



Photo by Richard Merrill/Sorcha Merrill

# Outrageous the Wisdom of Nasruddin

A collection of traditional Persian, Jewish, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist wisdom tales well-disguised in humble nonsense and foolishness as only Nasruddin can deliver. Nasruddin is an ancient Persian folk character claimed by many traditions and brought to life by puppeteer Richard Merrill.

Richard Merrill discovered puppetry at age 8 in a summer arts program. Since then, he has founded two puppet theaters, making the stages, puppets and scenery and writing the plays. Merrill's background in mechanical engineering, music and art find their perfect expression in puppetry.

Nasruddin, the storytelling Persian folk character, appeared about 1995, when Merrill studied with master puppeteer John Farrell at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle. Nasruddin is a direct-manipulation puppet two feet tall, without strings or wires. Sometimes Nasruddin will begin a story and it will be taken up by shadow puppets inspired by the wayang kulit of Thailand and Indonesia.

Nasruddin's influence has caused Merrill to focus on stories with spiritual content, usually well-disguised, in the Sufi tradition (the poet Rumi was a Sufi). Sufis taught spiritual and social truths based on the level of knowledge of their audiences, often telling very humorous stories to make a spiritual point. Nasruddin was originally a Persian folk character, a fool whose antics contained valuable kernels of wisdom. In his present incarnation, Nasruddin tells Sufi tales and stories from Jewish, Buddhist and Christian wisdom traditions. His inimitable style captures audiences of all ages.

Merrill has created shadow puppets for Figures of Speech Theater of Freeport, Maine, and exhibited his puppets at libraries, arts festivals, and the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine, where he also gave three performances. Merrill was a workshop presenter at *Sharing the Fire*, the nation's oldest and largest storyteller's conference, in March 2002. He has given performances and workshops for diverse audiences, from children of migrant blueberry harvesters to schools and arts organizations to families at arts festivals to prison inmates.

## Audience response to Nasruddin:

"Nasruddin is so alive, I was so fascinated. His hand movements are so expressive!"

"He seems to change the expression on his face. How do you do that? And his stories are just a scream!"

"I just can't believe how a puppet can stand there and tell stories for an hour, and we all are just entranced."

## Responses from pastors and storytellers:

"Thank you and Nasruddin for what was one of the high points of my Festival. I will never forget Nasruddin, and my gratitude to you is therefore permanent." – Rev. Eugene Schwab

"What he is doing is so important! He's telling the truth! It's wonderful! It's priceless!" – Brother Blue, the late Boston area storyteller, of Merrill and Nasruddin

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