

# Giddierone



## The Mysterious Events At Ariel School, Zimbabwe – 16 Sept 1994

By Gideon Reid / 14 July 2022 / 9 Comments

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## Introduction

This blog is about the supposed spaceship sighting and close encounter of Sept 16th 1994, at Ariel Primary School, Zimbabwe. It assumes the reader is familiar with what

happened that day and has read or watched the interviews with the children who witnessed it. If you are not familiar, there is no better place to start than [Charlie Wiser's blog](#) which is the clearest overview and probably the best resource for this topic. I have referred to it frequently in putting together this blog.

I have one main argument to make in this blog and it is in agreement with Colin Mackie, the headmaster of the school at the time said who said:

**“I believe the children did see something”**

I also believe the children saw something, but that there is a good argument, based on circumstantial evidence, that what the children saw was **nothing out of this world**.

## **An unusual English class exercise**

I come to this topic like everyone else who enjoys a mystery, especially one involving multiple witnesses, and as the parent of two children roughly the age the Ariel School children were when they had their strange encounter.

Just last year my children's primary school staged a mysterious UFO landing in the school grounds. The charred wreckage of a craft was created and a staged crash site was set up with a police cordon. A masked scientist in a green hazmat suit was seen collecting green goo in a test tube, an inspector with a magnifying glass performed checks and a policeman stood by protecting the scene against tampering. Apparently there had been a call from the Ministry Of Defence and even the Prime Minister, and there was a rumour that an alien had been spotted leaving the scene...

What made all this more mysterious is that it happened during the COVID restrictions on movements in the UK, so no parents (except those who were in on the hoax or played one of the characters mentioned) were able to see the UFO on the school grounds. All of the reports about it came from the children. Most other parents were not told about it ahead of time.

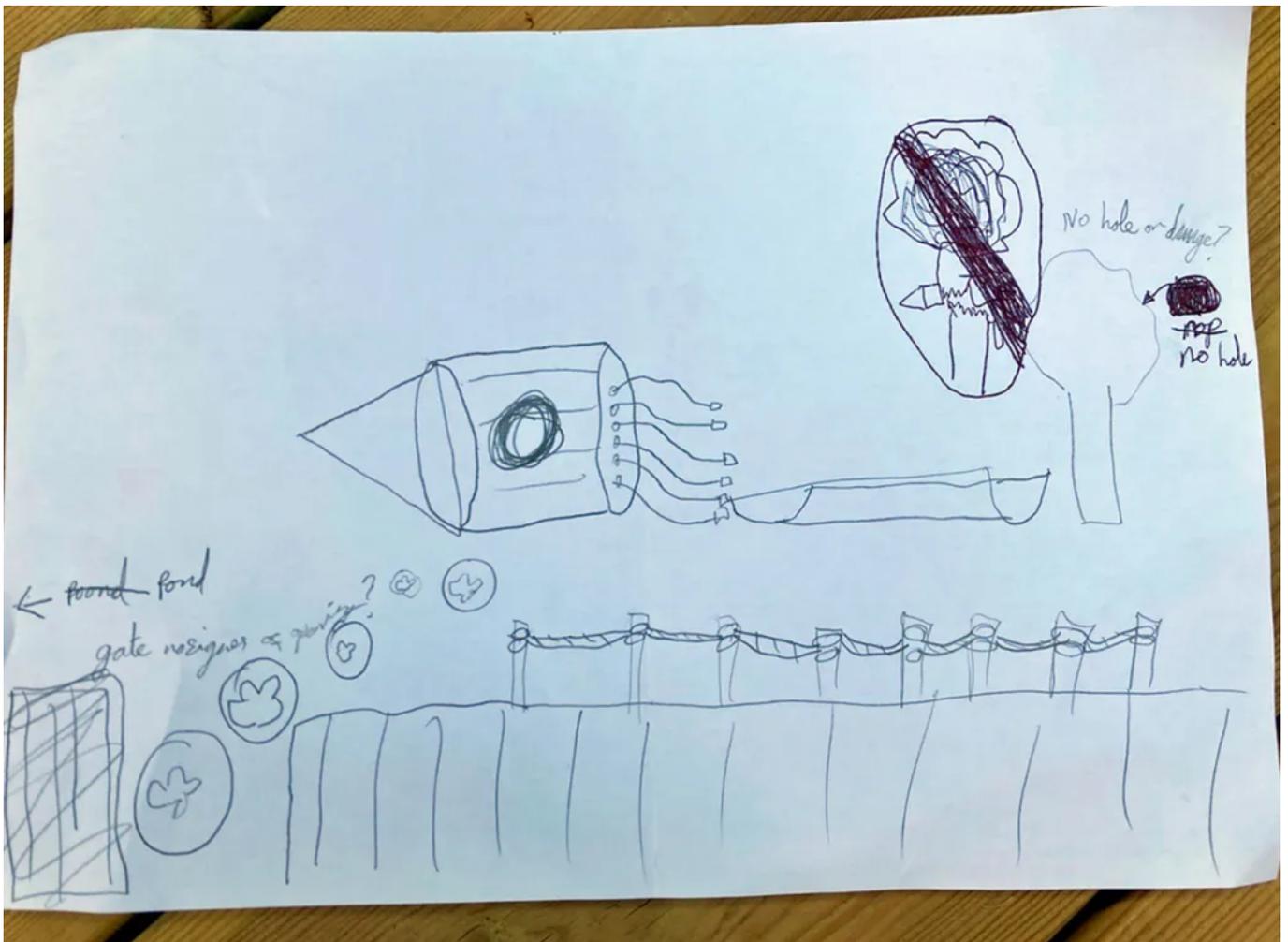
I hadn't known it at the time but this is a common English class writing exercise in UK primary schools that has been on the curriculum for more than a [decade](#), and is designed to encourage children to be observant when they are asked to write up a report on the incident.

## **Accuracy in reporting, a test of recollection**

About a year after the event I asked my son (9) to draw what he had seen. Then I came across a photograph on the School's Twitter account of what the crashed UFO actually looked like. He had also not seen the photo, just the original scene a year prior, and he drew his picture from recollection. What is interesting are the details he got right, but there were others he added or exaggerated because they made him think. For example when I asked him to describe the craft he spent a lot of time talking about a hole in the middle of it, asking who could have made it? What was it for? What did they use to make it? But when you see the actual craft there is no hole, at least not one where he indicates in his drawing, yet for him it was a distinctive feature.

The kids (then aged 6 and 8) both understood it wasn't a real space object, and that there wasn't an alien loose around the school. They were brought by their teachers to view the scene in a structured way, just like a normal class. It was not a spontaneous discovery. It was a bit of fun and they both embraced the faux mystery. They talked about it for weeks afterwards. It was a success.

Overall I think the eldest, a bright observant articulate 8 year old, was a fair witness to what he had seen and his report was fairly – although not wholly – accurate.



Our son's drawing of the UFO scene



### The actual scene at our school

I think the Ariel Primary School children were articulate and accurate, *to about the same degree*, in describing what they saw. As Mr Mackie says, it is clear they definitely saw *something*, but rather than a spaceship and alien beings I think there's better evidence that what they saw was more down to earth.

### Puppetry hypothesis – I think they saw puppets

There are a number of descriptions in the children's remarks, that don't appear to be influenced by the interviewer, the situation, pressure to perform for the teachers, the television cameras, or the expert questioners, but that are offered spontaneously and which support the hypothesis that what the children observed were puppets.

These features include:

- grey or an unusual skin colour

- large head
- big eyes
- scrawny neck
- long black hair
- shiny black (clothing or skin)
- no facial expression
- stiff necks
- running in slow motion
- wordless communication
- running up and down on top of a “spaceship”
- a big one and quite a few little ones
- (figures) hovering, not touching the ground

These features are mentioned in the television interviews with the pupils of Ariel School and in recent interviews with them as adults. Some details such as “large heads” and “big eyes” are repeated in some of the drawings they made as children.

The drawings were made on the Monday, two days after the event in Sept 1994, which occurred on Friday morning around 10am.

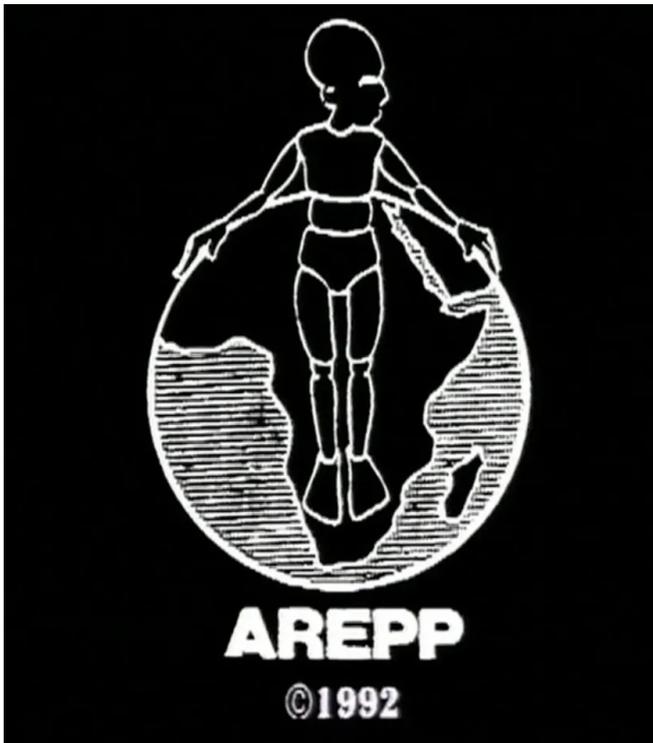
In the weeks and months that followed their collective descriptions have been spun to the point where they are today. Any media report mentioning the Ariel School will now refer to it as the *landing* of an unidentified flying object and a mass close-encounter with alien beings. It is repeated as a fact that 62 children had an identical experience, that they saw a hovering spaceship, experienced a kind of time dilation, saw teleporting oddly coloured aliens wearing shiny black diving-suit-like clothing, who stared at them with captivating large black unblinking eyes and delivered to them a wordless telepathic message about environmental conservation, technology, and stewardship of the earth.

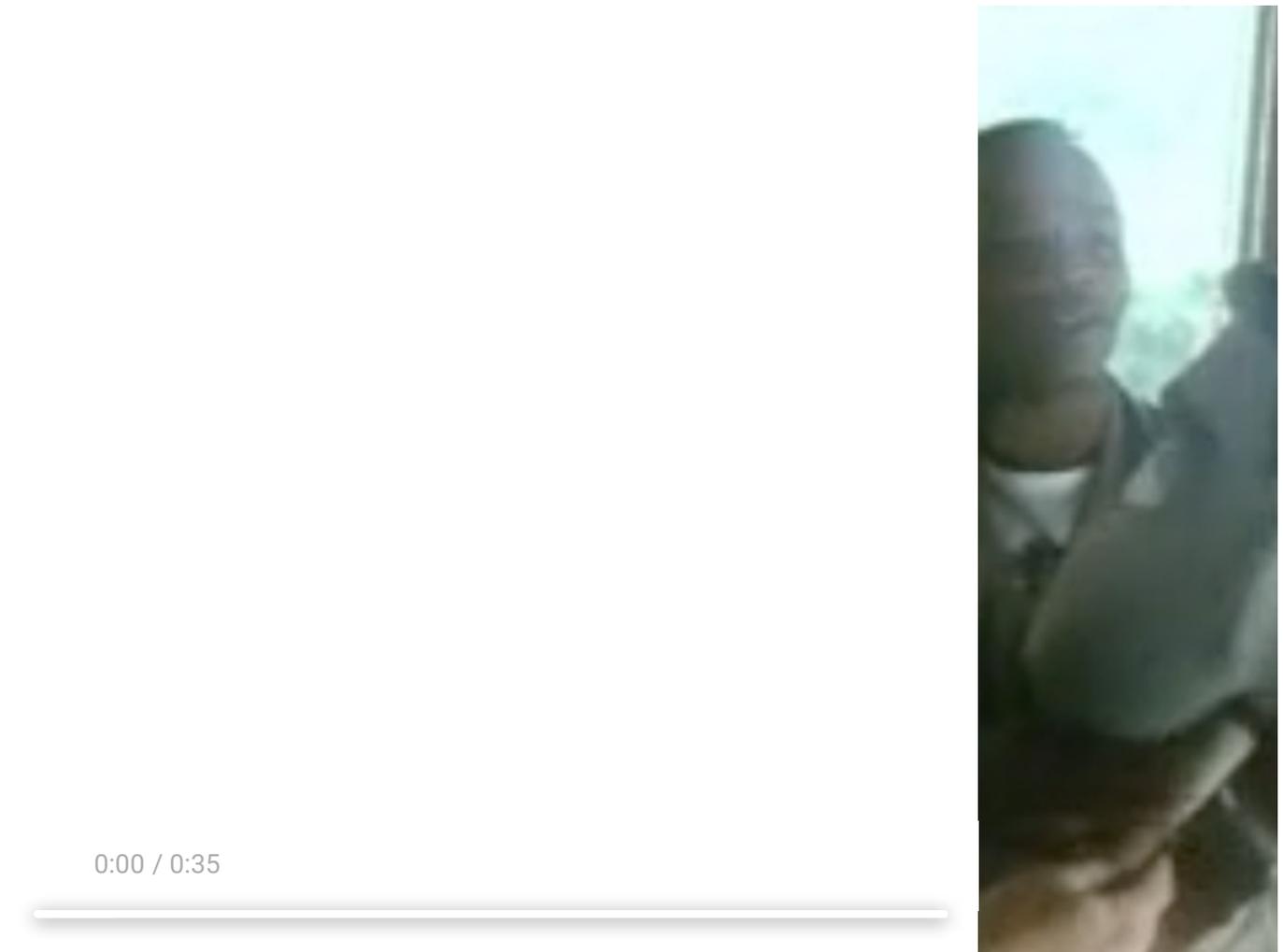
Instead, I believe, there are enough details in their descriptions and drawings that map on to the puppetry hypothesis, and make this a worthy – if rather less fantastic – explanation

for what they saw.

## What kind of puppets could the Ariel children have seen?

Originating in 1987 the African Research and Educational Puppetry Programme (AREPP) is a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that uses the principles of “applied theatre” puppetry to teach school children via dramatic presentations. One of its stated goals, according to director Gordon Bilborough, is “precipitating cognition among audiences by means of the productions”. In other words to educate via puppet shows and to have their audience go away thinking deeply about what they saw.





### **A clip from *Township to Tundra* – Gary Friedman Productions (1993)**

AREPP's main outreach to audiences is via puppet theatre shows which travel to and perform in schools throughout Southern Africa. Their earliest show *Puppets Against AIDS* (PAA) began touring South Africa in 1988 and was designed to bring AIDS awareness directly into communities. They used puppets as a device to more easily give voice to a taboo or socially difficult subject to address in a public forum.

### **A puppet show about AIDS for children?**

Yes. The AIDS epidemic was considered a significant public health crisis in African and other rural communities in the 1980's and 1990's, and AREPP sought to debunk and destigmatize the disease and its transmission. They took their message to people and played free of charge to public audiences of all ages.



In 1992 *Puppets Against AIDS* – performed to audiences of all ages in Kenya (left) and on tour in Canada (right) Photos from *Township to Tundra* – Gary Friedman Productions

A 1994 review of the company’s objectives says:

“AREPP has seemingly achieved a stunning administrative success in having managed to send puppetry teams to cover almost the entire Southern African region and farther afield...The programme has reached into the very heart of the townships, informal settlements, rural, peri-urban and urban areas, and travelled extensively in southern Africa”.<sup>1</sup>

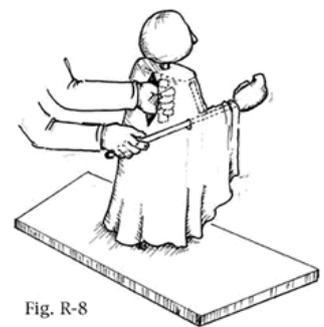
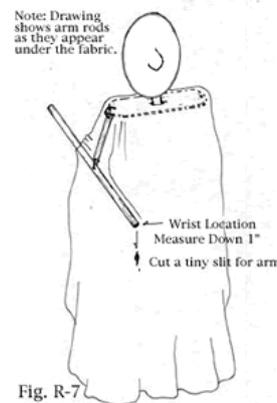
“From 1992 to 1994, AREPP ran two full time three member teams. Between these two teams Puppets Against AIDS toured to most areas of South Africa where there were roads, as well as to Berlin (performing at the 9th International AIDS conference), Botswana, Canada, Kenya, Namibia, Reunion, Zambia and Zimbabwe and reaching an ‘estimated of 1,6 million people’... The organisation had also conducted several four-week workshops to ‘pass on the skills necessary in setting up local programmes such as Puppets Against AIDS, in Botswana, Canada, Kenya, Namibia, Zimbabwe regions of South Africa’”.<sup>2</sup>

“Applied theatre”, was a success in Africa. Theatre with the purpose to create political and social change was evidently working. In 1994, after the success and franchise of *Puppets*

*Against AIDS* the company experimented with new projects and with new styles of puppetry.

“...In 1994 a *Puppets Against Abuse* project, originally called *Puppets for Peace*, went into development with the aim of creating awareness and education on the issues of ‘abuse, rape and domestic violence’... The project, funded by Christian AID, was inspired by *Puppets Against AIDS* and hoped to re-create that successful formula what was becoming an issue of national concern with only minimal resources to respond to it... The puppets used for the production were rod puppets that were operated above the puppeteer’s head in front of the puppeteer in the Japanese Bunraku style.” (Bilborough, 2008)

This style of Bunraku puppetry, in Japan at least, has three puppet operators, two of which are dressed entirely in black. Part of the puppet is controlled by rods and, as it is supported by the puppeteers, it appears to float in front of them.



There’s a resemblance with this Bunraku style puppetry in the children’s descriptions of figures all in black, or faceless, this also appears in some of their drawings.



### Two of the Ariel School pupils drawings showing faceless figures in black

Emily Trim, another Ariel pupil at the time, in a recent interview<sup>3</sup> as an adult recalls the beings she saw as having,

- longer thinner necks
- limbs that were flimsy
- hovering – not touching the ground
- pot bellies

As far as i'm aware there are no descriptions of feet of any kind in any of the interviews with the Ariel pupils.

### Puppetry is indistinguishable from magic

Arthur C. Clarke famously wrote,

**“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”**

It's a phrase often invoked in science-fiction and ufology to describe the unbridgeable gap between our current experience and the future. But the same magic can also be the product of the most primitive technology when combined with a skilled puppeteer and the

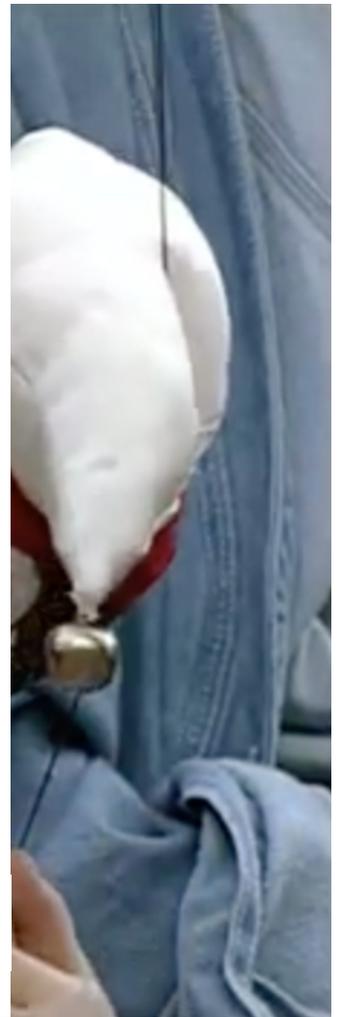
audience's imagination. Bunraku puppetry is just one example of this. Animated living creatures spring into life from only the most basic of materials.

For hundreds of years puppetry has been a low-tech storytelling device, performed in the open using simple materials. For example this medieval manuscript *Romance of Alexander*<sup>4</sup> from Belgium depicts a travelling puppet booth not dissimilar to the ones used by AREPP.<sup>5</sup> Examples like this in Africa have mostly been a relatively recent import from Europe.



Two traveling puppet booths illustrated in *Romance of Alexander* a 13th century manuscript in the Bodleian Library

Puppets are able to almost instantly elicit emotions. They can cause us to suspend our disbelief in their inanimacy. For example this clip is from a street performance by Igor Fokin<sup>6</sup> where a marionette interacts with the audience and creates a bond with a young audience member.



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### Igor Fokin performing with a marionette

As puppeteer Hobey Ford explains here the puppeteer can be immaterial to this effect, even when performing to a more mature audience.

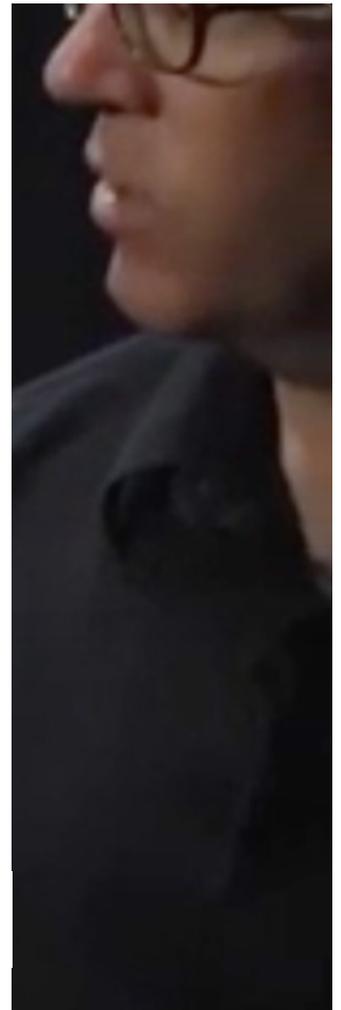


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## Pupeteer Hobey Ford operating an eagle puppet

“I’ll often go into a library or school and there’ll be older kids and their sitting there like this (arms folded) and like “we are not going to like this”, they might initially get into it because of how it’s done mechanically, then they’ll get into the beauty of it. That’s part of the appeal of creating puppets it’s that they’re kind of transformational they’ll want the experience to be something of wonder, and quite often they’ll tell me that “when you were doing that eagle and flying over me, you like turned invisible”. I love that!”<sup>7</sup>

We are also obsessed with attributing life to anything that has eyes. Even non-blinking expressionless ones like those described by some of the Ariel children. Again Hobey Ford gives an excellent explanation of this magical phenomenon in practice.



0:00 / 1:08

## Pupeteer Hobey Ford

**“...I really liked the way eyes would bring anything to life, it’s sort of a very basic animistic kind of thing, that you put eyes on something, whether your hand or an object and it, instantly it becomes alive...if something has eyes it’s alive...”<sup>8</sup>**

## **Telepathic communication or mime?**

The aim of political theatre like AREPP’s work, is to provoke an audience reaction. If an audience reports being involved or ‘caught up’ in the production, if their experience of the performance is as it’s being ‘real’ and ‘true’ then the production is a success.

**Dr John E. Mack** – Psychiatrist and Harvard Medical School professor – interviewed 12 of the children two months after the event and brought out new details about the children’s experience. Of note are how their feelings and the imagined motives of the beings are brought to the foreground. Most notable is the idea that the children received a wordless message about the environment and technology from the beings they encountered.

These interviews place the Ariel School children within the targeted creation of a personal “epiphany” in the audience that companies like AREPP sought to achieve with their productions. If an audience is left evaluating their own beliefs then they have succeeded. This is what Gordon Bilborough, a director of AREPP refers to in his analysis of the pedagogy of AREPP’s puppetry as a “Theatrical Peak Experience”.

This effect, lasting long after the performance, is echoed in the views of other artists of the same era who also saw the magic in puppetry and it’s power to deliver a lasting message. Writer Jane Taylor, on the audience relationship with the puppetry used in her work *Ubu and the Truth Commission* a puppet play performed by South Africa’s Handsprung Puppet Company about the Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

**“The puppet draws attention to its own artifice, and we as audience willingly submit ourselves to the ambiguous processes that at once deny and assert the reality of what we watch. Puppets also declare that they are being “spoken through”.”<sup>9</sup>**

As we saw with the Igor Fokin clip above, the consent to submit to the “ambiguous processes of puppetry” is not as clear cut with children as it is with adults. I suggest with children there is a less conscious discernment about the reality of the spectacle, especially if the puppets use mime to convey their message.

In a 1996 interview with Gary Friedman, founder of AREPP, Daryl Accone quotes him saying:

**“Puppets express emotions and feelings without words. It is the theatre of metamorphosis and transformation. It is all about sound, movement and light. That is the magic of puppet theatre: actions are a thousand times more effective than words.”**

A similar theme is brought up in this discussion of their 1994 project *Puppets For Democracy* which aimed to demystify the democratic process before the first free election in South Africa that April.

**“The puppets would be particularly effective as an educational tool for television, as they not only transcend all barriers, but go further by putting the message across, simply without the use of human language, which means we had little translation work to do into our eleven official languages.”** <sup>10</sup>

## **A wordless message about the environment that was ahead of its time?**

One of the claims made about the Ariel School incident is that the children’s reports about messages of concern for the environment and use of technology were ahead of their time. Given that they were in rural Zimbabwe, with perhaps little exposure to media or popular culture it is claimed it was impossible for them to know about such complex ideas like [Earth Stewardship](#).

However environmentalism and concerns about technology were far from new concepts in Africa. Many of the charities working in Africa also shared these concerns and it’s not

unreasonable to suggest that ideas about pollution or conservation were part of the everyday background conversation within a rural community such as Ruwa.

The claim that the children attending a private school in Ruwa were somehow so remote as to be cut off from popular culture is verifiably false. [I return to this point in much more detail in [Part 2](#)]. Take for example this conversation on a phone-in to local Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) where the host speaks with someone from Ruwa. He asks his guest what she spends her weekends doing. Her response is very relatable, “cooking sometimes, listening to the radio sometimes, or watching television”.

in HD @ TunesToTube.com

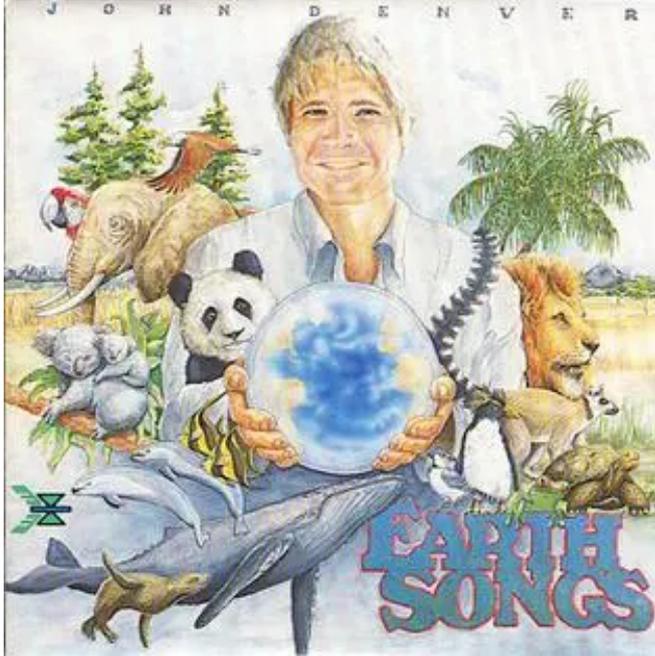
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A clip from a [1993 ZBC radio broadcast](#) with an interview with a woman from Ruwa.

You only have to look at small sample of popular songs written with an environmental message the from the 1960's onwards to understand that the themes the children talked about were far from new ideas and very firmly embedded in popular culture. For example:

- *Pollution* – Tom Lehrer (1965)
- *Where Do The Children Play?* – Cat Stevens (1970)
- *Pollution* – Bo Diddley (1971)
- *Big Yellow Taxi* – Joni Mitchell (1971)

- *Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)* – Marvin Gaye (1971)
- *Don't Go Near The Water* – Johnny Cash (1974)
- *The Landscape is Changing* – Depeche Mode (1983)
- *Is this the world we created?* – Queen (1984)
- *Earth Songs* (whole album) – John Denver (1990)



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### Album artwork from John Denver, Bo Diddley and Cat Stevens

There were also puppetry teams addressing similar topics and engaging with primary school aged children across Africa in the early 1990's. The messages they brought covered a range of topics not just about public health, but also conservation, and environmental degradation.

#### **African Research and Educational Puppetry Programme (AREPP)**

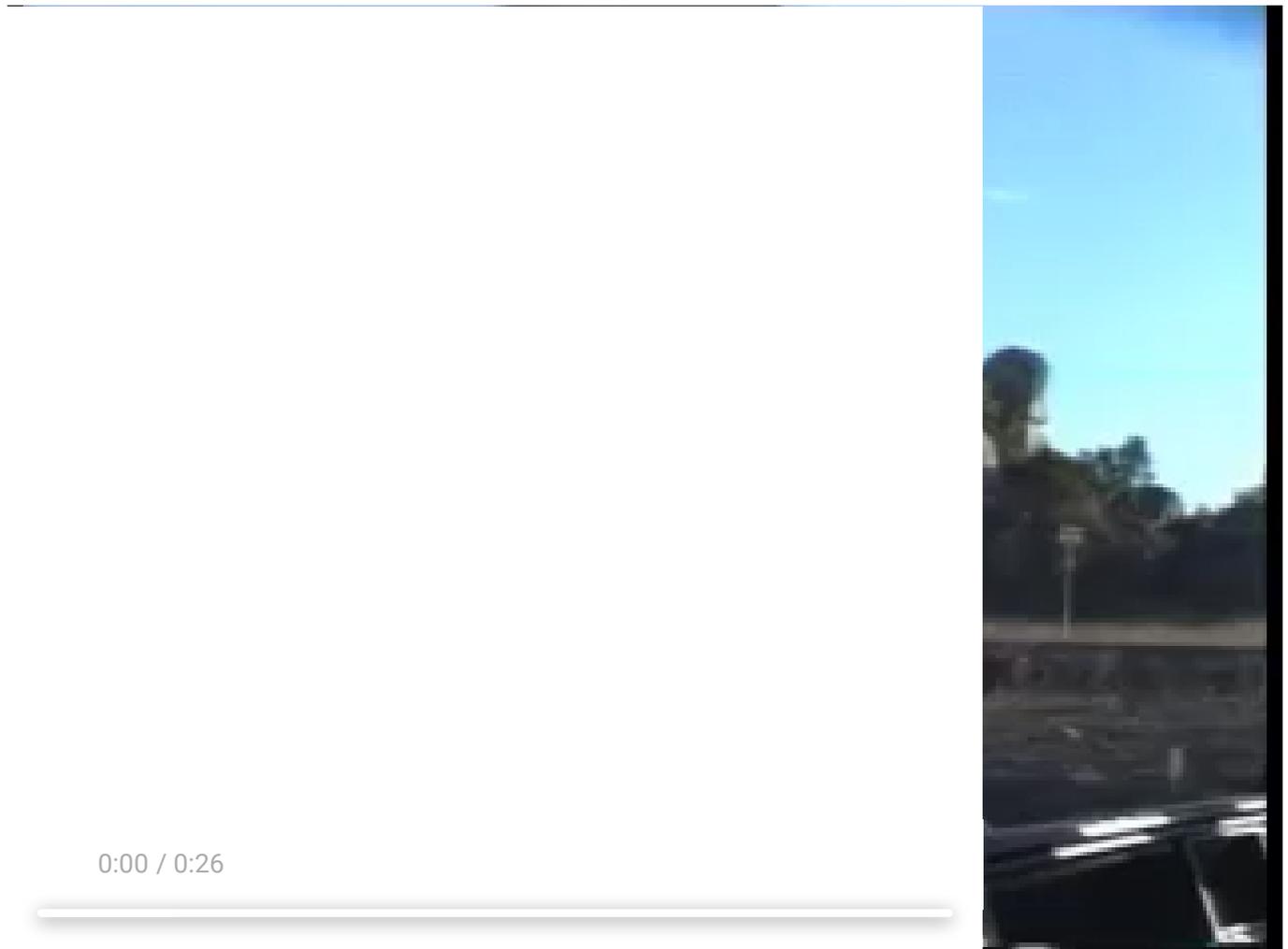
AREPP is an educational trust whose aim is to provide educational puppet theatre and training workshops concerning issues related to the environment and physical well being of the community.

A 1990's newspaper listing for AREPP specifically mentioning "issues related to the environment"

## Puppetry Workshops

In Africa in the 1990's puppetry was growing in popularity as an educational tool and AREPP was driving that growth.

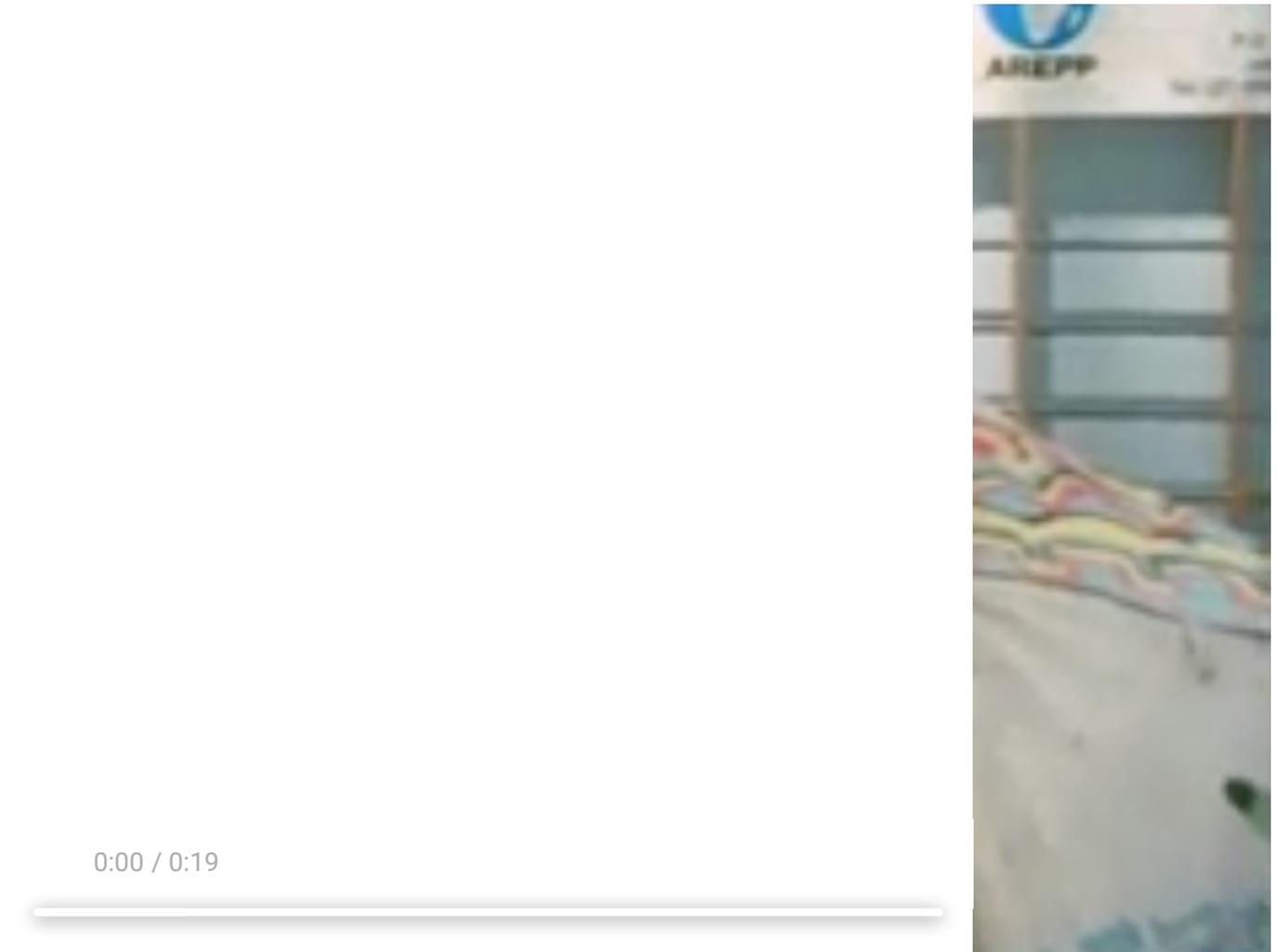
In 1992 in this clip from *Puppets Against Aids – Zimbabwe*, Gary Friedman describes the puppetry workshops they were running.



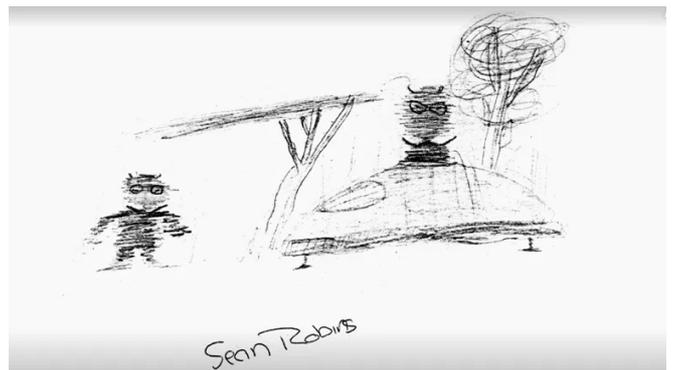
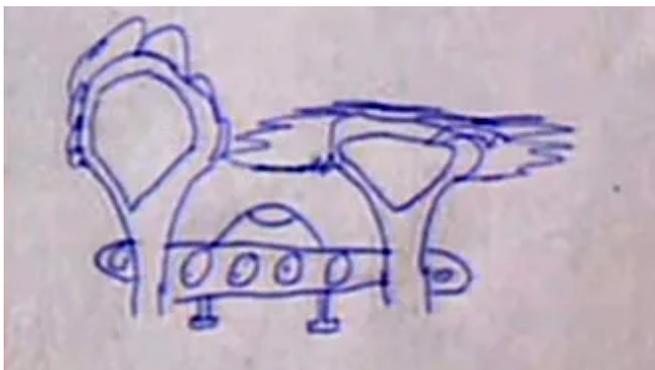
Gary Friedman explaining the workshops he ran in Zimbabwe clip from *Puppets Against AIDS – Zimbabwe* (1993)

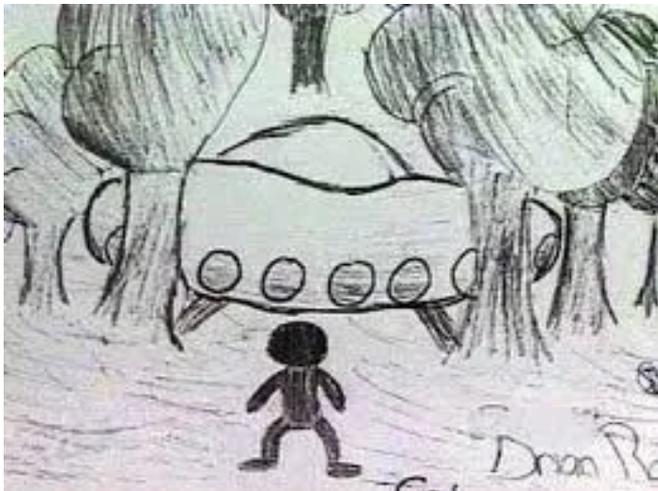
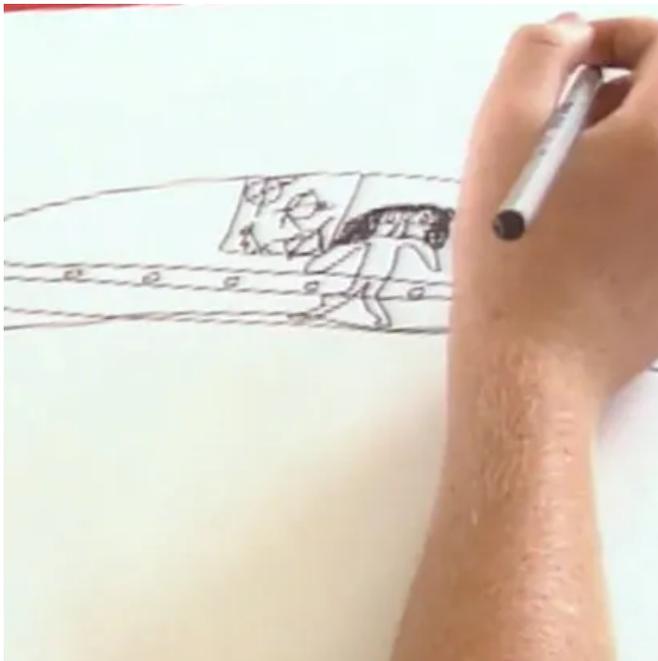
“In our workshops we had people from amateur drama groups, we had local community workers and health educators coming from all over rural Zimbabwe to a central venue where we held these week long workshops, concentrating on how to put the AIDS message across and how to use the puppet as a medium of communication to teach people about AIDS”.<sup>11</sup>

Not all puppets looked the same. There were a wide variety of puppet creations and puppet booth types.



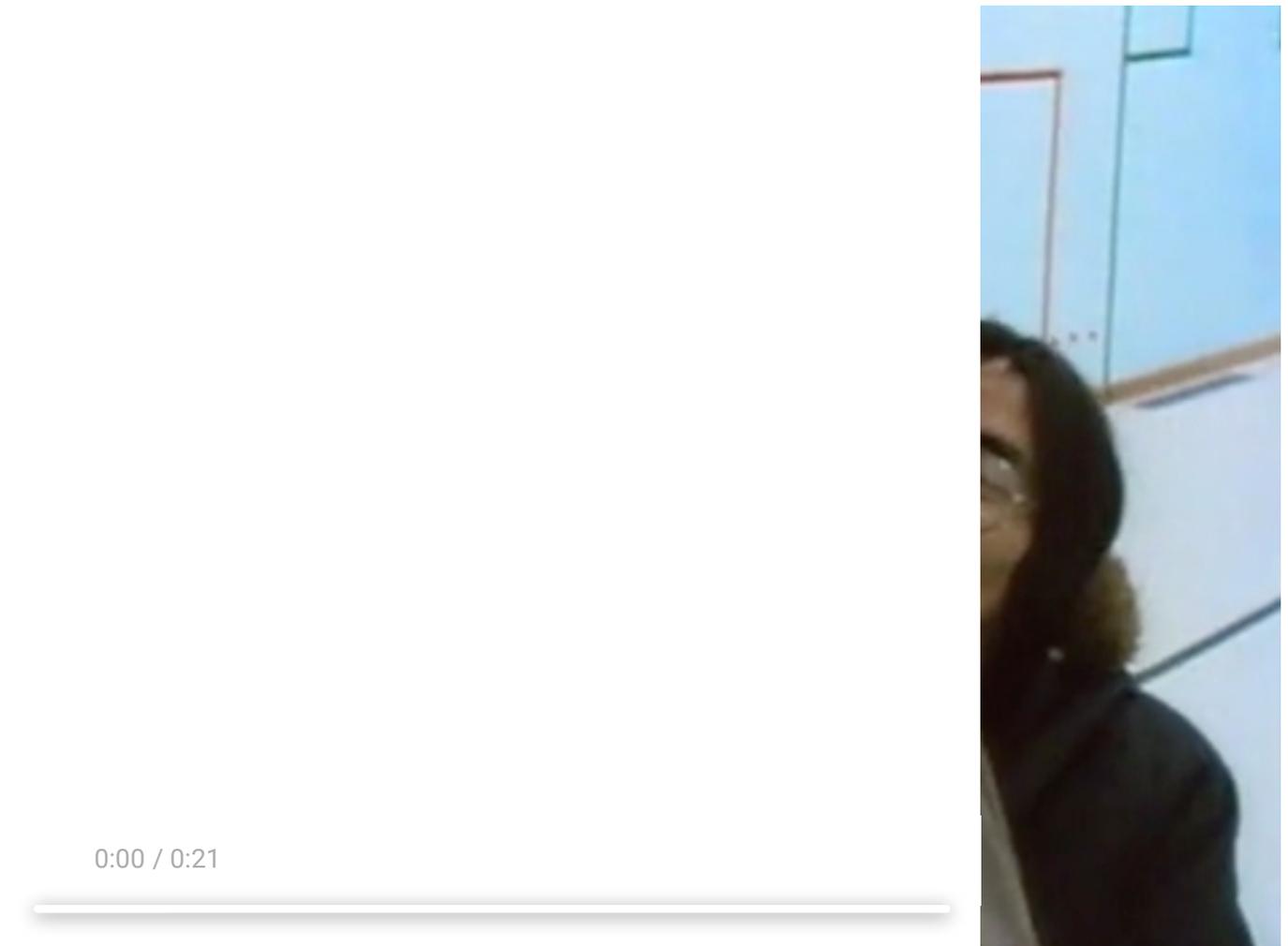
A clip from *Township To Tundra* (1993). An AREPP puppetry workshop in Canada



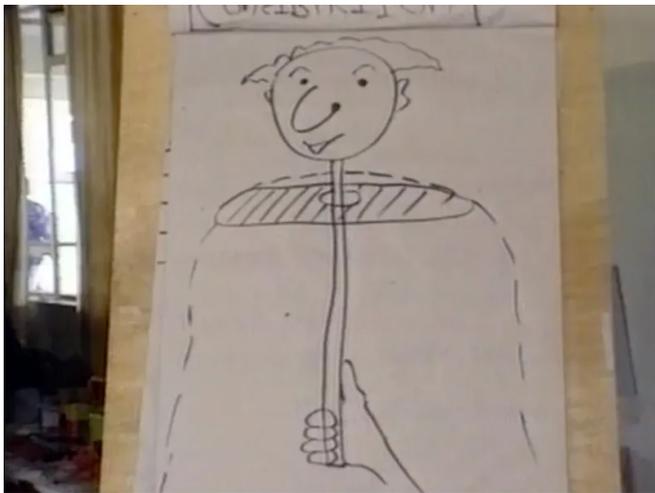


Some of the drawings by the Ariel pupils, two of which show a figure with long black hair.

Often puppets resembled their creators. Some had long black hair.



A clip from *Township To Tundra* (1993). An AREPP puppetry workshop in Canada – 1993



A puppetry diagram (left) several puppets in early stage of construction (right)

1993 saw the expansion of AREPP and the training of new puppeteers to perform their own versions of *Puppets Against AIDS*.

“Eric Krystal (from the Family Planning Private Sector or FPPS) invited Gary Friedman to Kenya to train a core group of puppeteers who in turn became trainers in a nationwide programme of *Puppets Against AIDS*. This remains a community-based training programme which has resulted in the establishment of forty troupes throughout Kenya.”...“other charities have used the regional puppet troupes as part of their extension work.” <sup>12</sup>

“Gary (Friedman) trained 9 young people who then went out across Kenya and eventually trained 600 more puppeteers who spoke out about AIDS and other social issues.” <sup>13</sup>



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A clip from *Puppets Against AIDS – Kenya* with Eric Krystal explaining the FPPS relationship with AREPP

“...In August 1994 a group of puppeteers from The African Research and Educational Puppetry Program in South Africa were invited to Kenya to host a two week puppet training camp education workshop. Their objective was to train Kenyans to produce their own local version of *Puppets Against AIDS*, an original South African program, which over the past eight years has greatly inspired people in many parts of the world.” <sup>14</sup>

In April of 1994 AREPP had two teams of touring puppeteers.

“At present there are two shows touring southern Africa, employing 15 people”... “There are now two teams of 3 or 4 people in the field”... “The work is done in a wide range of local languages, mostly in rural areas.” <sup>15</sup>

And these teams were working to train others in the art of puppetry.

“Workshops are also held to teach people how to set up *Puppets Against Aids* groups using simple puppets.” <sup>16</sup>

As an indication of their success as they developed new projects they expanded to bring in new puppeteers. In 1994 When discussing their upcoming television project *Puppets For Democracy* that was in development for the upcoming election of April, 1994. Gary Friedman says,

“As most of AREPP’s staff were tied up on other projects, we had to sub-contract some freelance artists to help put this production (*Puppets for Democracy*) together.” <sup>17</sup>

## Similarities between AREPP puppetry and what the Ariel children reported seeing

Description:

- grey or unusual coloured skin
- large head
- big eyes
- no facial expression

Salma, then aged 11, was interviewed at the time and has spoken publicly about her experience more recently as an adult.

To quote her (then aged 11),

**“He looked like, definitely not a human... He had a big head and big black eyes and was dressed in a black bodysuit, tight fitting. [Arms and legs] like a human’s but he definitely didn’t look like one, his head was much too big.”** <sup>18</sup>

In an interview (as an adult) with Randall Nickerson<sup>19</sup> she describes the figure she saw,

**“/ was taller that *it* was... (it) moved but had no facial expression”**



Salma's drawing, made when she was aged 11, of the face she saw amongst the grass

Lisel, another pupil, describes something similar. Her drawing includes a figure with a large head in a suit with what appears to be a belt and buttons.

"I saw a black man, he was just in black, and he had big eyes".<sup>20</sup>



Lisel's drawing of the figure she saw next to a craft

Features of her description:

- wearing black
- big eyes

Nathaniel C – also in an interview with John Mack,

“They had short legs and quite a long top. And a big head and eyes that are bigger than ours. [eyes] “Four or five times the size.” [of ours].

Features of Nathaniel's description:

- big head
- big eyes

- short legs, long top

## The AREPP puppets and the puppets in *Puppets Against AIDS*

Some of the puppets created in AREPP workshops had big heads, large eyes, short (or no) legs and long “tops” or bodies. The puppets in *Puppets Against AIDS* were coloured grey. Gary Friedman explains this choice,

“It was quite difficult to do AIDS education, especially in South Africa, using black puppets or white puppets because of the racial discrimination and too much concentration on the color of a human being. So we resolved everything by doing the grey puppets so it would cater for both the black people and the white people.”<sup>21</sup>

The puppets were not only grey, some of them were tall & captivating. This is captured vividly here by Thomas Riccio,

“Shoeless children in tattered clothes scattered, helter-skelter, running down compact, unpaved and garbage-strewn streets. Their screaming was a blend of fear and excitement, their faces going from shock to beaming smiles as they turned, their runs alternating between flight and leaps of playfulness. Infants wailed in spasms of tears, adults stood curious, amazed and bemused. All of the action on the street came to a halt as an eight-foot-tall figure with an enormous cartoon-like grey head shocked the grim reality of the slum into the surreal, with a perfect equatorial blue sky as backdrop.

The ‘mobilization’ puppet stooped to shake hands with shop-owners who were selling everything from live chickens to herbal medicines to used clothing. The puppet performer hugged grandmas, chased children, greeted unsuspecting shoppers, pushed cans, and directed traffic: it did what it was supposed to do, namely, cause a stir and draw an audience to see a performance”<sup>22</sup>

## **“it did what it was supposed to do, namely, cause a stir and draw an audience to see a performance”**

The similarity between the AREPP puppetry and Salma’s description of a figure with arms and legs “like a human’s” but with a head that was “much too big” is reinforced by her drawing, especially when it is compared with images of the puppet of Mary from *Puppets Against AIDS*, which is a puppeteer wearing an oversized styrofoam and papier mache head and a black shirt with buttons. The head had no moving features and so remained in a fixed staring expression.

Another child, Munyaradzi Nyamuda, describes something similar,

**“I looked like straight in the grass, just some like alien thing. He had big eyes”** <sup>23</sup>

Cynthia Hind, the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) investigator who visited the school describes this area outside of the school playground. She writes,

**“one could soon disappear from view while walking here”** <sup>24</sup>

## **Ariel Primary School and a rural landscape**

We have to remember that by some estimates the children observed what they saw from possibly hundreds of meters away<sup>\*</sup> and were looking across an area of long grass and other vegetation.

The earliest publicly available satellite Image of the school and surrounding area is from 2005. Here the yellow arrow from top right shows the direction of the sun at 10am on 16 Sept 1994. A 100m and 220m radius from the approximate location of the children and the direction of view of the children is also shown.



From the various news interviews on the scene at the time the children appear to be looking approximately North.



## BBC Archive, 1994

It seems quite possible that this vegetation and the uncertainty of the terrain beyond the playground could affect how a figure seen across this landscape was perceived. Especially if that figure is already of unusual proportions such as one of the 2m tall AREPP puppets.



A puppeteer in the Mary character costume from *Puppets Against AIDS*, Photo by Gary Friedman

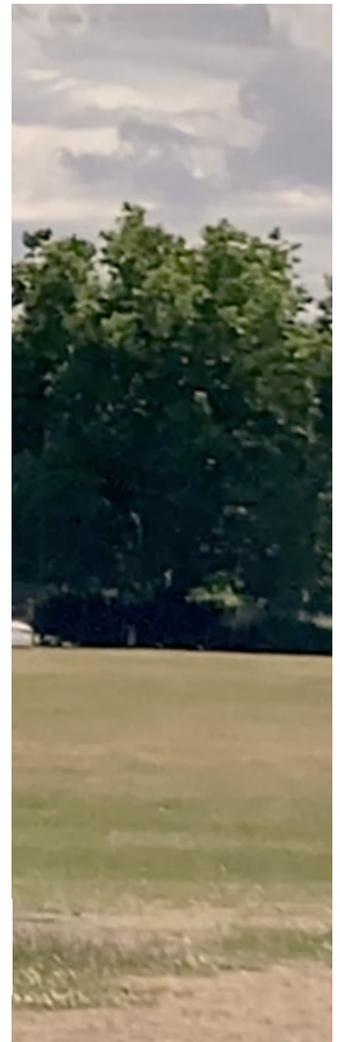
Here I've attempted a rough visualisation using a photograph of the actual area beyond the school playground. In it I've placed amongst the vegetation two of the commonly seen

elements from the travelling AREPP puppetry teams. Namely the white VW T3 Microbus that they used and the 2m tall Mary puppet from *Puppets Against AIDS*.



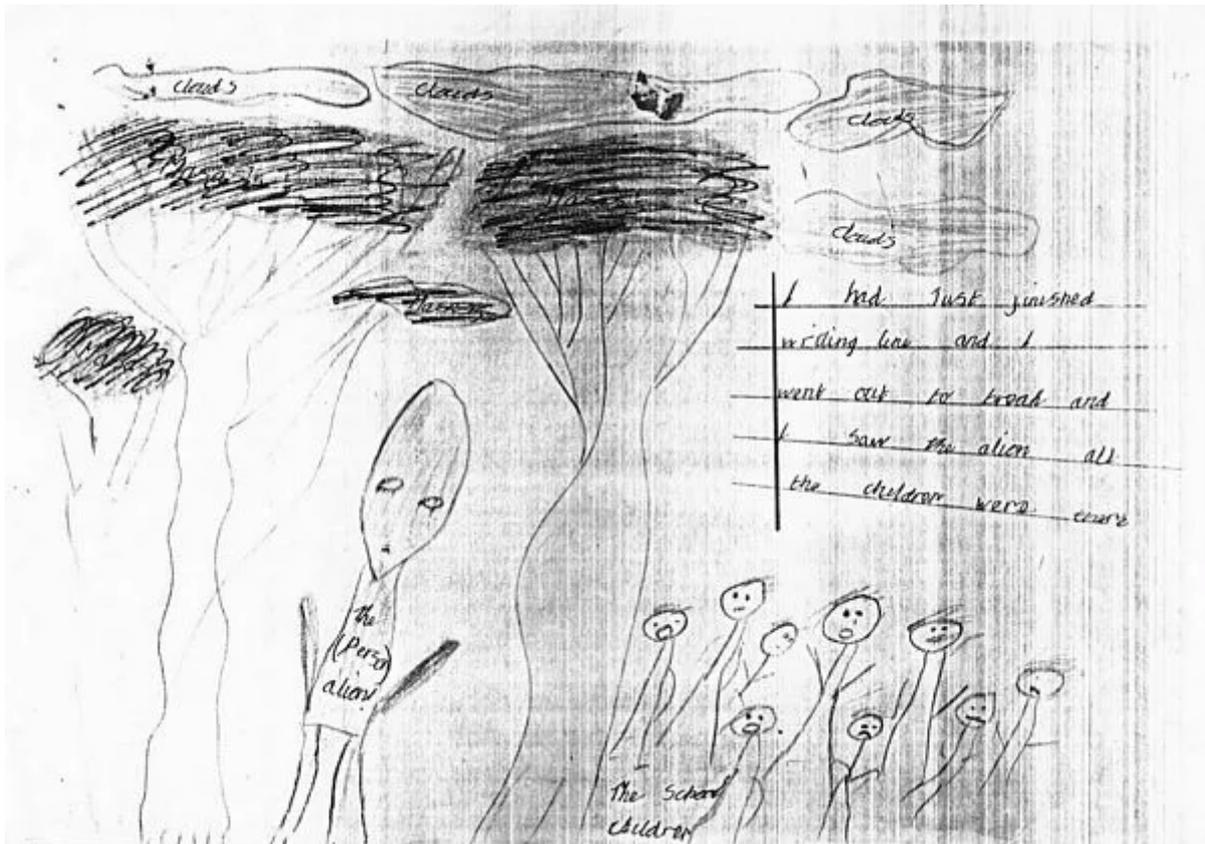
**A speculative composite image based on Gunter Hofer's photo of the area beyond the school playground, with a 2m puppet and the AREPP VW T3 approximately scaled in the scene**

In another visualisation here is a video, filmed on an iPhone SE, of a ice cream van with a white roof parked behind a hedge row. The aim here is to give some sense of the distance between the children, and the object and figures they saw on the ground. I'm standing exactly 220m from the road that the van is on, and the video is zoomed after a few seconds. Note the barely visible figures in the scene which appear black (on the grass and in front of the hedgerow) and the glinting vehicles catching the sun in the street behind. Only the top of the ice cream van is visible and it appears somewhat like a disc hovering over the ground. If it were catching the light in the same way as the cars to its right the effect would be much more distinct.



0:00 / 0:17

An attempt at visualising the distance from the children to the object – here I am 220m from the road



## One of the Ariel pupil's reports on the being they saw



A version of the "Grey Giants" from *Puppets Against AIDS* – photo by Gary Friedman / Thomas Riccio

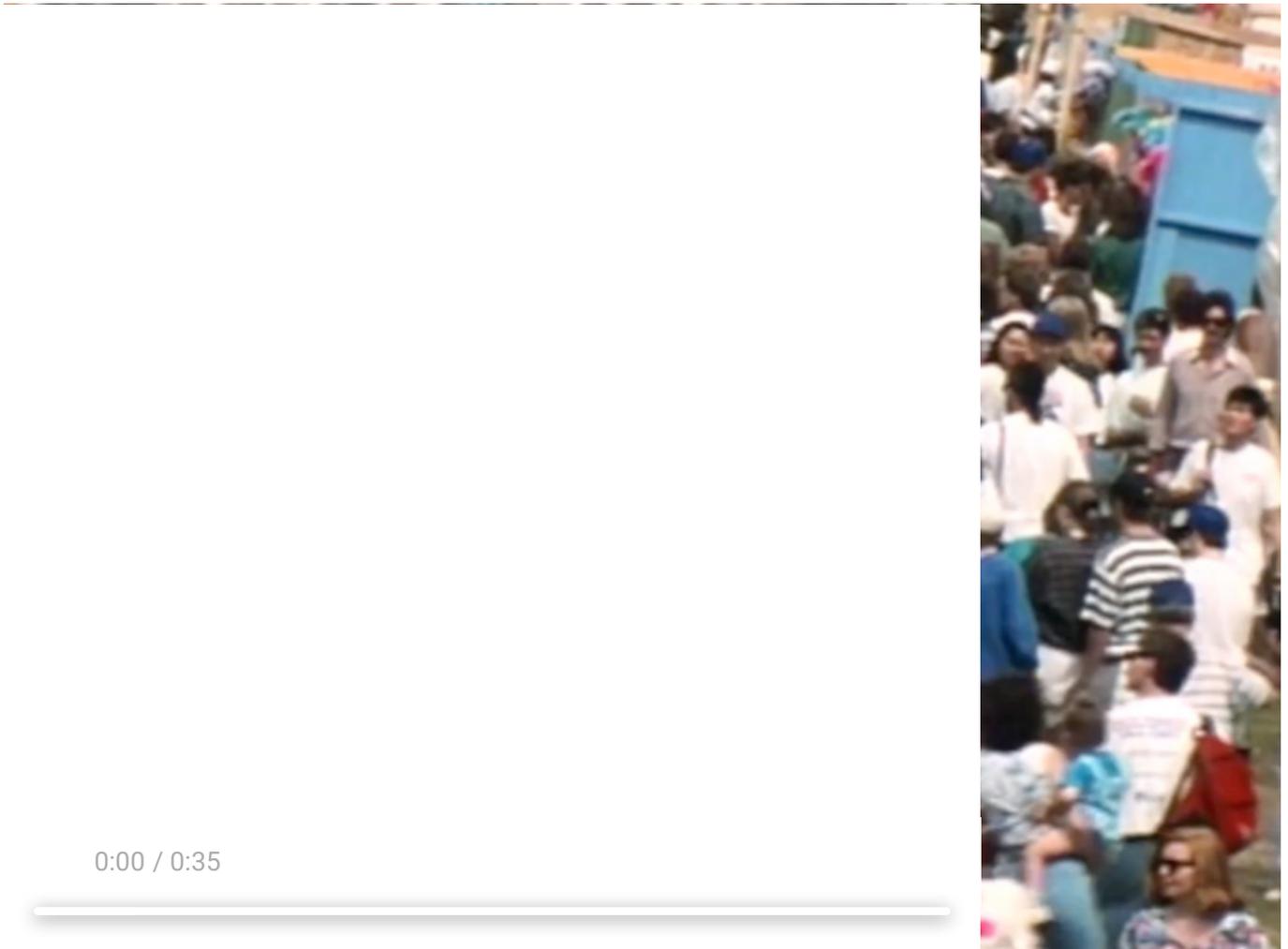
### **"Running in slow motion"**

The AREPP puppeteers who wore the papier mache head for the large Mary and Joe puppets would bob, and bound almost as if in slow motion. There are a number of

examples of this movement in the available archival footage.

Emily B, an Ariel pupil describes the one of the figures she saw,

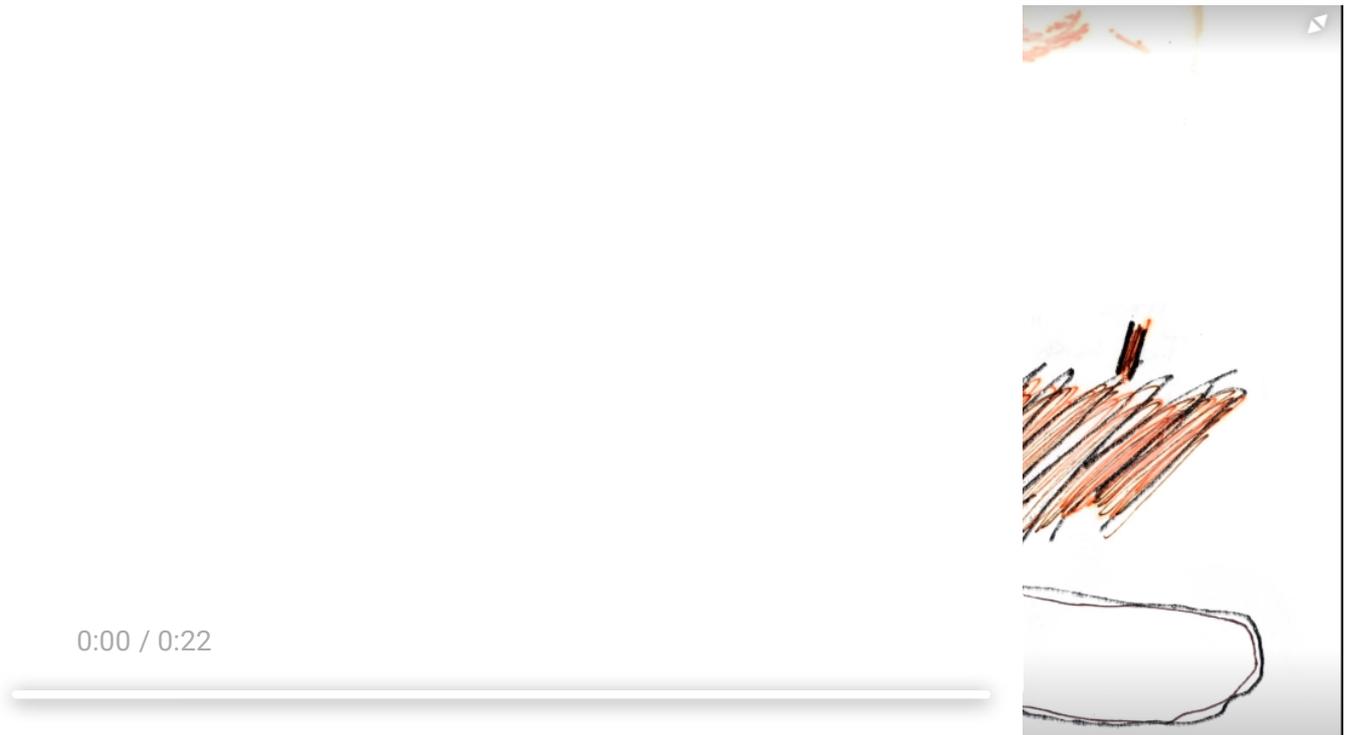
“...there was another one running in the grass. He ran normally like us, but bouncy as if a human would run on the moon...”



A clip from *Township to Tundra* 1993 where *Puppets Against AIDS* toured small town Canada. Here Gary Friedman explains about the purpose of the giant grey skinned puppets.

As well as the human puppeteers wearing oversized heads AREPP, and it's workshopping puppeteers, used a variety of different sized puppets from person-sized to hand puppets. The movements of these figures are typically exaggerated. They are typically operated from below a puppet booth (although bunraku style puppets don't require a booth) which screens the puppeteer from view. They appear to bob, and turn or abruptly disappear and

reappear below the puppet booth between scenes. Expression is given through gestures made with one puppet hand that is operated by a rod and by the turning of the head operated on a rigid stick by the puppeteer's other hand.

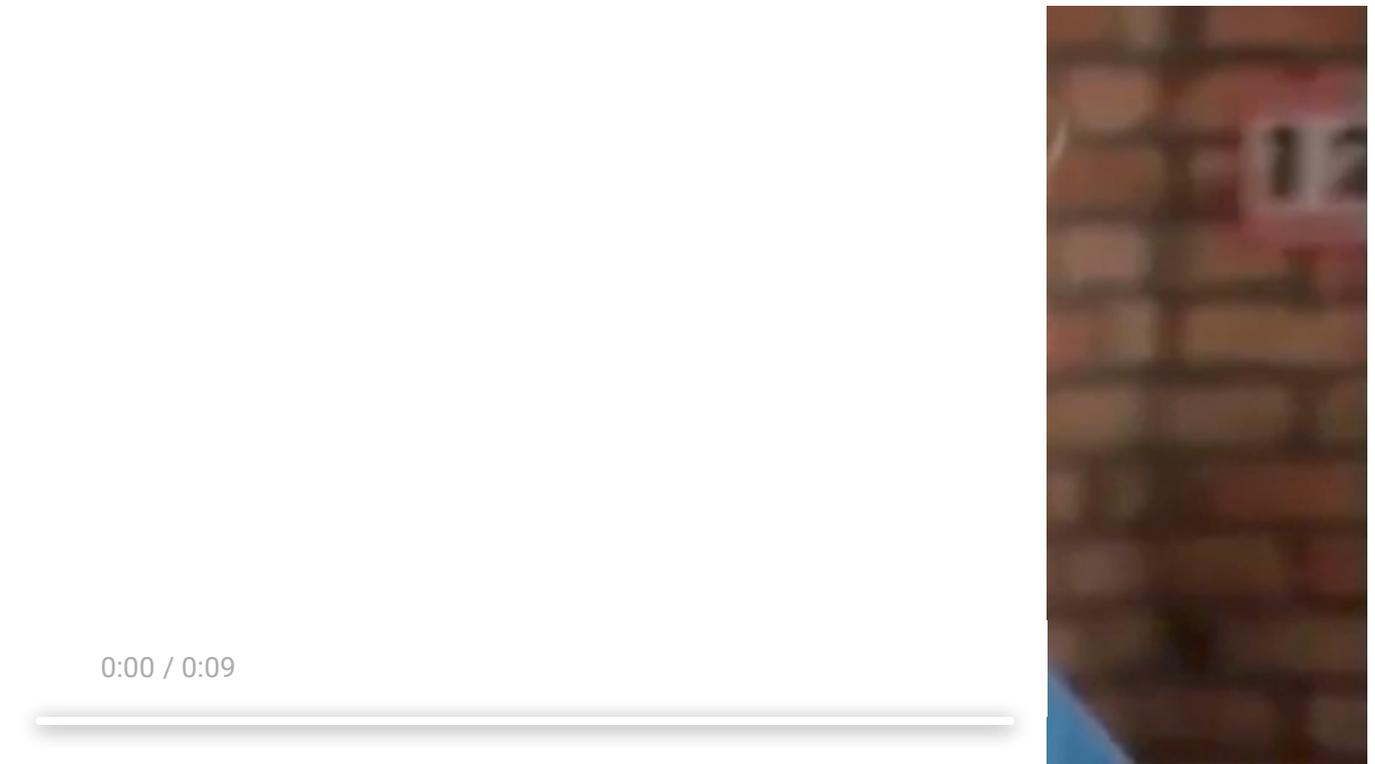


## "Stiff Necks"

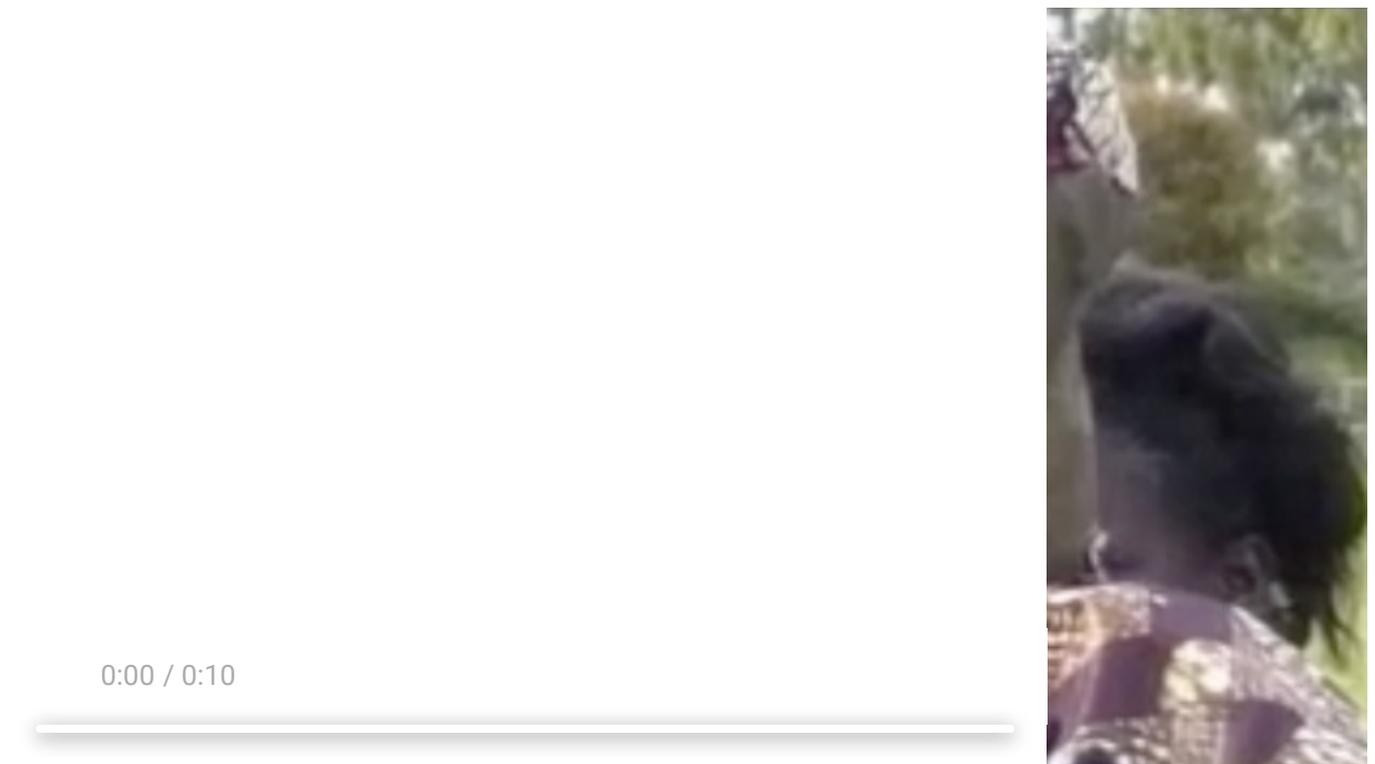
In a television interview with Cynthia Hind, these observations are made, again by Emily B.

"I saw the little black men. They had longish hair and it was all black. And they had big black eyes, that's all I saw. I saw a glimpse. They kind of turned around and stared and then went back into a kind of like ship. There was like sort of one big one and quite a few little ones." <sup>25</sup>

And then later in her interview with John Mack she mentions this interesting detail.



**“They were just like looking at all of us. They didn’t, they seemed to have stiff necks, they didn’t seem to move their necks like we can”**



## **Puppets with stiff necks, from PAA – Kenya, with audio from Emily’s interview with John Mack**

I think this is perhaps the most revealing detail in all of the available interviews, because it is spontaneous and so specific. I think it is an example of how this child was accurate in her description but that it also maps directly onto the puppetry hypothesis because it describes both the kinds of puppets AREPP were using at the time and the way they would engage with the audience by “staring”.

Both the large “mobilization puppets” and the smaller bunraku-style puppets had “stiff necks” because they were constructed without flexible neck joints (as seen in the diagram above). They were given expression by bobbing and turning. Their engagement with the audience was with a stare that was performed with the whole body of the puppet. Again, nearly all of the AREPP puppets had no operable facial expressions and had fixed features rendered in papier mache or fiberglass.

## **The “Spaceship”**

As well as the descriptions of the figures they saw there are descriptions of the “spaceship” or UFO which have a number of common features when spoken about in the interviews. Being silver and glittering are the most common.

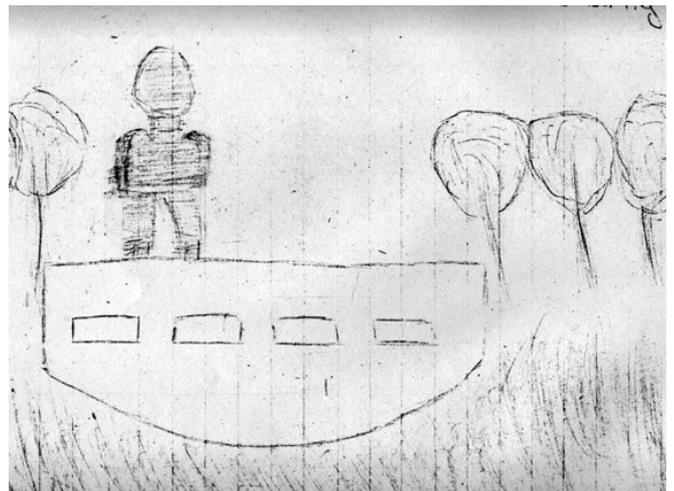
- **something silver**
- **glinting in the trees**
- **a silvery thing in the bushes**
- **silver light**

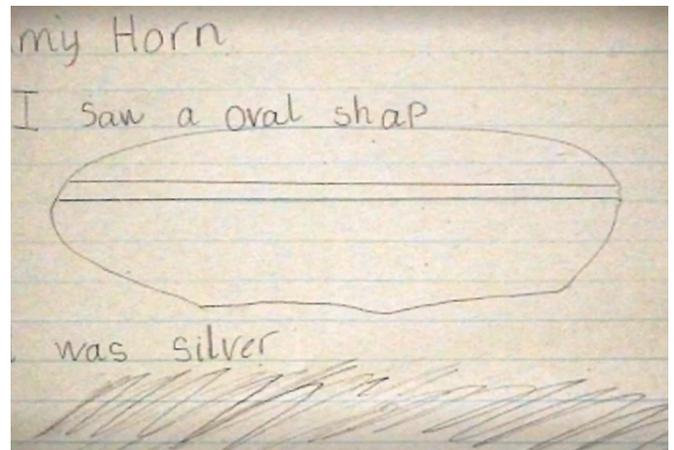
**“I saw a sort of like ship landed on the ground... it had a round top and it was flat like that around the sides. Just a sort of like a platform coming around the side...It was silver and the ring around it was red. There were lights around**

here... One of them was running in the trees and the other was running across the ship. They were about my size.” – Nathaniel C<sup>26</sup>

“I saw this silver thing in amongst this clump of trees with this one thing sitting on the side and another thing sort of like running up and down the top... It almost looked like a real person except it was fairly plump... At first I thought it was just some boy from the compound playing around, but... it looked more like our hair, it wasn't curly. That thing almost looked like a hippie.” – Daniel M<sup>27</sup>

There are also several drawings of the “spaceship” which include what appear to be windows. Again, I think we should not overlook this specific description, respect the accuracy of recollection from these children, but ask ourselves what already known object this detail could relate to.





## Drawings of the “spaceship” some with what appear to be windows & photographs of two of the AREPP VW vehicles

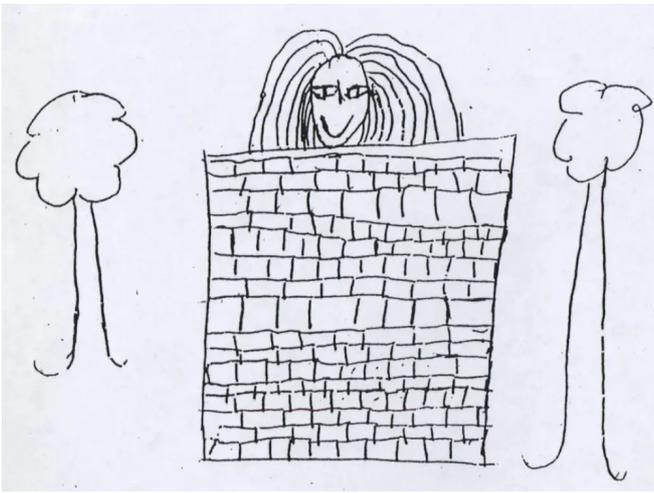
Specifically, one known object sharing these features is a Volkswagon T3 Microbus, the exact kind which AREPP used to tour its puppetry teams with – one of the most popular vehicles in Southern Africa at that time.

It should also be noted that the VW T3 van has a line around its middle formed by the creases in the body panels. This might be apparent from a distance if the sun's light is reflected off it in just the right way.



A diagram of a Volkswagen T3 Microbus (left) the AREPP team setting up for a performance in Zimbabwe (right)

## More similarities



Two of the more unusual drawings by Ariel pupils (top row) the one-person mobile puppet booth and a larger booth used in *Puppets Against Aids* in Kenya. Photos – courtesy of Gary Friedman

## No conspiracy theory – a theory from coincidences

The puppetry hypothesis is not a conspiracy theory. It doesn't point to a shadowy actor operating behind the scenes out to deceive a playground full of school children. There is literally no group pulling the strings. It doesn't discount the descriptive accounts of the

child witnesses. It agrees they saw something they couldn't explain, but which, according to this theory, is explainable as being some element of AREPP puppetry that coincidentally was seen for a few minutes by some of the children in the playground that day.

Gordon Bilborough, a director of AREPP, describes the coordination process between AREPP and schools,

**“The tours are arranged from the organisation’s offices by project managers who contact all the appropriate schools telephonically in the pre-planned touring area and arrange for the production to visit those which are interested,” (Bilborough, 2008)**

It's unclear, however, if this was the same process of pre-planning that would have been used in 1994 or, crucially, whether there was even a puppetry team operating in Ruwa, Zimbabwe on that date.

Perhaps AREPP was scheduled to visit the school that morning. Perhaps this was a miscommunication. Perhaps it was a misunderstanding about the subject matter of the performance and a last moment cancellation.

There were no adults present – all of the teachers were inside the school while some 250 children were outside, and only a quarter of those children reported seeing anything. This only makes the story more mysterious and open to conspiracist thinking. As Colin Mackie explains in this television interview,

**“There were no adults who saw it, it was only children at the school, and all the children in the playground, something like 250 of them, and out of that only sort of 60 claim to have seen it”. <sup>28</sup>**

The absence of *all* the teachers with so many unattended children outside is striking. There was one adult in the tuck shop adjacent to the playground but she was not witness to what the children saw.

Again there is a read across that can be made with AREPP's work and on HIV/ AIDS education in schools. Teachers, "save one" were asked to leave so that a "respectful open relationship between performers and the audience"(Bilborough, 2008) could be formed. However, this appears to be a process decision taken by AREPP in 1996 – after the Ariel School event – and there is no evidence I have found so far that suggests they did this prior to that date, or with primary aged children.

## Table of comparison

Description / Features	"Alien(s)"	AREPP Puppetry	Notes
Grey or unusual skin colour	✓	✓	Typical features of AREPP puppets
Large head	✓	✓	
Big eyes	✓	✓	
Black clothing	✓	✓	Mary puppet had black shirt with buttons
Shiny black clothing	✓	✗	Found no evidence AREPP had "shiny" black clothing
"Some people (a white one, a red one and a black one)"	✓	~	Debatable - if it was a puppet workshop multipul different looking people could be expected.
"A big one and quite a few little ones" (Emily B)	✓	✓	Puppetry teams were 3-4 people.
"stiff necks"	✓	✓	Exaggerated movements of hand/rod/bunraku puppets operated from below a puppet booth or in directly in front of the puppeteer.
Running in slow motion, appearing and disappearing	✓	✓	
"Black figure ran in slow motion" (Candice A)	✓	✓	Puppets operated above a puppet booth, seen behind a vehicle roof or amongst the long grass? Luggage stored/retrieved from roof of vehicles.
Black thing on the spaceship (Oriana Fenwick)	✓	~	
Person on top of the ship, running like confused	✓	✓	
No facial expression	✓	✓	Possible (puppet teams were 3 people, workshops more)
"Four or five of them", "about four"	✓	~	
"He never said anything" (Lisel) Telepathic Communication	✓	✓	Puppets use mime
Looking at us, staring.	✓	✓	Puppets engage audience
Seen at Primary School	✓	✓	AREPP toured schools
	"Spaceship"	AREPP Vehicle(s)	
"Glinting in the trees"	✓	~	Possibly vehicles and/or equipment reflecting sunlight. Seen across an area of tall grass and trees.
Silvery thing in the bushes (Ross Shiels) "silver thing just shining" (Candice A)	✓	~	
"Silver light" (Anna Navaro)	✓	~	
Something glittering (Guy Gibbons)	✓	~	
Round disc	✓	~	
Drawings of a "craft" with windows	✓	✓	AREPP VW T3
Heard a flute noise (Candice)	✓	~	Some puppet shows were introduced with flute music
Orange, Glittering thing (Oriana Fenwick)	✓	✗	No supporting evidence
"Maroon colour waving about" (Candice)	✓	✗	No supporting evidence
Coloured Lights - yellow, purple, green (Munyaradzi Nyamuda)	✓	✗	No supporting evidence

A table of comparison between the features of the "alien(s)" and the "spaceship" that are described in the Ariel School event, and the puppetry used at that time by AREPP. ✓ = a direct match, ~ a debatable match, ✗ = no evidence

## Non-matching features

The vast majority of features have a match or a debatable match, but there are some features of the encounter that don't line up in a such a direct way with AREPP.

These are:

- **shiny black clothing** – in the puppetry images I could find black clothing is typically matte, fabric but not “very, very shiny black” as is described by Emma K.
- **orange glittering thing or a maroon colour in the sky.** The puppetry hypothesis provides no explanation for objects or light(s) in the sky. While the traveling shows are described as bringing mobile generators and loud speakers there don't appear to be any kind of additional lights since performances are during daylight.
- **flashing coloured lights that were” yellow, purple and green”** – nor does it account for coloured lights on the ground.

## Conclusion

The evidence presented here supports the argument that there is better evidence that the children at Ariel school witnessed something related to the established puppetry education occurring in Africa at the time, than there is that a spaceship landed and the children encountered aliens or otherworldly beings. What it lacks is verifiable records, perhaps from AREPP, that place them or one of their teams in that location on that date. I've reached out to AREPP to see if they can help in this regard and await their response. I have also reached out to a witness for their opinion about this hypothesis.

However, the evidence above makes a strong case that,

- **there is a physical similarity between the AREPP puppets – including those made by trainee pupeteers in various workshops – and the “alien(s)”**
- **there is a similarity between AREPP puppet movements and that of the “alien(s)” as described by the children**
- **puppets are used to deliver a message, sometimes powerfully and without words**
- **the spectacle of puppetry can render the pupeteer unnoticed or “invisible” to the audience**

- there is a physical similarity between the AREPP vehicle(s) and the “spaceship” drawn by some of the children (given the observation distance / environmental conditions from the children’s point of view)

From the available newspaper reports cited here it is verified that,

- AREPP sent puppetry teams into rural areas, (Ruwa, Zimbabwe possibly being one of them on the date in question)
- in April of 1994 there were at least two puppetry teams of 3-4 people working in the field, “mostly in rural areas”.
- by at least 1994 AREPP had trained up to “40 troupes of puppeteers” (in Kenya) and “600 puppeteers” more broadly in southern Africa.



Twitter



YouTube

## Footnotes and references

1. ^ p.15, *Qualitative Evaluation of the African Research and Educational Puppetry Programme (AREPP) Executive Summary and Recommendations*, January 1995, C.Evian B.Oskowitz Z.Hlatshwayo  
[<https://www.garyfriedmanproductions.com/uploads/1/0/5/1/10518366/paaevalsum95.pdf>]
2. ^ *Playing for Keeps: An examination of arepp: Theatre for Life’s applied theatre pedagogy with regard to adolescent sexuality*. Gordon Bilbrough, 2008  
<https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/7784>
3. ^ Interview with Martin Willis & Randall Nickerson. <https://youtu.be/RhosxOMHTME?t=2372>

4. ^ *Romance of Alexander*, fol.054v and fol.076r Digital Bodleian  
[<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/ae9f6cca-ae5c-4149-8fe4-95e6eca1f73c/>]
5. ^ If I had my [Ancient Astronaut](#) theorists hat on I might I be tempted to submit this as evidence of an historical close encounter with a hovering craft containing diminutive humanoids.
6. ^ Clip from *The Puppeteer* <https://youtu.be/cJ2gizaqVw8?t=1296>
7. ^ Clip from *Master puppeteer Hobe Ford's magical creations inspire children & adults alike.* <https://youtu.be/V2clNdbwPYw?t=272>
8. ^ Clip from *Meet Hobe Ford* <https://youtu.be/gS-r8h87W2Y?t=266>
9. ^ Quote from Jane Taylor [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubu\\_and\\_the\\_Truth\\_Commission](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubu_and_the_Truth_Commission)  
*Ubu and the Truth Commission* [https://youtu.be/lVgT\\_x53z14](https://youtu.be/lVgT_x53z14)
0. ^ *The Journal* – Brigid Schutz & Gary Friedman (1994)
1. ^ *Puppets Against AIDS – Zimbabwe* (1993) <https://vimeo.com/113830584>
2. ^ *Puppet Notebook* British UNIMA Summer 2005
3. ^ *Control Stick*, Boston, September 2005
4. ^ Quote transcribed from *Puppets Against Aids – Kenya* <https://vimeo.com/113826143>
5. ^ *UNESCO Sources*, France, April 1994
6. ^ *The Saturday Star*, South Africa, 29 May 1993
7. ^ *The Journal*, 1994, Brigid Schutz & Gary Friedman
8. ^ *UFO encounter Zimbabwe 1994* <https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs?t=1423> [Timestamp 23:43]
9. ^ *Ariel School Encounter Witness, Salma Siddick & Filmmaker Randall Nickerson*, 10-18-17  
[https://youtu.be/1rtJpw\\_WWDg?t=4636](https://youtu.be/1rtJpw_WWDg?t=4636) [Timestamps 17:30 and 1:17:16]
0. ^ *UFO encounter Zimbabwe 1994* <https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs?t=1423> [Timestamp from 20:46]
1. ^ *Canada The Province The Evening Telegram*, Tuesday, August 4, 1992, By Mark Vaughan-Jackson
2. ^ *Puppet Notebook*, British UNIMA Summer 2005, *FOLLOW THE GREY GIANTS – A new medium* By Thomas Riccio
3. ^ *UFO encounter Zimbabwe 1994* <https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs> [Timestamp from 2:32]
4. ^ p.7 *MUFON UFO Journal*, Dec 1994
5. ^ *Ariel School UFO landing 1994* <https://youtu.be/eBqKJHSrYZg?t=456> [Timestamp 7:35]

6. ^ *Ariel School UFO landing 1994* <https://youtu.be/eBqKJHSrYZg?t=268> [Timestamp from 4:28]
7. ^ *Ariel School UFO landing 1994* <https://youtu.be/eBqKJHSrYZg?t=390> [Timestamp from 6:30]
8. ^ *Zimbabwe School UFO 1994* <https://youtu.be/6sK2eGdfNNQ?t=1070> [Timestamp from 17:50]
9. ^ As far as i'm aware there is only one account that differs from this estimate, from Salma, where she says she was much closer, some "3 or 4 feet" away from the figure she saw.

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[Next Post →](#)

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## 9 thoughts on "The Mysterious Events at Ariel School, Zimbabwe – 16 Sept 1994"



**THOMAS**

24 JULY 2022 AT 21:11

Excellent study 👍❤️🙏 perfect 👍 one more downed ufo : victory against invasion in sight . I thought about an army vehicle ( helicopter ) with soldiers wearing sunglasses but it wasn't entirely satisfying and how to verify : your study seems highly credible to me and thorough .

[Reply](#)



**GIDEON.REID**

24 JULY 2022 AT 23:08

Thanks. I looked into the military angle also. The [Casspir](#), an unusual looking armored vehicle, has some resemblance to the drawings that show a craft with square/rectangular windows and a line around it's middle. It would have had soldiers on

top of it or “guarding” it but it’s mainly South African, possibly not seen in Zimbabwe, so that’s where the similarities to the broader picture end.

[Reply](#)



**GEORGIA**

1 AUGUST 2022 AT 11:25

Credible and well-articulated writing supported by relevant and interesting diagrams and videos. Well done.

[Reply](#)



**JONATAN**

13 AUGUST 2022 AT 21:04

Very interesting. This together with Wisers blog has put this whole thing in a new light for me.

Looking forward for updates! 😊 A comment from example Salma would have been wonderful.

(I’m still not sure what to believe.)

[Reply](#)



**K**

19 AUGUST 2022 AT 21:22

The puppeteers would have been aware they were being watched, right? After all, the sixty-two children allegedly got quite close to the “beings” and “craft.” I’m assuming that the puppeteers knew where they were as well, being right outside the Ariel school. The event would have been memorable for the puppeteers too, surely? An impromptu rehearsal or performance in the woods with dozens of children looking on – who wouldn’t remember that? Now add in the sudden news media frenzy that surrounded the school and made it famous across the continent after their supposed “performance” was interpreted as close contact with extraterrestrials – surely the puppeteers would have

gotten wind of that, right? And yet, decades later, the truth still hasn't come out? None of the puppeteers bothered to set the story straight and clear up the confusion? Or, assuming they somehow weren't aware of the onlooking children, none of the puppeteers saw the news and put two and two together, connecting their "show" with the events at Ariel? Why would none of them have come forward in the decades that followed this well-known event?

When you consider who these AREPP puppeteers being put forward as the "explanation" were – members of an educational group raising awareness about real-world issues like AIDS – the idea that they would be fine with allowing these children to spend the rest of their lives deceived and troubled by the event is questionable, to say the least. There just seem to be too many contingencies for this to be the case: the puppeteers would need to somehow not know where they stopped and did an impromptu performance, they would have to not know they were being watched, they would have to not have ever heard about the Ariel event at the time, or if they heard about it then or later they would have to have not put two and two together, or if they did put two and two together they would have had to have agreed to keep quiet about it, for unknown reasons. On top of all that, we have to assume that none of the children were able to discern the fact that what they saw were puppets and puppeteers, that no one else saw them, and so on...

[Reply](#)



**N.D. MAGOO**

18 SEPTEMBER 2022 AT 15:42

The body (shirt) of the massive puppet on the left side of your video above about the "stiff necks" would certainly qualify as a "maroon color waving about"?

[Reply](#)



**ROBOMARTION**

24 OCTOBER 2022 AT 08:24

Didn't the children say the aliens were child sized, hovered above the ground and followed them, mimicking their movements and also phased in and out of sight while repeating

this, like a recording? While some of the kids were far away, some were very close from what I understand.

[Reply](#)



**GIDEON REID**

24 OCTOBER 2022 AT 11:05

My blog focuses on the earliest descriptions from the children, it is a study of what parts of their remarks appear spontaneous and uncorrupted by the group interviews they were subject to. It looks at what there are records of the children saying at the time, or as close to the event as possible. These are the interviews done on the Monday and Tuesday (the event happened on Friday) and some second hand remarks recorded by Cynthia Hind over that weekend. This is because contamination of testimony is a significant problem with this whole event.

The children have been interviewed many times over the years, and there are many different things they say about how the beings behaved. At least one witness – Francis – has done a hypnotic regression as an adult to attempt to recover more detail about what he saw.

There are many wildly different and contradictory descriptions they have given of the beings they saw. For example Hesemann's interviews – 2.5 years later with a large number of the children include significant differences in how they describe the "aliens".

[Reply](#)



10 JANUARY 2023 AT 22:04

Awesome

[Reply](#)

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