I was finished in like, you know, after recording it, I was- edited in less than 10 minutes and it was really- So I've really come a long way in terms of editing. And other skills I think of- I think my other skills I've had to like really hone in on are my, my teaching skills. It really has really kind of like, you know, before I felt like when I would go into the classroom, I was always so, you know, I'm an exuberant person, and I do my [unintelligible]. And then I come-, you know, I come eat people with a lot of energy. And, and, and I think that I used to be able to get by on just sort of like, having an idea of what I wanted to do every day as a teacher, and just going in and jumping in and like showing love and, you know, be creative. But I think that during, you know, during the online sessions, I've had to really pare back, you know, hone in and like, script, everything that I do. I keep a script next to me every time I sit back, and actually, before I, before I go online and teach, I spend, you know, a good amount of time prepping what I want to say and what and I- and that has been a really big thing for me, just to be on track, because I can go different places, and it's kind of brought my teaching up, I hope. I want to say it's brought me as a teacher in a better place because I don't know, I feel like, it's- it just feels a lot more complete, if you know what I mean. It's like, and I'm really glad that this time has forced me in a way to sort of do that, because of the time constraints, because you're working on video, you know, and you're not in the classroom, and you can't move to one section and devices are limited, you know, so students will have to jump off to their parents and, you know, use the device to go to their own class. So it's, you have to really stay on schedule and get everything. Yeah.

Ellen Balleisen 21:27

So when you go back into the classroom, what will you keep from the new approaches you've developed during this time?

Andy Gaukel 21:34

Yes, good question. I would keep, I would keep all. Like, really- we actually got a chance to go back in the classroom last week at Bronx Community College. I drove down and taught in person. I know it was- I could tell like it like, it was the stuff that I learned during this COVID age, like what I just said about like, being prepared and being organized and being you know, and being, you know, like, online with young people like this, like it's really brought my attention level up. And I could really feel that; I took a script with me and I mean, I kind of had it there as like a little like, what I wanted to hit and I- and it went really well, and so I think I'll always keep those aspects. And I think I've started to beef up my like, you know, you're able to like share different videos more like during Zoom. Like you can go online and like, zip something over and just share that video of like, today, we looked at baby birds in a nest, like, you know, and I would share that video, then I would put that in the episode. Well, like last week we did, we did a similar thing with- like, we were doing we were studying babies and what newborn babies, and we made little mobiles like, mobiles of like, for their for their houses and, and we looked at a really cool different videos of mobiles and like different types of- I think I would keep that kind of stuff that like interaction, that, that like connection more like, kind of continue- because I really learn more and more, even though I take my projector with me a lot, I think video and watching and observing and observation is really important. I would kind of do that.

Ellen Balleisen 23:13

What are you most looking forward to about being back in the classroom?

Andy Gaukel 23:17

I'd say definitely human interaction, connection that we have, you know, the ability to sort of help, be there and not have this thing here. This barrier, you know, physical barriers to be able to like have that eye to- real eye contact and that real like connection and being able to- because you know online you never can really read out somebody's feeling, I don't think. You know, and when you go back in person when you're- when you're in a classroom you can read a student or a teacher's, you know, body language and their- you know, and you can feel like the room better. Put you in there and yeah, and I guess that. I can't wait- can't wait to have that and also like, I can't wait to have more of like somewhere to go, you know, I mean the structure of like, "okay, I have an adventure today; I'm not just rolling out of bed and into my classroom." I'm looking forward to getting back into that zone of like, personal needs, it's like that structure.

Ellen Balleisen 24:27

And how do you think you experience during the pandemic has changed you?

Andy Gaukel 24:33

I think it's made me more patient. I think when I've had so many personal like, highs and lows like everyone and have had a lot of times sort of work on myself which is interesting, like, literally just like, eating better and exercising more, but mentally like, seeking like, you know, dealing depression or anything like, we do- like a lot of people do. Like just, you know, putting

those things and realizing- yeah, I think, you know, like, it's taught me to sort of feel okay with who I know that things are [unintelligible] like who I am, and like what I do, and, and it's made me sort of love what I do even more, being able to have this time to, like, connect through these opportunities that I've been given. So I think that's, it's sort of changing your- in that way, I feel more, I feel much more grateful for everything, even though I was always very grateful. But like, I feel like I;m closer to my family and closer to myself, my dog, you know, everything like my friends, my students, I just feel like I've taken the time to really take that in and feel like also, I think it's made me more empathetic, I think I can, I'm a more- I think I feel, I mean, not that I I wasn't before, but I even feel more like, like I, you know, want to help humanity, help the world be a better place, more and more, in some way really rejuvenated that about me, which I think before, I felt like the world was like, weird enough, I thought it was gonna end. I just like in terms of politics, and sort of, like, what the world was headed- where we were heading, and I'm sure you know, but I think just stopping has really helped you know, a lot of us sort of, I hope, I know a lot of people I know just stopping and just saying, "Whoa, with the brakes second." Even though it wasn't great financially, even though it's not great for a lot of people's health, you know, like, like in terms of getting ill, but like, I think it was nice to sort of hit the pause button a little bit. And that's changed me and lot of people.

Ellen Balleisen 26:46

Well, thank you so much. It's been fascinating.

Andy Gaukel 26:48

Thank you. Thanks for letting me talk.

Ellen Balleisen 26:51

Okay, take care.