

Edinburgh Fringe Interview: Jeff Achtem



Shadow puppeteer
extraordinaire Jeff
Achtem

Since first arriving on the Fringe in 2009, [Jeff Achtem](#) has built a solid reputation for innovative and visually arresting family theatre. Appearing this year with cinematic new show [Slapdash Galaxy](#) as well as a reprise of last year's hit [Swamp Juice](#), Achtem took some time out for a chat with the Edinburgh Reporter about the hard work behind the magic.

Could you speak a little about the process you go through when developing a show?

Usually I start with a simple idea, or an image. I think of the mechanics and changes in movement, or how a shape forms.

Then I pull out bits of equipment, and I begin to play with certain materials and simple tools, like soap bubbles or a fog machine. And then, after that, really it's just play time.

Hours and hours of bending, twisting and exploring the limits of what the tools will produce. For instance, for the new show *Slapdash Galaxy*, I spent a lot of time working with soap bubbles in shadow. Playing and exploring the lovely effects that are created when moving fluid is stretched into a thin film of color.

Once I've got an idea for a handful of effects, then I begin to think about plot and characters, and I derive a story that can be told with the new effects that I've been exploring. The process actually gets easier as I go along, because so many things don't get used, but you remember them for another date.

I've got big boxes of little tricks patiently waiting for

their turn to be in a show!

Do you have a particular audience in mind for your work, and could you describe whom you are targeting?

Not really. Part of the feedback we get along the way is that many people say things like: "I wouldn't normally go to a puppet show, I came to yours and it was brilliant." That's lovely, because it means we are reaching a wider audience, beyond the usual niche.

Can you sum up the underlying ethos of your work, and what message would you like audiences to take away from your shows?

I'm never trying to push a message in the show, as such. I just want to create a lovely 60 min experience of images, story, senses and emotion. An experience to walk away, and be able to remember at a later date. The message is a memory.

There seems to be a noticeable increase in the amount of puppetry in the Fringe programme this year, do you see yourself as part of a movement? What do you feel is the appeal of the genre, and what do you envision for the future, both for your own work and in a more general sense?

There is no question that interest in puppetry in the UK is growing. It's great, because as audiences see more styles and shows, they develop their own tastes, which pushes the companies to create new work in new directions... and bang! You've got the elements for a very fertile creative relationship !

Underbelly at Bristo Square 16.30 14-27 August 2012 [Booking details here.](#)