Feature

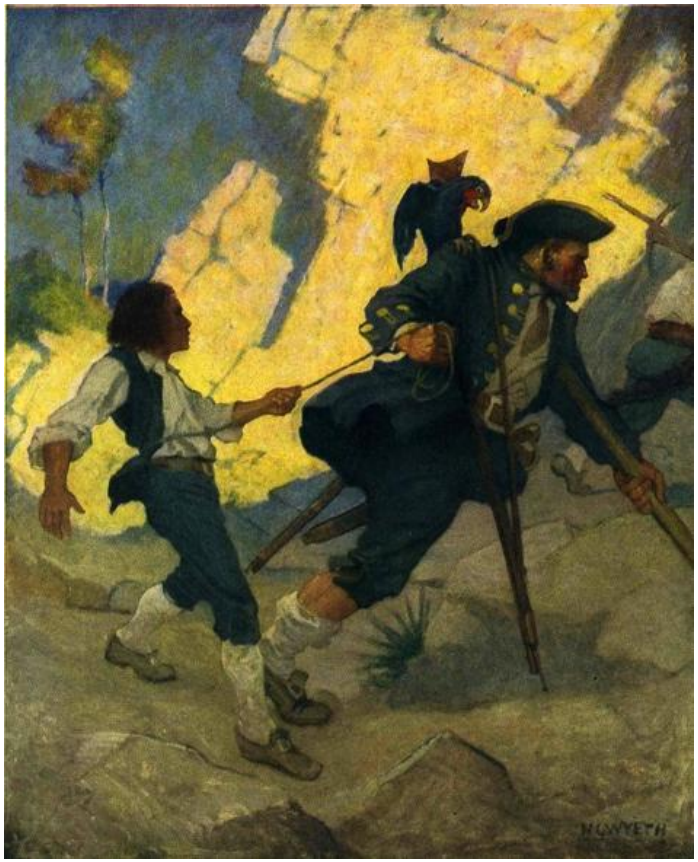
Long John Silver's Peg Leg

Charles McKeithan

An actor who portrayed Stevenson's pirate anti-hero, Long John Silver in a stage production of "Treasure Island" describes how he built and wore his own peg-leg prothetic, one that even allows him to dance.

The past few years have seen a huge surge in popularity regarding the romantic vision of the Pirate. Not the Somalian rowboats with RPG s that terrorize the eastern shores of Africa, but that true childhood pirate from the books of our past.. We have grown the culture from an appreciation of swashbuckling young villains that are a staple of every halloween, into a year round selection of events with the opportunity to don an eyepatch and grunt out "arghs!" and "yaarrs!" while swilling grog from our tankards.

In 2009, shortly after the release of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, I was approached by the artistic director for the Bus Barn Stage Company, a theater group in the San Francisco bay area, with the notion that they would be producing the stage adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. As a stage set master carpenter, I was excited about the idea of bringing ships to life in a live theater setting and transporting the audience from old England to the south seas. But the first question on my mind was, what about Silver? His most infamous aspect was his peg leg. As a regular actor in the bay area, I could not think of a single one legged actor I had ever seen. In an intimate theater setting where the audience was only a few feet away from the stage, it would be crucial that Silver be realistic. He had to walk, turn, in some cases run, and absolutely had to be able to fight.



Long John Silver and Jim, N.C. Wyeth, 1911 ed. *Treasure Island*.

There are things that stand out about the most famous of pirates. Icons of the pirate captain that first come to mind. A parrot, an eye patch, and a peg leg and a hook. Thankfully, Long John Silver was a two eyed pirate, but even an actor with two eyes can adapt to covering one eye for a few hours. The parrot was a fear only because of that old broadway saying, "never work with children or animals" and not my problem. Hooks are easier than eye patches, but a missing leg?

I was already involved with the show as the resident master carpenter for the season, but as an actor and a pirate admirer, I could not resist the desire to play Long John Silver himself.

Again....problem..... I have two legs.....

In past productions, the actor playing Silver typically would be asked to tie one foot up and use a crutch. An admirable feat for a two hour show in any circumstance but a huge limitation to his blocking and combat ability. So after auditions found me being offered the role of Silver, I went right away to the director and asked if I could invent a peg leg rather than be limited to the crutch. The response was honest and simple... "I don't know... *Can* you"?

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The answer was *yes!* Two weeks later, I strolled across the parking lot, thumping on a peg leg that looked fantastic. As I entered the rehearsal hall there was a collective gasp of awe. Two mighty steps in and as I came in contact with the tiles, I was felled mightily to the floor amidst a new series of gasps. Back to the drawing board.

Peg assembly: closet dowel, table flange, plywood, and rubber tip.

But, by opening night, I had developed a peg leg that allowed me to walk, sword fight and even run and climb stairs without the use of a crutch, while remaining balanced and, most importantly, safe.

Step one was to remove my own left leg. Given that the budget was tight and with my lack of medical insurance, I decided against amputation. After several failed attempts to conceal my leg in a thick tube with a peg, and a few suggestions for where friends thought I should stick it, I finally decided to tuck it just above the right buttock and trap it in a construction worker's back brace that can be purchased in hardware stores. This allowed for flexible limited movement of the trapped foot without risking loss of circulation and allowed for adjustment to avoid cramping.

The peg unit itself was made out of a hodgepodge of "found objects." Given that the budget, and my experience in costuming were both limited, I did what I most often do: dig through my garage for spare parts and ideas, and improvised. The peg itself was fashioned from a closet rod dowel that fit into a short length of galvanized pipe screwed into a table flange. The dowel was driven into the pipe for a snug fit. The flange was screwed onto a disk of 3/4” plywood that would attach to the bottom of the sheath assembly that I'll describe next. The result was not visually a work of artful costuming grace, but it was a thing of joy to play with.

Leg sheath of two hockey kneepads and scrap 1”x4” lumber, tied together with strapping and gaffer's tape..

Step two was to build a sheath that would cradle the tightly bent leg and not allow the pressure of my body weight to rest completely on the knee cap.

Belts and carabiners attached to a pair of adjustable suspenders allow for fine tuning pressure in socket

This unit is comprised of two hockey shin guards and two pieces of lumber adjusted and custom fit to my bent leg, with leather belt wraps to tighten, and not a small amount of gaffers tape and foam padding. The original design tightens enough to pinch the leg and stay on with tension, which worked for most of the show. However, if it became loose, it quickly dropped off.

It became evident that a separate set of straps devoted to pulling the sheath against the leg would be necessary. A series of belts and carabiners attached to a pair of adjustable suspenders allowed for fine tuning until the unit was held tight from the shoulders by the suspenders instead of pressure around the thigh. By lifting the left leg at the hip, the pressure was tight enough that the socket held firm and had to be pressed down by the leg to step forward.

Padding inside the socket proved the simplest protection for the knee. But really, what made this pile of junk heap artifacts work as a perfect pirate peg leg, was, in the end, the length of the peg. Left too long, the left hip had to rise and drag the peg around to take each step; too short and every step was a jarring bang on the knee and a distracting fear of falling forward. By shaving the peg dowel off a quarter of an inch at a time, I was able to find the final perfect balance of height.

Leg sheath wrapped in burlap, with, peg assembly, straps, and crutch.

After adding a crucial rubber tip to combat that tile floor, I had the perfect piece: a peg that allowed for a slightly limped gate but at a balance point that accommodated speed, maneuvering, and not only sword play, but on a dare to myself, a few hours of waltzing at the recent PEERS pirate ball.

The only thing that remained was to make it all, well... LOOK good. Now that it was functional, I could perform, but looked like a Borg child's worst nightmare. The peg contraption itself was easy enough to wrap in a sheath of burlap. Then I chose an oversized pair of loose pants and a sword shirt to cover the miles of straps and buckles. On top of everything was a great overcoat with a sword belt and a flintlock pistol, so that any focus in the back from the trapped left foot would be hidden by the obvious points of sword and pistol.

The end result was a Long John Silver I could be proud of. Captain, pirate, sword fighter, dancer, and lover.... All with a leg that was believable from front row to back. I have been offered many challenges as a stage carpenter. From flying kites over audiences, to magic flowers and exploding clocks, but this peg leg is my proudest achievement. Should anyone like more information or help in creating their own, I can be reached at cmckeithan@gmail for advice and suggestions.

A final cautionary note: this device must, under all circumstance, be completely custom fit for the individual wearing it. I took many a spill creating it. All caution should be taken, given the risks inherent in trapping ones foot up and rebalancing on a stick. The builder and the wearing should be always aware of the potential risk of injury and take every precaution to avoid danger.

Charles McKeithan *has been an actor and stage carpenter for over 15 years. His work with Ron Gasparnetti under the company Thrust Scenic Design helped to create over 130 shows in the bay area and in addition to acting, he now designs and builds for Starting Arts in Santa Clara, California. Visit Charles' web site to learn more about him as an actor and a scenic designer.*

Padding socket proved the simplest protection for the knee.

a) strapping leg into harness, b) pulling foot up with suspenders, c) foot in white stocking pulled up to rear, d) side view, e) in great coat front, f) great coat back g) with cast on-stage