

# Old Ways in the New World

Since the people now called Native Americans crossed the Bering Straits into an empty continent thousands of years ago, we have always been a country of immigrants and, thus, the proud inheritors of the artistic styles of many different peoples. The section of the Festival that focuses on this particular feature of United States culture is called "Old Ways in the New World". Here we bring together the sons and daughters of people who immigrated to the United States from various parts of the world and their cultural cousins who stayed at home. These two groups join together in the practice of their traditional artistic and creative behavior; thus they can celebrate a kind of family reunion while they examine together the changes that their different experiences have brought about.

Where possible, we invite participants from the same region or even the same village—both those who emigrated and those who stayed at home. Where this is impossible or impractical, we turn our attention to behavior or style, looking for parallels in all aspects of tradition from cooking to dance. During past years of the Festival, this program has proved to be a healthy kind of self-examination for our domestic peoples—who draw strength from discovering their relationship with older cultures—as well as for our foreign guests, who can return to their homelands proud of the virility of their own art forms which remain clearly identifiable though removed by oceans of time and space.

*Papa Manteo in his workshop in New York.  
Photo by Ralph Rinzler*



## Gifts to America

Susan Kalčík, editor

*The Festival of American Folklife is interested in certain kinds of "gifts" the various immigrants brought with them, particularly those that fall under the rubric of folklore or folklife. At the Festival held in Washington during the summer of 1975, we invited a family from New York to share with us and the Festival visitors a tradition of nearly life size marionettes which had been in their family for five generations. The Manteo marionette show, presenting a part of the saga of Orlando (Roland), was an immense favorite with the crowds who came to see the "Old Ways in the New World" section of the Festival.*

*On a bitter cold Sunday, in January this year, in a church hall on Bleeker Street, a number of the Manteos met and shared with me their knowledge of and feelings about the marionettes and the part they have played in the life of the family. Michael Manteo, whom I will call Papa, introduced himself with these words: "I am Michael—they call me Papa—Manteo; I live after my father's name. I'll carry his name until as far as I can do it." His son, Mike, also carries the grandfather's name, Agrippino Michael Manteo, Jr. Papa's older sister, Ida Manteo Grillo, and her daughter, Susie, were the other two family members who speak most frequently in the edited transcript that follows. I would like to thank all the family, and especially these four, for sharing their story and for the warmth they showed me.*

Susan Kalčík

PAPA—Well, the family came from Sicily, there's a town called—

IDA—Catania

PAPA—Where my father was born, and his

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father, my grandfather.

We came to this country in 1919, 1920, something like that. First we had the marionette show and then we closed up and opened up a movie house, but we weren't so happy about the movie house. We went right back again and opened up a theatre on Mulberry Street in 1928. That's when we started the real performances, at 109 Mulberry Street.

SUSIE—They stopped giving regular performances in 1939 when my uncle died. Right? My grandpa closed down the theatre.

MIKE—My grandfather became an electrician in the 20's. Because many times the marionettes didn't pay. My grandfather started the business and he passed it on to my father, my father passed it on to me, and my Uncle Bill [Ida's husband] got caught in the family and, whether he liked it or not, he was a puppeteer and an electrician.

PAPA—Why do I know these things about the puppets? I'll tell you why. Because when I was a little boy, the first thing I do, when I started to walk, I get on stage, right. And I sit by a pail of sand, (you know you got the fire department rules), and I sit there and I look. I'm just about seven, eight years old. And I look at my father, and I look at the men that were working on the bridge and you gather all this and you gather the language too. The same thing with my sister. My sister at the age of, not even fifteen, already she started to throw voices through my father's tuition.

And there I'm looking at my sister; I'll follow her. And then I was envying those people up there that manipulated those heavy marionettes. And that's how you became a puppeteer. Because you cannot, especially these kind of marionettes, you cannot teach. You've got to learn yourself. You have to go every night, every night. Then as I got old, I got promoted. I was allowed to get on the bridge. And then I was privileged to hold a marionette. And the professor would take it and make him walk,



then he'd turn it around and get it ready for me and he told me, "All right, you hold it this way and be attentive. When your father speaks his words, you look at your father and when he talks for the king, you just move the arm this way." And then I was a nervous wreck. This was my first time. And I graduated, slowly, slowly, they allow me. It's something like, if you aren't of age, you can't drink. That's how you learn. Because if you teach them, they take it for granted. Let them go by themselves, they'll learn. MIKE—We've got about 120 marionettes now.

PAPA—When I was in production with my father, back in the thirties—500. The kind of shows I ran, the stories involved, I would say, about 150 different marionettes coming in and out. I have five puppets just about 97 years old. They were made by my grandfather and my father. There are pieces that my father did in Italy.

IDA—Some from the 1800's, more than a hundred years old.

PAPA—I have original marionettes from my grandfather and then the ones that the whole family built when we were in New York. But when we came here we really made more. The show called for more marionettes. The last one my father built was in 1937. A beautiful suit of armor. When I was not in production anymore, I destroyed quite a few. But I don't worry because if I was in production again I would build again. The newest one I've got is four months old. And if you put this marionette that is four months old with the one that is about ninety-seven years old, you will not know the difference.

MIKE—Except you made the armor out of stainless steel. You thought of your son, because it's much lighter, this new marionette. The other ones weigh like eighty pounds. The giant weighs a hundred pounds.

PAPA—The bodies are made out of—some of it pine, some of it oak. The pine is lighter, but sometimes you have to use oak

for the feet and the fist. The fist has to be strong because that takes so much punishment, when they use the sword to fight. The left hand has to be opened up like that to show that it's holding a fist. Then we drill a hole through it to put the sword in. And the head is made out of pine; the rest of the body's out of pine. And then we've got excelsior and canvas. And with the excelsior I keep on putting it on the frame out of two by two lumber, and I keep on turning my hand with twine and shaping up the excelsior, shaping up the leg. And the same thing, I shape up the whole torso. And then when it comes to sculpturing, you've got to have real Italian sculpturing chisels, because they are homemade. You have to make them. And I have a few only. But I don't do any more sculpturing like I used to.

MIKE—Well, now you're doing a lot of the armor work.

PAPA—Yes, I'm practicing more on the armor. You know, you can call me a very good tailor, but not textile. Metal! And I can make a beautiful suit. Ida makes the ladies' dresses, costumes.

IDA—See, my mother used to make them and I used to help her. I used to design the dress and then she used to get an idea—After she died, I took over. And also, I paint the sceneries too.

PAPA—She does all the painting on all the drops. And it doesn't take her long to do it. All watercolor, no oil.

MIKE—The paint is powdered form, right Dad?

PAPA—Powdered. You have to have powder.

MIKE—And it's very pliable.

PAPA—I can't find powder like I used to years ago. We have to go out of the way to see where we can find powdered paints. And we mix it up with some water and some glue; we say one part glue, four parts water. Mike also works on the puppets.

MIKE—Whatever he wants me to do. Dad does the sculpting, painting the armor—

PAPA—I manufacture a marionette com-

pletely.

MIKE—But I've seen the way he's done it and when the time comes to jump in, I'll jump in.

PAPA—The whole story (in the show) takes 3, 3½ years. There are about fifteen generations with the show.

MIKE—There's a multitude of stories.

PAPA—I don't know if you ever read medieval stories, about Constantine the Great. He started the Christian faith; and then, generation, generation, it came to Charlemagne. From Charlemagne came his son and two more generations. That ends the story. Then the sequel.

IDA—It's like the Bible, just like the Bible.

PAPA—See the end of the Palladin, then the sequel; there's the story of Guido Santo. Then how long does Guido Santo last?

IDA—About three months.

PAPA—So Guido Santo dies. Now we have another sequel which is two brothers, Dolores and Strenero. That lasts about three months. This story has two brothers unknown to each other. So after that comes, what my sister says, the Crusaders. That's just the last. So by the time that finished, then we start all over again and people start coming in again, the same people, and we repeat the story again.

MIKE—If the audience was interested in and tended toward dialogue, then the story would be mostly dialogue. If they wanted fighting, there'd be more fighting. They would go with the audience; it was a very flexible show.

SUSIE—Think of it like the serials you have on the TV soap operas.

MIKE—A medieval soap opera, this is what it was.

IDA—The people would get very involved. Once, when the hero, Orlando, he is put in chains, about twelve o'clock, somebody came and knocked at the door. Because we used to live upstairs, and the theatre was downstairs. And he says, "Mr. Manteo, I can't sleep." "What is this, you can't sleep? Why?" He says, "Orlando, he's in chains,

he's in prison. Please go downstairs and take the chains off." You would see the people crying over the scene. And we cried too. Because I take the female's part. And those parts, you feel—especially every night you get this character, that you talk for more than three, four months, and then she dies—

SUSIE—You become part of that person. IDA—And when she dies, we cry and we feel it in our hearts.

PAPA—To me the marionettes are I would call it a priceless possession; we could never sell.

MIKE—It's a part of you; it's a part of the family.

PAPA—If you ask any members of my family here, they've got the same idea—you don't sell. Because you build them yourself. There's something about that you love. It's something, like I said before, priceless.

MIKE—It's a part of your life. It's a part of you as much as your arms. We get together to work on the puppets when we have opportunities to. Everybody pitches in, building, refurbishing the marionettes. Dad puts them together, decides what's supposed to be put together, what's not, what characters we want, to prepare for the eventual show that may come up.

IDA—And I have worked on the bridge too. I had to have the muscles.

PAPA—You'd be surprised. Look, my niece Joany already worked on the bridge. Susan now and then comes up when she has—Of course, she's got kids to take care of, but when she's free, she's up there. We can't keep them away.

IDA—And we have now sons-in-law. So we have one, two, three manipulators, now.

MIKE—My daughters are about ready to go on.

PAPA—My *grand* daughters. And as these kids grow, we'll have manipulators, plenty of them.

IDA—We have little Joe.

PAPA—He's going to be a good one.

MIKE—Hurry up, Tommy, grow.