

# Little Amal's New York Journey

## The Big Puppet in the Big Apple

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Throughout the summer of 2021, I bemoaned the Covid pandemic concerns and other practical and financial issues that kept me from the alluring dream of joining Little Amal on her international trek. Little Amal, an eleven-foot-tall puppet of a nine-year-old Syrian girl, designed and crafted by South Africa's brilliant Handspring Puppet Company—also famous for their creation of the horse puppets in the UK National Theatre's production of *War Horse*—journeyed from Turkey through Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, France, and the UK, from late June to mid-November when she arrived at her final destination in the Hague.<sup>1</sup> The narrative conceit behind *The Walk*—one that echoes the situations of too many real individuals—is that Amal, whose name means hope in Arabic, was an unaccompanied minor fleeing unrest in her homeland and making the arduous journey to meet up with her mother. This enormous performative undertaking, created by Good Chance, a socially committed arts organization that produces international, collaborative, and community-building performance projects, set out not only to bring attention to the plight of refugees as their ranks continue to grow through political unrest and environmental crises around the globe, but also to shift the often hostile regard and reception of refugee populations in the countries where they arrive.<sup>2</sup> Responding to Good Chance's invitation to devise creative ways to welcome Amal, community and arts groups across Europe organized events to greet, entertain, celebrate, and interact with their large-scale visitor. This expansive artistic enterprise, with an impressive puppet at its center gathering throngs of participants in outdoor venues, felt particularly enticing and inspiring after two years of Covid pandemic isolations, travel restrictions, and theatre closures. Given the continued importance of her message, Amal has embarked on several subsequent journeys, including one to Ukraine and Poland in the wake of the Russian invasion.

Along with thousands of other New Yorkers, I finally got the opportunity to meet Little Amal—who is now said to be ten years old since an event in London celebrated her birthday—during her trip to New York City from September 14 to

October 2, 2022. Beginning with an arrival experience at JFK airport, Amal spent two-and-a-half weeks walking to and through venues across the five boroughs, met by performances and crowds that reflected the city's ethnic and cultural diversity as well as its varied arts and socially engaged communities.

Although, on this excursion, Amal visited only one city, instead of crossing multiple national borders, the idea of travelling and displacement, the refugee's essential condition, is crafted within her. Amal is ingeniously designed to be a large figure that, unlike most processional puppets generally carried aloft on poles, walks with her feet directly on the ground. And in contrast to Royal de Luxe's enormous characters that have taken over cities like Montreal, Perth, and Antwerp, attached to cranes and operated by ropes and cables from outside, Amal seems to stride of her own accord. Inside the figure stands a puppeteer on the stilts encapsulated within her legs, who does the walking and even dancing, while operating her eyes and mouth with their hands by means of levers. Her eyes can open and close, assisted by a small computer chip, and her mouth can go slightly agape. Two other puppeteers each perform one of her arms, controlled by the long poles they carry as they travel alongside her. On particularly difficult terrain, a fourth puppeteer helps out with a pole placed at her back. The team members must work in concert, sensing and reacting instantly to each other's moves—coordinating with what Handspring co-founder and executive producer Basil Jones calls “group mind”—in order for Amal to manifest as a visibly living, fully integrated character.<sup>3</sup> *The Walk* preserves the magical effect of Amal's living presence by having her and her unobtrusive entourage (which includes Artistic Director Amir Nizar Zuabi and Puppetry Director Enrico Dau Yang Wey, guiding her in real time) wave friendly goodbyes to spectators at the end of her events, encouraging them not to continue following or taking further photos as she rushes off behind a simple wooden screen to dismantle.

Yet the process that goes into creating Amal's illusion of life is apparent at every moment in performance. Her torso is an open lattice of shaped cane, a design that makes her light to carry and allows wind to blow through so she remains stable. Her central puppeteer is always visible inside this frame, as are the other puppeteers working her arms. The prominence of these operations contributes to her captivating appeal; spectators enjoy both the presence of the enormous, unusual character in their midst and the artistry and virtuosity at work in her construction and in bringing her to life. The project uses three alternating crews of talented and no-doubt resilient performers (puppeteers Sebastian Charles, Craig Leo, Barges Mohammed Smahneh, Mouaiad Roumieh, Ben Thompson, Fidaa Zidan, with locally hired puppeteers Nicole Baker, Yukari Osaka, and Ashley Winkfield). While some people I met at her events remarked that Amal's face was not particularly attractive, and others said she looked like someone who had already had a hard life, a puppeteer friend posted for me a photo of a group of spunky and adorable young Syrian girls he had met at Za'atari Refugee camp in Jordan, and there was a definite resemblance between them that complimented both. Perhaps the honest details of a young girl's face, blown up

to scale and translated into puppetry, might not echo the more carefully designed “cute” versions we are used to seeing in crafted and animated commercial figures. But like her self-locomoting structure, her face—alert, innocent, and somewhat care-worn—reflects the greater meaning of her performed travels. Not conforming to expectations of a charming doll-like figure signals that she is not here solely to be admired; she makes us think twice about her presence and what it signifies.

My first sighting of Amal took place in Times Square. I had originally hoped to catch up with her for a scheduled appearance at the New York Public Library on Forty-Second Street, but I arrived ten minutes after her appointed time, and she, having come early, had already taken part in activities, interacted with the crowd, and left. As I heard several astonished people remark, with her long legs, she moves surprisingly swiftly. So I showed up extra early at Times Square. This allowed me to witness a rehearsal of the activities meant to take place once she appeared. A Broadway stage manager ran a small group of professional performers and a larger ensemble of New York High School students through the songs they would sing and sketched out other moments that would happen. Three students had been selected to take turns dancing with Amal, and others were told to create a parting corridor for her at the spot from where she would depart. Somewhat dismayed, I anticipated a very unspontaneous, choreographed performance.

However, as Amal arrived, walking north on Seventh Avenue, the encounter took on a life of its own. Crowds of onlookers, including unsuspecting tourists, followed her on all sides and soon poured into the central space that had previously been cleared for the performance and around which the students originally stood. Amal herself, apparently overwhelmed by the throngs and flashing billboards, momentarily sought refuge from it all outside the demarcated circle, leaning up against a storefront. The crowds flowed with her, reshaping themselves as she moved back and forth through them, admiring her, taking photos, and talking. While everyone wanted to get close to her, there were no bad seats in this house; her constant motion through the gathering gave all who wanted an exclusive moment. She eventually seemed to warm up to the venue and its energy, and, slowly opening and closing her eyes, danced to the beats of the drummer that traveled with her. All the events that had been rehearsed indeed took place, but in ways that were unexpected, alive, and mixed in with the spontaneous actions of the unrehearsed crowd. Amal also danced and interacted directly with people who were not preselected, but simply present and engaged with the event in the moment.<sup>4</sup> Her actual performance (by her amazing puppeteers of course) as a child responding to the world around her, seeing, not just being seen, occasionally regarding and softly embracing an individual in her path, and sometimes showing herself afraid or overwhelmed by the very activities shaped around her presence and designed to welcome her, helped to lift the event out of the realm of mere spectacle or processional parade exhibit to define a much more human, even humane encounter.

Amal's close intermingling with the people and the performance of the crowd itself, supported by the masterful ability of the puppeteers and her nearly invisible accompanying directors and crew to manage the throngs—all while allowing her to pass continually among them—is what struck me most in all her events. The experience unexpectedly recalled how, when my son was little, we easily walked right up to the corner of Central Park West and Eighty-First Street to join spectators watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade already in progress. Oddly, I didn't call to mind this moment because of the parade's famous flying character balloons (initiated by puppeteer Tony Sarg in 1927), whose media and commercially driven nature today stand in stark contrast with the puppet, goals, and motivations behind *The Walk*. Rather the memory was aroused by the fact that in the following years, after the September 11 attacks, the same scene had transformed into an inscrutable maze of barricades and impenetrable security. Such constraints are now a ubiquitous and expected part of daily life. The pandemic has added further barriers and scrutinizing of credentials to ordinary endeavors, as the refugees that Amal represents know only too well.

Given the constant policing of public space, experiencing a major outdoor performance asserting free, unobstructed intermingling with masses of ordinary individuals felt refreshingly liberating. Little Amal's message, which is at its heart about the necessity of unobstructed border crossings, was echoed in the absence of hindering boundaries around her own presence. The experience also stood in strong contrast to the security measures active for President Biden's visit to the United Nations, which took place in New York while Amal was in town. These required major thoroughfares on either side of Central Park to be cleared of traffic and flanked with blockades, forcing both cars and pedestrians to make extensive detours. Amal, on the other hand, spent two-and-a-half weeks walking in all parts of New York, its most popular tourist centers and outlier neighborhoods, surrounded at close range by huge crowds, and, to my knowledge, nothing bad happened. This is itself a kind of miracle in our volatile times. At a chance meet-up with Handspring's Basil Jones and Adrian Koehler, they told me the initial response to requested venues for Amal's appearances have almost always been a resounding "no." The project's ability to turn those noes into yesses in spite of these initial responses is surely a feat of diplomacy comparable to anything Biden was up to at the UN.

On September 24, I had the opportunity to get further into the heart of the project by volunteering to participate in events planned for another Amal gathering called "When the pigeons flock." Each day of her appearances in New York had its own defining phrase or title. That day included a performance in front of St. Ann's Warehouse in Dumbo, Brooklyn followed by Amal walking across the Brooklyn Bridge to Manhattan. Puppeteer Robin Frohardt, Fogo Azul—"the New York City-based all-women Brazilian Samba Reggae drum line"—and Students Rebuild, an organization that engages children in grades K-12 in international art and

philanthropic actions, sponsored by the Bezos Family Foundation, planned the events. Arriving at St. Ann's Warehouse at 8:45 A.M. to rehearse for the 1 P.M. show, I was excited to find some former students I had introduced to puppetry as well as many local puppeteers, most of whom I hadn't seen in person since before the pandemic. In fact, connected to New York's puppetry network, I received calls to participate in several Amal events. This relatively small but strong and mutually supportive community of artists turned out in force for Amal as organizers, performers, and admirers. Frohardt and her troupe built countless cardboard pigeon puppets on poles for the volunteers to carry along with more sophisticated foam pigeons, sporting string mechanisms to flap their wings. Her own collaborators used these birds as they led the rest of us in our puppet flights. At St. Ann's, we were introduced to all the personnel involved in the project, told how the day would go, and, with some minimal instruction, put through our paces, flying around Amal in our designated flocks.

The first part of the event was a more formal presentation and took place on a grassy expanse by the East River under the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge. A large turnout of adults and children had already gathered before we took our places. Many had participated in the free pigeon puppet-making workshop beforehand and their own hand-colored birds wavered above their heads. The performance riffed-off of Frohardt's highly successful, award-winning puppet production *The Pigeoning* (2014). Amal's version began with her spotting and opening an enormous paper bag, built to her scale, and pulling from it an equally large slice of New York-style pizza. As she attempts to take a bite, puppet pigeons fly in eager for their own taste. Amal also endeavors to drink from a large cup sporting the unmistakable New York Greek coffee cup design, only to be thwarted again by flocking puppet fowls. The birds comically continue to surround and harass her, eventually flying off with her pizza altogether, so Amal moves on. The drummers in bright blue shirts that had accompanied the scene lead the way of the procession, which included all the pigeon volunteers, as we made our way together through the onlookers on either side, down the streets of Dumbo, to the small staircase for ascending the bridge. As we passed, the crowds flanked us to cheer, dance, take photos and videos, and eventually filled the streets themselves, joining us in the march. Amal magically reappeared ahead of us on top of the bridge, packed with people, and as we made our way across, following our giant puppet leader, everyone rocked to the lively music. A small group of designated individuals occasionally clasped hands to hold back the flow, making sure Amal didn't get crushed. But these are light measures as she was surrounded on all sides by the drummers, the people, and the flying puppet pigeons. During the crossing, she occasionally looked over the side of the bridge to admire the water or the skyline, real pigeons swept through the clear blue sky above. At other times, she turned back to take in the crowd behind her or paused to give her hand to or embrace a bystander, dazzling spectators suddenly anointed as active participants. It was an exhilarating communal procession: we were all



Little Amal's 2022 visit to New York City, designed and performed by Handspring Puppet Company.  
Photos: Ash Marinaccio.

intermingled in and creating something glorious together. How is it that walking across a bridge to drums with a large puppet could feel like the most important thing taking place on that clear autumn day?

Incredibly, this was not the first time I had walked across the Brooklyn Bridge in a crowd with a large puppet. That occasion was on the evening of October 1, 2011, traveling in the opposite direction, from Manhattan to Brooklyn, as I helped two others with a large processional figure of the Statue of Liberty built by the People's Puppets of Occupy Wall Street. This occurred during a major protest march organized by Occupy Wall Street, the movement that had taken over Zuccotti Park that fall, a long-term demonstration against growing wealth inequality, inspiring similar actions throughout the country. Unions across the city encouraged members to participate in the march, and I came planning to walk with the City University of New York's Professional Staff Congress, my own union. But as I stood across from the ramp leading to the Bridge, looking for the PSC-CUNY contingent and watching the dense crowds of chanting protestors heading to Brooklyn, a small cluster came by with a large, papier-mâché Lady Liberty asking bystanders if anyone wanted to help carry the puppet. How could I resist? They handed me the main pole supporting her and those for her two arms to two other volunteers and our newly formed trio embarked across the bridge. My position, covered by the puppet hanging in front of me, left me hidden in the newspaper images that followed of this eye-grabbing figure within the demonstrating crowds.

While the enthusiasm and energy of those participating in these two bridge events were perhaps comparable, other aspects could not have been more different, like night and day, incidentally the disparate times when the two walks took place. In 2011, before joining the march with Lady Liberty, I watched as, to my left, ranks of protestors in passive resistance took turns sitting down in the middle of a cordoned-off section of the street surrounded by NYPD personnel and vehicles, red flashes lighting up the night. The activists were almost instantaneously arrested and dragged into the waiting vans, only to be replaced within minutes by a subsequent contingent. Nearly eight hundred arrests occurred that night, with most charges subsequently being dropped. Walking with Little Amal, however, I spotted one of the officers assigned to help keep crowds under control happily swaying along to the music. There were no chants of protest, only gasps of awe at Amal's presence and people taking photos. Importantly, there were also many who inquired what it was all about. At this and other Amal events, I had several opportunities to inform inquisitive onlookers about Amal's socio-political project, offering them a more expanded view of puppetry in the process, as did many others. Spreading this information is one of the project's goals. Joining Amal on her bridge walk, traveling in the opposite direction, over a decade after the Occupy march, left me with an uncanny sense of completion or closure (although I am still not sure of what). Certainly, the wealth disparities and other grievances Occupy Wall Street addressed

have, if anything, only becoming more pronounced and problematic. These economic and social issues lie at the heart of other divisions plaguing our country. Perhaps Amal's approach to calling attention to them, distinct from purely political or activist endeavors, emphasizing empathy and compassion over outright protest, offers another or an additional, and hopeful, path?

Little Amal inevitably became a point of discussion among speakers and participants attending the Pageant Puppets Panel at Puppet Homecoming, Puppeteers of America's Northeast/Mid-Atlantic Regional Festival, which took place in Coney Island just days after Amal had left the city, inaugurated by its own parade of large figures from Amy Trompetter's Redwing Blackbird Theatre and Heather Henson's Ibex Puppet Company. Panelists Stephen Kaplin, Amy Trompetter, and Gregory Corbino, all with deep ties to Peter Schuman's Bread and Puppet Theatre, experienced Amal as recognizably within the tradition of politically engaged processional figures Bread and Puppet has popularized in the U.S. (as well as abroad) since the 1960s. Bread and Puppet's large-scale creations, paraded at marches and rallies, artistically encapsulating emblematic or symbolic expressions of the issues at hand, have bequeathed the incorporation of similar figures to several generations of activists—including those who built Lady Liberty—and spawned important kindred, socially committed organizations such as In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre in Minneapolis with its famous annual May Day Parade, and Spiral Q in Philadelphia, known for its own annual Peoplehood Parade. Attending the panel, Steve Abrams, puppeteer and editor of Puppeteers of America's quarterly magazine, *Puppetry Journal*, by contrast compared Little Amal to Sesame Street's Big Bird, noting her combination of large size and childish innocence and the powerful effect of this fusion. He might have added that, while Bread and Puppet's figures generally represent archetypes—bankers, workers, Mother Earth, The Devil—both Little Amal and Big Bird present specific individuals with personal stories. When Amal holds out her hand to someone in the crowd and looks into their eyes, she is attempting to make a personal, human connection. The discussion at the panel also turned to whether Amal had avoided becoming a mere spectacle, her message and meaning lost in the enthusiasm for enjoying her and her accompanying performances, especially given the fervent selfie taking activity these elicited. A similar concern was voiced by Laura Collins-Hughes in a *New York Times* article in which she urged spectators to “Be present. Shoot a few photos if you like, a snippet of video. But mostly, just put down your camera, put away your phone. Be there, in the moment, walking with her. And feel.”<sup>5</sup>

I certainly understand Collin-Hughes's sentiments and the impulse to lament the mass cultural addiction to smartphones (who is immune?) and how these devices continually mediate our direct apprehension of the world, disrupting our potential to “be present” in our own lives as we use them to transform experience into image. However, given this ubiquitous cultural condition, Amal, and her astounding manifestation, may be made precisely for our media era, the “age of animation”



as Teri Silvio insightfully describes it in *Puppets, Gods, and Brands*.<sup>6</sup> One might even view constant photo-taking as a way of appreciating or at least responding to the power of puppetry unleashed in this project. At every moment, Amal is alive anew, moving, changing, responding to her surroundings, drawing our attention. She is continuously astounding, appealing, looking extraordinary against the city's landscapes, transforming our perceptions of them. Taking photo after photo asserts her stream of extraordinary, gorgeous, unique moments, and one's apprehension, acknowledgment, even honoring of these in trying to capture them, hold them in place to admire. Spectators' subsequent media postings of Amal might even be intentional means the project employs to help spread her message and can account for why her entourage discouraged taking photos of her dismantled. A large puppet, bigger than life, amplifies the visibility of what she stands for.

For the two-and-a-half weeks of her visit, nearly all of New York City, a global political, economic, artistic, and immigrant capital, was at least made aware of, if not also talking about and, more importantly, *learning* about Little Amal and her cause. Through this project, puppetry and the concerns it was sharing communicated beyond the insular artistic and academic circles I generally connect with that tend to care about such endeavors. Several of my students were thrilled not only to see Little Amal but to find out their friends, not involved in the arts, were aware of the project. While the seven locations where I spied Amal were in the various parts of the city I frequent, she appeared and brought people together in areas that, as a native New Yorker, I have never even ventured. Each appearance had its own style and feeling, some perhaps more exuberant or meaningful than others, yet she connected with the broadest cross-section of New Yorkers of any art project I can recall, bringing to each location her presence as an innocent child at the mercy of events beyond her control. When was the last time the people of this city were all simultaneously focused on something creative and, in essence, positive, in this way? Amal, of course, might have had a very different reception in other parts of the country that are not as hospitable to immigrant populations. During her European travels, while she was mostly appreciated, as *The Guardian* reports,

In Greece, far-right protesters threw things at her as she walked through the streets, local councillors voted to ban her from visiting a village of Orthodox monasteries, and protests in Athens meant her route had to be diverted. In France, the mayor of Calais raised objections to her presence.<sup>7</sup>

Municipalities, of course, risk seeming ridiculous, extremist, or just plain cruel in expressing anger toward a large puppet of a little girl.

When considering the role of the arts in political and social activism, it is always true that, while art projects can find many useful means to address and contribute to causes and disrupt consumerist models of artistic engagement, it is also

unreasonable to expect them, in and of themselves, to engender the massive changes their endeavors target. Little Amal has achieved about as much as one big little girl can. The real test of course comes when the real Amals arrive, along with their brothers, parents, aunts, and uncles. This story is the very fabric of New York City's history. Even in a receptive place like New York, when new waves of refugees appear, as they presently are, we all need to remind ourselves of how we welcomed their big sister.

## NOTES

1. While *War Horse* and *Little Amal* are the most well-known projects Handspring Puppet Company has worked on, the company, founded and directed by Basil Jones and Adrian Koehler, has a forty-year history of impressive productions that include *Ubu and the Truth Commission* and *Woyzeck on the Highveld*, both directed by artist William Kentridge.

2. The organization also famously produced *The Jungle* about refugees in Calais, France's infamous 2015 migrant tent camp. *The Jungle* premiered at the Young Vic in 2017. It played at St Ann's Warehouse in New York in 2018, where it will make a return engagement in February 2023.

3. See Basil Jones, "Puppetry: Authorship and the Ur-Narrative," in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, ed. Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (New York: Routledge, 2014), 64.

4. I learned later that the director walking with her is on headset with the puppeteers, helping direct them to different actions and people to connect with as she moves along.

5. Laura Collins-Hughes, "Is Little Amal Getting Lost in New York?," *New York Times*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/23/theater/little-amal-new-york.html>.

6. Teri Silvio, *Puppets, Gods, and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019).

7. Amelia Gentleman, "'People Felt Threatened Even by a Puppet Refugee': Little Amal's Epic Walk Through Love and Fear," *The Guardian*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/oct/18/threatened-puppet-refugee-little-amals-epic-walk>.

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