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PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

the puppet in contemporary theatre, film & media

issue no. 5

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*"The Whale's Eye" by Ellen Driscoll,
part of the exhibit "Ahab's Wife" (see review, page 14)
photo: Nicholas Walster*

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*A scene from Larry Reed's Wayang Listrik (see article page 10)
photo: Michael Venera*

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Editorial

Catch the Wave!

Trends in Art sweep across the cultural landscape like tidal waves across tropical atolls: The Mersey Sound, Op Art, Performance Art, Disco. Some waves disappear without a trace, some nourish vestigial subcultures in obscure tidal pools, others litter the beach with corpses.

As my partner and I create new work, we usually find ourselves well behind the current wave, often in a different ocean altogether.

Imagine my surprise then when I realized that our own company, Perry Alley Theatre, was “hanging ten”—surfing the wave alongside some of the country’s most talented Big *Kahunas*. It all started on the internet, when I found the website of Daisy DeBolt. I knew Daisy’s music from the early 70s, when she was half of the exquisite Canadian folk duo Fraser and DeBolt. She combines a natural musicality with the earthy vocal power of Joplin (Janis, not Scott). Through months of electronic correspondence, we discovered common ground and soon were planning a large-scale international collaboration: puppets, shadows, dance, music and storytelling—a new art form! Or is it?

The 19th century German Romantics had an expression for it: *Progressive Universalpoesie*—an art form which transcended boundaries of genre, form, academic domain. The current wave in puppetry seems to be exhibiting similar aspirations in a number of

recent collaborations which synergize diverse cultures, styles, nationalities, and artistic disciplines. *Kwaidan* integrates the talents of Atlanta’s Jon Ludwig, New York’s Ping Chong and Japan’s Mitsuri Ishii (with the writing of Lafcadio Hearn), *Wayang Listrik* brings together the work of San Francisco’s Larry Reed with Balinese dalang I Wayan Wija, and *Dieu!: God, Mother, Radio* springs from the diverse talents of New York’s Roman Paska and France’s Massimo Schuster. The process of each of these collaborations is considered in this issue of *Puppetry International* (pp 5 and 10). Furthermore, each of the programs will be presented at the International Festival of Puppet Theater in New York City this September (p 3). In the way that “World Music” has integrated an array of techniques and rhythms from diverse cultures, these new productions create a World Theatre which includes music, movement, performing figures and objects, masks and acting, from realms traditional and non-traditional: *Progressive Universalpoesie*.

And what will Perry Alley Theatre be performing at the New York festival? *Chinese Take-Out Theatre*—a solo performance without collaborators, without ties to world cultures, outside of any recognizable theatre traditions. One can’t *always* ride the wave!

—Andrew Periale



The Puppets Shake Manhattan

(and Staten Island, too!)

Once again, the Henson Foundation presents their International Festival of Puppet Theater. With 191 performances by 166 artists from 16 countries, this is without doubt the biggest puppet festival in the country. It is also one of the most ambitious festivals anywhere, and in ways which go far beyond the mere quantity of performances: the excellence and contemporary nature of puppetry presented, the variety of exhibits, the outreach to other cities around the country.

It would be difficult to pick out highlights among the performances offered at the International Festival of Puppet—everything looks great! The range of styles is also striking: from the biting drama *Ubu and the Truth Commission* by South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company, to the darkly hilarious *Slap Head: Demon Barber* by Green Ginger, of Wales. Performance styles range from the physical (Driscoll/Sleigh and Spencer/Coulton) to the pataphysical (Paska/Schuster) from the meticulous (Ronnie Burkett) to the ridiculous (Paul Zaloom). So much of the work here might be described as "edgy" that it's hard to find the center. Indeed, you won't find Albrecht Roser's solo show here, or the Moscow Academic State Theatre's *The Unusual Concert*—those companies which show us so beautifully where puppetry has been, but not, perhaps, where it is going. No, the bill of fare here is all fresh. This year's festival will include five diverse exhibits: Puppet Inspiration (at Snug Harbor Cultural Center), Puppet Inspiration



The *Iliad*, by Great Small Works, will be at Los Kabayitos Puppet Theatre

photo: Orlando Marra

II (at Dance theater Workshop), toy Theater (at Los Kabayitos), The Puppet Photography of Richard Termine (at the Public Theater), and The Masks and Magic of Ralph Lee (at The Children's Museum of the Arts). This conscious effort to foster a greater public appreciation of both the diversity of the art form and its aesthetics goes a long way toward creating the informed audience which serious puppetry desperately needs in this country.

Not content to leave the cultural *richesse* of their festival to New York alone, the Henson Foundation has included a touring program among their goals. Part of their strategy from the beginning, this fall six troupes will be touring to 19 different cities across the US.

There are many other aspects of this festival which make it the supremely important event it is: the film festival, the Late Night cabaret, the family series, and the way the Henson Foundation has managed to place it in so many different theaters and museums around the city.

One of Jim Henson's many contributions to the field during his lifetime was to



demonstrate that puppetry was commercially viable: that this garnered respect from those in control of mass media is a fact, the importance of which should not be underestimated. One of his dreams, though, was to support artists whose work in puppetry had less (sometimes *much* less!) commercial potential, showing America that puppetry was a performing art with limitless possibilities for the highest expression of human thought, emotion, spirit. He fostered such work through the Henson Foundation. His successors there seem well on their way to making his dreams a fact of life here.

—by Justin Kaase



**The Jim Henson
Foundation
salutes the artists
& partners of the
International
Festival of
Puppet Theater**

1 9 9 8

Joan Baixas

Ronnie Burkett
Theatre of
Marionettes

Faulty Optic

Figuren Theater
Tübingen

Green Ginger

Handspring Puppet
Company

Teatro Hugo & Ines

Loco 7/
Federico Restrepo

Stuffed Puppet
Theatre

Teatron Theater

Youki-Za

The Cosmic
Bicycle Theater

The Czechoslovak-
American Marionette
Theater

Driscoll/Sleigh
& Spencer/
Colton Dance

Great Small Works

Sandglass Theater

Theodora Skipitares

Paul Zaloom

Ping Chong,
Jon Ludwig, and
Mitsuru Ishii

Roman Paska and
Massimo Schuster

Larry Reed,
I Wayan Wija and
I Dewa Berata

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Marionettes &
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*The collaborative process in the making of
two puppet theater productions—*

DOUBLE VISIONS

by Stephen Kaplin

Puppet theater is a natural medium for collaborative theatrical production. As a synthesis of visual object, dramatic text and performer energy, the puppet theater has qualities that help it to cut across lines of theater discipline and cultural variance. Technically, it is a perfect jam-site for designers, directors, craftspeople, poets and performers of all types—providing a unified field of endeavor that intersects all artistic disciplines and all fields of performance media. In addition, puppet theater performance tends to have a strong visual dimension, which shares the broad gestural language of dance and pantomime. This allows genres of puppetry to travel between linguistic barriers and along cultural fault lines, in the same way that genres of contemporary pop music circumnavigate the globe, acquiring local inflections which in turn feed back into the global jukebox. And, finally, the flexibility of scale in puppet productions allows for complex and elaborately staged pieces to be created with relatively moderate or limited means. These three factors help explain why the puppet theater has become a choice collaborative vehicle for a large variety of contemporary international artists.

This article presents two examples of puppet theater collaboration. Both are productions to be presented at the 1998 Henson International Festival of Puppetry, yet they represent strikingly different approaches to the delicate task of collaborative creation. *Kwaidan*—with Ping Chong as director/conceiver, puppetry by John Ludwig, and designs by Mitsuru Ishii—demonstrates how puppet theater can effectively bridge cultural and disciplinary boundaries. The second production, *Dieu! God Mother Radio*, directed by Roman Paska, with Massimo Schuster as tour-de-force performer, reveals some of the process by which two puppet artists, equally matched in professional stature, create a piece fusing their distinct skills and genius.



*Kwaidan, collaborative
work by Ping Chong,
Jon Ludwig and Mitsuru Ishii*

photo: Beatriz Schiller

Contemporary Western puppet theater, following the global trends of cultural and economic convergence, has been absorbing the influences of Asian puppet genres for some time. In the past few decades, individual American artists—Julie Taymor, Lee Breuer and Larry Reed, among others—have borrowed (or appropriated) freely from Asian styles of puppet performance. If there is a danger of turning traditional Asian puppetry forms into exotic stage dressing for great, multi-cultural productions masterminded by western theater directors, there is also the potential for a cross-fertilization that will enrich both partners. And, as the global cross-referencing of styles and forms continues, opportunities for intercultural collaborations will certainly grow apace into the next century.

The puppet performance *Kwaidan* is an example of how puppet theater can serve as a bridge across both cultural and aesthetic divides. Based on three Japanese ghost stories as recorded by Lafcadio Hearn, the production was conceived and directed by Ping Chong, with designs by Mitsuru Ishii and puppetry by Jon Ludwig. Its first production was at Atlanta's Center for Puppetry Arts in June of 1998.

Ping Chong was the prime catalyst and the artistic center of the production. Since the early '70s, when he was a collaborator on several award-winning Meredith Monk productions, Chong's idiosyncratic blend of dance, film, multimedia spectacle, and music has garnered critical acclaim and international recognition. His recent works focus sharply on the collision of Eastern and Western cultures—a thread that runs deep through his own personal experience of growing up the son of immigrant parents in the cultural stew of New York's Chinatown and Lower East Side neighborhoods. Two recent stage works, *Deshima* and *Chinoiserie*, are the first parts of a trilogy that directly addresses this historical/cultural fault-zone, using a fluid, multi-leveled performance style that Chong describes as a "docu-concert-theatre-lecture."¹

Chong's interest in puppet theater grew out of these explorations of multimedia performance spectacle. It is also deeply rooted in the same impulses that led him to reject conventional theatrical forms and pursue his own, unique stage vision:

...It had to do more with the idea of theater as a transformative form— theater as place of wonder and astonishment. I hate traditional theater, because I feel that there is absolutely zero magic in it. And theater should be magic. So, even though I didn't come from loving puppets, puppets seem a natural part of a transformative theater form... As a child, the cinema was what I was into—shadow, light and shadow. And I'm still into the cinema more than anything else. But mainly it's about magic lantern, about transformative theater, and that's how I come to it.²

Chong met Jon Ludwig in 1991 when he was teaching a set design class in the Amsterdam Summer Academy. Ludwig is the pri-



photo: Beatriz Schiller

mary resident puppeteer, designer and puppet director at Atlanta's Center for Puppetry Arts. The idea of a collaborative project, with Chong as a director and Ludwig as a technical consultant, was first broached at that time. Chong suggested a selection of three Japanese ghost stories translated by Lafcadio Hearn as a text, which Ludwig thought to be perfect material for adaptation to a puppet production. The choice of the Hearn material was consistent with Chong's aesthetic fascination with the gray areas where Eastern and Western cultural fields interpenetrate and miscegenate. Hearn is in fact a sort of cultural inversion of Chong—a Westerner "gone native" and willfully absorbing himself in the culture of the other. He was an American journalist on assignment to Japan in the last decade of the nineteenth century, who, on becoming enamored with Japanese culture, decided to stay, marry, raise a family, and even give himself a Japanese name. A prolific translator of Japanese literature into English, he was especially attracted to the folk tales and the sort of macabre, fantastic "ghost stories" from which the material for *Kwaidan* is drawn. Chong had attempted to do a version of this same material with live actors as part of a larger piece, but the results were not satisfactory. The idea of staging the Hearn stories with puppets, however, seemed natural to Chong, especially when he could rely on Ludwig's technical expertise in the field to assist him. Ludwig, in turn, was sparked by Chong's enthusiasm. On returning to Atlanta, he discussed with Vincent Anthony, the artistic director of the Center for Puppetry Arts, the idea of co-producing *Kwaidan* with Chong's company.

It took several years to line up grant money and financial support for the project. In the meantime, Chong was introduced through a mutual friend to Mitsuru Ishii, a Tokyo-based scenic designer of operas, ballets and plays. Ishii became the critical design leg of the production team, although he had little experience with the puppet

¹ John Dillon, "Three Places in Asia," March 1996, *AMERICAN THEATRE*, p. 21

² All quotes are from conversations with the author, except where noted

theater. Like Chong, he was taking a leap into a new medium, but he brought to the project an intimate knowledge of both Japanese culture and stagecrafts and western theater practice. It was a critical choice in Chong's mind because the show had to bridge the cultures—it had to have authenticity with Japanese audiences while remaining accessible to western ones. By choosing a creative team so far distant from one another, Chong set up a dynamic that helped build this bridge. In laboring to overcome their physical separation, the artists also found ways of minimizing the cultural distance between them.

Chong took the responsibility of conceptualizing the piece. Drawing on years of multi-media performances, he devised a formal structure that permeated the production from its inception:

The way I present *Kwaidan* reflects my background in cinema.

I graduated as a

film maker. With puppets I can do things scalewise. I can't do a closeup in one shot and then a longshot... and it's the same character, with live people. But here I have three foot high heads in one scene, and in another scene he's this big going into a train... And also I have one or two scenes where you are looking at the action straight down, as if the camera was looking straight down at something overhead. I couldn't do that with live actors...

Production began in April of 1997, with the three principles corresponding by fax, telephone and e-mail from their homes in New York, Tokyo and Atlanta. Chong made a trip to Tokyo in September, and then all the principles met in Atlanta in December for a week. At this time, Ishii presented a stage model, sketches, and design drawings.

The set that evolved out of these conversations reflected both Chong's desire for a cinematically-inclined, multimedia, theatrical experience with multiple focusses and Ishii's firsthand knowledge of traditional Japanese architecture and building methods. The three large "windows" in the proscenium could change shape, or be configured in various ways: with a single window presenting a cinematic close-up or "tight shot"; with three separate scenes running simultaneously in different windows, as a sort of "montage" effect; or with all three windows joined to present a single scene in a "wide-shot" configuration. Used in conjunction with projected scenic effects and shadow puppetry, Ishii's flexible staging framework gave Chong complete control over the visual image.

At the same time the set was evolving, Ludwig was shaping Chong's understanding of the technical requirements of the puppetry, and then helping to translate Ishii's puppet designs for the builders in Atlanta.

Ludwig speaks of this process:

[Chong] knows what he wants to see,

but he's not sure how to do that; what that means, what kind of puppet. So I have to go back to our guys and say..."Well, this is what we are looking for. And it needs to do these things." ...Bill [CPA puppet builder] told me we need legs and things

according to the designs. I was like, "well, they're really functionless, they weigh a lot. We need to make a decision here. Can we get rid of them? I guarantee the puppets will free up their movements considerably." ...Things like that. But otherwise, [Chong] really had a good sense. It's kind of what attracted me to the whole thing to begin with. It wasn't a case of he just didn't know what puppetry did. He had a pretty good sense of what they could do.

The fact that Ishii was unfamiliar with the technicalities of the puppet construction created some difficulty for the building crew. As is sometimes the case with designers new to the mechanics of puppet figures, there was a tendency to make things overly complicated. Ludwig remarked on "...these elaborate eyes that he wanted to move up, down, side-to-side... blink, and move their mouths and sweat." Ludwig had to solve these engineering difficulties as well as negotiate differences in artistic expectations. The very American attitude of "if nobody sees it, then who cares? Just paint it in," came into direct conflict with the more reverential Japanese treatment of materials and detail.

After the production phase concluded, the three collaborators meet again face to face in Atlanta for rehearsals and the final tech period. The performance opened in late June at the Center to rave reviews and packed houses.

In assessing the work process for *Kwaidan*, both Ishii and Ludwig mentioned the problems in communicating across the vast distances between each other's home bases, and in trying to bridge the cultural divisions. But these difficulties were mitigated by several factors: First, The Hearn text, an American's mediation of the Japanese material, was itself conducive to bridging the gap between Eastern and Western sensibilities; Secondly, the medium of puppet theater gave them a common platform on which they could approach one another from their unique areas of expertise; and finally, Ping Chong's overarching vision, which drew upon his ability to combine disparate performance styles and express himself through various artistic media, gave focus to the entire project. The puppets helped tap into something fundamental to Chong's theatrical vision, and that added another technique to his already prodigious arsenal of expressive instruments. Chong comments:

Of course, theater is a collaborative form, but puppetry is even more so.

Because it really is an ensemble form.... It's like putting a clock together, because it's a precision instrument that's being put together here. I think of this show as a precision instrument. I don't know if that's specific to the way I work anyway, which is very precise, or to puppetry in general.... It's very natural to me. In fact, I feel I relate to it better than even working with live performers because it's transformative—because it's metaphysical by nature. And that's something I'm fundamentally interested in anyway.

If *Kwaidan* represents a precision instrument, whose assembly relies most heavily on a master craftsperson's distinct directorial vision, then *Dieu!: God Mother Radio*, by Roman Paska with Massimo Schuster, represents a sort of creative *pas-de-deux*. While the collaborators of *Kwaidan* had no professional connections outside their work together on their production, Paska and Schuster are old colleagues, with a friendship dating back to the early '70s when they toured together through France and Europe with the Bread and Puppet Theater. In the decades since, they have kept track of each other's careers as they both matured as solo performers with unique, idiosyncratic performing styles. Schuster created a boisterous, folk-inflected presentation—while Paska, with his Theater for the Birds, developed a precise, almost classically constrained performance manner, a westernized styling of the traditional wayang golek rod puppets of Indonesia. More recently, Paska has focused on designing and directing larger ensemble productions that use actors, dancers and puppeteers on an equal footing. Although based in New York, Paska's work reflects a distinctly European concern for theory and form, and for a deeply nuanced approach to the relationship between performer and object. In describing their contrasting approaches to their craft, Schuster writes: "He likes to think, I like to sweat; he likes precision, I like rough, approximate things; he likes to express his meaningful vision of the world, I like the senseless side of the universe."

As described by Paska, the origin of *Dieu!: God Mother Radio* was an encounter he had with Schuster at the 1997 UNIMA Festival in Budapest. After watching Schuster's performance of *Charta*, Paska was inspired by the idea of directing a piece that would feature Schuster's stage persona and virtuoso solo performance technique:

The concept was that this would be a tour-de-force performance,

and of course, that's asking a lot of a performer. But I never lost faith in Massimo's ability to pull it off. He himself has a very strong stage presence and I was already familiar with his broad range of character voices and interpretations. Basically, I wanted him to bring these abilities and his own innate theatrical instincts to the rehearsal process, and that became an important part of the way the piece developed.

Schuster began pursuing the means of producing the show in Europe. Through his efforts, they were able to persuade a small Parisian theater, the Theatre 71 Malakoff, to give them the use of their space for four weeks, complete with technicians, staff, and shop facilities. "A luxury," notes Paska. They worked on the production for five weeks in Paris, a period culminating in previews and public performances.

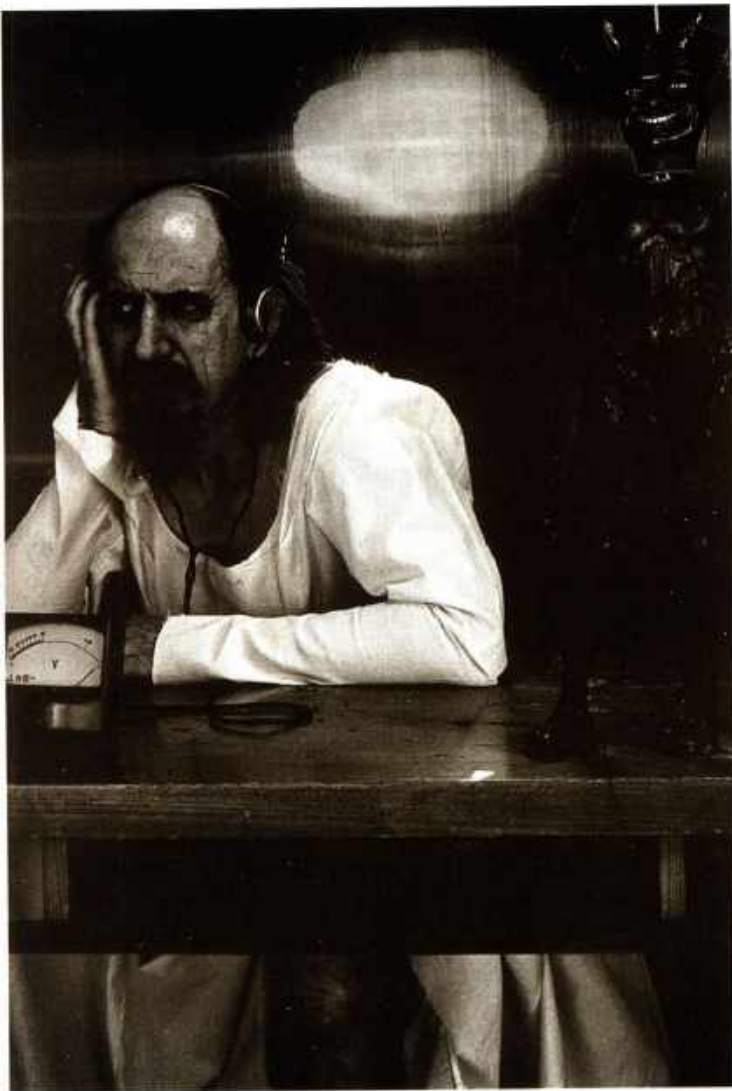
It was Schuster who suggested using an obscure Christopher Marlowe play, *Massacre at Paris* as a starting point. The play recounts events surrounding the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, when Huguenots were slaughtered in the streets of the city. In Schuster's mind, the scenes of urban strife and religious fanaticism echoed with some of the brutalities he had encountered personally on a recent trip to Sarajevo. He had been working on a performance with these themes that he had tentatively titled: "GOD!!", meant to sound like a shriek. Paska was attracted to the Marlowe play because of its fragmentary and possibly unfinished structure, which made it "less of a sacred text." He was also fascinated by its sheer theatricality—with 17 murders and 30-odd victims in five acts, it outpaces most Hollywood action films. In addition, Paska was intrigued by the possibility that Marlowe might have been an eyewitness to the events, which gave his drama a sense of contemporary urgency, like a kind of Elizabethan Living Newspaper.

On top of the thematic material proposed by Schuster, Paska overlaid another layer of textual material inspired by research into American radio programs from the '30's and '40's—Arthur Godfrey, The Mercury Theater, The Shadow, Edward R. Morrow and others. The Marlowe text was now folded inside of a framing device of a radio Deejay and announcer that would be Schuster's stage persona. Paska explains some of the complexities of this structure:

... So the idea was that Marlowe's piece is a play within a play,

the play within which the play-within-the-play is played being *Dieu!: God Mother Radio*. Massimo is actually performing the role of a radio announcer—or Deejay, I suppose—who creates his own news in the interest of having something to report. He is in a closed world, and from the closed world of the radio station from which he's broadcasting, he is basically performing for an invisible radio audience, which, for the theatrical audience, may or may not even exist. We call this character "God."

After working out the theme and subject matter for the piece, Schuster and Paska needed to negotiate their respective roles during the production phase—as both are strong directors and consummate performers in their own right, this took some conscious doing. In his own work, Paska's directing tends to be rigorously controlled, with the puppets' slightest gestures choreographed. This tightness and precision had to bend some in response to Schuster's more spontaneous performing style—and Schuster in turn had to forfeit a fair amount of improvisational freedom to Paska. Yet, the restraints and limits imposed from outside stimulated Schuster: "Working with someone else, instead of directing myself, has offered me the opportunity to be forced



Massimo Schuster in
Dieu: God Mother Radio

photo: Laurent Kariv

tor. For Paska, every project is a collaboration. Since not all projects can function with the same degree of openness and equality between participating artists, perhaps what defines a collaboration best is that each artist involved contribute something unique to the process without which the final product would not have been realizable. Given this definition, the true gauge of any collaborative work could be measured by asking how much would the final product have been altered if any one of the artists had been replaced. In the case of Paska/Schuster, the answer is that *Dieu! God, Mother Radio*, since it grew out of the interaction between their highly individualistic creative styles, could hardly have come into existence without the two of them. With *Kwaidan* however, because of Ping Chong's leadership role in the creative process, the other two artists took on a more or less supportive function. Would it have been possible for Chong to have assembled a different creative team and still have resulted in a similar work? The answer is not so clear-cut as it is with the Paska/Schuster piece. It is certain, though, that the particular sets of technical skills and cultural assumptions brought to the project by Ludwig and Ishii substantially shaped and enhanced the production.

Does puppetry heighten the collaborative aspects of the theater process? In replying to this question, Schuster points out that what makes a good field of collaboration (which could also be nuclear physics, soccer or sex), "is not the object of collaboration, but the willingness of the partners to collaborate." While this may be the case, it is not enough for the collaborators to merely be willing, they must also have a field that actively supports their will (an atomic laboratory, a grassy lot, an empty bed). To the extent that puppet theater merges the technical and performance aspects of theater, and encourages a collective give-and-take among participants, it can be considered a good arena for collaborative activity. As a medium that provides a single, unified field to artists of various and sundry disciplines and cultural backgrounds, both Paska and Chong agree that puppetry is unsurpassed. In Paska's words:

The puppet theater at large is a kind of meeting place for the arts—

the visual arts and performing arts especially, historically even before the rise of the visual theater movement or performance art movement in the '70s. So from that point of view, the idea of collaboration with artists from other disciplines, is natural. In some ways, it's surprising that it doesn't happen more often. •

into someone else's limits." He found that working with an outside eye gave him a new view of his own work, and, "seeing someone else going through his daily creative process makes one look differently at his own creative process." Differences in their working methods did cause some friction. Schuster writes: "I hate rehearsing, always have, and since Roman obviously doesn't, some of my days were long." In such situations, it helps to be old friends. With an intimate knowledge of each other's stage languages and personalities dating back decades, a level of artistic accord could be reached far surpassing that of a more conventional director/actor dialectic. The differences in personal and performance styles can then be channeled directly into the collaborative process.

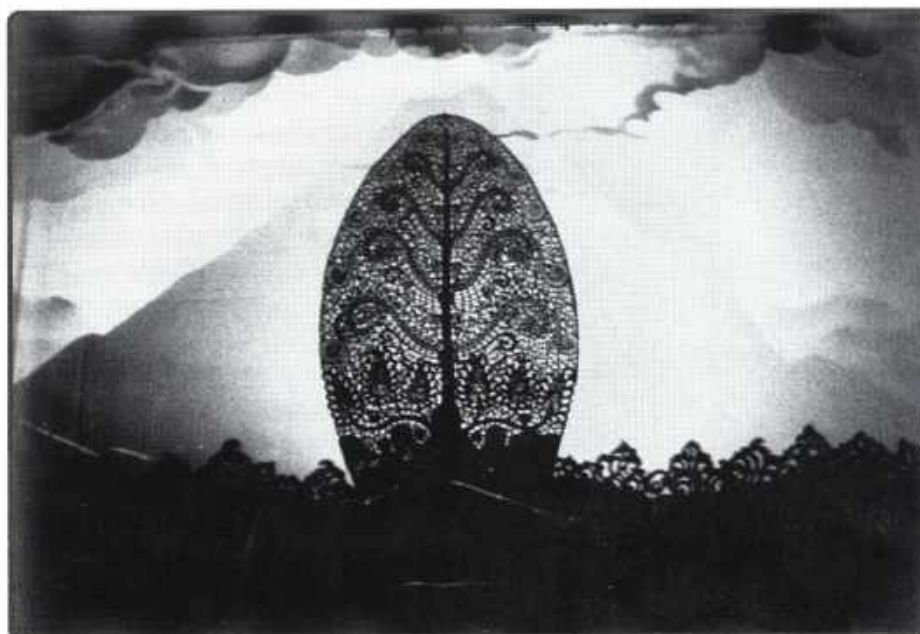
But what is meant by "collaboration"? Paska points out that defining the idea of collaboration is tricky. Since he and Schuster share similar artistic statures, they had to work together on a very deep level or else the project would have failed. In other situations, the dynamic might be very different, yet the division of labor among the artists involved in the creative work process is still an important fac-

INTERCULTURAL COLLABORATION—

WAYANG LISTRIK

INTERVIEW WITH LARRY REED

BY PAMELA MALKIN



The opening visual in
Wayang Listrik—
the kayon against a
distant mountain

photo: Larry Reed

"There is a special joy presenting legends and myths that are unfamiliar to most Western audiences and making those images mean something. Mythology itself is very hard to do in a realistic form and often gets drowned out by commercialism. Shadows, with their unique power and almost limitless expression, are better suited to fantasy and myth than they are to realism. The shadow performance provides a link between past and future, between the individual and society—between myth and a way to live everyday life. The key to the Shadowlight style is the exploration of what one culture has to offer any other and how one performer, designer, director or audience member influences the entirety. It is a sharing of tastes and ideas. When we stop learning about life from ourselves, from others and the world outside—we die." We are sitting on a warm July afternoon in the garden patio of the Shadowlight

Productions office, located in San Francisco's Noe Valley. It is home base to founder Larry Reed's latest, ambitious directorial project—*Wayang Listrik* [Electric Shadows]. Our discussion focuses on the complexity of this inter-cultural collaboration between Reed's company and some notable Balinese shadow artists, most importantly I Wayan Wija, *Listrik's* co-director.

One of the few Americans to be trained in traditional *wayang kulit*, Balinese shadow puppetry, Larry has pioneered a contemporary, fusion shadow theatre by integrating traditional elements with Western theatre and film styles.

His award-winning 1994 production of *In Xanadu* melded Larry's Western perspectives with those of Tibetan, Chinese and Indonesian artists. In 1995, Shadowlight and *gamelan* Sekar Jaya combined with four Balinese artists to create *Sidha Karya*,

a massive shadow and masked theatre piece presented in San Francisco.

The following year Larry collaborated with two preeminent Balinese artists, I Wayan Wija and Dewa Puta Berata on a shadow extravaganza, *Mayadanawa*. Created for Balinese audiences, it extensively toured the island. Larry had known both artists for over twenty years and studied with Wija in the early 1970's. I Wayan Wija, one of Bali's most popular *dalangs* for the past thirty-five years, is internationally renowned for his highly skilled puppet manipulation, vocal quality and characterization. Berata has distinguished himself as a noted musician and scenic designer; he has worked extensively in American universities as well as Bali.

While *Wayang Listrik* marks another collaboration between Shadowlight and Balinese artists, there are substantial differences between this venture and earlier

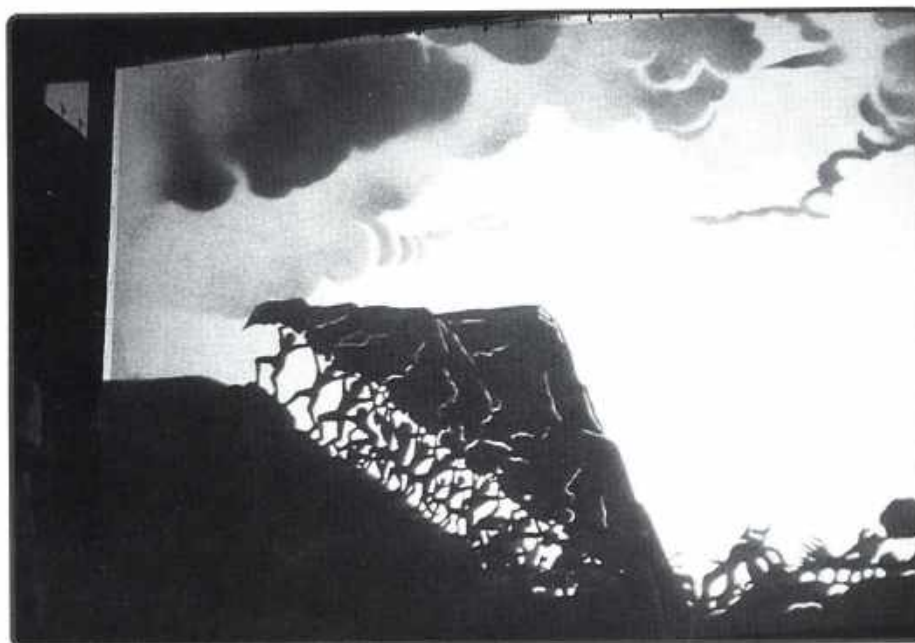
productions. Wija and Berata will travel to the U.S. with choreographer I Nyoman Catra and four highly skilled Balinese shadowcasters. These seven Indonesian performers will join forces with seven Western artists to present the piece solely for American audiences.

Asked about the genesis of *Wayang Listrik*, Larry replied, "Actually, it was the Henson Foundation's idea. I had presented

tour to other venues on both coasts through October.

The source material for *Listrik* is "an exceptionally complex Balinese legend chosen by I Wayan Wija." The story of "the Elixir of Eternal Life," is a profoundly evocative Hindu creation myth and a story of the gods' coming of age. Larry explained that "Wayan Wija was drawn to this piece because he was quite interested in

relying on techniques that were originated in other productions, but are developed and refined for this show. A cinema-size screen, 30 feet wide by 15 feet high, will again be used. Multiple electrical sources will replace the traditional single coconut oil flame. Three xenon lights with interior motorized discs and up to five halogen instruments with dimmers will supply most of the cinematic effects, particularly scale



Figures moving a mountain up a hill

photo: Larry Reed

In Xanadu at the 1994 Henson International Festival of Puppet Theatre. Wayan Wija had performed his own show for Cheryl Henson. The Foundation thought it would be interesting to see us collaborate on a new production to be seen in the U.S."

It has been a relatively quick process. Funding was secured from a variety of sources. "This past May we were sponsored by one of these sources, Arts International/Inroads, to begin work on design and structural elements. Construction of original masks, sets, costumes and puppets, designed by Berata and Wayan Wija, were begun in Bali. All of the Balinese performers will arrive in the U.S. on August 10. We will then have three weeks to put the entire production together here in San Francisco; it's a little scary!" After its September 2nd premiere in Oregon, it will be showcased at the Henson International Festival of Puppet Theatre in New York and

choosing a story from the early episodes of the Mahabharata, which he rarely gets to perform." His phantasmagorical puppet creations would be difficult to realize in Balinese venues due to their size and the technical complexity of manipulation. "However, the epic scale of the story becomes eminently possible on the big screen I employ. So, for Wija, it is an opportunity to explore something he wouldn't get a chance to otherwise."

Shadowlight Productions is noted for using projected shadows, multiple actors/puppeteers and original music to create, essentially, a new form; a synthesis between the simple majesty of the traditional one-man shadow show, with the power and scale of film. When asked if the *Wayang Listrik* text would give him a chance to stretch technologically, Larry felt that "this might not be a 'breakthrough show' because of our rehearsal time constraints; we are

and perspective. The ability to provide such things as "close ups" and "wide shots" are greatly enhanced with projected shadows which, Larry said, "are not at all possible if the performer is working directly against a screen." "In fact," Larry continued, "one of our tricks during the rehearsal period will be to learn how to work in three-dimensional space with two-dimensional figures. There will be tremendous experimentation and collaboration in this area."

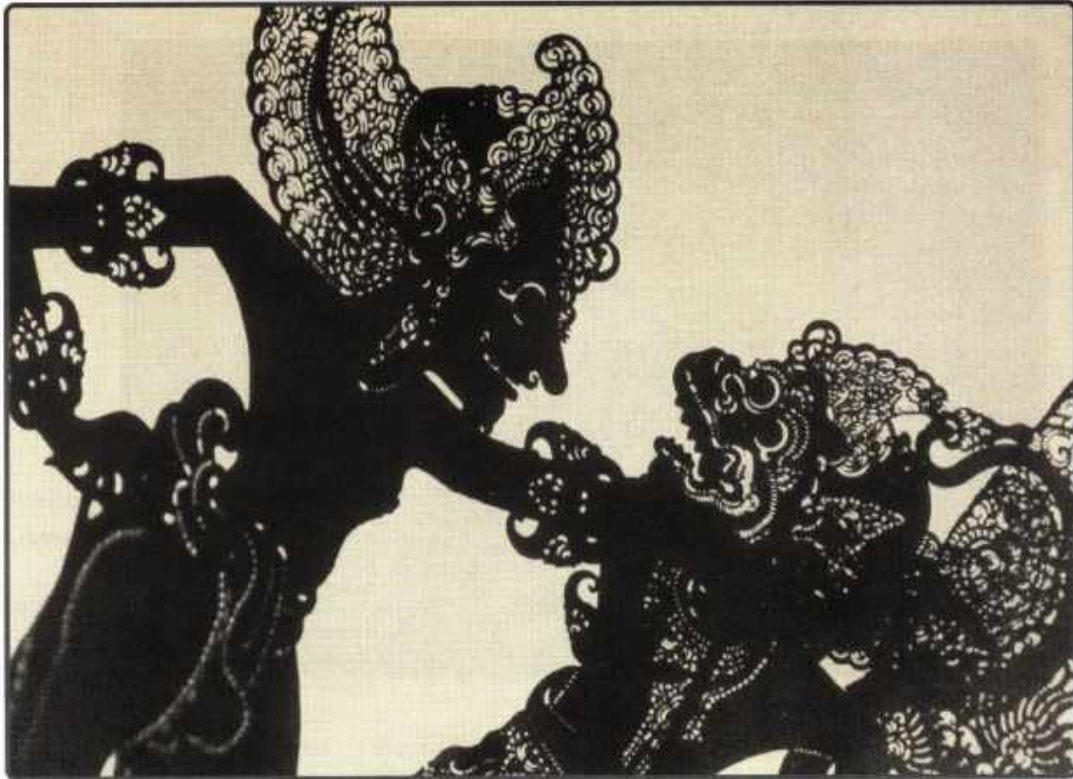
The original music by Miguel Frasconi and Sarah Willner will also blend traditional and more technological elements. While in Bali during pre-production, Miguel electronically sampled each *gamelan* instrument so that they can, if necessary, be tweaked a bit when played back on an electronic keyboard. Larry elaborated: "As we will only be using a

five- person live *gamelan* orchestra instead of the normal thirty, we can use the recorded samplings very effectively to augment the sound. We will also record group reactions and possibly various pieces of dialogue that don't necessarily have to be live."

Despite the complexity of the technology, Larry emphasized that *Listrik* will not

We will use some structured improvisation during the rehearsal process and then specify how, when and where limited improvisation will occur during the actual production. Where traditional shows have no set time limit, we are trying to create a very concise and exciting piece— no more than one and a half hours— which is a very Western concept."

traditional director, but to get to the finished product we are going through a complex give and take process. I want to guide and steer the Balinese artists as much as I can to do a show that communicates with Western culture. I want to learn from them. I have been dealing with wayang characters—the gods and various figures— for over twenty years. I know how I have tried to help



A scene from
Wayang Listrik

simply be a technical tour de force: "All of the Balinese performers are some of the most experienced artists in the world— expert shadowmasters as well as dancers. This production will be heavily dependent on the high quality of both the puppetry and acting. In shows such as *In Xanadu*, for instance, actors played a supporting role to the puppets and technology; in this production, the puppets and technology will play a supporting role to the actors."

I asked Larry to elaborate on additional differences he envisioned between the traditional *wayang kulit* and the *Wayang Listrik* collaboration. "Traditional shows are completely improvised," Larry noted. "Since we have very sophisticated technical elements occurring backstage, however, we will have to set parameters.

The scenic elements designed by I Dewa Puta Berata will also blend Balinese and Western sensibilities. "All the visuals— sets, costumes, masks, figures— will have a Balinese flair appropriate to both the traditional and original styles of puppets we are using. The sets that are being designed, however, are truly one of the most important aspects of projected shadow theatre. Traditional *wayang kulit* productions do not give a defined sense of place; by adding this element, we create a certain Western 'cinematic reality' that is really quite new to the form."

Because of the special intercultural nature of *Wayang Listrik*, Larry eloquently discussed the unique working relationship he has developed with his Balinese collaborators. "Ultimately, I will function as a

Western audiences understand perhaps unfamiliar legends and stories. I am immensely curious, however, as to how the Balinese artists explain their own traditional myths. Their points of view will then be filtered through my aesthetic sensibility."

Since both Larry and Wayan Wija are co-directors, I asked what separate visions each of them would bring to the production. Larry reiterated that his technological innovations would primarily contribute to the form of the piece. In addition to establishing a defined environment, scale and perspective, "this work will develop sequencing and continuous flow of action." "When you are doing a traditional one-man show, the shadow screen is blank for considerable periods of time while the *dalang* is preparing for the next action.

"This production utilizes multiple performers; when one shadowmaster finishes, the lights change and another puppeteer can begin immediately."

"I will also be adding some of my sensibility to the Balinese legend, looking for ways to help Western audiences connect with the myth. For instance, I will reduce the number of characters who are named. I might also introduce characters—a clown, for instance—who would add some humor accessible to American tastes. Most importantly, however, I am bringing a respect for the tradition, but I will not be bound by it. We will use what is appropriate to create a potentially new tradition."

Larry noted that "Wayan Wija's voice as co-director will be enormously important. Wija, of course, brought the story to the project. He has provided both the content and the specific puppetry sequences. Both he and the choreographer,

I Nyoman Catra, are incredible performers who will add invaluable insight."

He continued, "In working with Wija, there will be a tremendous amount of collaboration. He is an amazingly intuitive performer; he can come to a rehearsal and by manipulating the figures, arrive at seemingly spontaneous solutions."

After August 10, mornings will be spent constructing visuals that were not finished in Bali. Afternoons and evenings will be devoted to rehearsals. "The first week of rehearsal will primarily be talking—identifying what has to occur at each moment, making it both concise and theatrically exciting. The rehearsal process itself will be tricky coordination. The puppets' moves will be intricately blocked and choreographed."

Larry noted that the entire company would then refine and polish the production. "We are going to videotape every rehearsal to help in this process. All the performers will review the prior days' work, giving us a common reference. It will not be solely my decision to say what did or didn't work; it becomes quite evident when everyone sees the product together. All the artists involved are so

experienced that even though the rehearsal period is very limited, we can make this time really count. The final responsibility will, however, be mine."

In closing, Larry reflected on the remarkable benefits that can be derived from this unique intercultural collaboration. "In one sense," Larry remarked, "The Balinese tradition is a culmination of centuries of development and is perfect in its way. All traditional materials are used beautifully. The flame is the best light; rawhide is the best material. An electric light, by contrast, is dead. It doesn't move. It is cold, hard light. However, you can do powerful things with electricity—you can project, you can add the sense of place and fluidity. We're at the beginning of our search for perfection."

"My Balinese collaborators are incredibly inventive in the traditional context and are reaching out towards what I

can offer. I am going in the other direction. It is a wonderful blend. None of us have the ego investment of 'my way or no way.' Our investment is purely in making it the best production possible."

"What is most exciting is the chance to work on a common project with people who have been my teachers; people I have both admired and learned from. I now have the possibility to help them do something in this country which has the potential for being very special."

"This production will hopefully be 'food for the soul.' In Balinese tradition, that is the ultimate theatrical goal. In the Western sense, that is not always the case but, in the best productions, it certainly can be."

Pamela Malkin is Associate Department Head of the Department of Theatre and Dance at CalPoly at San Luis Obispo.



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AHAB'S WIFE:

Harbor Soundings, Ocean Dreams

by Jena Osman

Instead of classifying
he browsed and dreamed
—Susan Howe,
"Melville's Marginalia"

The Snug Harbor Cultural Center was built in 1833 as a home for retired naval and merchant seamen. A few years later, Herman Melville took his first voyage out to sea, and in 1851, *Moby Dick* was published. These contemporaneous histories combine in the current art exhibit at Snug Harbor, "Ahab's Wife: Harbor Soundings, Ocean Dreams." But the generative powers of combination don't stop there. The Snug Harbor galleries consist of many small rooms clustered on the edges of a grand hallway. In these rooms are sculptures, paintings, historical artifacts, installations, and "puppet inspirations"—all gathered at the material and psychic peripheries of Melville's fictional and real worlds.

Procedures of combination, juxtaposition, collaboration, and mixing of disciplines can be found in all of the work here. It makes perfect sense that much of the art included has strong ties to puppet theater, for these are the same procedures that make puppet theater the powerful form that it is. Theatre, visual art, dance, music and literature combine and juxtapose so as to allow for the spectator's imagination to be maximally active and creative. The exhibit "Ahab's Wife" is, in a way, a giant puppet theater; the spectator builds connections between the parts, and infuses the show with lively linking narratives.

May 16-October 4
Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, 1000 Richmond Terrace, Staten Island



"Turtle Empress"—cibachrome chinagram
by Naomi Tarant

The title of the exhibition comes from a performance work (conceived by visual artist Ellen Driscoll, poet Tom Sleigh and choreographers Amy Spencer and Richard Colton) that is part of this year's International Festival of Puppet Theater. On the first floor of the gallery space, there are drawings, monoprints and sculptures by Driscoll, serving as a kind of map to her thinking about the performance piece. As the gallery notes mention, only one line in Melville's *Moby Dick* makes mention of the fact that Ahab has a wife; Driscoll presents the figure of Ahab's wife "as Ahab's literal and symbolic other half..." Even though Ahab's wife has an extremely minimal presence in Melville's narrative, there is still room for revising this single mention. In the novel, Captain Peleg tells the narrator not to fear Ahab: "Besides my boy, he has a wife—not three voyages wedded—a sweet, resigned girl." In Driscoll's (re)creation, Ahab's wife defies such sentimental and disempowered description. Instead, she is reinvented as an explorer, an adventuress; buildings parachute above her head and the circumference of her skirt is a map of the world. In this exhibit, the "other half" of Ahab revolts against her literary suppression. Driscoll's project is to let that previously hidden half come to light.

In one room of the gallery there are stage models for the performance version of "Ahab's Wife," accompanied by a videotape of an earlier production done at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. A room across the hall has several sculptures made of steel and glass that, although not part of the performance, seem directly related to its theme. Small orange and purple figures are positioned inside of transparent globes—a configuration which reminds us of laboratory experiments, but also of how model ships are magically captured in bottles. The glass globes are encased in heavy architectural steel, sometimes suspended from the ceiling and the combination of these antithetical materials is startling. These pieces are simultaneously static and performative, narrative and abstract.

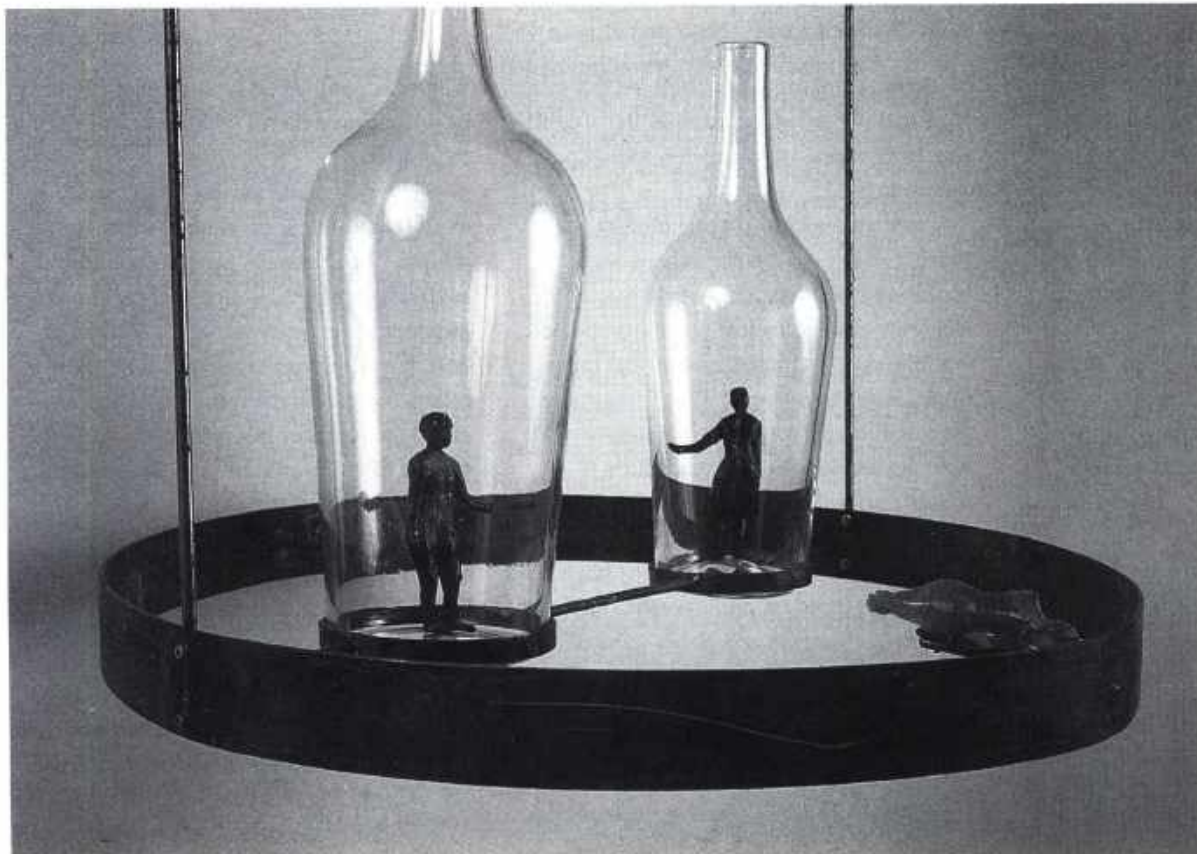
Down the walls of the main hall are drawings and sketches by Driscoll on the Ahab's Wife theme. Driscoll's work is the centerpiece of this show; however, there is much more to see. Several other rooms on the first floor display work of an historical nature. There is a room of scrimshaw objects and a room of 18th and 19th century prints of maritime scenes from Melville's personal collection. Upstairs, the multi-roomed exhibit "Puppet Inspiration" adds another dimension to the question of Ahab's "other." Puppets have always inhabited a dual world; they are simultaneously dead material and live actor, both sculptural and theatrical. The awe that performing objects cause in the spectator is the result of how material objects can magically *suggest life*. This is what Driscoll has accomplished with the seemingly lifeless textual figure of Ahab's Wife. What is interesting about the work represented in the "Puppet Inspiration" series is that it was selected because of its ability to *suggest puppets* which in turn associatively lead to the suggestion of *life*. In other words, the paintings and prints here have been chosen not only because of their quality, but also for how they gesture

toward the dual mechanisms in puppet theater. As with the rooms downstairs, these spaces do not ask for autonomy, but for connection, combination and interdisciplinary relations.

The "Puppet Inspiration" exhibit was curated by Leslee Asch and features the work of Neville Tranter, Janie Geiser, Liz Goldberg, Marguerita, Naomi Tarantal and Jana Zeller. Asch explains that this exhibition "is a celebration of the many faces and modes of artistic expression":

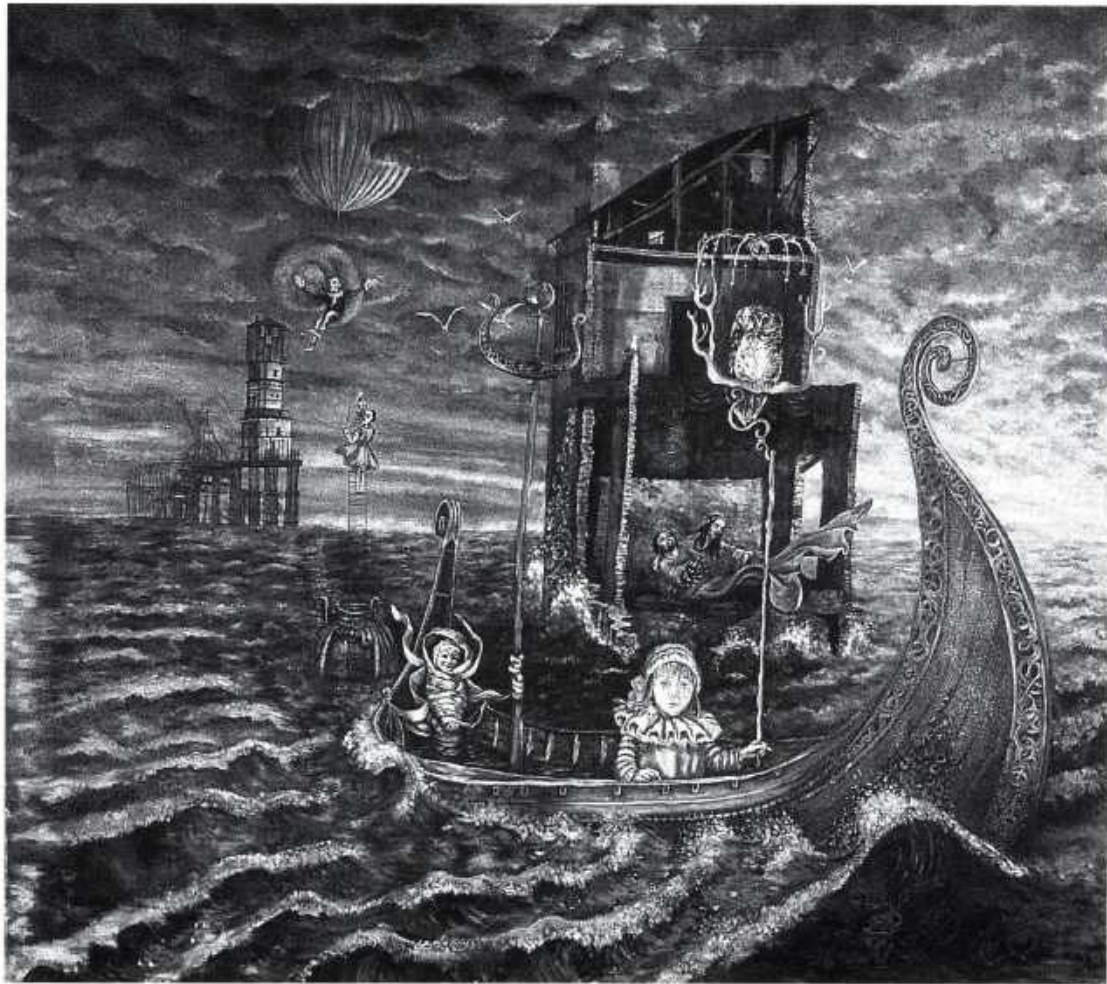
The starting point for the exhibition was my pleasure in discovering the paintings of Neville Tranter, a man well known and respected for his theatrical work in the puppet theater. Neville was, in fact, the first artist we selected for the very first festival, in 1992. During a casual conversation I learned that he had been painting for years and that in fact he painted constantly while he was on tour. I told him I would love to see the work. Many months passed and finally, the opportunity arose for me to see images of his work. I was completely blown away by what I saw and I decided somehow these should be shown...

Janie Geiser is also well-known for her puppet theater work, but her visual artwork shown here will seem familiar to those who have seen her illustrations for *The New York Times Book Review*. To someone unacquainted with Geiser's performance work, the connection of these paintings to puppet theater may not be visible at first. However, Geiser articulates the link quite clearly in her artist's statement when she explains that she has always been "drawn to a certain kind of flattened out perspective, to simple and stylized gestural language, and to juxtapositions in scale. The elliptical narratives of the films and performances are mirrored in the paintings, almost as if they were stills from lost films or barely remembered dreams." In the painting "One Chose Fire," the walls of a brick apartment building open to reveal two men sitting on chairs, one behind the other. The man in back is on fire. Anyone who saw Geiser's piece "Evidence of Floods" at the last Festival will recognize in these two-dimensional works the combination of sparse urban landscape and elemental magical realism unique to Geiser's narratives.



"Cardinal Points"
by Ellen Driscoll

photo: Nicholas Walster



*When My Mother
Was Bargaining
with Death*

by Jana Zeller

Narrative is also what pushes the paintings of Jana Zeller. Zeller has taken advantage of the fact that the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, with its many small rooms, provides mini-installation spaces. A sound track designed by Noah Thorp plays in the background, and while looking at the paintings, you have the acoustical sensation of a circus in the distance, voices, and the seashore. The sound enhances the “ghostliness” that Zeller’s paintings point to. Zeller’s figures are less “flat,” less abstract than Geiser’s; they are frightening in the way that images from the best children’s books are. “When My Mother Was Bargaining with Death” at first appears to be a fantastical boating adventure taken by two children, but on closer examination, the details provide an unshakable eeriness. In the background, the father falls backwards and one of his arms dissipates into feathers. The mother’s double stands on a

ladder in a sinking diving bell. At the same time that we are attracted to Zeller’s child-like landscapes, we also want to escape their danger.

Such an uncomfortable duality is ever-present in puppet theater, where each element of our everyday world has a shadowy and fantastical counterpart—an Ahab’s wife—which the theatrical inanimate allows to move into the foreground. Naomi Tarantal’s work is in dialogue with how the shadow side of perception is literally addressed by puppet theatre in her Cibachrome “Chinagrams.” Small puppets, leaves, flowers and line drawings have been randomly placed on photographic paper so as to form complex and richly colored “snapshots” of performing shadows. The “Chinagrams” freeze animation—but the animation of objects rather than humans. Unlike Geiser and Zeller’s work, these pieces lack obvious narrative. Instead, the

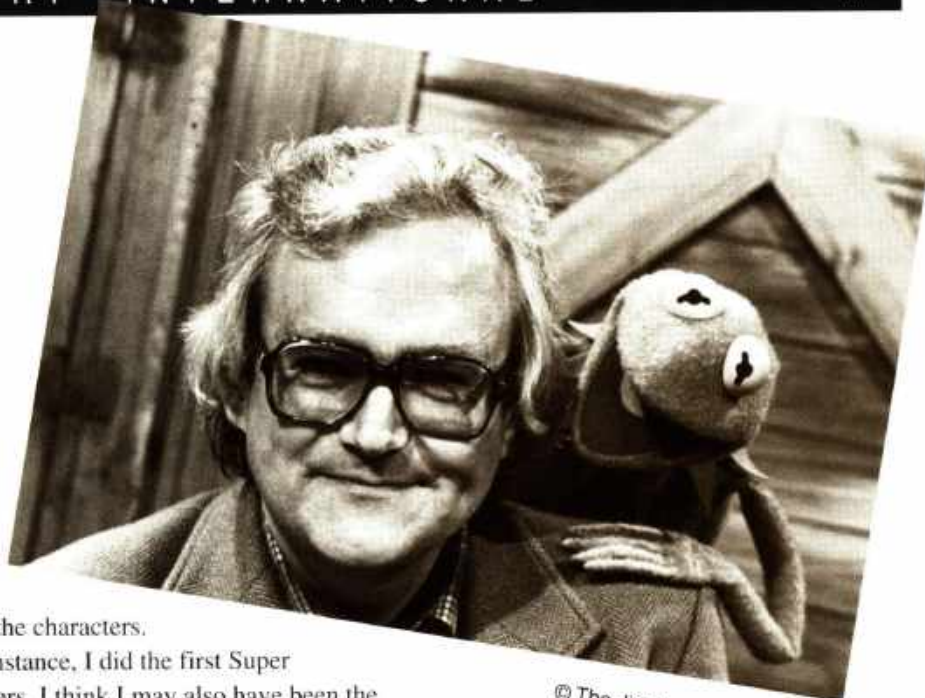
viewer is confronted with a beautiful array of provocative forms which ask us to bring them to life.

The range and variety of the work exhibited at the Snug Harbor show is unique. The result of mixing literature, seafaring artifacts, sculptures, paintings and puppet theater, proves that art forms are best served when in dialogue with their others (be they hidden or not). Ahab’s wife clearly announces her presence: she is the double that this exhibit (and the puppet theater) makes visible. I’m not sure what Melville would have thought of this associative expansion of his epic novel; however, I’m certain he would have appreciated the adventures it provides.

Jena Osman is a visiting assistant professor of English and creative writing at Ursinus College. She edits the interdisciplinary arts journal CHAIN.

A Conversation with Muppet Writer, Jerry Juhl

by Michael R. Malkin



© The Jim Henson Company

1 Could you list some of the work of which you are most proud?

“I’m proud of many things, but I have to start by mentioning *Sesame Street*, even though I was a relatively minor player on that team. In its prime, *Sesame Street* was a project that changed the world in small but significant ways. The show was a successful experiment in making the education of small children both entertaining and accessible. The Muppets developed a knack for blending a genuinely inquisitive, childlike excitement and curiosity about life with a solid curriculum. We created characters, relationships and situations that resonated with a lot of people – inner city kids, very young children and adults. I still know adults that spend a lot of hours watching the show.

I think the comedy style of *Sesame Street* also carried over into other areas of television. I did four or five seasons of the show starting in 1969, when the series began. I worked long distance on the show. I turned down the job of head writer for it so that Susan and I could move back to California. (Probably NOT the shrewdest career move I ever made.) In those very early days it was very hard to find writers for *Sesame Street*. I wound up submitting material over the telephone and by US mail – this was well before the days of FAX and e-mail. I wrote exclusively for the puppets because they were the characters I knew.

Because of the physical distance, I wasn’t a part of the character development process in the same way that writers are when they’re in the same building with the performers and can collaborate with them in a close personal sense. At the same time, I always tried to find different things to do

with the characters.

For instance, I did the first Super Grovers. I think I may also have been the first person to do the fairy tales – with Kermit as the reporter poking around in the business of Rapunzel or Jack. At this point, probably hundreds of those have been done over the years. I was working with a group of people who were trying to push the edges and find ways to use the characters in ways that were both meaningful and entertaining.

We used an immense guidebook that listed all of the educational goals towards which we were supposed to be working. (By now, twenty-nine years later, that guidebook must run to a dozen volumes – like an encyclopedia.) We looked to it to find principles on which we could base our work. But it very often worked in reverse. We would write things that were immensely entertaining to us and then we would ransack the book for an excuse to justify what we had done.

Ultimately, it was the fact that we were dealing with characters in situations and relationships that people really cared about that made the educational messages so appealing.

One of the things that I also enjoyed most over the years was the whole body of work with *The Muppet Show* characters. I love to take a family of characters and try to sustain them over a long period.”

What was the role of the writers in the creation and development of characters for the Muppets?

“There’s no way to generalize about the process of creating and developing charac-

ters. We’ve worked in many different ways. Some came almost entirely from a performer. For instance, Miss Piggy comes very much from Frank Oz. I say “almost” because Frank found and developed that character in pieces of material that we provided for him. What was on the page wasn’t character. What was there was situation.

Other characters are thoroughly developed on the page. For instance, the *Fraggle Rock* characters were developed pretty much by writers and then taken to performers. For the most part, this situation was more like the relationship that actors can have with a playwright and a new play.

There have also been some really elaborate collaborations on characters. Some characters have started quietly and then developed through an interesting cooperation between writers and actors. For example, Dave Goelz’s Gonzo character started off as a strange novelty act that we put into one of the shows. We kept giving him new things to do because Dave kept creating weirdly compelling aspects of Gonzo that the writers could then, in turn, play off. Gonzo grew from a character who did quintessential geek acts on *The Muppet Show* to a point at which we could put him on the big screen, call him Charles Dickens and get away with it.”

3 What kind of special demands does puppetry place on artists?

“ We were always aware that puppetry offers unique creative possibilities and places singular demands on character and story development.

Puppets can create an entirely different reality than, for example, animation. I think most people watching a cartoon have an innate awareness that what they're seeing is drawn. Therefore, anything is possible. Of course, there would be a huge argument about that from animators.) Still, there is a sense that animation is a two dimensional reality controlled with a pencil. Puppetry creates a three dimensional reality. I like both forms but puppetry has a sense of depth and reality that – at least for me – animation never does. With prosthetic make-up and high tech costumes we're entering a new blend – a “never-never world” combining puppetry and people.

Puppetry is really good at dealing with humor and innocence. I think that puppetry that strays completely from either of these two things tends to get itself into trouble. There's something fundamentally childlike about the process of puppetry... but childlike in a very profound sense. The Muppet performers jocularly talk about themselves as wiggling dolls for a living. In truth, that's what puppets really are – strange, simple, childlike playthings. Because of that simplicity they are the things that shamans use to play out the myths and speak for the gods. This fact, that they can be humorous, innocent and, at the same time mythic or godlike, is what makes them unique.

The popular image of puppetry as a childlike “playing with dolls” has gotten the art into huge trouble. It has led to a ridiculous but remarkably pervasive tendency to pigeonhole puppetry as an art for children. Puppets may, in part, be a celebration of innocence but they're capable of all sorts of sophisticated things.

Puppeteers play very close to the edge. They're always trying to pass off a dummy

as a living creature. Performers who don't have some sort of sense of humor about this process can get themselves into, or won't be able to get themselves out of, some major difficulties. I remember, once, watching Kermit the Frog do a live number on television. While the cameras were on him, his left eyeball fell off and sat on the playboard where it watched him for the rest of the number.

Without humor and innocence, it's really easy for puppets and puppeteers to become pretentious. Pretension is probably the deadliest enemy of puppetry and, perhaps, of all art. I don't mean to say that puppets are only for comedy, but the craft's underlying relationship with absurdity should always be there – somewhere in the artist's mind.”

4 Was there ever a problem taking the characters too seriously after they became famous?

“ After characters like Kermit and Miss Piggy became famous, I had to work hard to avoid thinking of them as the cultural icons that they had become. That's one of the real problems in bringing in new writers for these characters. They can't get beyond the iconographic status of the characters. We bring young writers in because we're looking for people who know the characters, their personalities and foibles, but who can forget about all the situations they have seen these guys in. We're looking for fresh fields to cultivate. So often writers come back to us with exactly the same sorts of things we've been doing for years. That's deadly. The characters are NOT icons. They're friends – sentient beings – that react to different situations in unique, peculiar, yet totally believable ways. It's important to create situations that help the performers explore new aspects of the characters' idiosyncratic personalities. I understand how hard that can be – perhaps better than anyone. After thirty-five years – or whatever it is – I have to fight the tendency to fall into predictable patterns all the time.”

5 What puppeteers had the greatest influence on you?

“ The puppeteer with the greatest influence on me during my early years was Burr Tillstrom of Kukla, Fran and Ollie. He created a family of characters and then acted as nanny and nursemaid for them through his entire career. I was intrigued with the idea that he was constantly in the process of creating a set of characters that were living their lives in front of an audience.

Once I started to work for the Muppets, I became fascinated with Peter Schumann's [Bread and Puppet Theater] work. With his giant puppets, he was working on a scale that was completely unheard of in puppetry. He appealed to adults with his huge, mythic figures and material that was typically highly political and wildly satiric. It was so different from the puppetry world in which I grew up... little furry bunny going to Miss Perfect's birthday party.

More recently, I have been completely taken with Nick Park's work on *Wallace and Gromit*. He's become the darling of PBS. His precision, his timing, and his sense of comedy and character are brilliant. I put stop motion work into the same general world as puppetry. Besides, Park is so good that I certainly don't want to exclude him.~

6 When you play around with original projects for yourself, do you consider puppetry projects?

“ That's an interesting question. No! Never! I started thinking of myself as a puppeteer when I was about eleven years old. I was one of those obsessed kids, I was a puppeteer all through school and got my original job with the Muppets thinking I was a puppeteer. After working the Muppets for a couple of years, it slowly began to dawn on me that I wasn't a puppeteer at all. My thinking processes were completely different from those of puppeteers. I discovered that I'm really a writer. I think linearly in terms of story, character and development. Puppeteers, I think, are basically performers but are also a little like sculptors and a little like choreographers.

They think in terms of shape and movement. I was the sort of guy who wanted to write exactly the sort of things that dovetailed with a certain style of puppetry . . . and I built a whole career on that. My job has been to create the kinds of characters, stories, situations and dialogue that puppeteers can use in their work—so that their puppetry can really shine. I try to present puppeteers with a series of problems that can only be solved with puppets. I know what puppeteers do and admire them. When I toy around with projects on my own, I think about children's stories, or I tinker with the idea of doing a play.”

Do you have any tips or tricks that you can share?

“No, I have a lot of methods that can help to get me through the morass of half formed ideas. I use very well known ways to clarify thoughts so that I can get a better handle on what I'm doing—outlines, three by five cards, that sort of thing.

The biggest “trick” is not a trick—it's whole philosophy. Go with the truth. Hunt down truth and use it at whatever level is necessary.

Sometimes on a conscious level, but usually unconsciously, we use the events that are going on in our lives as the material for the fantasies that we create. In the same way, actors look at the characters in a play and try to realize them in terms of the truths of their own lives. At whatever level—whatever problem you're dealing with—the most difficult and most important task is to search out the basic truth of a situation—whether it's your own working situation or the situation of the characters. It's really easy to completely forget that, to get bogged down in strange, peripheral things; personal whims, ego conflicts, market forces, or the seduction of cool technical possibilities.”

Can you elaborate on what you mean by “the seduction of cool technical possibilities”?

“Technology can lead puppetry astray in terrible ways. The ability to do anything can lead to lot of traps. It's easy to wind up

doing things just for the sake of doing them. No matter how good the technology is, no matter how many wonderful things we're doing with foam rubber, servos, electronic controls and computers, Kermit the Frog is a sock and two Ping-Pong balls. But he has a reality that's hard to beat. Knowing how and when to use technology is a special sensibility—a real gift.

From the very beginning of his career, Jim was fascinated with the relationships between puppetry, television, film and other technologies. He experimented with throwing away the puppet stage and floating the characters free in film space. He placed the characters in a camera frame rather than in a puppet stage. Immediately, all the tricks of cinematography and editing could be combined with puppetry to create increasingly elaborate worlds of fantastic reality. Jim explored the limits of these techniques throughout his career. They were the basics for *Sesame Street*. He moved from simple hand puppets to the visual wonder of *Dark Crystal*, *Labyrinth* and *Storyteller*. At this point, he was combing all the tricks of cinematography, special effects, animatronics with the technologies that he was helping to develop for puppetry. Under his leadership, the company had pioneered in these areas as far back as *Emmet Otter* [1977]. Jim was very aggressive in his search for ways to incorporate technology into his work. Over the years, he grew into a mastery of many techniques. In the days of *The Jim Henson Hour*, he started experimenting with computer generated images. We did a computer-generated character named Waldo on that show which was performed by a puppeteer in real time. I think that was a first.

With *Storyteller*, he worked to combine high-level technology with great storytelling. Jim mastered many crafts. He knew puppetry, music, film, animatronics, computer generated imaging. He went through those things on his way to discovering that great storytelling is what it's all about.

To this day, the company continues to explore the relationships between puppetry,

storytelling and technology.

For Jim, *Storyteller* was an inspiration for a body of work that would have been a culmination of sorts. With that series, Jim pushed puppetry off in a remarkable, different direction. Puppetry today is heading down a road that Jim first bulldozed. His comedy crossed over from being very childlike to very sophisticated, very satirical, and sometimes very dark.

After the two technically ambitious feature films, Jim went back to the smaller medium of television with its smaller time frame. He brought in Anthony Minghella. Anthony, who started as a playwright, wrote all of the *Storytellers*. Working with Anthony and the producer, Duncan Kenworthy, I think Jim started to experience the potential of great stories in combination with all the techniques of film and puppetry that he had learned over the years. It was a process of preparation for the movies that he was going to make . . . that he never made.

What he left behind for puppetry with this series were signposts and standards that other people are now looking at. Like all great performers, what Jim had was the concentration and the discipline to focus intensely in order shut out the entire world for the sake of creating a few perfect moments.

Once and for all, the Muppets moved the field away from little Miss Cute Bunny, fairy stories, novelty acts, and children's birthday parties. This kind of puppetry was fine, in and of itself, but it was not where a major art form was going to happen. The art has potentials that need to be explored and developed. The field is attracting a new generation of people who might—without Jim—not have been drawn to puppetry. It was fun to be a part of that search for new potentials and it's wonderful to watch it continue.”

This article is excerpted from Malkin's upcoming book, “Puppetry: Wonderful Worlds”. A former UNIMA-USA Board member, Malkin is a professor of theatre at CalPoly at San Luis Obispo.

The Obraztsov Influence

by Penny Francis



OBRAZTSOV in 1980 at the
World Puppetry Festival in Washington, DC

photos: Tommy Noonan

In the modern world, Walt Disney has exerted a strength of influence over the presentation of children's stories which would be difficult to overestimate, in terms both of worldwide popularity and worldwide imitation. The films from the Disney studios have, since the 1930s, depicted well-known tales in a brash, unsubtle, highly colored, emotionally-charged, optimistic style, executed by expert painters and graphic designers whose artistry is subjugated both to the style and the most advanced techniques in animation. The Disney productions are watched by millions all over the world, and the style is copied not only in animated film but in puppet theatre performances.

Even in China and Japan the influence may be observed, culturally alien though the Disney style may be.

The "cultural imperialism" of Disney was once matched, but in a theatre context, by that of Sergei Obraztsov (1901-1992), hired by the Communist authorities in 1931 to found Moscow's Central State Puppet Theatre. This was in the time when the Soviet Union's empire stretched from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean and the outpost of Cuba, from the Arctic Sea to the Balkans. China was not strictly a part of that empire, but Communist China's official program of puppetry certainly came within the Obraztsov orbit.

For the government of the Soviet Union, art was an important vehicle of the ideology of Communism, and morality an important aspect of art. The state's duty was to feed the people with more than bread: the feeding of hearts and minds was a conscious endeavor, especially the nourishing and training of the young and malleable—a high priority in the program of the Kremlin, as it is with most totalitarian regimes.

The Communist cultural powers embodied in the People's Commissariat of Education (known as Narkompros) had the perspicacity to observe that the theatre of puppets had a special power of communication to the people, old and young, and the medium would therefore impress ideological and social messages on spectators in a way which no human form of theatre could match. Accordingly, in the early years, they turned to the practitioners of puppetry including Russia's most popular puppet, Petrushka, cousin of Mr. Punch.

Pressed into the service of ideology, our bewildered hero found himself employed by collective groups playing all over Russia with titles like "Red Army Petrushka," "Collective Petrushka," Hygienic Petrushka" and the "Special Automobile and Factory Petrushka." these staged agitprop shows that forced the former rebel to toe the Party line in many fields of Communist endeavor, from the time of the Revolution up to 1930. If Punch had heard about such craven conformity, he would have disowned his cousin.

"This new Petrushka won the unreserved approbation of the authorities and the newspapers. *Sovetskaia Kultura* (Soviet Culture) wrote: "Red Petrushka is no longer the old Petrushka, the comic, the buffoon. Red Petrushka represents the new life emerging, the worker, the war correspondent, member of the Consomol, good union man, Soviet diplomat, de-mobilized Red Army soldier. He is a shining warrior fighting for everything that is right. Petrushka is a true agitator and propagandist."¹

¹ from Henryk Jurkowski, *A History of European Puppetry, part II*, chapter 3. Typescript in process of editing by Penny Francis. Edwin Mellon Press, New York, 1998.

Poor Petrushka! He was left no room for improvisation, for any choice of target against whom to direct his mocking laughter, and in the new context he could not and did not work. The Red Petrushka collectives were wound up in the 1930s. Somehow, little by little, criticism of authority and satire crept in to the extent that the authorities grew nervous of them and they were removed. Perhaps it was a kind of victory for our hero after all.

On the hands of the young Obraztsov, Petrushka simply refused to come alive and thereafter Obraztsov regarded him as a thing of the past:

"Before the Revolution, Petrushka... embodied... The dream of the common people... He restored the spirit of justice missing from the world around... With the coming of Soviet power, though, justice was established and Soviet law began to do battle with anti-social elements... The services of anarchic boot-boys were no longer required... The attempt to revive Petrushka, the positive-negative hero, could not succeed."²

Thereafter, the "boot-boy" was virtually bound, gagged and hidden away, except in some performances by the old fairground player Ivan Zaitsev. He was occasionally brought in to perform in the State Central Puppet Theatre, in a short-lived spirit of affection for a historic curiosity. The ancient, popular, oral tradition had no place in a society where every script had to be approved by the cultural ministry. Petrushka had no more truck with written propaganda texts from which he

might not deviate, nor after more than a decade of effort on both sides, could the enemy, Authority, allow him to subvert their programs of cultural and educational improvement for the masses. Instead:

"The Council of Children's Theatre and the School section of the Commissariat [the Peoples Commissariat of Education, Narkompros] worked on the formulation of a unified program of puppet theatre, to be enforced in every region."³

Looking for a leader and paradigm for this new program for the children of the ever-growing Soviet empire could not have been difficult. The choice lay among the few most prominent of the puppeteers of the '20s, including Alexander Pavlovitch Sedov and the Efimov couple, Nina and Ivan. Sedov was a traditional marionettist and the Efimovs dedicated hand-puppeteers (until much later in their career when they added rod and shadow puppets to their plays). Both were trained in fine arts- she a painter, he a sculptor- she loved to perform, he was mostly the puppet maker. Both Sedov and the Efimovs were already well-known to the authorities who, in fact, harnessed their services as early as 1918. But for reasons of age and, perhaps, the lack of dynamic and fresh ideas, they were not approached again, at least not for the role of Soviet Supremo of the network of puppet theatres being established in most major cities of the USSR during the nineteen-twenties and beyond.

There were few others who could offer serious competition for the new leadership. There was lively activity in Leningrad, thanks mainly to Lubov Vaselevna Shaporina-Jakovleva who was given charge of a State Marionette Theatre in 1918. It is probable, however, that the Moscow authorities were a little nervous of Jakovleva, who had a certain independence of spirit and an uncertain relationship with the critics, since she did not always stay within official guidelines. In fact, her company was annexed in 1930 to the new Leningrad State Puppet Theatre run by Evgeny Demmeni, after which she lost her position as director and her independence⁴

Moscow must have considered Evgeny Demmeni, one of the great Russian puppeteers, as the leader they sought. But his work and reputation in Leningrad, where he was in charge of a most important theatre, had only just begun. He was doing excellent work in the service



² S.V. Obraztsov, *Moya professiya*, quoted by Catriona Kelly, *Petrushka, the Russian Carnival Puppet Theatre* (from Kelly), Cambridge University Press, England, 1990, p.194.

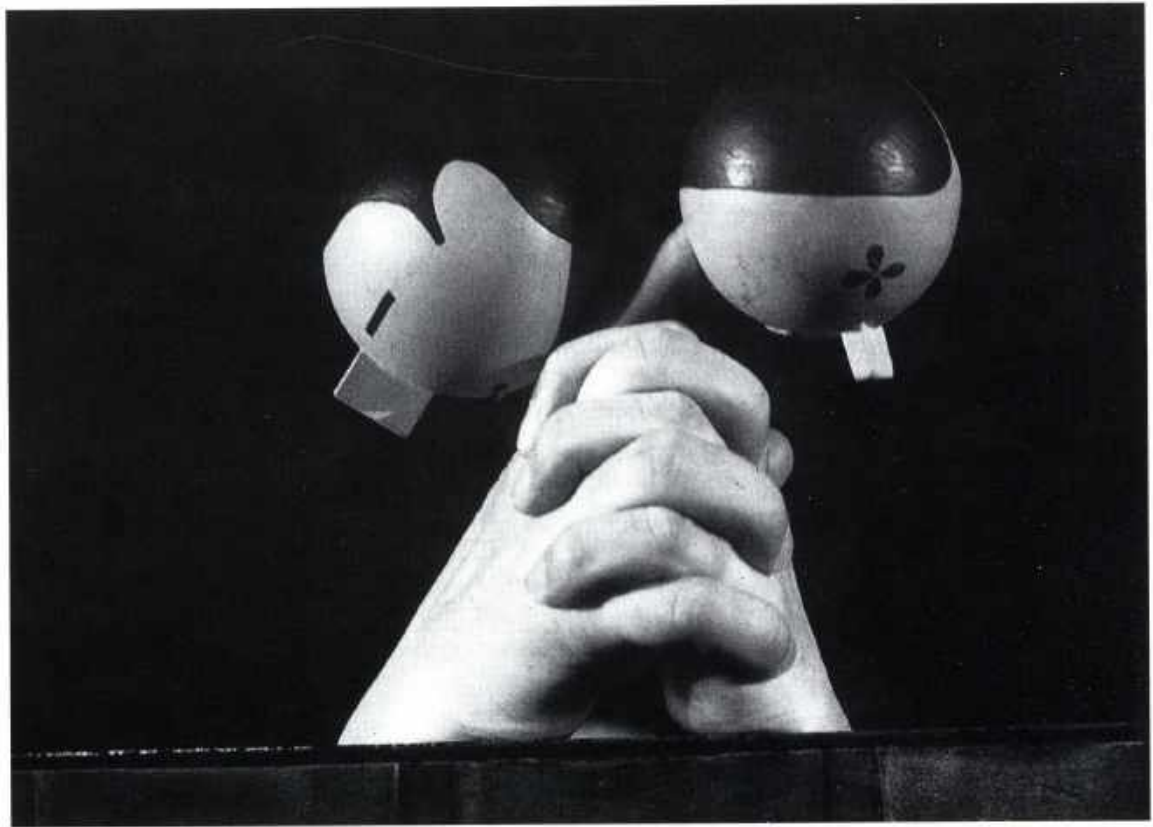
³ Henryk Jurkowski (trans. Jurkowski), *Dzieje teatru lalek* (History of Puppet Theatre), vol. III. Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 1984, p.64.

⁴ Jurkowski, op.cit. p.66.

of the regime, mixing the artistic with the propagandist, which could have caused them to hesitate to move him to Moscow, especially since in Moscow itself they had the uniquely talented and amusing Sergi Vladimirovitch Obraztsov, free and unattached to any institution, under their noses. They had seen him in the local cabarets and fashionable artists' cafés, a painter who became an actor who took to playing a brilliantly-original one-man show, "romances with Puppets." The show was a series of musical parodies on human behavior, funny without being politically dangerous, and approved by the right critics. His characters were either ridiculous or decadent stereotypes (a drunk, an operatic soprano), or charming youngsters from sentimental ballads (lovers, a baby).

Obraztsov was young, but the cultural authorities judged him intelligent, dynamic and compliant enough to be entrusted with the directorship of a large theatre which would act as the model for the practice of puppetry throughout the USSR. In 1933 the company, the Central State Puppet Theatre, was housed in a permanent home, first in Mayakovsky Square, and eventually, in 1970, in a splendid new building on the Sadovoye Ring, designed for his purposes by Obraztsov himself. It was, of course, at the heart of the expanding territories of the Soviet Union, and, as ordained by the authorities, was to act as the model for all the children's live entertainment programming of that same Union. Obraztsov's position carried more power and influence than any puppeteer in history could ever have imagined in their wildest dreams, and he held it until his death at age 91.

The young man clearly proved more than equal to the task he had been set. The Central



State Puppet Theatre, as decreed, did indeed become the model—in terms of style, techniques and dramaturgy—for all the puppet theatres eventually established throughout every country dominated by the Communists.

He and his collaborators worked hard and long to find a repertory and style. His acute observation of human behavior, his sense of humor and his taste for the ridiculous underpinned all the best work, and audiences of all ages were charmed and entertained. By the 1950s the Obraztsov effect was to be seen everywhere in the Union. There was hardly a major town in any of the countries, either those of the USSR or the satellite states (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and, by extension, Romania and Yugoslavia) which did not boast a large puppet theatre, sometimes seating a thousand, usually staffed by scores of workers, artists, administrators, technicians, maintenance workers, all of them subsidized by sums of money no western puppet company has ever approached, and all charging the spectators little or nothing for the shows.

A first concern of Obraztsov was the deminiaturization of the productions, so that the

figures and settings might be seen and heard by large numbers of people in large spaces. Thus by 1940 the great rod puppet was invented, perhaps inspired by the Indonesian *wayang golek*, but bearing hardly any resemblance to it. Obraztsov and his team of technicians developed the type beyond any Asian recognition, adding mechanisms, both internal and external, that allowed for an astonishing range of imitative human movement. The specification of these figures has not, as far as I am aware, been imitated outside the Obraztsov sphere, and were a secret. They were first employed in a highly acclaimed version of "Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp" in 1940. A puppeteer-friend and I were amused when, in the '70s, after a festival performance of "The Unusual Concert," we went backstage and bent to touch some of the puppets lying on the floor. Out of nowhere appeared Obraztsov moving with great speed to remove the figures from our hands, while assuring us that there were no mysteries attached to their making, that they were simple mechanisms and that anyone could achieve such results independently.

These astonishing puppets were often supported and manipulated by two or even three people, because of their height, weight, and the complexity of levers and strings. They were soon to be seen throughout the Communist-ruled world, usually performing plays, first reached, approved and probably performed in Moscow, with Obratsov at the center of all the activity, responsible for most of the choices. He travelled widely, with his solo show and his large company, encouraging, teaching, approving, disapproving, and always the center of attention—the metaphorical pinnacle of the puppet and children's theatre world, spread over vast dominions.

Such individual cultural influence has, I repeat, been equaled by no one but Walt Disney, whose mission was a political one only in the widest sense. Certainly each of these brilliant artists had extraordinary autonomy, the one motivated by Big Brother, and the other by Big Business.

It should not be thought that Obratsov's aesthetic was an imitation of Disney, except insofar as he advocated bright colors and simplified forms which would speak directly to "the child" (a feature of his manner of speech and that of his disciples was to speak always of "the child" rather than of "children," as if every child had indistinguishable characteristics). The dramaturgy of the productions was, like Disney's, brash, and its tone frequently didactic; but Obratsov's penchant for gentle satire added, as often as possible, welcome zest to the characters he created which in fact appealed as much to adults as to the young. One of his most famous shows was a parody of the American Broadway musical, based on the Don Juan legend. It toured the world for at least 30 years and, for all I know, may still be in the Moscow Academic State Theatre's repertoire (the name changed in the 80s).

The age of darkness, meaning the stultifying era when social Realism was mercilessly imposed on all art and artists, must have brought him a lot of trouble, since humor was alien to the genre, but he bowed to the imposition, and used the children he played for his

excuse for introducing some lighthearted elements into the gloom. With its slow demise after the death of Stalin in 1953 and the "thaw" of the Khrushchev regime, the staple fare of the company became fairy and folk tales once more—also contemporary themes with a clear moral, often featuring anthropomorphized animals as characters, and peppered with song and dance.

In China, where the use of giant rod puppetry was quite strange to the Chinese traditions of the art, the Obratsovian techniques penetrated even to the adventures of the Monkey King. The great rod puppets still play to vast numbers, with the usual technical mastery of that extraordinary nation, so that the shows can become a series of illusionistic effects and dazzling displays of manipulative skill.

The influence of Moscow and Obratsov, backed by money, talent, and the official (and unofficial) will to tour abroad with their wares to commercial theatres and theatre festivals, percolated to western Europe. The novelty of the productions from behind the Iron curtain, the technical achievement, the economic viability of large-scale, heavily subsidized puppetry in big theatres were welcomed by impresarios and post-war family audiences, especially in the 50s and 60s. The Moscow puppet theatre filled one of London's biggest West End theatres, the London Casino, in the 50s with "The Unusual Concert," a hilarious parody of a variety show. After that event, a few British puppeteers adopted both the aesthetic and the ethic of the Obratsov style; two permanent theatres were set up which, for at least 20 years, successfully attracted more subsidy for their children's productions than any before or since. They were Jane Phillips' Caricature Theatre of Wales and John Blundall's Cannon Hill Puppet Theatre in Birmingham. Both are now defunct, alas, but both helped in the revival of interest in puppetry as a respected performing art in Western Europe. It becomes clear that, even in the West, the Obratsov web was woven, with lasting consequences.

From the 70s, however, in most of the satellite countries under the Soviet heel, local genius and the

nationalist aesthetic were surreptitiously introduced to the great rod puppet shows, usually without protest from the local authorities. It suited the puppeteers of these countries—especially Poland and Czechoslovakia—to present their national fairy tales and folklore, to remind their country's people of their independent roots and their true cultural history and identity, hitherto well masked by the Soviet powers who had imposed an alien language and culture and changed the history books. The move towards national folk traditions as a way to revive cultural memories was the first nail in the coffin of the Soviet influence—and not only in theatre.

Communism and the Obratsov hegemony ended in the 80s, and the king of puppetry died in 1992, his name known throughout the world as no other puppeteer's before him. By then he had an ego to match his reputation, but he was mourned by many loving friends, to whom he insisted that he never joined the Party, unlikely as this seems. His empire collapsed, and the giant rod puppet is now little seen in most of the countries which emulated him through choice and compulsion. But where Communism still reigns, in China especially, and doubtless in many of the puppet theatres of the outer ex-Soviet Union, you may still see the large rods in all their dying glory. Perhaps they will return to fashion, although Western puppeteers may never discover the technical secrets which the wily old wizard applied to these amazing figures—the manner of their internal stringing, the superlative craftsmanship which gave them almost as much variety of movement as that of a human being. Did he take his secrets to the grave? Perhaps not. If any puppeteer really wants his characters to move just like humans, they should know that "The Unusual Concert" and an exhibit of the Obratsov puppets are still touring, 67 years after he started the Moscow Central State Puppet Theatre. Like Disney, he was a cultural phenomenon of the 20th century.

Penny Francis has written extensively about puppetry. She is a former editor of the British magazine, ANIMATIONS.

Visions of Graver Puppetry

Marvin Carlson

The title of this article comes from the founding manifesto, in January of 1841, of the beloved British humor magazine, *Punch*. In it, Mark Lemon disagreed with the popular conception of the famous puppet as mere "rude and boisterous mirth," calling him instead "a teacher of no mean pretensions" whose gift for carnivalesque disruption of received ideas suggested the future "visions of graver puppetry."

The *Punch* tradition, limited as it seems in comparison with many other puppet traditions around the world, nevertheless has provided our British cousins with some experience of a national puppet tradition of some symbolic significance. In America, until very recent times, even that fairly modest performance tradition was lacking and it is only today, a century and a half after Lemon's pronouncement in England that in America there is developing sufficient cultural consciousness of this ancient art so that one might legitimately imagine a future in which the national theatrical horizon would include not only a popular puppet theater but the "visions of graver puppetry" that much of the rest of the world, East and West, takes for granted.

During the past generation, puppets have indisputably gained new attention in this country. One of the best known and best loved experimental groups to emerge in the 1960s was the marvelous

Bread and Puppet Theater, one of the few groups of that period that still maintains a living presence. In their work, a wide variety of puppets of all sizes were lovingly created and displayed and doubtless in part owing to that

inspiration, puppetry and object manipulation has gained an unprecedented prominence in the contemporary experimental theater in this country. Lee Breuer and Mabou Mines, from the earliest animations through *The Warrior Ant*, the *Epidog* plays and on to his recent *Peter and Wendy*, has made puppets central to his work. There are many puppet specialists among the leading figures of today's Avant-Garde, such as Paul Zaloom, Fred Curchak, Theodora Skipitares and Julie Taymor, and others who, like Breuer, have significantly utilized puppets. Among these are many of the leading American avant-gardists of our era, such as Reza Abdoh, Ping Chong, and Robert Wilson.

Nor has this new American interest in puppetry been confined to Avant-Garde experimentation. The enormous success of Jim Henson's *Muppets* on television, and subsequently in film, has made the puppet a significant part of recent American popular culture, perhaps most notably in the enormously popular films of the imagination of Steven Spielberg and George



Karagöz:
Hero of the Turkish
shadow screen

Lucas. On the stage, the puppet interests of the Avant-Garde and mainstream culture have merged in one of the key cultural events in the current American theater, the opening of Julie Taymor's staging of *Walt Disney's The Lion King*.

Not surprisingly, this new consciousness of the power and flexibility of one of the most ancient and widespread of theatrical forms has led to a new critical and historical attention to the puppet tradition. Until only a few years ago, there were virtually no serious American scholarly studies, either critical or theoretical, on puppetry. Anyone with an interest in this subject had to rely on art books and illustrated catalogues with little historical or theoretical information or "how-to" manuals primarily for those interested in children's theatre. For serious academic histories of the subject, one had to rely on often dated continental historical studies such as Charles Magnin's monumental 1861 *Histoire des marionnettes*, or, on the theoretical side, scattered brief if provocative essays such as Heinrich von Kleist's famous "On the Marionette Theater" or scattered speculations by the Prague school of semioticians.

Clearly this situation is changing as a new generation of critics, theorists, historians, and practitioners of



MR BLANCAN,
RESPECTFULLY informs the Public that he came to this city with a kind of amusement entirely unknown in this country. His exhibitions consist of *Fontuccini* or Artificial Comedians, *Avabask Firms*, small Chinese *Sba les*, and animated pictures, imitating those of the celebrated *Ve-tor* in Paris. These four kinds of amusements will be exhibited on Tuesday evening next, the 27th inst. in a very convenient new building in Broadway, opposite the Hospital.
 Prices of admittance—Boxes one Dollar, Pit fifty cents—children under the age of ten years, half price. A gallery will be provided for people of color. Particulars in future advertisements.
 dec 24 3t*

The oldest-known illustrated puppet show advertisement in America. From the NY Commercial Advertiser, December, 1808

by A. Anderson

Theater in America is coming to realize the rich history and astonishing possibilities of this ancient theater form. Two recent books in particular seem to me to open this field in particularly stimulating ways. Steve Tillis' 1992 study *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet* provides a model of analysis of puppetry as an art form, closely related to theater of course, but with its own aesthetic dimensions. Important as Tillis' work is, clearly much more needs to be done in this area, not only because of the complexity of the many different kinds of puppet performance, but because of the aesthetic complexity of the puppet itself as performing object. Recent work on the "art object" suggests a fruitful and still largely unexplored line of inquiry. (for example, Jon Erickson's stimulating 1995 study *The Fate of the Object*).

The other recent study that I find particularly stimulating is Scott Cutler Shershow's 1995 *Puppets and "Popular" Culture*, which utilizes the current interest in popular forms and the recently developed analytic strategies of cultural studies to study some of the ways that this widespread form has served as a tool for the exploration of questions of gender, culture, and class. 1995 was a bumper

year for the publication of serious studies of the puppet. It saw the first volume of James Fisher's *The Puppetry Yearbook*, a wide-ranging collection of essays on historical and current puppet performance, both by scholars and by performance artists. It also saw a major new historical study: Harold B. Segel's comprehensive *Pinocchio's Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automaton, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama*. Considering the importance of the puppet in Avant-Garde and experimental theater, it is a bit surprising that this is the first extensive study of this topic, but no one could be better equipped to undertake it, at last, than Segel, who is thoroughly at home in the complex world of the modernist theater. His work maps out a terrain of scholarly investigation that is so broad that it suggests dozens, perhaps hundreds, of possibilities for further research.

Scholars dealing with Oriental theater have traditionally paid more attention to puppet theater than those specializing in the West, since a number of Oriental puppet forms have long been recognized as major cultural expressions; puppet theater throughout the West has been generally relegated, until recently, to the neglected area of "popular culture." Even theater histories that say little or nothing about any



The Bread and Puppet Theater's
Woyzeck, New York City, 1981

photo: G. Lange

Western theater puppet traditions must, if they deal with the Orient at all, recognize the importance of such forms as Bunraku in Japan or the wayang of Indonesia. Specialists in the theater of this part of the world, such as James Brandon or Faubian Bowers, have provided English-language readers with useful introductions to these traditions, but, here too, a new generation is building upon that introductory work to provide much more complex and subtle studies of the relationship between puppet aesthetics and cultural history. A model of such work is Laurie J. Sears' 1996 *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales*, which explores the continually evolving relationship between puppet performance and the shifting power structures in colonial Java.

This book provides a model of the kind of contributions puppet research can make to the current burgeoning interest in post-colonial studies.

Shershow and especially Sears thus demonstrate the potential contributions of puppet research to current cultural studies and Tillis to general theater aesthetics, but in addition to such applications of puppet research to ongoing theoretical and

cultural concerns, much basic research also remains to be done. The long ghettoization of puppet studies within the domain of "popular culture" has resulted in far less attention by theater scholars to its records and texts than has been given even to comparatively minor "literary" drama. There is thus a vast amount of archival material that has been scarcely studied.

There is, for example, a widespread and quite mistaken assumption among Western students of theater that, due to its uneasiness about representations of the human figure, the Islamic world had no theater until Western forms were imported in the mid-nineteenth century. Recently, with a new interest in puppetry, scholars have begun to study the shadow plays that, in fact, have existed in the Middle East since the beginning of Islam. These include three fascinating plays by the thirteenth-century Egyptian Muhammad ibn Daniyal, which in complexity and social significance are easily comparable to any Western plays of the same period. Although continental Arabic scholars have been aware of these plays at least since George Jacob's mention of them 1907, and English language scholars since Landau's pioneering study of Arabic theater in 1958, there is still no critical edition of the plays, even in Arabic, and English and American theater scholars remain totally unaware of them. Doubly marginalized by being both puppet plays and created in a non-Western tradition, Ibn Daniyal's works provide a single striking example of the sort of major primary work that remains to be done.

Segal's work offers yet another suggestion of the possibilities of future puppet research. Although his introductory chapters provide a background of literary use of the puppet from the pre-modern era, especially from the era of German romanticism, his discussion of this earlier period is far less intensive than the analysis of modernist work, suggesting how and how much work remains to be done in earlier periods.

Moreover, Segel stresses throughout his study the use of puppets by literary authors, leaving largely open the vast field of non-literary puppet activity, still largely the domain of folklorists and ethnographers. Individual puppet traditions tracing of certain characters, themes, concerns, and techniques through a culture provides yet another possibility for future research. A rather modest, but fascinating example of the sort of project that might be undertaken in many theatrical cultures is provided by the 1996 *Shakespeare Manipulated*, by Susan Young. Young traces the history of productions of Shakespearean-inspired works in the various forms of Italian puppet theater from 1821 to 1991. It providing a rewarding study, not just of the varieties of puppet culture in Italy, but also of cultural borrowing and assimilation, and of the continuing negotiations between "high" and "low" culture—almost always a question of central interest in the puppet theater.

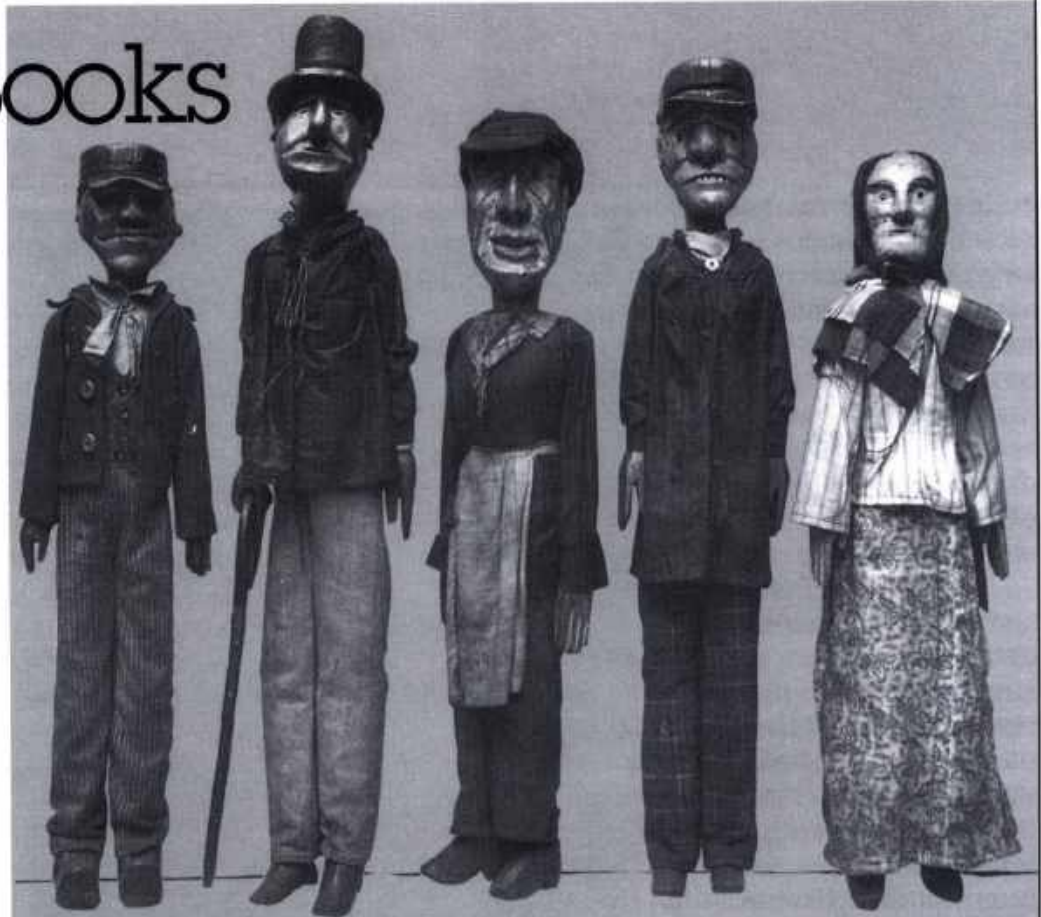
The range of potential study of puppet performance, theoretical and historical, academic and popular, primary and secondary, is clearly immense. With the new interest in popular culture and cultural studies, it is clear that the time is ripe for a broad new interest in puppet studies. The various studies cited above provide clear evidence that this interest is strong and developing and the coming years will surely see, at last, a recognition that this long-neglected form has much to contribute to our understanding of both our own cultural tradition and those of other people. •

About Puppet Books

by John Bell

A common complaint among puppeteers, or those interested in puppet theater, is that there are not very many books about the subject. A look at, say, the Puppetry section of New York's Drama Book Shop would tend to support this view: in a bookstore filled with thousands of volumes on theater, only a handful are presented under the Puppetry rubric. This points to three things: first, that in fact there aren't a lot of books on puppet theater, especially as compared to other forms of theater; second, that many books about puppet theater are not consistently or effectively distributed; and third, that puppet books are not necessarily labeled as such.

Writing on puppet theater has been a lonely calling, at least since Charles Magnin wrote his *Histoire des marionnettes en Europe* in 1852. But part of the apparent scarcity of writings on puppet theater has to do with the fact that puppet theater can be addressed in so many different ways. In the Drama Book Shop there are numerous examples of the most common form of puppet book: the how-to manual which describes in detail the process of creating puppet performance from construction to dramaturgy to performance techniques. A new example of the genre is Maria Bodmann and Cliff DeArment's *Making Shadow Characters, Balinese Style*. A



Popular puppet theatre in Europe, 1800–1914

John McCormick & Bennie Pratasik

somewhat rarer puppet book is the puppet theater history, of which Bil Baird's all-encompassing, out-of-print *Art of the Puppet* is the most salient American example. In recent years, histories of specific European puppet theaters have shed light on particular puppet traditions; for example, George Speaight's *The History of the English Puppet Theater*, Paul Fournel's *L'histoire véritable de Guignol*, Catriona Kelly's *Petrushka: The Russian Carnival Puppet Theater*, or Antonio Pasqualino's *L'opera dei pupi*, or Harold Segel's *Pinocchio's Progeny*. An exciting addition to this literature is *Popular Puppet Theatre in Europe, 1800-*

1914, by John McCormick and Bennie Pratasik.

A third way in which puppets appear in print is through the anthropological and ethnographic writings of westerners attempting to understand Asian, African, and Native American performance. Since puppet, mask, and object theater traditions are ubiquitous throughout the world, anthropologists and ethnographers from the mid-nineteenth century on have been forced to write about puppet and object performance from their particular social science viewpoints. Mary Jo Arnoldi's *Playing With Time* joins this line of puppet research with real joy and excitement.

◆
**MODERN PUPPET THEATER
 IN MALI**

*Playing with Time: Art and
 Performance in Central Mali*

by

Mary Jo Arnoldi

Indiana University Press, 1995

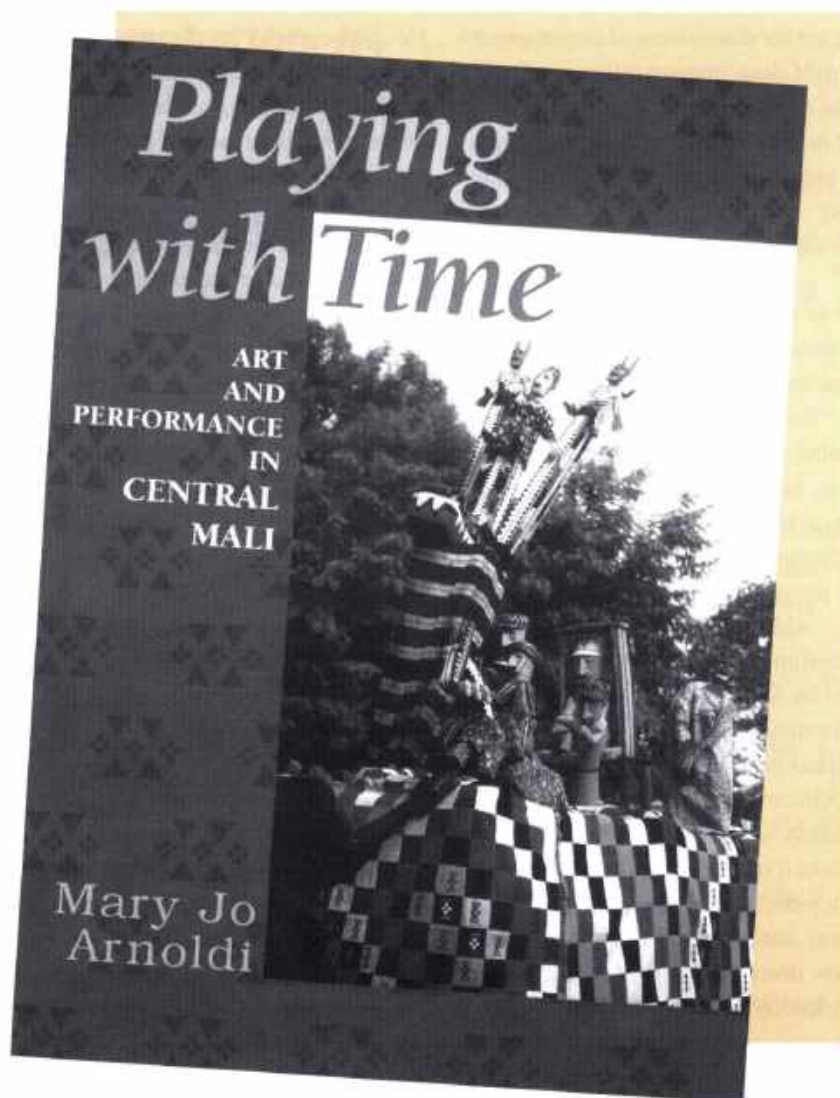
◆

Arnoldi's account of community puppet performances in the Segou region of Mali offers a fascinating look at how African puppet performance has developed over the decades of this century to reflect the stresses and continuities of modern life in the agricultural and fishing town of Kirango. Arnoldi's focus is the festivals presented by youth associations three times per year, in which young men perform a succession of simple or complex puppets as a series of dances, accompanied by women singers and a chorus of drummers, in a circular outdoor space surrounded by an audience of villagers.

These performances, popularly known in Europe and America as Bamana puppet theater, might at first glance appear to be straightforward celebrations of the human desire and ability to recreate animals, humans, and spirits. Arnoldi, though, shows how these puppet shows are a complex means of expressing and commenting on the most fundamental aspects of life in present-day Mali. "Segou's youth puppet masquerade," she writes, "is a specialized and highly valued genre of *kuma* [talk]; more than a narrative constructed only from words, it is a dialogue that arises through the interrelationship of sculpture, song, drumming, and dance." Arnoldi shows how this dialogue functions by analyzing not only the puppets themselves and their performance traditions, but also the social makeup of Segou society in its various communities; the history of these puppet performances over the past two hundred years; and the complicated communication codes which form the sculpture, painting, language, music, and choreography combined in the puppet performances. Aesthetics and politics come into

play here as Arnoldi attempts to understand how an activity culturally defined as frivolous and fun, at the same time serves as a means of continuing and augmenting the most basic of Malian social and individual values. "The project of the fictional world of youth theatre," she writes, "is to open up the universe of possible meanings through the massing of visual and verbal images that continually play off one another and are intensified through the aesthetic experience."

These overarching analyses are to be expected considering Arnoldi's social science viewpoint (however, it is curious that this approach is so rarely applied to our own performance practices. Reading Arnoldi's analysis of the place of Segou puppet masquerade in Segou society makes one realize how infrequently similar studies are made of the function of American and European puppet



theater). Arnoldi strives to be complete in her analysis. Basing her study on scores of interviews, her own experience of viewing these puppet performances, Lynn Forsdale's amazingly rich photographs, and a scholarly review of existing material on her subject, Arnoldi is able to examine a wide range of important aspects of Segou puppet theater, from the particulars of puppet sculpture (although certain puppet mechanisms were kept secret from her) to the competing aesthetics of *fadenya* [a paternal sense of rivalry and competition] and *badenya* [a maternal sense of unity and cooperation]. Particularly engrossing are her discussions of contemporary issues in Malian communities, such as a newfound empowerment of women, and her sense of how these issues surface in puppet theater, especially in such recently created "abstract" puppets as "Divorce Today," "Unity Is Good," or "The Good Village's Tree Cheers."

Part of the difficulty in Euro-American writing about another culture's puppet theater is that European terminology can be misleading. "Rod puppet" and "string puppet" call to mind specific European or American traditions, but Arnoldi uses these terms to describe quite different techniques of Malian puppet theater. A western term which is particularly prevalent in Arnoldi's book is "masquerade," which she uses to mean both the puppet/costume assemblage worn and manipulated by Segou performers and the puppet performance event as a whole. Perhaps this term has become customary for descriptions of African puppet performance, but it is a particularly unfortunate noun because the connections it makes to the frivolity of European fancy-dress balls have little to do with the intense immediacy and necessity of the theater she describes.

The knotty problem of nomenclature could be ameliorated if one could get a rich, suggestive sense of what Segou puppet performances are like, the kind of verbal re-creation that typifies good dramatic criticism; writing which gives you the sense of being

there at the performance. But Arnoldi, as a good ethnographer, is interested in the performance as an aspect of Segou culture and community, and thus takes its constituent elements apart to better understand them. You'd think that the ethnographer's sense of structure need not necessarily preclude a vigorous description of the complete performance of a youth association masquerade, but, in Arnoldi's book, such concerns are secondary. We don't really get a sense of the full effect of the puppet performance until the fourth chapter, more than halfway through the book, when it is revealed, for example, that the basic choreography for the whole event is a series of circle dances. But even this late explanation of an amazing six-hour (!) performance never gives the reader a full sense of what that experience was like. Another experiential question involves the complex sculptural quality of the Segou puppets, which, quite typically, involve the presentation not simply of one person or animal, but, as Arnoldi describes one example, "an antelope head with a small puppet of a mother and her child on its back." Arnoldi does a brilliant job showing the workings of verbal and visual language here, describing how "the visual image and the verbal metaphors in the song" sung for this puppet "worked in tandem to express the theme of unity." But one wishes, again, for a sense of what it was like to see this figure, together with even more complex multi-image puppets, performing in the midst of a crowd of Segou villagers, the drummers drumming and women singing as the puppets dance around the open circle.

These aspects of Arnoldi's study are, in a way, built into the necessities of approaching Segou puppet performance as ethnology. After all, they are completely in line with the whole tradition of ethnographic analysis of object theater, for example in Claude Lévi-Strauss' landmark *The Way of the Masks*, which also never gives the reader a sense of Kwakiutl mask performance. But there are great riches in Arnoldi's study, including a wonderful sense of how this strong puppet

tradition can exist in an Islamic society which (like those in Java and Turkey) ostensibly opposes the performance of images. Arnoldi also conveys a good sense of how European colonialism has influenced the development of this theater. She details with great subtlety and understanding how these puppet performances (although socially defined as youthful play separated both from the serious occupations of older villagers and from the serious business of "power objects" used in more consequential rituals) still "remain important public artistic contexts for the production of knowledge and meaning" in Segou communities. And, quite importantly, she shows that "despite the still too often repeated notion that these artistic forms" are "conservative and static," they are highly adaptable to change, and, in fact, are visible markers of change; in effect, they are modern forms of puppet theater.

Arnoldi's book is a valuable contribution to the study of contemporary puppetry. It makes one realize how much needs to be written about the form. Will it help to inspire comparative studies of puppet theater in Islamic societies? Or studies which could compare the multi-imaged puppet sculpture of Mali to similar traditions in Mexican mask performance, and perhaps to theories of multi-leveled postmodern performance? Can books like Arnoldi's inspire writers to compare the influence of African mask and puppet theater on Euro-American performance, from Fernand Léger's *Creation of the World* to Julie Taymor's *Lion King*, to the functions of puppet theater on the African continent? Can we look forward to puppet books which can discuss the merits of "amateur" community puppet performance as a cultural force in Asian, American, and European, as well as African societies? Clearly much good writing on puppet theater needs to be done. *Playing With Time* shows one way it can be achieved.

(continued on page 32)

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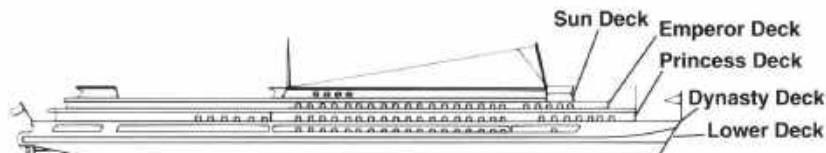


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◆
**MAKING SHADOW
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by
**Maria Bodmann and
 Cliff DeArment**

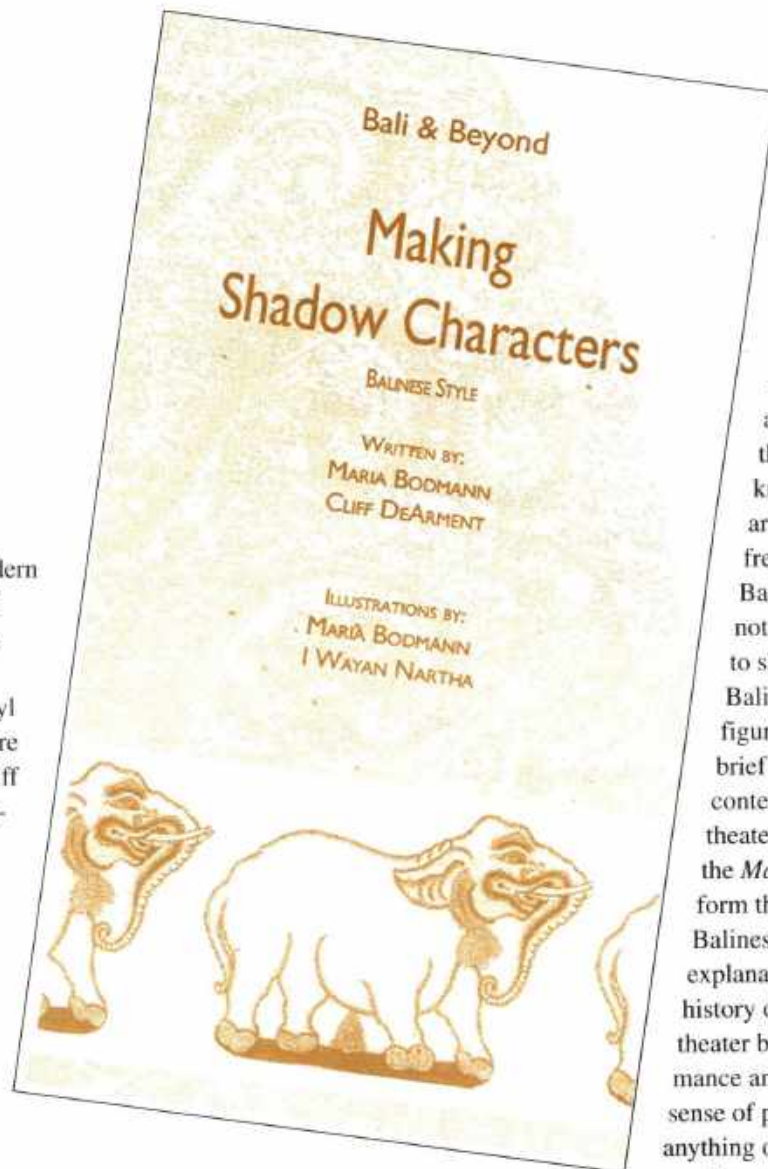
with illustrations by
**Maria Bodmann &
 I Wayan Nartha**
 Bali and Beyond Publications
 1997
 ◆

The "how-to" puppet book has been a staple of puppetry bookshelves and, perhaps, the most common form of modern puppet writing. Remo Bufano, the great American puppeteer of the 20s and 30s, wrote numerous puppet handbooks, promulgating a tradition of which Cheryl Henson's *Muppets Make Puppets* is more recently a part. Maria Bodmann and Cliff DeArment's book is also part of this do-it-yourself educational tradition, but with a different angle, reflecting the nature of late-twentieth-century American puppet theater: instead of explaining how to make traditional hand puppets or marionettes, the book explains how to make shadow figures in the Balinese tradition.

In some ways, the biggest difference between the 1990s puppet resurgence in the United States and, say, the American puppet revival from the 30s to the 50s, is that now Asian puppet traditions are emulated as much or more than traditional European forms. Fully articulated Bunraku-style puppets, the kind used in Lee Breuer's *Peter and Wendy* or *Epidog*, are far more common than the marionettes and hand puppets which typified Bil Baird's work thirty years ago. Similarly, the figures which *Making Shadow Characters* wants you to create are not the solid, silhouetted shapes of the European *ombres chinoises* tradition, but the filigreed, lacy shapes of Balinese *wayang kulit*.

Bodmann and DeArment's book takes

pains to lay out straightforwardly the methods of making shadow figures, and, in truth, it is a bit unnerving to see a complex, centuries-old cultural form like *wayang kulit* explained as if it were as accessible as a Martha Stewart tutorial on interior decoration. Actually, the text, diagrams (by Bodmann and I Wayan Nartha), and photographs of leather carving in *Making Shadow Characters* are quite fascinating and probably useful to one inclined to so construct a set of shadow figures. And the booklet probably is even more helpful with the videotape which Bodmann and DeArment's company, Bali and Beyond, made to accompany it.



The idea of do-it-yourself culture inherent here is breathtaking in its assumptions of the ease and purchase westerners should show as they consume Asian culture, but in a global media culture where it is assumed that everyone in the world should and will know who the Spice Girls are, perhaps a sense of freedom in understanding Balinese shadow theater is not a bad thing. In addition to showing how to construct Balinese-style shadow figures, the book attempts brief explanations of the content of Balinese shadow theater, including a synopsis of the *Mahabharata*, whose stories form the basis for much of Balinese *wayang*. There are explanations of the context and history of Indonesian shadow theater both as religious performance and entertainment, but no sense of present-day Indonesia as anything other than a tropical paradise of luscious fruit and contented people. The Indonesia of

military dictatorship, economic disaster and political repression is notably absent from this pamphlet's vision.

The brevity of this 32-page booklet makes its effort to explain Balinese shadow theater alarmingly simple, but that is also in keeping with the tradition of how-to puppet books. The idea that puppetry is a theater which anyone can do is more than a marketing ploy for hopeful purveyors of shadow puppet templates and carving tools (which Bali and Beyond plugs in its book). It is also a central aspect of puppet theater's existence as local, community theater. This

function is not diminished by the presence of professional artistry; instead, it is a reminder of how essential puppet theater can and should be to the people and audiences who create it, whether it is in a living room, a street, a park, or a Broadway theater. Bodmann and DeArment finish their instructions to potential American dalangs with the advice "Be creative and have fun!" If such counsel helps someone somewhere make their own epic theater, even if it is a pale, American version of the *Mahabharata*, that will clearly do much more good for that puppeteer and her or his audiences than a few more hours of television watching.

◆
PUPPET THEATER
 AS
POPULAR THEATER
Popular Puppet Theatre in
Europe, 1800-1914

by

John McCormick & Bennie Pratasik
 New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998

◆

This new addition to the thin but proud ranks of European puppet theater histories is a fascinating work, not only because it attempts to understand 114 years of a popular European theater form, but because it is an appropriate culmination of a century's worth of history writing on particular forms of puppet theater in different European countries. At a moment when those disparate nations are being gently forced to adopt a European, rather than French, German, English, Spanish, Italian, or other identity, McCormick and Pratasik show how nineteenth-century puppet theater united Europe culturally through a shared development of urban, industrial-age puppet shows. These shows built on the preceding centuries of regional and international traditions (the ubiquitous presence, for example, of travelling Italian mask and puppet performers, and the totemic characters they planted in almost every European country) and transformed those traditions into new ones which reflected the urban industrial lives

of their audiences. McCormick and Pratasik's book depends on the existence of the particular puppet histories by Speaight, Pasqualino, Fournel, et. al., to produce a continent-wide overview of the various marionette, hand-puppet, and shadow theaters which developed, flourished, and sometimes perished in the hundred years during which the enormity of the social and cultural force of the Industrial Revolution became apparent.

Popular Puppet Theatre is not an academic history book in terms of theory; it's not overloaded with the theories and jargon of postmodern cultural studies which now bloom from university presses. McCormick and Pratasik refer to the object theory of Prague School semioticians Petr Bogatyrev and Jiri Veltrusky, as well as to more recent audience theories of Susan Bennett, but in the main, their book is focused on detailing what exactly happened, with whom, where, and when. The book is straightforwardly divided into three sections: the context of European puppet performances; the puppeteers, their puppets and their stages; and finally the repertoire of the various puppet theaters. Early on, the authors sketch out the contours of their story, explaining how, through the course of the nineteenth century, a culture of travelling puppet companies performing at fairs and on street corners gradually became a culture of relatively stable, less itinerant puppet theaters set up in bars, ballrooms, storefronts, living rooms, and specially designated outdoor "pitches" reserved for them by civil authorities. The arc of development followed by nineteenth-century puppet theater as it became a truly popular art form is fascinating. McCormick and Pratasik write:

In Brussels in the 1890s a score of theatres, mostly seating under a hundred people, were entertaining some 1,500 to 2,000 nightly, and by 1900 the town of Liège could count some fifty active puppet theatres. In Sicily the numerous "teatrini" of the back streets presented nightly episodes of chivalric adventure and were closely integrated with the popular life and culture of Palermo and other towns. In contrast, Milan and Turin possessed elegant

"bonbonnières" seating over a thousand spectators. But by 1914, the authors assert, "a decline had set in," after which point "puppetry ceased to be a significant factor in popular culture." Other, mechanical means of entertainment, especially film, had begun to dominate the eyes and ears of urban audiences.

The above quotation from McCormick and Pratasik is indicative of the whole book: the scope of their inquiry brings together all the strands of various local and national puppet theater trends, so that we can see how they reflect the developing popular culture of Europe. It's stimulating, for example, to understand that the puppet traditions out of which (or in reaction to) our modern "avant-garde" puppet theaters began to grow, had themselves only recently emerged as popular entertainment. But the quotation above also indicates another aspect of the book: its tendency to explain the constituent elements of its story with extensive, almost wearying lists of puppeteers, towns, and venues across Europe. Perhaps this is inevitable in a book which, for the first time, is putting together a comprehensive study of such a vast subject. Sometimes in the middle of reading through a long series of names and titles, one longs for a bit of generalizing theory; but what keeps the reader (or this reader anyway) going is the utter fascination of the material.

One of the important points McCormick and Pratasik do make is the fact that "the study of puppet theatre is not primarily a branch of literary studies or of art history, but rather of social and cultural history." This is the key element in the achievement of *Popular Puppet Theatre*: their point of view continually points the authors' comprehensive accumulation of details back into a sense of what the puppet theaters were doing in the communities of which they were part. As they cover the whole range of elements determining the life of nineteenth-century puppet theater—the family companies, the stages, the puppets, how they travelled, the audience, the backstage, publicity, puppet construction, official censorship, ticket prices, characters, costumes, acting styles, music, old and new rep

ertoires—McCormick and Pratasik take care to make connections among all these facts, so that by the end of the book, the reader feels utterly at home (imaginatively at least) in the lost world of the Guignol handpuppet cabarets of Lyons, the living-room marionette theaters of working-class Belgian cities, or the year-long spectacle of Sicilian marionette theaters performing daily episodes of the *Orlando Furioso* epic.

Illustrating the book are scores of unusual photographs showing not only the puppets and their stages (the kinds of images one often finds in puppet books), but the surroundings and other elements: backstage views, advertising posters, and a wonderful photo of Frau Martha Ritscher, a puppeteer (in her seventies!) hefting a puppet trunk, with the help of her son, up to the second floor of an inn in Saxony—an image that will be familiar to any puppeteer. The broad scope of McCormick

and Pratasik's study must inevitably include some ellipses or mistakes. For example, the authors assert that "the first attempt to document a performance" of a German Faust puppet play was the Bonesky manuscript, in 1905, when in fact, as Max von Boehn pointed out in *Puppets and Automata*, that script was first published in 1850. This discrepancy is important because it points to the fact that early in the century German Romantics and enthusiasts of the recently invented field of folklore initiated Europeans' high-culture fascination with the low-culture world of puppets.

Out of the nineteenth-century emerged the characteristics of puppet theater that are still with us today. For example, McCormick and Pratasik point out that it was in the mid to late 1800s that puppet shows began to be defined as children's entertainment. Also, nineteenth-century puppet shows were constantly changing form: instead of sticking

strictly to one form of puppet theater or another, puppet performers continually blurred boundaries by combining puppets with live actors, mask performers, shadow images, projections, and even film, the kind of heterodox approach to form the defines contemporary puppet theater. Nineteenth-century puppeteers made puppet shows in the middle of rapidly expanding cities, an increasingly mechanized culture, and a milieu of constant, often difficult, social and economic change, just like puppeteers today. The fact that the nineteenth-century puppeteers so often succeeded in producing essential theater for their communities is a wonderful thing to learn and understand. •

John Bell, a founding member of the New York-based Great Small works theater company, teaches at New York University and Rhode Island school of Design

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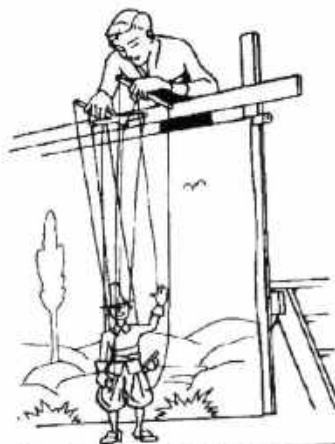


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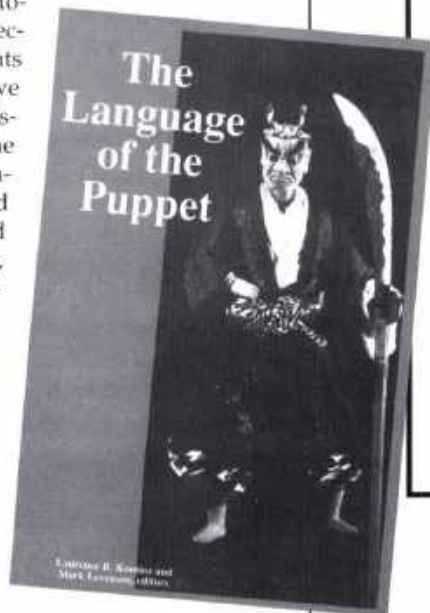
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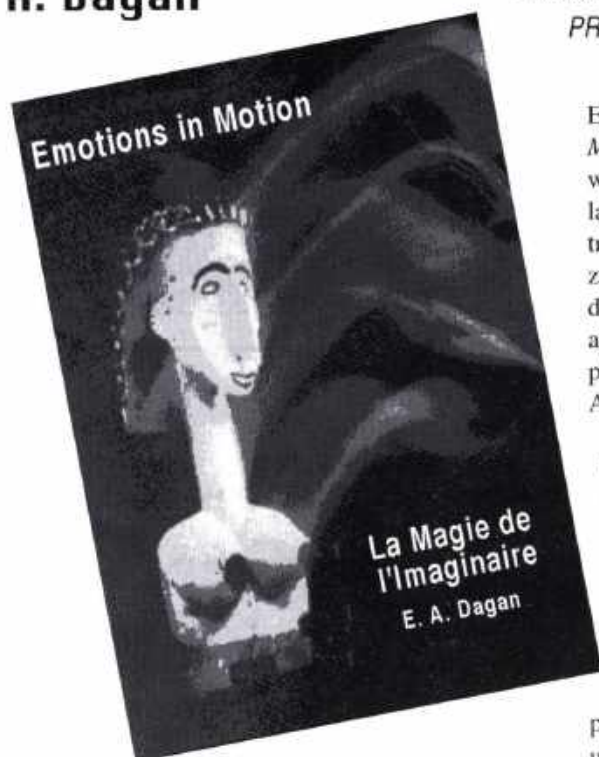
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Theatrical Puppets and Masks from Black Africa

Montreal: Galerie Amrad African Arts, 1990.

by E. A. Dagan

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Everyone interested in African puppetry should have *Emotions in Motion* on their bookshelf. Esther Dagan has pulled together widely dispersed and sometimes difficult to find literature on a large number of traditional and contemporary African puppetry traditions. The text is in both English and French, and the organization makes the information on puppet types, materials and sizes, drama and characters, and the various types of stages easily accessible. Puppeteers and historians will appreciate the over 200 photographs of individual puppets and field photographs of African performances.

While there is much to recommend this book, puppet historians will be disappointed that it does not present a systematic discussion of each of the individual puppetry traditions. While the bibliography is adequate, many of the primary sources are not included. For historians, Olenka Darkowska-Nidzorska's *Théâtre populaire de marionettes en Afrique sud-Saharienne* (1980: Publication du Centre D'Etudes Ethnologiques, Bandundu, Zaïre) remains the better source for the synthesis of primary sources on traditional African puppetry. It also has a more complete bibliography which is more useful for scholars.

Mary Jo Arnoldi

*Curator of African Ethnology and Art,
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Photo: The Gertrude Show, Israel

East Meets West at the Festival of the Millennium

by Sidney Mallard

The 1999 National Festival of the Puppeteers of America will be nothing less than the "Festival of the Millennium"—as it is being billed by festival directors Stephen and Chris Carter. A wide array of national and international performers has already been booked with more in the works. Seattle's port links the city with Asia and the Pacific. Reflecting this, the Seattle festival will have a distinctive Chinese focus. The greatest living masters of Chinese puppetry will be performing three different techniques: string, hand and shadow. The festival will be the US debut for two of the performers.

What we can expect from these performances is a sampling of the rich history and diversity of puppetry from China. Puppetry has been a part of Chinese culture for many centuries and many of the performers today are carrying on what has been passed down to them from ancestors and puppet masters.

Huang Yi Que, a master marionettist of Quan Zhou, China, will be making his United States debut. The marionette tradition in his region of China is one of the richest and oldest in the world. Marionettes were first introduced to the region in the tenth century. String puppetry was historically associated with exorcism of bad spirits. Huang Yi Que was born in 1924 and began practicing puppetry skills at the age

of sixteen. After the formation of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949, Mr. Huang started the Quan Xhou Puppet Troupe. Huang Yi Que has been a leading artist with the troupe since its formation and is responsible for many technical innovations which have created the highly refined performance style practiced by the troupe today. Among these innovations are the lengthening of strings from four feet to fifteen feet, the division of the playing area into three spaces representing varying distance and the introduction of techniques borrowed from hand and rod puppetry. Huang Yi Que is recognized today as a master of the highest standing.

Yang Feng, a handpuppet master, will be performing with his daughter Yang Xie Zheng. The two make up the fifth and sixth generation of Chinese handpuppet performers in their family. The Yang Family are the oldest of traditional Chinese puppetry performers continuously operating up to the present day. Yang Feng's great-great grandfather, Yang Wu



Huang Yi Que

Xian, took up puppetry in 1850 and the tradition has now been passed down through six generations. Yang Feng began practicing puppetry skills at the age of six, under the tutelage of his father. He was appointed director of the Longxi Prefectural Puppet Theater and School at the age of 23. Yang Feng has been living in Washington State since 1992. His daughter, Yang Xie Zheng, is the first female in his family to take up puppetry. This father/daughter team brings new levels of amazement to an all new show. Yang Feng is also an outstanding teacher and puppet carver in the Chinese tradition.



1999 National Puppet Festival



Yang Feng



Yang Feng as a boy,
studying with his Father

The Tong Shan Shadow Theater will be making their US debut at the 1999 festival. This is an extraordinary shadow puppet troupe using traditional Chinese shadow puppets. The puppets have exquisite detail and color. The intricate manipulation and live music make this a show not to be missed!

Africa will also be represented, by the talented puppeteer/musician/sculptor/playwright Yaya Coulibaly. He was featured in the 1998 issue of *Puppetry International* magazine.

All of the performers mentioned, along with many others, will be teaching workshops at the festival.

For information about the "Festival of the Millennium" contact—
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production,
Wayang Listrik