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FRONT COVER

Mother & child marionettes
by Joe Cashore
see page 28



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS

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the National Endowment for the Arts.

Editorial

It's always best to start at the beginning. (Glinda the Good Witch)

The beginning of string puppetry? Difficult to say. We get hints, certainly—clay figures with holes in their hands dating from perhaps as early as the Pleistocene. Intriguing, but hardly definitive.

Bil Baird, in *The Art of the Puppet*, refers to Potheinos as the great granddaddy of string-pullers, but I wondered how much was really known about him. I put the question to British puppet cognoscenta, Penny Francis:

“There’s plenty of writing about Potheinos, and the *neurospasta* (neuro=nerve, and spasta=moving or jerking, hence ‘spastic’). So it seems to add up to things that jumped about – and internal stringing of the figures seems very likely.”

She goes on to say that Henryk Jukowski’s *History of European Puppetry* covers Potheinos, and, further, that the Greeks who originally described these puppets never mentioned the method of manipulation. While “nervous” and “spastic” seems an apt description of someone picking up a marionette for the first time, it is considered unlikely that the Greek figures (from several centuries BC) were worked by strings from above.

So our profession has its roots in a mystery— what’s wrong with that? The essays that follow include things historical, theoretical, traditional and experimental, as well as a number of our most respected “string-pullers” reflecting on our most fascinating pendulum.

Two well-known marionnetists have recently passed away – Slovakian Anton Anderle and American Paddy Blackwood. Anton Anderle was featured in one of our first issues of *A Propos* (PI’s predecessor) in the late 1980s. His work was rustic and vital, and we were saddened to read of his death in the *Puppet Notebook* article celebrating his career (British UNIMA’s journal).

Paddy Blackwood’s career is remembered in the current issue of the *Puppetry Journal*, but among our memories is a moment that comes back to us from time to time. Soon after the death of that other great string puller, Bil Baird, there was an auction of many of his puppets in Manhattan. We were there to observe and to make a photographic record of everything being sold. The bidding began rather sluggishly. Then Paddy began picking up the items offered for sale. As he began to work the figures, the amounts being bid jumped up way beyond anyone’s expectations. It was a feeding-frenzy as we all saw not just puppets, but the glory days of Snarky Parker and his pals brought back to life. Paddy was worth his weight in gold that day, though we doubt he earned a dime. For this, and so many other things, we will remember him.

This appearance of *Puppetry International* #27 marks our 25th anniversary of producing the magazines for UNIMA-USA. It has been a marvelous adventure—one that we hope will continue for awhile. We’ve had so much help along the way, from our many board members and staff, advisors and associates, interviewers and reviewers, writers and underwriters, and, of course, the members and subscribers who read *PI*. Our heartfelt thanks to all, and especially to the innumerable artists, present and past, whose creative output has made such publications necessary. To them, and to all of you, we offer this poem of praise (with apologies to Walt Whitman).



DANIEL MEADER'S 10-1/2" TRANSFORMATION MARIONETTE, THE TERRIBLE TURK. COURTESY DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS, THEATRE DEPT.

Your editors,
Andrew and Bonnie Periale

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

—Andrew Periale

1 Come, my supple-fingered children,
Take your places, get your figures ready;
Have you your slapsticks? Have you your rawhide shadows? Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

2 For the curtain rises soon,
We must play my darlings, we must bear the limelight bravely,
We, the truthful, black-clad races, destiny on us depends, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

3 Whether youths, or wrinkled sages,
Speak your texts, or act in silence, we respect all styles and genres,
Ancient Kathputli or post-post-modern, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

4 Have our greedy forebears ruined us—
Left polluted soil and seas to clean up, set one race against another?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden, and the lesson, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

5 Though you live out on the margins
With the whores, dreamers and shamans, like Lear's fool
Speak truth to power, walk with kings and commoners, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

6 Our history is writ on pavement
Market places, police blotters, rain-soaked posters
What care we for critics, or self-serving Masters theses? Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

7 We primeval tales are telling
Down the ages, gods and demons, flying monkeys
Conquering audiences of all ages, with our virtuosic antics, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

8 Dolly wiggling tribes are we,
With our simulacra rolling down the interstates and blue roads
Undeterred by peaks gigantic, road construction, poor directions, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

9 We have taken summer workshops
Honed our skills with rod and string at festivals, and blushed at
All the hands of comrades clapping—UNIMA and PofA'ers, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

10 O weightless race of dalangs
O beloved gamelan, my ears ache with thy clang'rous din
I love your show, yet always sleep through half the Ramayana, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

11 Punch, the undisputed master,
If as Kasper, Karagoz or Pulcinella, Guignol,
Puppetry is full of little pint-sized bastards, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

12 Hear me, Bread and Puppet offspring,
champions of the huddled masses, whistle-blowers to the unsung
bear your fangs & raise a ruckus, "If I had a hammer"-singing, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

13 Art's contrived and varied pageants
Would be flat and dull without us. Like Macy's Parade—Thanksgiving
sans those huge balloons, or French fries without salt, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

14 'Til with sound like swazzle buzzing
In the lobby—hark, how loud and clear I hear it wind
The intermission's almost over!—Swift! Spring to your places, Puppeteers! O Puppeteers!

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My Own Private Püterschein

by Ronnie Burkett

I love marionettes. By this point in my life I should be able to explain why, but there's no pithy, academic reason. Even if there were, I wouldn't want to shatter the romance with cerebral musing. Which is odd, because the tribe of us who are smitten by puppets on strings spend our lives thinking, dissecting, fiddling and tinkering with the very thing that is our jointed muse.

Any discussion of marionette construction among practitioners soon reveals distinct influences, preferences, periods; going out on a limb, I'd daresay that on the family tree of puppetry, marionette builders lay claim to a stronger technical lineage and provenance than, say, their handpuppeteering counterparts or other forms within the puppet culture. This is not to perpetuate the notion that "marionettes are superior because they're more difficult," but given that the construction of a marionette is usually rooted in a mechanical vocabulary, marionette craftsmen/performers tend to spend their lifetime exploring and refining that mystical balance between figure and performance.

Ah, balance. To the serious marionette geek, balance is all. In *Puppetry 1935*, William Addison Dwiggins wrote of his experiments with marionettes. "The quest: a marionette to make the motions of the human animal in response to simple pulls and releases of the strings. If motions in general could be left to gravity on one side and string-pull on the other, the manipulator could give his main attention to fine shades of expression *via* stance, gesture, etc." What followed from this thoughtful, precise hobbyist was *Marionette in Motion*, published by Paul McPharlin's Puppetry Imprints in 1939, in which Dwiggins revealed the counterbalanced marionette, built under "the Püterschein Authority."

For most of my adult life, I have proudly considered myself a "Püterscheiner," even if I wasn't altogether sure what that meant. Still, as a career marionette man, it sounded fancy and lofty, difficult and desperately European, so I embraced it.

My own climb up the puppetry family tree was precipitated by those who went before me. As a young puppeteer my two chief influences were Martin Stevens (whose early work was so elegant I still catch my breath when looking at it) and Bil Baird (who, pre-Muppets, had perhaps the most widely recognizable style in puppetry). Tony Sarg begat Baird, who eventually begat Burkett. Vittorio Podrecca's Teatro dei Piccoli inspired Stevens, who was further influenced by Sue Hastings and then Dwiggins, ultimately spawning Burkett. Even if you don't know those names, I might



still probably sit next to you at a puppet festival (maybe), but to those in the know, these links sum up the moorings of my own vocabulary. It therefore makes perfect sense that my marionettes have a Sarg knee joint, sometimes a Baird turnbuckle at the hip, the Dwiggins middle disk, the Stevens stance. All at once. My technique is a smorgasbord of 20th-century American marionette influences. And British, since being a Canadian *d'un certain age* involved domination by both the UK and the USA, culturally speaking. So, with all those American bits and pieces in my marionettes, you'll often find Waldo Lanchester's shoulder joint, too, for his book *Hand Puppets and String Puppets* was the first I owned. Later on, and once I was actively in the marionette trenches, I discovered other influences: Josef Skupa, Paul Brann, Frank Paris, Walton and O'Rourke, John Wright. A broad and diverse assortment of approaches, yet each one triggering an instinctual response in me.

I'm about to immerse myself in the creation of another large show, which brings months of design (character, costume and technical drawings), script workshops, sculpting, mold making, carving, endless days of jointing. And the design and creation of the stage set on which this strange, small world will play out. Over the years I've played with various stagings; manipulating as a character on the same stage as the marionettes, working long-strung marionettes from a series of bridges above the action, combinations of the two. In terms of design, I've done starkly naturalistic figures, more stylized proportions, and completely "puppet-y" looking puppets. My greatest joy and challenge is always the interpretation of text through marionettes, for I am a writer and a speaker. So, in essence, my marionettes have been built as acting figures. I've also made monkeys and bears roller skate, and strippers dis-robe, and characters push shopping carts, and take off their slippers, but usually in service of the story rather than being a trick. Don't get me wrong, I love the tricks, and no one is happier than I when a marionette juggles.

For the new work I'm about to immerse myself in, I've realized that I'm personally longing for a return to a strange naturalism in design. And to get above the marionette action and out of the way of the puppets. When I began, being onstage was a conscious choice, a way of deconstructing marionette performance and the performer/audience relationship to the puppet. But now, seemingly everyone is visible and puppetry has been deconstructed to the point of being, quite possibly, more about the performer than the poor, noble puppet.

I'd like to remove myself from the puppet's realm and let it stand alone, for in that embrace by an audience I am even more present, represented fully by the instrument of my discussion: The marionette itself.

My next forward move will be a backward glance to everything I've learned, not as a revisionist of my past, but as a "re-visitor" to the influences that first made me love marionettes in the first place.

I've been thinking a lot about marionette construction, and am as preoccupied with this lately as I was as a twelve year old. And believe me, at twelve, I literally couldn't sleep because of my lust for marionette construction information. The difference between that puppet-mad boy and the slightly mad puppeteer I am now, is the absolute knowledge that the control to which the marionette is strung is equally as important as the figure below. For the last seventeen years I've used variations on the German Bross/Roser control. The influence of Fritz-Herbert Bross on Roser, and subsequently Albrecht Roser on, well, everyone, cannot be denied. His years of unparalleled performances, teaching and mentoring have caused a major rethinking in marionette design, specifically the controls. It is now common to see hybrids of German, English, American and other styles. This is marionette theory and craft now, with significant experimentation taking place. There may be fewer marionette practitioners than during the heyday of the mid-20th century, but in my observation, the approach has become more personal and refined by the few still smitten by this form of puppetry.



Luman Coad's *Marionette Sourcebook* was a revelation to me. From his own research of various controls and marionette joints, he put them into print, not as a "how-to" book, but as a reference of theory and practice for those already working with marionettes. I had not encountered such an influential book in years, and it propelled me to a rethinking of every aspect of the marionette. Luman has built my marionette controls for years, both the standard "acting controls" and specific ones for specialty marionettes. At the precipice of a new show and in a continued evolution of my own work, we're now discussing a complete rethinking of controls. Our noodling in this direction is based solely upon performance, and the specific needs and requirements I ask of my puppets in tandem with the human limitations of the guy "at the controls." The current clan of my peers have already been on this track; I feel that I'm finally catching up to them.

Stephen Mottram is one of those people who, without a lot of initial external influence, began playing with the notion of marionettes. His approach is singular, inasmuch as he figured things out as he went, and what he figures out is movement: "That first experience of being isolated at the start from traditionally designed marionettes has meant that usually I still start by analyzing a movement that I want the puppet to be able to do, then designing from scratch a control and a method for achieving that movement with a marionette. I find the simplest solutions are usually the best and that most apparently complex human movements can be broken down to an identifiable and reproducible sequence of mini-events. So, since the marionette is controlled by upward pulls from the top of the strings, friction between the puppet and the ground, swings initiated from above etc, a method of creating the necessary sequence of mini-events at the puppet end can usually be designed which exploits these simple tools."

Conventional marionette construction has usually focused on the building of the figure itself, and the ability (or restrictions) of the puppet to move within space. What Mottram describes is a "from the puppet up" view of movement, wherein the control is of equal importance. This is echoed by Joe Cashore, who, as an exacting performer of solo vignettes, demands very specific movements from his marionettes and, as explained elsewhere in this issue, devotes considerable time to the design and mastery of his bespoke marionette controls. Similarly, as Craftsman in Residence at the O'Neill Puppetry Conference, Fred Thompson credits Rufus and Margo Rose, Albrecht Roser and Stephen Mottram as major influences, and continues this approach: "I think from the puppet up, and ask what has to happen AT the control to make the marionette do THIS action. I find that by asking 'What if?' I can break away from routine approaches and sometimes discover another way. Simple solutions are often the most elegant."

As Marionette Master (with Phillip Huber) at the O'Neill Conference, Jim Rose observed this philosophy firsthand from an early age. Rufus Rose was legendary in his on-going refinement of marionette controls: "It was typical of my Dad to experiment with new solutions to control problems as well as body construction challenges. Traditional solutions didn't appeal per se. Solutions had to be justified by practical and aesthetic considerations of the case-in-point."

For Phillip Huber, a consummate marionette showman, controls have been one of his most experimental areas: "The first marionette control I made was a variation on the Dwiggins paddle control. From there, I tried the English vertical control; my own experimental designs which looked like outlandish kinetic sculptures; the basic airplane control (while working for Tony Urbano); then a hybrid vertical-horizontal combination created by Jim Gamble; a Roser style German control; and now I have come full circle back to the paddle control with enclosed handle that is amazingly simple but versatile. It is a combination of Rufus Rose, Dwiggins, Japanese and Chinese styles."

Of course, without a responsive figure at the end of the strings, even the most genius of controls cannot produce brilliant movement. What's interesting to me now is that puppeteers are revisiting marionette construction in order to serve the movement from the control above. Bernd Ogrodnik devised a method of marionette walking for the movie *Strings*, enabling very clean and reliable walking in all directions. Stephen Mottram admits that he never felt a marionette was capable of walking well before seeing Ogrodnik's method: "I have been much more interested in marionette walking as a result and the last few years of work have been very influenced by his ideas. To enable this very clean walk, a particularly steady hip joint is necessary at the puppet end and this is a type of ball and socket joint, which I have changed in my own figures to be made with moulded plastic cups which fix to the tops of the legs and capture the ball attached to the marionette pelvis in such a way that there is a virtually friction free hip movement, which at the same time has no wobble or unwanted movement of its own - as is sometimes the case with a leather and staple hip joint." Phillip Huber mentions a similar approach: "Of all the puppet joints, the hip is perhaps the one that I have changed the most. I have tried almost every variation from Sarg to Dwiggins, but finally established my own unique joint that includes a dowel & nylon cord creating a ball-in-socket, duplicating the realistic movement of the human hip."

This cross-pollination of vocabulary is what makes marionette craft more interesting than ever before. Undoubtedly, for many people building marionettes, the "how-to" and craft aspect is the primary focus, which, when you think about, is not the primary focus of a marionette at all. But for the handful of people who build marionettes with performance as the intended end result, an understanding of marionette crafting is essential to the refinement of movement and interpretation.

As personal and particular as philosophical views on the marionette are to each, so too are construction materials. Invariably there's wood, sometimes the entire figure, more often than not in combination with a cloth arm, a foam chest, heads of papier mâché or neoprene or Paperclay or Celastic, joints of rope or string or trunk fiber or steel. Again, these choices are based upon not only performance requirements, but preferences. I have made many marionettes from patterned cloth (influenced by the late American dollmaker Robert McKinley's *Dollmaking, One Artist's Approach*), carved entire bodies from wood, cast torsos and hips from molds. Among practitioners, these choices are based upon factors such as weight, durability, a movement away from toxic materials, ease of use and familiarity.



Those of us who have worked with marionettes for many years are actively playing with new and old techniques, less rigid in adherence to one particular approach. It will be interesting to see how the bright new crop of Roser acolytes develop and cross-pollinate marionette technique in the future, taking his revolutionary approach and marrying their own performance-based experimentation with other, older techniques waiting to be rediscovered, adapted and tinkered with. This is the very essence of marionette craft, and what it needs to continue. Personally, I'm very hopeful and excited about that future. The marionette is in a lot of good hands.

Martin Stevens told me a story about Dwiggins years ago while I was making my first marionette with him. He and Rufus Rose had discovered the Dwiggins theory of counterbalanced marionette construction and had begun to construct their marionettes accordingly, adding their own specific adaptations along the way. Several years later, Martin and Olga Stevens found themselves, while on tour, near the town Dwiggins lived in and they decided to make a pilgrimage to see the great man himself. Arriving at Dwiggins' home, Steve knocked on the door and when Dwiggins answered, Steve bowed down grandly (Steve was always "theatrical") fell to one knee and said: "Oh Mr. Dwiggins, you are our Master, our inspiration! Your counterbalanced marionettes are glorious machines; they walk, they stand regally, they move like instruments of heaven and obey the most subtle or bold manipulation!" To which Dwiggins, looking down at this madman, replied: "They do?" Dwiggins built his marionettes in a very small scale, about 12" tall. Stevens and Rose followed the Tony Sarg influence and made their marionettes in the standard American scale of 4"=1', so their figures were in the 24" range. Because of the small scale Dwiggins worked in, his counterbalance theories technically didn't work, and he had to insert lead weight into various parts of the body in order to keep them grounded. So, while his theory was sound (and I myself use it), without enough size or natural weight to the marionette, it simply floated and was unresponsive. I've always loved that story. Somewhere between the theorists and the practitioners lies the truth.

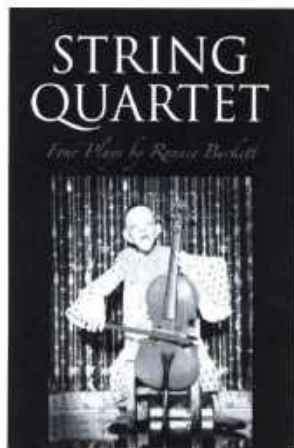
I recently learned that the "Püterschein Authority" was so named as a winking joke; Dr. Herman Püterschein was simply Dwiggins's pseudonym. This doesn't lessen the theory at all; in fact, it makes me embrace it even more. For if this exploration and experimentation isn't fun, filled with wonder and a continued passion for the possibilities of a marionette, what's the point? No matter how serious we try to make the marionette, inevitably a string will break, or untie itself from the control, or tangle. So, winking right back, I will continue to think of myself as a "Püterscheiner" as I dive headfirst into the terrifying thrill of building another cast of marionettes in motion.

"MY VERY FIRST MARIONETTE, BUILT AT
MARTIN STEVENS' STUDIO." —R.B.

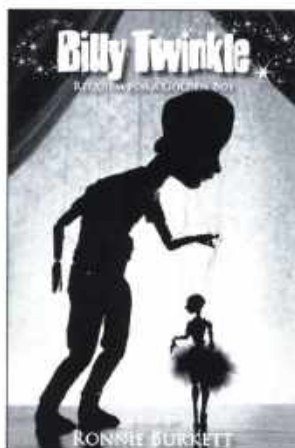
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VERTICAL BALANCE by Irina Niculescu

VERTIGO

When I was about 12 years old, I climbed onto a marionette bridge that was about 6 feet tall; the puppet attached at the end of the strings seemed very far away. I got dizzy just by looking at it and climbed back down.

Today, as puppetry goes through an extraordinary revival—an exuberant search for new forms, integrating actors, dancers and digital arts—the “classic marionette” continues to charm and fascinate people of all ages. What generates this incredible power? Is it the skill with which the puppeteer moves the puppet? Is it the illusion of life? Is it the presence of the strings as a visible connection to the hands of the puppeteer? Is it the relation of proportions between the marionette and the spectator, from the miniature marionette of the contemporary Toy Theatres to the giant marionettes of “Royal de Luxe”? The marionette has the capacity to open locked doors and to free our emotions.

“ART IS A LIE THAT TELLS THE TRUTH”
—Picasso

I didn’t choose the marionette, she chose me. A short time after I finished theatre school, I was invited to make a show for Tandarica Puppet Theatre of Bucharest. The theatre had two companies: one specialized in marionettes, and the other performed with hand, rod, and body puppets. I got the marionette team. It was a challenge. I studied marionettes and I didn’t like the realistic approach, which focused on reproducing the human and animal movement in its truthfulness and detail. It was considered popular and successful, and though I respected the skill required, I didn’t find the effect theatrical. It seemed to me that the more the puppet imitated real life through numerous articulations and strings, the less convincing it was. To skillful imitation, I preferred the fragility of the balance and movement, the visual metaphor, and the power of suggestion.

I was attracted by the tragic-comic essence of the marionette, its naiveté, and helplessness. I was interested in exploring its tragic dimension. This is what I brought with me when I stepped into the marionette world, although I didn’t confine myself there. I have worked with different forms of puppet theatre for different shows. I move between tradition and research and sometimes weave them together. Certain themes lead me to create new forms of puppetry. It is like writing poetry. You write a poem only once. But I returned to the marionette many times.

VISUAL METAPHORS

My work has two main themes: explore the capacity of the marionette to transmit emotions, and bring the puppet and the actor together to play with the potential meanings of their new relationship. This drove me to bring the marionette out of its protective booth and place it on the open stage. The proportion of the marionette in relation to the space provokes our own feelings of fragility. The marionette and the actor, the marionette and the space, the marionette and the public, all questions inviting us to start each time from the beginning.

I look for a strong impact with the audience. I like to push the limits and break the golden rules of balance, weight, proportion, symmetry, and articulation. I do this in an attempt to create a certain atmosphere, a certain image, and a certain dramatic tension.

My first show on the main Romanian stage was a fable with horses and wolves. It told the story of a young foal that begins his journey through life and discovers the joy of being, confronts violence, misunderstanding, danger, fear, betrayal, confusion and learns a sense of justice, wisdom, solidarity, and friendship. It was important to create the image of a free wild world. I was looking for materials which would allow fluidity of movement.



I wanted to transmit a feeling of freedom. Material and form are essential in puppetry. I was inspired by a painting of Velasquez and the relationship between the horse and the distant sky. I decided that, instead of using hard materials which allow safely controlled articulations, we would make the bodies of the animals out of fabric, with the heads sculpted from wood. Using new materials and abstract forms led us to explore new points of balance, new articulations, and new expressive movements. We worked against inertia and gravity. This new form of marionettes demanded a new form of dramaturgy. We played with different structures and finally decided to compose four seasons: "The Seasons of the Foal." I introduced a master of ceremonies/actor/puppeteer, who appeared from the clouds and brought in the seasons. His role was to break the closed space of the marionette stage and establish a direct relationship with the audience. A couple of times, the master of ceremonies intervened in the flesh of the story. The foal had a moment of anxiety and confusion followed by panic and pain. I called it an existential crisis. In all my shows, the main characters (played by marionettes) have an existential crisis. Here, the Foal takes a big jump, too big for him. He falls and remains immobile as if his strings were broken—the strings, the fragile connection between life and death. A long moment of immobility stops everything. The public is completely silent. We are in a suspended reality, inside the story and outside. The actor/puppeteer/master of ceremonies comes down from the bridge and gently sets the foal on its feet. The strongest moments are those when the marionette starts to come to life.

"The Legend of the Pied Piper" was an adventurous search for the tragic dimension of the marionette. I wanted to create the image of a sick world; the disease was greed, and our keyword was "loss," better said: the fear of loss. I chose with the designer two very different sources of inspiration, Breughel and Giacometti. The bridge was 6 feet high. The characters were very tall and thin. We created surrealistic moments in which the law of gravity stopped working. Immobility played an important role, too; it expressed a humanity petrified in sorrow. The long legs, arms and necks of the

marionettes made both movement and immobility a big challenge. The strings were long; and the impact with the ground was small for the tall puppets. The puppeteers discovered different techniques to control the swinging and to go from movement to immobility. The fragile balance and the elongated forms created the powerful dramatic tension I was looking for.

THE MARIONETTE MEETS THE ACTOR

The marionette performed in full view has been known in cabarets and in folk theatre. But in the last fifty years, the actor and the marionette met in a different way. The moment when the puppet stepped out of the booth to face the manipulator, the actor, was crucial. Their relation got a dramatic function and became a source of existential interpretations.

In the show "Juan Darien," we integrated the marionette bridge in the scenography. The space was completely open. We created a bamboo forest with real bamboo and a water pond in the center. The bridge connected the jungle to the village and later on became the marionette bridge. The actress playing Juan's mother crossed the bridge to get to the water where she met the young tiger. The hunters who were looking for the tiger were actors. It was the magic transformation of the tiger into a boy that drove

the story into a marionette world. I followed more an associative logic that was closer to the dream. Juan's destiny going from the woman's love to the village discrimination, torture, and fire were very dramatic. I wanted the puppeteers and the musician to be discretely visible, to give the public the opportunity to wake up if they needed to, and reassure them that this was just a dream, theatre. The puppet's impact on the public was even stronger.

I believe that the animation performed in view of the audience makes the illusion of life even stronger. The magic consists in the capacity of the actor to extend into the object and invest in it. The marionette placed between the actor and the public becomes more real than reality itself.



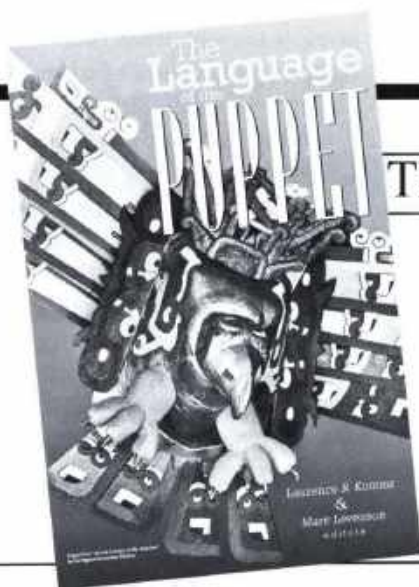
All images from "Master Peter's Puppet show," by Manuel De Falla
 A production of Madcap Puppet Theatre and the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra
 Conception and directing by Irina Niculescu
 Design by Brad Clark photos: Brad Clark

*A WINK AT TRADITION –
 "Master Peter's Puppet show"*

I was confronted with a different challenge in staging De Falla's "Master Peter." The piece was originally written and composed for puppets, and this fact itself provoked already many interpretations. I went back to Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote*; it helped me understand the cultural context and the source of his irony, and enabled me to commit to a direction. In my vision, "Master Peter's Puppet Show" explores the shifting boundaries of truth and illusion. I wanted to tease people's need for planned harmony and control. For this purpose, I added a prologue in which the conductor gives a speech about De Falla and his desire for perfection and control. We interrupted his speech with a farce: two musicians burst on stage fighting. The two puppets were built on one puppeteer. We provoked an explosion of laughter and liberated the audience from the concert stiffness. We conceived several layers of puppet theatre. The chivalric story is played with marionettes and rod puppets,

while Master Peter, Don Quixote and The Boy are body puppets that use the legs of the actor and allow a comedic performance. We created moments of illusion meant to have an emotional impact on the public, and we demystified them a moment later by showing "the trick." We followed Cervantes' irony, mixing chivalric legend with slapstick. Gradually, the puppets came out of their designated space. During his final aria, Don Quixote left the stage and the theatre, surprising the conductor and mixing reality and illusion one last time. And as the Don leaves the hall he flirts with the audience, demonstrating that absolute control does not exist.

Irina Niculescu works in many countries, but now lives in Cincinnati, OH. She still finds the possibilities of marionette theatre dizzying, but thankfully no longer suffers from vertigo.



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BOB BAKER, *History and Interview*

by Christine Papalexis



BOB BAKER, "THEN"

I recently sat down with Bob Baker to find out a little more about his life as a puppeteer, his influences, his collaborators and his favorite puppet.

Bob has been a puppeteer, a teacher, an archivist and his theater has been an institution of puppetry in Los Angeles for decades. The style and palette of Bob's shows have changed little over the years - the puppets may be a little bigger now than when he first built them many years ago. Puppeteers who have worked at his theater have come and gone, some moved on to have successful careers in puppetry, but Bob has remained committed to his vision of having a beautiful puppet theater, a place where children can come to be delighted with the magic of puppetry.

The early years. . .

Bob was 6 years old when he saw his first puppet show - he was at Barker Brothers department store in downtown Los Angeles on the 10th floor. After watching a trick marionette - a puppet with a balloon in his stomach to make him fat - Bob had to stay to watch all six shows to see the marionette do the trick again. Shows two, three, four and five had problems but during the 6th show the trick worked perfectly. Bob was hooked. There was also a beautiful ballerina puppet that fascinated him and the image of the ballerina recurs throughout his career. At age seven he bought his first puppets at Bullock's (which had a puppet department at the time) and took lessons with a professional puppeteer. At eight he was hired to do his first birthday party show for actor Mervyn LeRoy and made \$15.00, which was a lot at the time for a young boy. He also had some hand puppets, but they didn't have the same appeal to him; He enjoyed performing with the whole puppet, creating a "full concept of the stage" rather than being behind a curtain only showing the character from the waist up.

He performed for many Hollywood celebrities over the years and was one of many puppet companies that performed in Los Angeles during the Depression and the years after - Blanding Sloane, Bob Bromley, Walton and O'Rourke are just a few of the names that are part of Los Angeles puppet history. The Federal Theater was established in 1935 and supported puppetry across the country. Though the theater required youngsters to be 12 years old to work at the theater, Bob was only 11. He told them he was 12 and he worked as a gopher under the National Youth Authority, learning every aspect of running a theater company. One day, Bob had the chance to perform with the company when one of the other puppeteers didn't make it to the show, so he joined the other puppeteers on the bridge. They performed *Snow White*, with pre-recorded voices and music. At the very end of the show, one of the puppeteers was passing Snow White to Bob while he was holding the horse:

I had hold of Prince Charming on the horse and they were meant to hand Snow White to me because he reached down to get her and put her on the horse. As I reached for the puppet, I only grabbed the foot bar. The main part of the control goes down 12 feet onto the stage floor. The transcription (pre-recording) is saying "Oh my dear how beautiful you are" and the way the puppet is looking down at her, he sees her with just the legs up in the air. I yelled, "Close the curtain!" Finally the show ended, I dragged her offstage, and I didn't cry or anything but I was pretty upset, so I went down to talk to the man in charge, which was Bob Bromley, and I said, "Mr. Bromley, I'm not 12 yrs old, I'm only 11." He said, "We knew that." So I said, "Well, I guess I shouldn't be working here." He said, "Why not?" And I said, "You hired me and I dropped my puppet on the ground and made a mess of the whole end of the show." And he said, "Now you are a professional puppeteer, because you have to drop your puppet at least once! Continue to work."

Bob stayed and enjoyed performing many more shows. This incident influenced how he made marionette controls in the future - he found the controls at the theater too wide and hard to hold onto and decided to devise something that worked better. Bob's controls are the traditional airplane control that is typical to American marionettes, but they are little more than an inch wide with a wavy design that is very comfortable in the hand. Highly sanded and painted, each control feels like a smooth extension of the marionette below.

Bob's parents were supportive of his creativity from a young age and took him to classes including tap dancing, Russian dancing, drama classes, piano, various art classes and, of course, puppetry classes that all contributed to his ultimate profession of puppetry. Bob occasionally performed in movies. In fact, he was in the Shirley Temple movie *Poor Little Rich Girl* when he had an opportunity to make a bear marionette in a scene to skate on a bar of soap, which, unfortunately, ended up on the cutting room floor. Bob continued to work for Robinson's and other theaters that came through town and needed another puppeteer. He always worked marionettes until WWII came along and did a few things with marionettes in the military, but when he left the army, he decided to fulfill a dream of working for Disney. He applied for a job as an artist. During the interview, however, he was persuaded to apply for a job with George Pal. He started at Pal's studio immediately and worked there many years. Pal was an innovator in stop-motion replacement animation and for Bob it was a great opportunity to develop all his interests—dance, color, movement—as they applied to the world of stop-motion filmmaking. One his accomplishments was creating the new credits for Pal, which took a month to shoot.

Influences and collaborators. . .

In 1938, Bob went to see a Wagner opera:

...which was just awful. The sets were ghastly, the singers looked all wrong. But when I closed my eyes it was just gorgeous—the singing was gorgeous. At that moment I thought how wonderful it would be to do it with puppets. You could make the characters look however you wanted them to look.

This was one of the moments that informed his career, his puppetry.

In addition to his early lessons, he studied the arts at UCLA, Art Center and Pasadena Playhouse. There were many people that influenced Bob including Tony Sarg, who came to Los Angeles and performed an amazing production of Faust, complete with fireworks. Teatro de Piccoli also came to town (before they filmed "I Am Suzanne"), Walton and O'Rourke and the many performers on Olvera Street. Bob has also collaborated with amazing talent over the years. Here are just a few: Roy Raymond for twenty-five years, Zoe Brooks, twenty-five years, King Hall, Frank Paris and Ho Kasuda for almost twenty years. Morton Hack was a brilliant designer who worked with Bob in the early years, and though he didn't care for puppets, he loved Bob's style and helped conceive of some of Bob's early characters. Ursula Heinly is currently working there after a lengthy career in the fashion industry working for Gallanos and many others. And, of course, Alton Wood, his partner at the theater and in all aspects of the business for over fifty years. After meeting Alton, Bob's career took on new momentum. He began to make puppets for Bullock's Wilshire which started his career of building puppets for Disney, the theater, window displays, film and television.



BOB BAKER, "NOW"

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

Interview...

Christine: Tell me about your theater - when did you open and what was the first show you performed there?

Bob Baker: After 6 years of doing shows at Laguna, we opened the theater on 1st Street near downtown LA in 1960. The first show we performed was *Sketchbook Review*. That was followed by *Over the Garden Wall*, *Enchanted Toyshop*, *Circus* and *Something to Crow About* and many others.

C: When did you start the cabaret style of marionette performance?

B: I was performing at the Beverly Hills Hotel for Mr. Rockefeller—they were out here on vacation, and I was manufacturing puppets at the time and puppet stages and many kids around town were doing the same kind of show and had similar kinds of presentations. So I figured I'd go by and borrow one of the stages, but there weren't any drapes. I asked one of the girls to stitch some drapes, but they were the crookedest drapes you've ever seen, so I couldn't take them. I didn't have a stage. I had a brand new record player, I laid the puppets down on a bed and took each one into the living room for the number. . . It worked really well for many reasons - since it was right after the war, the kids didn't like sitting in a dark room, they didn't run around looking under the curtain to see what was there, and you didn't have to lug around all that stuff. At the next show, they put up a screen for me. It worked so well, I made two full length screens, puppets in a couple of suitcases, and we did hundreds of shows like that.

C: You've done some shows with a story and some that are more of a review. Do you prefer one or the other?

B: No, not really, I like doing both. When we did *Something to Crow About* (which takes place in a day on a farm) there hadn't been another show like it— a show totally in the round for more than fifteen minutes. It was different, totally different. A cabaret-style puppet show. That's the one that I really wanted to take around on tour. But we've done both.

C: Are there any shows you still want to do?

B: I started working on *Arabian Nights*, but in order to do it, you have to have a lot of mayhem, fingers lopped off, heads off, this isn't what I really think is good entertainment, so we want to go back to it and make it a comedy. . . We'll have Aladdin and the lamp and lot of other things to fill the story - Sinbad will go down to the bottom of the ocean, that'll be blacklight, of course.

C: How do you create a show?

B: I like to have someone to bounce a show off of. I don't have as many people around as I used to.. There is a meeting of the minds

that with some people— you come up with something, they come up with something and the chemistry works! It just works. Now it seems like people are so interested in how much money they can make. I have a couple of people that are interested in being involved. We'll see. We've been doing an inventory of the puppets, there are a lot of puppets, but it seems a lot have disappeared. We have a non-profit now and we are thinking of putting the puppets under that area for protection.

We have three or four people working with us, trying to get us some help to take over a lot of things so I can eventually show them what to do. There are a few people interested in the theater, but it seems the last thing they want to do is be in charge of a puppet theater. They just say, "Close it down! Get rid of it! Takes too much time on Saturdays, uses up my Sundays!" We had the idea of having a school. I'm hoping this year to not do so much myself, but to surround myself with people that can do things.

C: Do you have a favorite puppet?

B: People ask me that all the time and I say, can I give you a list? Well - I've got a black and white clown— I just love that clown. I got it out the other day just to look at him.

I have the dodo bird, I love the dodo, I love the way she makes people laugh. Course, I love Bobo because he's just one of my favorite of the commercial puppets. There's a lot of puppets that I like because of just being that puppet and I enjoyed making it, some I even had trouble making— Sandra Lee, the yellow cat, the orange cat. I get really angry at the ballerina, but I love her. When you're doing a show, people don't always understand this, but I tell them—I try to do the best show that I've ever done no matter how many times I've done it. And many times—I was doing a show just six months ago and I did something with a puppet I've never done before and I've been working that puppet for ten years!

The Bob Baker Marionette Theater opened in 1960. In 2009, it was declared a Cultural/Historical Monument by the Los Angeles City Council and is the only puppet theater standing in Los Angeles today. Thousands of children have grown up with this wonderful place in their lives, all due to one little boy's dream of puppets on strings.

Christine Papalexis began her puppetry career working at Bob Baker Marionette Theater and has worked in film, television and onstage for over 25 years. Credits include "Team America: World Police," "Men in Black II," "Alien Resurrection," "Dude, Where's My Car" and Fandango commercials. She is a past president of the LAGuild of Puppetry, current Board member and belongs to UNIMA-USA and PofA.

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DON'T DROP THE BANANAS:

Tradition v. Innovation in Burmese Puppetry

by Anna Sobel



MINTHA, A PRINCE

"God, please don't let me drop the bananas." I rarely pray before a performance, but this was a special case. I would be manipulating the Nagadaw, the spirit medium of traditional Burmese puppetry. Her every move is codified. According to the rules governing marionettes, the Nagadaw must open the show by bowing three times in three directions and then paying her respects to an offering of coconut and bananas. In a popular new twist on the tradition, the Htwe Oo Myanmar troupe has the Nagadaw puppet lift the offering, shake it as if possessed by a spirit, and then wave it nine times before exiting the stage backward. Not an easy feat for a marionette. Thankfully, it's almost impossible to make a Burmese puppet look bad, given the meticulous carving and stringing which go into its creation.

The performance was the culmination of a three-week workshop in Burmese puppetry, or *yokthe thay*, in which I participated in January 2010 at Empty Space Chiang Mai, an artist's retreat center in rural Thailand. Our host was director and designer Manuel Lutgenhorst, originally from Munich, who founded Empty Space and lives there with his Thai wife and two children. Mr. Lutgenhorst is extremely well connected in the Asian theater world and

hand picked the artists from Myanmar who would attend. (Myanmar is the new name for Burma, although it is still correct to refer to the people and language of the country as Burmese.) The marionette troupe he invited, Htwe Oo Myanmar, was founded in 2006 by Khin Maung Htwe, a former officer in the marines whose lifelong love of theater led him to change careers in order to preserve the fading marionette tradition in Myanmar. Mr. Htwe (pronounced "tway") brought with him one old master, U Daung Yin, a spritely 77-year-old with a youthful soul whom we affectionately called Babagyi, and a remarkably strong and gifted young woman puppeteer, Tin Nan Myint, age 36, whom we called simply Nan. Also joining us from Myanmar was a highly skilled puppet builder, Mr. Aung Than Thun, who helped us to carve and string our own marionettes. Later Burmese arrivals included an avant garde poet as well as a modern composer.

For the first week, we focused on making simple movements with the Thangye-do, or pageboy puppet. A Burmese puppeteer would typically spend one month learning to manipulate this character alone. The brevity of our workshop forced us to condense the training. Fortunately, although none of us had previous marionette experience, all the participants were professional puppeteers—eight from Thailand and two of us from the US—and we were a quick study. What is more, we had wonderful models. Babagyi and Nan tirelessly demonstrated, assisted and critiqued us as we struggled to master the manipulation. As Erik Finck, my fellow American, put it, "Babagyi and Nan were such patient teachers, and they were so skilled we couldn't help but learn just being around them." Many of us, myself included, admitted to having actually been afraid to manipulate marionettes before the workshop. "I use puppets in my theater," said Teerawat Mulvilai, a.k.a. Kange, of the Bangkok-based B Floor Theatre, "but I was always so scared to do marionettes. This was a good time to confront that." I can definitely say that I've conquered my own string phobia, but that is not to minimize the complexity and delicacy involved in manipulating Burmese marionettes.

The marionette tradition in Myanmar is said to date back to the 11th century, although the earliest written evidence is from 1444 (Thanegi 2008, 1). From 1752 to 1885, known as the Konbaung period, the kingdom of Burma was at its zenith, and puppetry flourished. Four levels of royal puppet troupes performed at court, where they had the king's generous patronage, sometimes even receiving entire villages as payment. Axel Bruns, a German researcher on the subject, notes "it was no coincidence that puppetry enjoyed the support of the ruling class, since it preserved the cultural traditions they wanted to maintain." While theater and dance modernized during the 19th century, adapting, for example, Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* for Burmese audiences, "the puppeteers stuck to their old ways and closed their minds to innovation. Their repertoire was restricted to the Jatakas and the chronicles" (Bruns 2006, 9). According to Mr. Htwe, this is not so different from the attitude of puppeteers today, even though the audience is tired of seeing the same old stories. Nevertheless, he himself, like his predecessors, adheres strictly to the traditional set of rules.

In 1821, the Minister of Drama, U Thaw, issued an edict governing marionette performance (Thanegi 2008, 22). The rules were incredibly specific, down to the very last detail about the construction of the stage. As I had learned, for example, the edict spelled out precisely what movements the Nagadaw must make at the top of a show in making her offering to the *nats*, or spirits.

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

The rules also mandated the order of appearance of the puppets in the standard prologue section of every show. Essentially a variety show, it is this one-hour prologue which Htwe Oo Myanmar performs today, omitting the lengthy narrative which traditionally spanned the entire night.

When the British annexed Burma in 1855, royal support of puppetry ceased (Foley 2001, 73). With their incomes greatly reduced, puppeteers were forced to cut corners. Formerly, every puppet had come to life as a collaboration of three artists: the manipulator, the vocalist, and the musician in the orchestra. Now one performer had to handle the puppet as well as provide the voice, and a recorded soundtrack, first on gramophone, later on tape and today on CD, often replaced the seven-piece orchestra. One positive innovation that was a result of the reduced size of the troupe was that women, usually from the puppeteers' families, were now allowed into the traditionally all-male profession.

In the 20th century, as was the case with puppetry worldwide, the advent of movies took its toll. As artists passed away or took on other professions, Burmese puppetry had been all but obliterated by the 1970s, when Dr. Tin Maung Kyi of Mandalay made a thorough study of the art form. A group of people who were inspired by his lectures gathered and began to rehearse regularly. In 1993, the University of Culture in Yangon (formerly Rangoon) established a *yokthe thay* division to train new puppeteers as well as research and preserve the art form. The nationalist agenda behind this move continues the Burmese trend of those in power using puppetry to preserve their preferred ideology. According to Asian puppetry scholar Kathy Foley, "It is clear that the current Ministry of Culture is framing its education of modern marionette masters in political and religious terms that bolster the nationalistic aims of the government" (Foley 2001, 76.) In 1995, the Ministry of Culture decided that puppetry should be included among the other performing arts invited to Yangon to compete for a gold medal. This annual event in October has been a driving force for Htwe Oo Myanmar, ensuring not only that the troupe remains faithful to the marionette rules, but also that it continues to seek ways to innovate that will raise them above the competition.

In bringing his troupe to the workshop in Thailand, it was Mr. Htwe's intention to come home with a contemporary piece. Little did he expect how much he would find the ideas of his co-directors at odds with the rules of marionette performance that he believes are so integral to the form. "I did intend to make a contemporary piece," Mr. Htwe said at the end of the three weeks, "but I don't want to change; I want to upgrade."

We based our contemporary show on a Burmese folk-tale called "The Four Puppets," using a version written in English by Aaron Shephard. According to Mr. Htwe "[this author] didn't know the rules and regulations of



PUPPETEERS FROM HTWE OO MYANMAR PERFORMING ON NEW YEAR'S EVE AT HOTEL RACHANKHA IN CHIANG MAI.

puppetry. He just took four of the traditional figures. I found many places where he goes outside the rules." One example Mr. Htwe cited was that the story requires the Tha-gya-min (pronounced TaAHmin), or god of celestial beings, to speak to an ordinary man, whereas traditionally he speaks only to important persons such as the king or the four ministers. In our workshop, we went one step further from tradition by allowing the Thai puppeteer who performed the Tha-gya-min to speak with a humorous stutter, which always got a laugh. Mr. Htwe said this would not be in keeping with the Tha-gya-min's character. At first when we made glaring breaches of rules, such as having characters fly who should not, Mr. Htwe would protest, but as more and more rules were broken, Mr. Htwe accepted that this version would do for Thai audiences. He may write a new story to perform in his home country.

In the evenings, before our intensive rehearsals began toward the end of the workshop, the participants had an opportunity to share our own work with each other. Amy Trompeter screened a video of one of Bread and Puppet's pageants, "The Gates of Hell," based on the Brecht play, which metaphorically deals with modern capitalism as a type of fascism. I showed video clips of my company, Talking Hands Theatre, which performs educational shows in schools on various social issues. The concept of using puppetry in this way was new to Mr. Htwe, who decided he'd like to experiment with issue-based puppetry in Myanmar. We spent a fair amount of time together brainstorming how to fund the shows and what issues he might address. In a country ruled by military junta, there are no shortage of problems to choose from: increasing poverty, infant mortality, AIDS, corruption, forced labor, torture of prisoners and the more than three million refugees now estimated to be living in horrific conditions in border camps or in the jungle are just a few (Ash, 2000). However, Mr. Htwe doesn't dare build a show that mentions any of these, for fear of the consequences. Instead, he proposed such innocuous topics "wash your hands to prevent swine flu" or "avoid using plastic bags" - social issues the government already sanctions. Here we were intending to co-create a show with a political message for Htwe Oo Myanmar, but we quickly realized that we could do nothing of the kind. On the other hand, Mr. Htwe quite liked the idea we developed of using another style of puppetry for interludes between the scenes.

PUPPETRY INTE



PUPPET-BUILDING DEMONSTRATION

As a co-director and teacher at Empty Space, Amy Trompeter led a Bread and Puppet-inspired papier mâché mask-making workshop for all participants, including all the puppeteers from Myanmar. She helped us develop “clown acts” based on signs that related, in a not too-obvious way, to the show’s theme. For instance, after the main character in the show strikes it rich, the sign for the ensuing act reads “Enjoy life” and the clown act involves a sensual massage that is brought to an abrupt end by the appearance of the client’s angry wife. “We don’t allow sequential thinking the way we insert the clown acts,” she said, “Their value, in fact, is to fracture. It liberates the audience to come back to the story freshly each time.” This approach, as non-traditional as it is, appealed to Mr. Htwe, who is planning to experiment with adding papier mâché mask acts in between traditional numbers when he gets back to Yangon. He saw this as a way to “upgrade” his shows with a new element, rather than change the existing material.

Meanwhile, the Thai co-director, Kange, had his own views on tradition. “Of course, tradition has many taboos,” he said, “but how can we go forward? For me, I don’t care about the traditional way. I myself may look free, but I have my own limits. I think we each need to seek to go beyond them.” Since initially we intended for Mr. Htwe’s troupe to perform the show in Myanmar, Kange was aware, as all of us were throughout this process, of how careful we needed to be not to include any material that the Burmese government might find problematic. Mr. Lutgenhorst did, however, encourage Kange to push the envelope artistically and to explore political undertones to the show that related to Thailand, Kange’s own company, B Floor Theatre, uses a lot of dance and physical theater, and he often directed us in this vein, seeking to create an interesting stage picture. His vision was sometimes in conflict with that of Ms. Trompeter, who was more interested in what the images were saying. Suffice it to say that, with multiple directors and three different cultures involved, it was not a smooth road to the finished product. In the end, however, we had a show of which all the participants could be proud.

We performed the show twice at our home stage in Chiang Mai, for a mix of local villagers, Thai puppetry enthusiasts and foreigners; once at a school in Bangkok where we also conducted puppetry workshops; and finally at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center. All the shows were extremely well received.



NAAM FROM MYANMAR DEMONSTRATES THE MANIPULATION OF A CONTEMPORARY MARIONETTE

Everyone involved in the workshop found it a memorable experience and came away with new skills. “We all started out at ground zero in terms of string puppets,” said Mr. Finck, “and we made a show. Quite a complex one at that. We were ambitious, but we did a lot. Perhaps because of this particular group of people.” This was the first annual puppetry workshop at Empty Space. Next year, Mr. Lutgenhorst is planning a collaboration with a troupe from Java. Puppeteers from the US are warmly encouraged to attend. As for the future of our show, Mr. Lutgenhorst and Ms. Trompeter will be going to Myanmar to restage it with Burmese puppeteers in February. Mr. Htwe’s puppeteers may or may not participate, but they are returning home with a new style of puppetry to spice up their shows. For my part, I am comfortable enough now with marionettes to plan a show utilizing them for my company, Talking Hands Theatre, at our new home base in Northampton, MA. And no, I didn’t drop the bananas.

For more information on the Empty Space workshop, visit www.emptyspacechiangmai.info

The Talking Hands Theatre website is www.puppetree.com

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Opera dei Pupi

by Lisa Morse



VINCENZO AND TERESA ARGENTO IN FRONT OF THEIR SHOP ON CORSO VITTORIO EMANUELE



VINCENZO ARGENTO AT WORK IN HIS SHOP

On September 5, 2005 I spoke with puppet master Vincenzo Argento in his workshop on Corso Vittorio Emanuele in Palermo, Sicily. Maestro Argento is a third generation Opera dei Pupi puppeteer and craftsman representing 117 years of family performance tradition. During the course of this interview, I asked Maestro Argento about his family and his career which are, within this profession, tightly knit. The performances I witnessed during the 2005 season featured Vincenzo Argento, his wife Teresa, sons Nicolo and Dario, daughter Anna, and his grandson Benedetto Bruno. Vincenzo's wife Teresa makes the costumes for the puppets while their daughter Rosalia paints their faces. Nicolo is also a talented painter and creates scenic backdrops as well as *cartelloni*. In the summer of 2009, at the age of seventy-two, Maestro Argento retired from the stage, but continues building his puppets, greeting tourists, and reflecting on a life filled with heroes, villains, and magical creatures.

Lisa Morse: *What do you remember about your grandfather Don Cecè Argento (1873-1948)?*

Vincenzo Argento: Well, I remember that I was ten years old when he died. So, I had very little association with him. He began performing in 1893 and learned from Don Giovanni Pernice. But, by the time I knew my grandfather, he couldn't do shows anymore. I remember, on his lap, he had this little wooden box with gouges, files, rasps, and he worked on bodies, heads, hands, and fists. He was always dedicated to the theatre even if he couldn't walk. Then in 1948 he died and I remember they carried him to the house, and in that moment the theatre became even stronger than before, because my father took possession of everything that was left behind by my grandfather and he began making his own shows.

LM: *Was your father (Giuseppe Argento 1912-1993) successful at first?*

VA: The public was used to the voice, the emotions of my grandfather. They were a little bit confused because now they would have to get use to a new voice that was taking my grandfather's place. But, soon my father's work became very strong.

LM: *Did your father make puppets as well?*

VA: My father began to dismantle all of the old marionettes that had misaligned legs, those that were broken, and he also repaired the armor. He then took advantage of changing the measurement of the pupo and they came out a bit larger, a bit longer in the leg of the puppet, lengthening it to 1 meter. And so, in Palermo, they were the largest puppi in existence. Then, in 1950, when I was 12, my father began to sell a few of the old puppets. But, because he was in prison for five years during the war, he did not know how to make new puppets and he had no money to buy supplies. He began to visit other puppi builders. He got on his bicycle and he went to find puppet-makers and to watch.

LM: *I've read that there was a certain amount of secrecy among puppetmakers at this time. Did your father have any difficulty finding a teacher?*

VA: When they saw him, they would stop working so he couldn't watch. They would cover their tools when he passed by. After some time, when they realized my father wanted to learn something, because they saw he was sincere, they would let him take a closer look. He began also, with time, to create his own models and no longer used the designs of other builders.

LM: *Did your father write many scripts for the shows?*

VA: Yes. He had the sides of my grandfather, the same ones that I use. From those, I took what I could. I am now writing my own scripts because no one knows the stories anymore. I write when I have time. In this way it is possible something will be left behind for my children.

LM: *In what year did your father retire?*

VA: *(He laughs.)* We don't retire. My father stopped performing about three or four years before he died, in about 1989. It was the year that all the theatres closed in Palermo. It was a very empty time. So, for about ten years, from 1989-1999, we couldn't perform any more. In fact, many tourists went looking for shows. They came and asked me where they could find a puppet show, but I told them that there wasn't anyone working puppets in Palermo. So, I had an idea to take a notebook and write all the names of the people who asked about a show, and asked them to sign it. I also asked these people to write to the *Comune* to make them give us financial help or to give us a theatre. We were the first to re-open our theatre after a decade of being dark.

LM: *What did you and your father do if you were not performing shows?*

VA: Instead we sold puppets. I continued to modify the scenery. I wrote new lines for the angel. I created a jester character who would say farewell at the end of the show. I designed wings for a devil...I modified everything: the scenery, the puppets, the movements. Everything.

LM: *How old were you when you started working in the puppet theatre?*

VA: My work, in truth, began when I was seven years old, playing the pianino during the shows. After some time, when I was twelve, I began to get up on stage and move the puppets.

LM: *At twelve years old? These puppets weigh over twenty pounds! How did you manage?*

VA: I was very delicate, thin and short. I had not yet developed and was not ready to manoeuvre the marionette. So, I made a little bench of about 20 centimeters to lift me up in order to be above the puppet. This made it easier.

LM: *Was it a successful performance?*

VA: The people who came at night to see our shows were always the same. They were familiar with the movements made for this character or for that character. After my performance, an audience

member came up to my father and said, "Can you satisfy my curiosity? Who was it in the part of the pagan?" and my father said, "My son." The man said, "Perfect, beautiful." For practically five years, while I was playing the pianino, I memorized the recitation and the movements of this character. And that person was aware that there was somebody new moving the puppet. Somehow he knew it was different.

LM: *Do you remember when you first started building puppets?*

VA: My parents went away for a wedding and I stayed behind. I saw an armor plate and I began to think, "Huh, this goes here, this goes here, this goes here..." And you know there was a shield started, so I took down a puppet, I looked at the shield, and I began hammering. I was making it. It was the first piece that I began to make. While I was working, there came a person, about 70 years old, that associated with my father and before that my grandfather and he said, "Like father like son." And from this moment I began to learn, more or less, how to build the marionette, then how you build the busts like they were built by my grandfather, how to solder everything. I began to see, more or less, the various phases of how to build a puppet.

LM: *What makes your puppets unique?*

VA: Most builders make a puppet with a string on the leg to help with the movement, to help the puppet start to walk. We continue to make it walk without this string. Also, we carry the weight of the puppet on our arm. We do not use a brace for support. The brace (*bracciale*) is a piece of leather, like a strap, the arm goes inside for support while moving the pupo. Instead, we always carry the full weight of the puppet but hook it on a chain for a moment if we need to move the left arm of the puppet, or if we have to draw the sword, or lower the visor. When we fight, our swords make contact so it is very noisy.

LM: *I noticed during the performance, your daughter Anna performs the voice of the Angel and Angelica. Does she also operate the puppets?*

VA: Yes, there is this one part when Carlo Magno exits from one side to the other and she takes Rinaldo. She knows how to move the puppets and how to perform the recitation. She has written and performed the story of Santa Rosalia. It is about an hour and ten minute show.

LM: *Why don't you perform the female voices? I thought men generally performed the female roles in a falsetto voice.*

VA: I prefer a woman's voice when the female characters speak. When a man performs the voice of a woman, sometimes the public laughs when they are not supposed to laugh, when it isn't supposed to be funny.

LM: *Do you ever hear criticism about your shows?*

VA: To do a perfect show today, one has to write, according to me, all the various roles and discourses that are needed. I write the entire script. I do it this way because I don't want to be criticized by the *studiosi*. I saw shows performed by others, and in the audience were

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL



A BACKSTAGE VIEW: VINCENZO ARGENTO
—OPERATING ORLANDO



RINALDO

these learned men that we called *studiosi* who ridiculed any mistakes in language or dialogue that were made by the puparo. These teachers would tell their students all of the mistakes made by this puparo or that puparo. For example, there was a puparo who one time said, "What is this I see? A knight behind that mountain that is approaching." They wanted to show that there is a lot of ignorance in the puppet theatre.

LM: *So you avoid this criticism by writing the scripts and memorizing them?*

VA: Yes.

LM: *You have been doing this for over fifty years. Do you still enjoy making puppets?*

VA: Oh, yes. I have many ideas for puppets that I do not have time to make. I made one puppet whose arm can be cut off, a ballerina that shows her skeleton when she turns. I have an idea for a giant who is killed by Orlando. When he falls to the ground, I want to make it so his stomach opens, and out come a bunch of small puppets.

LM: *Sounds fantastic.*

VA: Yes...and expensive. To continue making puppets, there must be both love and sacrifice. It's necessary that young people who are involved in this job, in this art form, have ideas, passion, and put all of themselves in it. If they don't, they will not be successful. Without the recitation skills, the movement, without every aspect of the show in place, you cannot do justice to this work.

An Opera dei Pupi puppet is made from both wood and cloth, and is controlled by an operator positioned in the wings of the stage. The puppet is manipulated by a rod that extends from the operator's outstretched hand, through the head and body of the puppet. An additional rod controls the right arm while strings manoeuvre the left arm, sword, and visor. The puppet itself can weigh an average of 22 pounds and stands just over three feet tall. The armor of the pupo (puppet), made from tin, is embossed with heraldic symbols made of copper or alpaca silver. The cut and pressed images of geometric shapes, leaves, stars, or moons are visual references to particular characters. Outside of these generally accepted conventions, each puppet family brings individual interpretation to the elements of performance that foreground their particular interests in certain themes or personality traits within the characters and stories.

Dr. Lisa Morse received her Ph.D. from the University of Colorado at Boulder and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Theatre at Morehead State University.

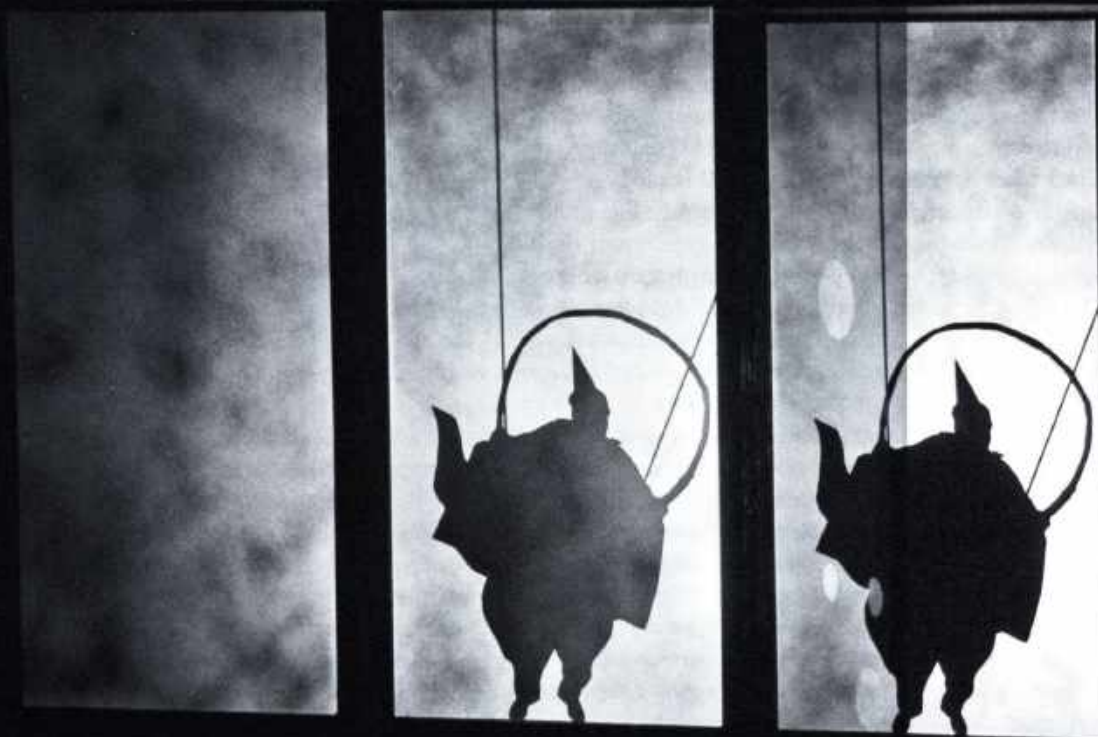
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In *Robotic Pygmalion*, theatre artists and engineers are collaborating on an automated marionette play. Authors Jochum and Murphey note the surprising similarity in the way marionettists and engineers approach the management of complex systems. In the process of creating a play for automated marionettes, they hope to learn new things about their own fields for the possible benefit of both. —Editor

Robotic Pygmalion: Choreography for an Automated Marionette Play

by Elizabeth Ann Jochum and Todd Murphey

I. MARIONETTE CHOREOGRAPHY

Recent technological advances have allowed for new experiments in puppetry and engineering. Recently, engineers at Northwestern University and Georgia Institute of Technology have explored marionette puppetry to advance their work in robotics. This will enable puppeteers to incorporate more sophisticated systems of technology in live marionette performance. Engineers want to understand the puppeteers' choreographic processes and apply them to important problems in computer science and robotics. Correspondingly, puppeteers will benefit from a system that allows automated puppets to perform alongside human-controlled marionettes. Marionette choreography is a significant site for investigating these shared principles.

Puppet theorist Miles Lee describes two principal approaches to puppet choreography: (1) realistic portrayal of human life (*verisimilitude*) and (2) impressionistic portrayal of human life (*interpretive*) (Lee 35). Lee suggests the latter allows puppeteers a scope for greater development, enabling them to utilize the constraints and potentials of marionettes to develop expressive movement through a process of selection, exaggeration, and distortion. Puppeteers at the Center for Puppetry Arts refer to this approach to choreography as the "Imitate, Simplify, Exaggerate" method (Murphey and Egerstedt, 2008).

Puppet choreography is broken into small units of motion, and each motion lasts a specified amount of time. Puppeteers coordinate the timing of a motion so they can interact with other puppeteers, ensuring the marionettes remain consistently animated. Finally, puppeteers must consider the potential and actual energy of the marionettes, making decisions about the use of *force*, *dynamics*, and *movement*, qualities that determine the expressive characteristics of a marionette and the overall effect in performance. The "Imitate, Simplify, Exaggerate" method allows puppeteers to develop motion in a way that is artistically expressive and technically feasible. Puppeteers make real-time decisions about how to handle complex choreographic sequences and solve problems of uncertainty before a puppet becomes unstable, intuitively smoothing transitions between movement phrases. For example, a marionette can fly down from above, land in the stage right quadrant, walk downstage center to address the audience, and then walk upstage



FIGURE 1

and begin a dance with another marionette. Developing this sequence, the puppeteer determines the most aesthetically compelling and technically viable choreography. In performance, the puppeteer will intuit how best to execute this choreography to avoid excessive force, sloppy transitions, or string entanglement. Puppet choreography defines when and where events should occur and how best to execute this choreography given a set of circumstances and constraints. It is precisely this sequence that engineers are trying to replicate mathematically. Understanding this process will help engineers develop software that is better able to handle complexity, while puppeteers will benefit from a mechanical system that allows for control of autonomous marionettes.

II. MARIONETTES AND ENGINEERING

The choreographic system that puppeteers use approximates issues of planning, control, and coordination germane to other sophisticated mechanical systems, such as robots. In particular, puppet choreography has practical applications for important research questions in engineering, such as optimizing control systems for automated robots, reducing complexity in dynamic modeling of complex systems (such as simulating the motion of a human hand), and creating more sophisticated rehabilitative therapies. Our project, supported through a grant from the National Science Foundation, is designed to bring engineers and puppeteers together to better understand choreographic processes and apply this understanding to other mechanized systems.

Engineers necessarily approach complexity from a “bottom up” approach. Unlike the puppeteer who can rely upon a combination of evolution, training, and improvisation, an engineer must work with comparatively simple building blocks to approach sophisticated problems like choreography. Our approach is rooted in the concept of motion description languages — compact descriptions of motion that obey the laws of physics. One can think of motion description languages as attempts to piece together phrases of motion that, in the computer science or computational linguistics sense, create a language of movement. Such phrases might include “walking,” “running,” “waving,” or combinations of these commands. But, unlike the puppeteer, the engineer cannot rely on a human agent to interpret choreography. Rather, in a robotic system, the agent is passive and mechanical; therefore the engineer must be able to describe puppet choreography mathematically.

The engineer’s perspective is not so different from the puppeteer’s perspective — complex motion is controlled by dividing choreography into simpler components to approximate desired movement. Simply “breaking down” the choreography into smaller units, however, is not sufficient for programming a robot to control a marionette. First, arbitrarily shifting between motion segments can lead to instability. In puppetry, this is equivalent to a marionette falling or becoming tangled because of switching too quickly between “walking” and “running.” The mathematical representation of instability is an important concept in modern engineering and plays a vital role in most engineering applications. Second, transitions between motion phrases can be optimized for smoothness and efficiency, making the motion more pleasing to look at and easier on the marionette. For example, in human motion, the transition between walking and running typically takes place when both feet are on the ground; transitioning in mid-air can cause a fall. Likewise, when programming a robot to perform puppet choreography, engineers must use software that takes physics into account when determining transitions between motions. The software we developed for programming a robotic marionette does this by combining physical modeling and optimal control (Johnson and Murphey 2009). Neuroscience results suggest that human motor control mimics some structures found in marionette choreography (Johnson et al., 2010).

The application of traditional puppetry to software-enabled choreography for computer animation and CGI is well documented (Sturman 1998; Shin et al., 2001). However, CGI has the advantage that the same principles that are used to simulate the animated characters are also used to predict their behaviors. Puppets in the material world do not have this advantage; the techniques used to simulate a puppet only approximate the actual physics that govern how the puppets move. For puppets performing in real time in actual environments, any software-enabled choreography must take into account uncertainty in the description of the puppet motion.

III. AUTOMATED MARIONETTES

In our play, live puppeteers are replaced by robots programmed to manipulate traditional wood and string marionettes (Fig 1). The project was proposed at the 2008 Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Intelligent Robots and Systems Conference, where we outlined a plan to translate the techniques used by professional puppeteers to develop an automated system for manipulating marionettes (Murphey and Egerstedt, 2008).

We chose a play that was dramatically interesting and technically feasible: the Pygmalion myth from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Pygmalion is the story of a sculptor who carves the image of a woman out of ivory. After Pygmalion makes an offering to Aphrodite, the statue is magically brought to life. The narrative invites examination into the philosophical underpinnings of the artist-object and scientist-experiment relationships, and the creation myth is especially apt, given the topic of artificial intelligence and robotics.

The goal of the Pygmalion Project is to build a robotic system that replicates human motion in operating traditional marionettes, following the “Imitate, Simplify, Exaggerate” methodology. We began by observing real-life human motion, exaggerated this motion in the style of puppet choreography, and then replicated the movement in a computer-generated environment (Figure 1). We are now programming robotic controllers to simulate the choreography onto traditional marionettes, writing algorithms based on tools from optimal control that smooth out transitions between movement phrases, just as human puppeteers execute choreography in performance.

To develop a motion description language to describe puppet choreography, we began by compiling a list of simple gestures and movements, determining the minimum amount of physical information needed to convey a recognizable storyline. We developed a list of twenty simple motion commands (“Walk,” “Turn,” “Kneel,” “Stand,” “Raise arm,” etc.) and compiled them into a choreographic sequence for two performers, labeling each sequence with emotional intentions to guide the human performers.

We then taught the choreography to dancers using a motion capture system to record their physical movement in real time (Figure 2). The motion capture system measures the location

and orientation of each motion in space, and is used to generate computer graphic images in animation and film (Sturman 1998). From this data, speed, duration, and forces can be calculated for each motion. We use this data to develop software that translates the movement patterns onto puppets. This “input” is programmed into automated robotic controllers which, like a human puppeteer,



FIGURE 2

manipulate the marionettes. Together with the Center for Puppetry Arts, we have built a prototype of the marionette and mechanical system and will soon complete a "rough draft" of the play. The production is scheduled to premiere in 2011.

Choreography is an important meeting point for artists and scientists. Understanding this process will help engineers develop software that is better able to handle complexity, while puppeteers will benefit from a mechanical system that allows for control of autonomous marionettes. Autonomous marionettes will create more possibilities for puppeteers in performance, allowing them to (1) combine human-controlled marionettes with automated marionettes, and (2) develop sophisticated methods for combining marionettes with live actors and large-scale marionette systems. With autonomous marionettes, the physical distance between a live performer and the performing object widens considerably; more sophisticated technology is required to bridge this distance (Kaplin 1999). Our proposed marionette system has the potential to promote significant developments in both puppetry and engineering.

for bibliography, go to:

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Elizabeth Jochum, M.A., is a doctoral candidate in Theatre Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and has studied puppetry at the Denver Puppet Theatre. Her research includes collaborations between artists and scientists and experiments with puppets and actor theatre.

Todd Murphey, PhD., is an Assistant Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Northwestern University. His research includes robotics, over constrained mechanical systems, abstraction of uncertainty, and robust cooperative control.

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photos: Elliot Johnson and Todd Murphey.

FIGURE 1. PROTOTYPE FOR AUTOMATED MARIONETTE CONTROLLED BY ROBOTIC ACTUATORS AT THE GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY.

FIGURE 2. A RENDERING OF THE PROPOSED SYSTEM FOR THE PYGMALION PROJECT. TRADITIONAL WOOD AND STRING MARIONETTES TO BE OPERATED BY ROBOTIC ACTUATORS TO PERFORM CHOREOGRAPHY.

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Marionettes and Modernism in the United States

by John Bell

"Marionette" is a fascinating word in puppetry because it has a number of different meanings. Quite particularly speaking, of course, it is a segmented puppet operated from above by strings. The etymology of the word gives it a certain amount of



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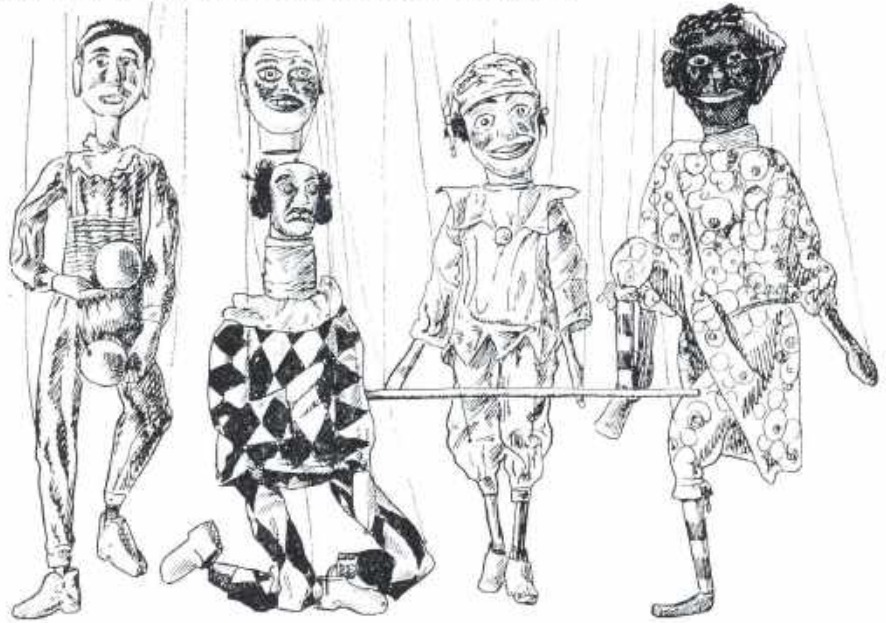
by John Bell

"Marionette" is a fascinating word in puppetry because it has a number of different meanings. Quite particularly speaking, of course, it is a segmented puppet operated from above by strings. The etymology of the word gives it a certain amount of class, since "marionette" supposedly derives from the 17th-century French term for puppet figures of the Virgin Mary used in religious performances. In European history, it looks like marionettes and handpuppets have been equally popular forms over the past ten or twenty centuries, but it is the former term which so often and so easily come to represent the entire field of puppetry. Charles Magnin's 1852 chronicle of puppetry in the Old World is titled "*Histoire des marionnettes en Europe*," and five decades later Edward Gordon Craig would write "The Actor and the Über-marionette," not "The Actor and the Über-puppet." The offhand manner in which "marionette" is used can cause problems, because sometimes (or perhaps often) marionette techniques are taken to represent the entirety of puppet performance in general. And conversely, the ubiquity of the word "marionette" sometimes tends to make the uninitiated believe that all puppets, or most puppets, or "real" puppets, are operated by strings.

The modern history of marionettes on American puppet stages is fascinating in this respect, because in the course of the 20th century, marionettes come to the forefront of the puppetry-as-art movement of the early 1900s, but were then eclipsed by hand-and-rod puppets in the sixties (especially in the work of the Hensons), and the plethora of other forms that determined the puppet renaissance of the late 20th century. Marionettes are still the puppet technique that displays the most intricacy and delicacy of movement, but despite the omnipresence of the word, they are in fact no longer the most popular form of puppetry.

From Paul McPharlin's history of American puppet theater one can see that both handpuppets and marionettes were equally popular forms of entertainment in the early 19th century. The overwhelming popularity of English marionette theater all across Europe spread to the Americas, as British troupes toured the U.S. and inspired American puppeteers such as Daniel Meader and Walter Deaves to create their own marionette companies. John McCormick has pointed out that, although British marionette troupes in the early 19th century originally performed the same melodramas that graced the stages of actors' theater, the marionette repertoire evolved (or devolved) to focus on variety acts and trick marionettes, whose most important feature was fantastic transformation. This was true in the United States as well, although American puppeteers also added the element of minstrelsy to their marionette shows. Blackface minstrel puppets, in fact, constitute the single largest category of puppets in the Detroit Institute of Art's magnificent puppet collection.

In the early 20th century, a great sea change took place in the American theater world as a whole, and in puppetry especially.



SKETCH BY PAUL McPHARLIN OF 19TH-CENTURY TRICK MARIONETTES

The steadfastly commercial world of the American stage, devoted to melodramas, vaudeville, and minstrel shows, was suddenly countered by the burst of alternative energy called the Little Theater Movement, and marionettes were a central part of that revolutionary change. The Little Theater Movement's basic assertion was that United States artists were every bit as capable of creating high art on stage as were their European counterparts. This idea spawned small-scale amateur theater companies across the United States, especially in New York City, where the work of Eugene O'Neill in the Provincetown Playhouse proved that an American art theater was indeed possible. Puppets, particularly marionettes, were a central part of this movement. Maurice Browne and Ellen Van Volkenburg's Chicago Little Theater (which gave the Little Theater Movement its name) delved into puppets in part because of Edward Gordon Craig's inspiring assertions that puppets might be the best possible agents for theatrical modernism. Other Little Theaters also followed suit in the 1910s and 20s, as Helen Haiman Joseph made puppet shows at the Cleveland Playhouse, and Remo Bufano did the same in New York at the Provincetown Playhouse and the Neighborhood Playhouse.

At the same time, Tony Sarg, who had closely studied the marionette techniques of Thomas Holden's company in London, developed his own company into the most successful popular puppetry in the country, and inspired Sue Hastings, Martin and Olga Stevens, Rufus and Margo Rose, Bil Baird and countless other American puppeteers to build and perform marionette shows for children's audiences across the country. In other words, the distinctions—often overlapping and contradictory but distinctions nonetheless—that would define the nature of American puppetry for the rest of the century were laid out: puppets for commercial entertainment, or puppets for "art." And these distinctions were played out with marionettes.



RALPH CHESSE'S MARIONETTE OF EMPEROR JONES, FOR THE PLAY BY EUGENE O'NEILL, 1928

Why were marionettes the most popular form of puppetry in the early 20th century, in both commercial and art theater contexts? I think it has something to do with the intricacy and delicacy of their movement which, when done masterfully, comes much closer to approximating the movements of humans than, say, handpuppets. Handpuppets require the audience to mentally supply the bottom half of the puppet character, since it has no legs, and the movements of handpuppets, especially in the Punch and Judy vein of popular street performance, are rough, incapable of refined movement. Marionettes, on the other hand, are capable of subtle turns of the head alone; a hand raised gently and expressively, or a turn of the knee or ankle. If handpuppets are the expressionists of puppet movement, marionettes are the would-be realists.

The refinement of marionettes, in contrast to the rougher manipulation possibilities of handpuppets (and their low-culture street-theater roots) led the art theater puppeteers to embrace them as the best possible means of making serious puppet art. When Eugene O'Neill created his radical treatment of race, slavery, and Freudian analysis in *The Emperor Jones*, the art theater puppeteers soon followed suit, as Ralph Chesse in San Francisco, and Jero Magon in New York both created marionette productions of O'Neill's play. Both Chesse's and Magon's Emperor Jones puppets are noble characters, meant to match the tragic import of O'Neill's original (first played by the African-American actor Charles Gilpin). In this play (which, in a barely conscious way, seeks to atone for the decades of racist stereotyping in minstrel marionettes), white artists try to perform the black man as a noble, if flawed character—the equivalent of Greek tragic heroes. Marionettes could do this, handpuppets probably not.

The idea that marionettes mark the highest artistic achievement of puppetry extended into further experiments in art-theater puppets, for example when Remo Bufano made life-size marionettes for the Metropolitan Opera's 1931 production of *Oedipus Rex*, or larger-than-life marionettes for the 1939 World's Fair production of *From Sorcery to Science* at the American Pharmaceutical Association Pavilion (a mixture of high art—Aaron Copland wrote the score—and commerce!).

However, things definitely changed for marionette theater in the post-war years. First of all, the development of puppetry in the U.S. was increasingly influenced by Asian forms: Chinese and Javanese shadow theater, Javanese rod-puppet performance (first celebrated by Marjorie Bateholder in 1936), and Japanese Bunraku. Secondly, the explosion of television after the Second World War brought puppetry into millions of households, to millions of kids. The Howdy Doody marionette⁶ was the first big puppet star on television (although Burr Tillstrom's *Kukla and Ollie* were close runners-up). However, by the 1960s, the popularity of Howdy Doody and other television marionettes had been eclipsed by the rise of Jim Henson's Muppets. Why did this happen? Why did marionettes gradually fade from television? I think it was because the television camera allowed audiences to see up close and in detail all the intricacies of marionette movement, and certainly the strings. If 19th-century marionette performances in miniature proscenium arch stages were far enough from viewers' eyes that the strings of the puppets may have receded from sight, the television camera brought them right into view, as well as those tiny, loose, moments when some part of a marionette limb was not exactly in control, but instead perhaps bobbing and weaving a bit. Handpuppets, in contrast, offered the possibility of movement control in close-up, and Jim Henson's addition of a large practicable mouth and rod-controlled hands allowed for complete control (the possibility of utter stillness, for example), as well as gestural expressiveness that simple handpuppets could not achieve. Henson's work was designed to work on camera, whereas marionettes were created to play on a pre-modern stage.

If puppetry in commercial entertainment (and in the fast-growing arena of children's educational television) was shifting away from marionettes, this was also the case in the world of art-theater puppets, whose post-war definition was created by Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater. Schumann used rod puppets, handpuppets, and giant puppets, but never string marionettes. Bread and Puppet's avant-garde and politically inspired shows seemed to need the bold roughness of expressionism that the above forms could provide, rather than the fine and intricate movements of marionettes. Schumann certainly knew about marionette theater, but was also aware of Bunraku, Javanese and Chinese puppetry, and the rough-and-tumble world of Sicilian rod marionettes.

Marionettes are often seen as the pinnacle of Western puppetry in part because they require so much skill to operate well. But many of the avant-garde innovators of U.S. puppetry at the end of the 20th century were not trained puppeteers. Schumann, Thedora Skipitares, Julie Taymor, Janie Geiser, Paul Zaloom, Dan Hurlin—none of these late-century innovators studied puppetry

⁶Though Frank Paris made the prototype, Velma Dawson created the figure we recognize as Howdy, which was further refined by Rufus and Margo Rose.

formally, or apprenticed with a "real" puppeteer. Instead, they approached puppetry from a visual arts, dance, or performance art background. Manipulating marionettes would, practically speaking, have been too difficult for them to learn, but also the legacy of marionettes as Western puppet classicism might have been too mainstream, too acceptable for "experimental" artists of the sixties, seventies, and eighties to pursue.

By the end of the 20th century, the situation of marionette performance had shifted. No longer the dominant form of American puppetry, it was now simply one of a number of techniques that highly skilled puppeteers could use. Marionette performance has remained particularly strong in cabaret and variety show performance, and in many places is still the benchmark of live puppetry. Ronnie Burkett has propelled marionette performance back into the realm of highly successful art theater, but his work stands out as an exception. Marionettes could stand out in Trey Parker's 2004 film *Team America World Police*, but this was in part because Parker and his partner Matt Stone wanted to play with and draw attention to the visible strings and inadvertent awkwardness of 1960s-style television marionettes from such series as Gerry Anderson's *Thunderbirds*. The fact that puppeteer Phil Huber and his colleagues made Parker's political satire so successful as a full-length movie is testament to the continuing effectiveness of marionette performance as an art form. Huber's marionette techniques were also essential to the success of Spike Jonze's 1999 film *Being John Malkovich*, but Jonze's attachment to the century-old idea of the marionette as a metaphor of

manipulative control made some aspects of his story ring false as a depiction of late 20th-century puppetry. A nebbish puppeteer with artistic aspirations in the 1990s like the character played by John Cusack would hardly have been likely to use marionettes on the street (as in the film); and the heights of puppet success at Lincoln Center would not be reached with a life-size marionette (as the film has John Malkovich doing), but much more likely with a giant rod puppets, bunraku-style performance, or some other puppet form not at all dependent on strings.

In a world now aware of a variety of global puppet traditions, new forms of puppetry invented for the camera, and increasingly prevalent techniques of digital puppetry (or motion capture), marionette performance is no longer the undisputed pinnacle of Western puppetry. Tony Urbano, Steven Ritz-Barr, Bob Brown, Rene Zendejas, and other inspired puppeteers now continue to point out the continuing possibilities of marionette performance as a 21st-century art form. And marionette masters, such as Albrecht Roser, have had a strong influence on whole coteries of puppeteers, for example at the University of Connecticut in the late 1970s, where Roser taught Bart Roccoberon, Brad Williams, Pam Arciero, Rachel Prescott, Richard Termine and others. These puppeteers have not dedicated their subsequent work solely to string puppets as their forebears in the 19th century might have; instead, marionette performance is simply one of a number of forms available to them, as contemporary puppeteers. An extraordinarily difficult, and classic form, one could say, and a form that, when done well, stands out, jewel-like, from other puppet possibilities. §

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"My interest in marionettes started early. When I was ten or eleven years old, my parents took my brothers, my sister and me into a large gift shop at the Jersey shore. We were on vacation. This is where I first saw a marionette in person."

—Joe Cashore



PHOTO: JOHN MAINKA

And so begins Joe Cashore's as yet unpublished autobiography, with a moment, I suspect, not unfamiliar to many readers of *Puppetry International*: our first captivating look at a marionette. And, as is also common, that first flush of excitement, followed by a seat-of-the-pants construction of a clumsy string puppet, was gradually supplanted by other interests. Cashore was already well into art school before he began making puppets again, but it wasn't until he built another, less-clumsy marionette and saw the effect it had on others, that he became possessed by these tiny beings once again. After many experiments with joints, stringing and manipulation, Cashore formed a troupe with his friend George Mercadante and two others. The company, formed in the mid-seventies, lasted only a few years and never made much money, but Cashore learned a lot from the experience of performing. He also met Mercadante's sister, Wilma, who has been his wife and partner for more than three decades.

Much of Cashore's journey into the soul of the puppet involved the development of his own system of control and stringing —

...if I was going to get everything I wanted out of my marionettes and get the greatest subtlety and range of movement, I was going to have to come up with my own designs for the controls. I looked closely at how I was holding the controls that I was already using. I spent a long time looking at my hands and wrists. I asked myself, "Is there any way I can make my fingers more free and more efficient?" I wanted to make a control that would fit easily into my hand in such a way that I did not use up any fingers in holding up the control. All my fingers and the movements of my wrists should be free to manipulate the strings and parts of the control. I wanted the puppet to be immediately responsive to every movement of the control. The spacing and positioning of the strings became critical. I wanted to place certain strings close to my fingers so that I could reach them without effort, but with enough space between them so that I could easily isolate individual strings. I experimented with this for a long time. I began to customize each control specifically for the particular series of movements that each character had to perform.

To learn to use these new controls, and the controls I'm currently using, takes some practice. It's very much like learning to play a musical instrument. It may seem difficult at first; but if you pick it up every day and play with it for hours, it soon becomes very familiar. Then, you are no longer thinking about the strings and the control and how it works; you are just watching and feeling with the character.

We learned a lot about acting with marionettes in those years. Sometimes there's a tendency when manipulating a marionette to think that it has to be moving all the time to be alive. This is not true. I learned to appreciate the importance of stillness in the marionette's body and how this stillness relates to clarity of gesture and the significance of movement. If the marionette has poise in its body, a certain stillness and relaxed calmness, and it moves cleanly from one position to another and maintains poise throughout, even the slightest gesture can gain significance. The whole countenance of the character is influenced. His depth, his sense of dignity, is reflected in the movement; but what's really important is the relationship of movement and stillness. We also learned to listen to the audience to improve our timing and pacing.

Cashore began developing vignettes that he could perform on his own:

I will try to describe what was, and is, my working procedure. I base most of the pieces in my show on observations of everyday life, on our common experiences. With the basic idea for each piece comes the need to identify the story that is being told. I ask myself: what is really being communicated, what is the subject, what is the theme? Most importantly, what is the movement that will best communicate the theme? What kinds of positions does the character have to get his body into to most clearly communicate this theme, this main idea? Is there any way I can make it clearer, stronger, more focused? For each piece, I want to know what is the beginning, what is the middle and what is the end, so that the piece has a sense of completeness. After that it's like a short story, in that I'm trying to trim away everything that is non-essential, so that every gesture supports the main idea.

Supporting his family through the sale of his paintings and with carpentry jobs, it was well over a decade before he was performing enough to consider himself a full time puppet artist.

Since that time, Cashore has established himself as one of the most successful and highly regarded solo marionettists in

the USA and abroad. It wasn't an easy climb, including financial and personal sacrifice, and a two-day drive through a blizzard to get to an international showcase of performing arts, but Joe and Wilma Cashore are now touring steadily for nine months of the year. In the summers, Cashore continues to work on new marionettes, new ideas:

I have never thought of myself as a children's performer. I've always tried to develop marionette pieces that are sensitive and entertaining and that I thought I



PHOTO: MATT CASHORE

would like to see myself - pieces that have something worthwhile to say to a mature audience. I think that marionette art can have a quality of magic that is much more profound than the stage magician's magic. At its best, the marionette can be like a mirror which allows us to see ourselves, and it's through the understanding of ourselves that real change takes place. This, I think, is worthwhile.

Edited by Andrew Periale

For more images of Cashore's Marionettes, go to www.unima-usa.org/publications/index.html

Yaburegasa Chōan: Chōan and the Ripped Umbrella

by Mari Boyd

Chōan and the Ripped Umbrella is a marionette adaptation by Yamamoto Kiyokazu of Kawatake Mokuami's 1862 blood-and-guts kabuki play about a villainous doctor. It was premiered by the Youkiza Marionette Theatre Company in December 2008 at the Tram Theatre in Tokyo and is scheduled to tour Europe in the summer of 2010.

While Japan is famous world-wide for its 3-man bunraku puppets, its long marionette tradition has not received the attention it deserves. Founded in 1635, the Youkiza is renowned for their stage innovations. The present company head Youki Magosaburō 12th began his own experimentations in the 1970s when he collaborated with underground theatre practitioners. Kushida Kazuyoshi, the single live actor in this show, was one of them.

Synopsis

The story unfolds rapidly. Dr. Murai Chōan helps his brother-in-law Jūbei pay off debts by selling his niece, O'ume, to the licensed pleasure quarters. He then kills Jūbei, steals the money, and foists the crime onto Fujikake Dōjūrō, who forgot his umbrella at the doctor's house. Accused of the murder, Dōjūrō dies in a holding cell during the investigation. The case is closed.

When Chōan's sister Osoyo visits to see her daughter, who she thinks is working for a wealthy family, Chōan has his buddy Sanji kill her.



AKABANE POLICE INVESTIGATION: THE ACCUSED FUJIKAKE DOJŪRŌ (LEFT; YOUKI MAGOSABURŌ 12TH) PLEADS INNOCENCE TO THE POLICE SUPERVISOR SASAGAWA GUNZO (RIGHT). THE UMBRELLA HAS THE FUJIKAKE FAMILY CREST



ASAKUSA PADDY FIELD: KUSHIDA-AS-SANJI (FAR RIGHT) READIES HIS SWORD...

The plot thickens when O'ume's client, a young Sentarō of Iseya pawnbroker, wants to buy her out. Pretending to assist him, Chōan takes the money Sentarō has prepared for her release by selling a dagger pawned by Sanji. Then Chōan instructs Sanji to extort money from the pawnshop owner for disposing of an item without permission. In order to protect Sentarō from exposure and humiliation, the head clerk Kyūhachi takes the blame and is immediately fired.

Three years later, Kyūhachi, now a rubbish dealer, and another man, happen to meet Dōjūrō's impoverished widow. The man tells her that he spotted Chōan near the scene of Jūbei's murder on that fateful night, and belatedly they report this to the authorities. Meanwhile Sanji has confessed to having killed Osoyo on Chōan's instigation. Chōan is arrested.

As Adaptation

As with many modern adaptations of traditional plays, the scriptwriter has simplified the plot and reduced the number of acts, characters, and relationships. Identifying the major differences from the kabuki original will reveal important qualities of the Youkiza version.

The most prominent change is in the ending. The final act with its court trial and guarantee of justice is omitted. The Youkiza show ends with Chōan captured, but magnificently defiant.

Furthermore Chōan's character is adjusted to fit this bravura ending. Obsessed with money and out of control, he murders Jūbei with little planning. In the original, Chōan carefully plots to awaken Jūbei earlier than promised so that it will still be dark when he kills his victim; he also thinks ahead of using the umbrella to incriminate Dōjūrō. In contrast, the new Chōan is clever but not careful.



...TO KILL OSONO AS A FUNERAL PROCESSION (LEFT) PASSES BY.

Another crucial difference is that in the *Youkiza* show, the young *Sentarō* and older *Kyūhachi* do not turn out to be biological brothers. The Confucian concept of loyalty in master-servant relations is operative but the story isn't burdened with the equally Confucian notion of a younger brother's duty to honour and obey his older brother.

Performance Code

Magosaburō is the driving force of the performance with his deft manipulation of nine characters, together with their voices so that their personalities and movements are lively and easy to distinguish.

In *kabuki*, *Chōan* and his buddy-accomplice, *Sanji*, are performed by the same actor. The *Youkiza* follows this tradition by having *Kushida* do both roles. A magical moment occurs when *Chōan* unwraps a checkered-green cloth bundle to reveal the stringless *Sanji* doll dressed in the same material. Henceforth *Kushida* performs *Sanji* sometimes as his puppeteer and sometimes as live actor (hereafter *Kushida-as-Sanji*) as well as continuing to play *Chōan*. As *Kushida* does not always use the green cloth as a *Sanji* marker, it is not always easy for the audience to tell *Kushida-as-Sanji* and *Chōan* apart.

Kushida is well known as a stage actor, but this show was his first time to work closely with marionettes. He tended to be rough with his petite co-players and sometimes interacted with the puppeteers instead. *Magosaburō* found his "errors" attractive and worked them into the *Youkiza* performance code.

For instance, in the extortion scene, *Kushida-as-Sanji* pulls out the pawnbroker's head to shock and convince the pawnbroker that his life might be worth more than he's willing to pay! On some days, *Magosaburō* had difficulty putting the marionette's head back into its body. In the same scene, *Kushida-as-Sanji* and a puppeteer squabble with each other over the marionettes' heads about

how much cash they could squeeze out of the pawnbroker. This shifting and sharing of identity between puppet and puppeteer was expertly handled.

Much of the comic effect of the play revolves around the familiar pattern of a loyal servant rescuing a love-struck young master. The comic also coexists with the grotesque in the marvelous scene of *Osono's* murder. A funeral procession crosses paths with *Kushida-as-Sanji* just as he is attacking *Osono*. The pallbearers flee, abandoning the lidded tub-coffin. *Kushida-as-Sanji* stabs *Osono* on top of it, shattering the wood to reveal a disturbed corpse come back to life!

The finale is the highlight of the play. Resisting arrest, *Chōan* slashes through an army of policemen. The marionettes are ripped open and blood bursts into view. Using a live actor for *Chōan* is particularly effective here as his sword play is large and vigorous. His grandstanding amply conveys his insurgence and the fragility of civil order.

From the umbrella in the beginning to the police at the end, many things and people get slashed and ripped in this extravaganza of crime and violence.

Mari Boyd is Professor of Literature and Theatre on the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Sophia University, Tokyo.

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STREET SCENE: THE PAWNBROKER'S SON, *SENTARŌ* (LEFT) AND HIS COURTESAN, *CHŌAN'S* NIECE (RIGHT), PREPARE TO COMMIT LOVE SUICIDE.

18th-Century *Commedia dell'Arte* *Fantoccini* Enable Costume Reconstruction

by Brandin Barón-Nusbaum

Fantoccini are a grouping of sumptuous rod and string marionettes produced by artisans predominantly for the 18th-century Venetian marketplace. A limited number of texts have addressed *fantoccini* solely as performance objects,¹ but these marionettes provide valuable information that could improve our current understanding of costume design history. Many *fantoccini* were thematically linked to the *commedia dell'arte*² genre, and *fantoccini* artisans created garment forms through their awareness of *commedia* performers, performances and related marketing material from 1570-1770. A small number of actual *commedia* costumes exist today³ and past scholarship has largely utilized two-dimensional print material to fill in missing information. But though heavily tied to both the visual history and the realized garments of *commedia*, *fantoccini* have never been presented as a primary artifact in the research of *commedia* form. I assert that *fantoccini* answer larger questions related to *commedia* costume history and lead us towards the most successful methods for reconstructing actual *commedia* costumes.

In historical clothing reconstruction, scholars seek accurate garment patterns, exact textiles, color indicators, visual documentation of the clothing upon a wearer and, ideally, an actual garment from the period. Though existing *fantoccini* display a variance of height measurements, they are unusual among performing objects in their strong correspondence to torso, arm and leg proportions of the human form. This relative scale easily facilitates the translation of patterns from marionette garments to human-scaled costumes. *Fantoccini* garments were constructed to assist the marionette's articulated body movements, clearly mirroring the range of human movement in a *commedia* costume. They are the only artifacts that demonstrate garment construction techniques similarly utilized in creating costumes for a human form, and the best method to view the front, back and side views of the costume. Their garments were engineered to be detachable, and are therefore the only representation that captures layers of clothing, accessories and interior construction techniques for all garments. Constructed of 18th-century textiles and related sewing materials, the dyes, patterns and other embellishments in the *fantoccini* garments are the most precise indicators of *commedia* costume fabrications.



BRIGHELLA

VENICE, 18TH CENTURY

WOOD, METAL, PAINTED TERRACOTTA, WOOL, COTTON, LEATHER

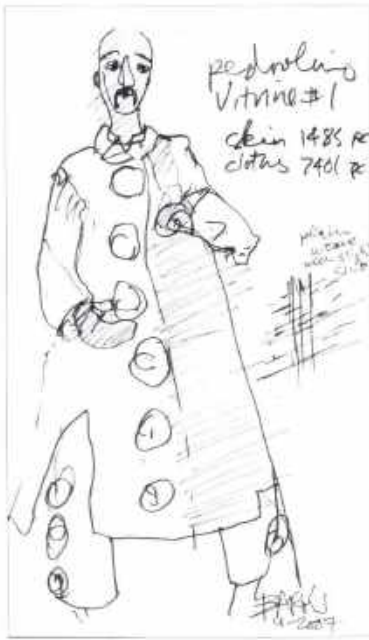
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To further assert these similarities, I have investigated *fantoccini* housed in four European and North American archives: the Saix-Caron collection (Département des arts du spectacle, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris); the Morosini marionettes (Casa Goldoni, Venice); the Dor marionettes (Musée des Marionnettes du Monde/ Musée Gadagne, Lyon); and the Rosalynde Stearn Marionettes (Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal). My work originally delved into related acquisition history, isolated marionette attribution, fabrication and production information, and attempted to link each *fantoccino* to other formats of preceding or contemporary *commedia* visual imagery. I then performed technical illustrations of individual garments and accessories for each *fantoccino*, and analyzed them through Pantone color analysis, an approximation of textiles/fabrications and individual measurements of each marionette body and garment's forms (figures 2-8). At this moment, I am in the process of creating human-scaled patterns based on the marionette garments. Because the four collections have varying qualities of archival photographs, I am also negotiating the process of standardizing the photographs of each individual *fantoccino* in the entire inventory of existing *fantoccini*.

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL



PEDROLINO

STRING MARIONETTE. VENICE, 18TH CENTURY
WOOD, METAL, SILK, LEATHER
AUTHOR'S SKETCHBOOK VERSION 2006
CASA GOLDONI, VENICE



COLUMBINA (sic)

STRING MARIONETTE, VENICE, 18TH CENTURY
WOOD, METAL, TERRACOTTA, SILK, COTTON.
METALLIC TRIM, LEATHER
AUTHOR'S SKETCHBOOK VERSION 2009
ROSALYNDE STEARN COLLECTION
RARE BOOKS AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS,
MCGILL UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, MONTREAL



BRIGHELLA

STRING MARIONETTE, VENICE, 18TH CENTURY
WOOD, METAL, SILK, COTTON. METALLIC TRIM, LEATHER.
AUTHOR'S SKETCHBOOK VERSION 2009
ROSALYNDE STEARN COLLECTION
RARE BOOKS AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS,
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SCARLET ISABELLE

STRING MARIONETTE, VENICE, 18TH CENTURY
WOOD, METAL, TERRACOTTA, SILK, COTTON. METALLIC TRIM, LEATHER
AUTHOR'S SKETCHBOOK VERSION 2006
CASA GOLDONI, VENICE



*FANTOCCINO IN PANTALONE/MEDICIN/
HARLEQUIN GARMENTS*

STRING MARIONETTE, VENICE, 18TH CENTURY
WOOD, METAL, TERRACOTTA, SILK, COTTON, METALLIC
TRIM, LEATHER
AUTHOR'S SKETCHBOOK VERSION 2009
MUSÉE DES MARIONNETTES DU MONDE/
MUSÉE GADAGNE, LYON



VIZIER (sic)/GRAND TURK

STRING MARIONETTE, VENICE, 18TH CENTURY
WOOD, METAL, TERRACOTTA, SILK, COTTON,
METALLIC TRIM LEATHER
AUTHOR'S SKETCHBOOK VERSION 2007
CASA GOLDONI, VENICE

I plan to publish my research as part of a larger text on *com-media dell'arte* artifacts currently entitled *Context, Continuation and Commercialization of the Commedia dell'Arte Costume*. Ideally, my forthcoming work will have great relevance to theater and fashion designers, directors and performers of *com-media*-themed works, and art and design historians. I also hope that this work will ignite further scholarship on the history and performance abilities of the *fantoccini* as a vital subgenre of performing object scholarship.

Brandin Barón-Nusbaum is an Assistant Professor of Design at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He has worked as a professional costume designer at La Jolla Playhouse, San Diego Repertory Theatre, San Jose Repertory Theatre, The Public Theater/NY Shakespeare and others. He has been awarded the NEA/TCG Career Development Grant for Directors and Designers, and his costume designs for the premiere of Lloyd Suh's *American Hwangap* were recently featured as the cover image for the December 2009 issue of *American Theater*.

¹ Following Professor Richard Pischel's work, Helen Joseph's *A Book of Marionettes* (1928), Joseph Spencer Kennard's *Masks and Marionettes* (1935), set the tone for marionette scholarship to address interpersonal relationship between performer and object over logistical criteria, such as production history, marionette artisans, attribution etc. Only recently in works such as MuCEM/Gadagne's *Les Marionnettes du Monde* (2008) has a more detailed view of the design of marionettes become unearthed.

² Hereafter *commedia*

³ Isolated costumes exist in The Museo Burcardo in Rome and the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. A larger collection of costumes exists in the Theater Museum of Cesky Krumlov, but they were constructed later in the 18th century than many of the existing *fantoccini*.

Works Cited:

- Joseph, Helen. *A Book of Marionettes*. New York: Bibliolife, 2008.
Kennard, Joseph Spencer. *Masks and Marionettes*. New York: MacMillan Company, 1938.
MuCEM et du musée des Marionnettes du monde. *Les Marionnettes du Monde*. Paris: R.M.N., 2008.



Steven Ritz-Barr is owner of Classics in Miniature, a film series with puppets. His biography, photos and "working previews" of his work can be seen at www.classicsinminiature.com and www.lapuppet.com. Karen Smith spoke with him in 2009, upon the completion of his short film, QUIXOTE.

- Why marionettes?

If I had not met Eugene Seregin, the puppet maker for both *FAUST* and *QUIXOTE*, I would not be using marionettes. I like that marionettes are close to realism. They inject sophistication and grace into a story. My early theatre experience, my background, is movement. I went to mime school, and studied theatre movement and dance for many years. I studied characters from the perspective of movement, not only from texts. Marionettes are perhaps the closest puppetry style to the human body, because they have legs. They can move like humans. There is an anti-gravity aspect that defines the movement but the visual aspect looks very human—a whole human.

I wanted these films, especially *QUIXOTE*, to be as close to reality as can be achieved by a puppet. And since there is a sequence in the film where these "marionette humans" perform a puppet show with primitive string puppets, the realism of the main puppets had to be more real than the other puppets. You will just have to see what I mean.

Marionettes can also be hyper-realistic—more real than real—a version of "larger than life at twelve inches high." They can do things humans can't do—like hang from a windmill and fly. They can also ride a horse like a human can, for instance. There is something quite eerie about this action because it is both real and beyond real. It is hyper-realistic. I like that.

Often other forms of puppetry get into a more pronounced abstraction of the human body. Rod and hand puppets are often just parts of the body. They can be extremely expressive. But subconsciously they do not measure up to the reality I want. Part of my style is how I represent reality.

- Why make puppet movies with strings?

This is real-time film animation. String puppets provide a sense of wonder. You can't see the strings. And the strings you do see, you tend to ignore; they don't intrude—hopefully. Some people don't like to see the strings at all.

With stop motion characters, on the other hand, you play with time. We don't play with time working with marionettes. You have to allow the audience to suspend their disbelief in one way or another. Marionettes are one way to do this. I attempt to hide the strings in the face of the puppet, but I don't go too far out of my way because they *are* string puppets. Team America did this too. They removed the strings from in front of the puppet's face with CGI, while I had to do retakes and take extra care while operating the puppets to keep the strings from taking more prominence than I wanted. I didn't want them to distract, but completely removing them is not an option for me.

The puppets are just a means to an end to tell the story—the delivery device. I don't really care about the puppet, if truth be told. I am not a purist puppeteer. I care about the story, and the total viewing impact of the artistic experience that is created by a talented team of artists. Hopefully, the puppet does become "one" with the story experience, and, while it is a huge part of the impact of the experience, it is only one part. The raw materials are the earth (wood, clay, fabric from cotton plants); the magic is with the team of artists where Eugene Seregin is a master at making the marionette. I am so grateful he is part of my team.

Karen Smith is the current president of UNIMA-USA. She is a past president of UNIMA-Australia, and was for years very active in UNIMA-India. She wrote about her feelings of international citizenship in PI #24, in her review of the UNIMA quadrennial Congress in Perth, Australia.

The Persistence of the Marionette and its Contemporary Presence

by Jennifer Stoessner

There is a hand gesture that people outside of puppetry use when I tell them I am a puppeteer. When they ask, as they inevitably will, "You mean like this?" they make a gesture with their hands, spreading their fingers into claws and moving the hands up and down in front of them. The motion is clearly intended to convey the operation of a marionette, though it often resembles the machinations of a mad musician playing an oversized organ. Regardless of how it is done, I marvel at the continued initial perception of puppets as marionettes. With the wide exposure of contemporary audiences to television and the style of puppet and manipulation that accompanies most television performance, I would expect a different gesture, one that demonstrates the opening and closing of a mouth. Yet, the perception of the marionette as *the* puppet is persistent.

The origin of the idea is no real mystery. In the U.S., puppetry in the early part of the 20th century was almost exclusively in the form of marionettes. The early geniuses of American puppetry, such as Tony Sarg, utilized string puppets and shared their techniques through books, magazines, and pamphlets. Issued to encourage the creation of puppets by hobbyists, many of them contained instructions for crafting marionettes. In the early days of television, marionettes were friendly faces on the screen. However, that complexion changed with the televised puppet performances of Burr Tillstrom, Shari Lewis, Paul Winchell, and, obviously, Jim Henson.

This brings me back to my initial wonderment at the persistence of the image of puppetry as a stringed affair. Evidently, these gesticulators have seen marionette performances on television, film, and in the live theatre. I am so glad. I have been lucky to witness world-class marionette performance. Marionettes have an appeal that draws artists and audiences alike. There is something in the "stringed instrument" that resonates with human beings. It is not my intent to think about why that is; there has been a significant amount of philosophical and critical work addressing the marionette's appeal. Instead, I choose

to briefly examine the different ways in which the marionette is used in contemporary performance. I have created three categories by which performers and performances may be defined. I realize that the creation of taxonomy invites disagreement, but have begun to see the divisions as useful though not absolute.

The first category I have created is the "classicists." A classicist uses the marionette to perform the show, in the traditional sense. The marionette is the vehicle for the performance and, while the performance will often highlight the virtuosity of the performer, the puppet remains the focus. It is a character in the work, and the storytelling revolves around its actions. The classicist represents a large portion of the marionette performance seen in North America, the sublime and the sub-par alike. The latter is best left to the imagination, but the former has practitioners who make use of the marionette to delight the audience and enliven the form. The Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes utilizes the puppets as the characters in complex, full-length, and compelling scripted drama. Burkett's carefully crafted figures and expert characterizations are matched by his dexterity as a manipulator. There are other artists, Phillip Huber and Joe Cashore jump to mind, who can do the same with vignettes, songs, and short subjects, all convincing the spectator that the small figure before them lives and breathes as they do. The expertise and attention to detail these performers place into creating their performances of marionettes as beings mark them as classicists.

The second category is the "extremists." If a classicist uses the marionette to be a character, an extremist utilizes the marionette to highlight the puppet qualities of the marionette, inherent to the string puppet; to say, "Look at this marionette and what it's doing!" The 2004 movie *Team America: World Police* is a prominent and widely seen example of the extremist at work. Though the puppets are the characters and the story is told through them, the filmmakers highlight the inherent "puppetness" of their stars throughout the movie. A scene that exemplifies this quality is the love scene between lead characters, Gary and Lisa. After the two make passionate, and graphic, love, they exchange heartfelt dialogue. Gary tells Lisa that she is amazing and she shushes him with a finger. As she is a puppet, she fails to make contact with his lips as she desires. Her pointed finger pokes him in the eye, drawing attention to the string connected to her hand and the complex manipulation required to perform her desired maneuver.¹ Another example of the extremist is the performance of gigantic marionettes, one instance of which, called "The Little Girl Giant," (Theatre Royale de Luxe) has 2,673,287 views on YouTube.² The reason for the popularity of this clip is not the quality of the performance or construction of the figure, both very lovely, but its scale. The enormous puppet dominates the landscape, drawing the viewer's attention to its indisputable puppetness.

The final category I have identified is the "adapters." An adapter takes knowledge of the marionette form and uses it to create work that draws upon traditional techniques of construction and manipulation, but also utilizes it in a way that points to something outside of the figure itself. An example that rushes to my mind is *Flamingo Bar* by Figuren Theater Tübingen.³ The performer, Frank Soehnle, engages with the puppet in a way that reinforces it as a character in the work, but also allows it to exist on a different, oftentimes symbolic, plane. Throughout the show, the puppeteer is compelled



PIERROT & PHILLIP HUBER
PHOTO BY WARREN K. WONG

to get a complicated string puppet to react and to interact. The marionette, a tangled mass more than useable figure, remains disengaged, despite the puppeteer's and other marionettes' efforts to entertain, to attract, and to torture the lifeless body. The feeling I had during the show was empathy for the puppet character but, unlike in *Tinka's New Dress*, I did not identify it as any specific character. It was a more abstracted vision of the marionette in performance—unable to move on its own, but unable to be budged by others—trapped



TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE ©PARAMOUNT PICTURES

in between life and death. Other artists whose marionette work has fallen into the adapter milieu are Basil Twist and Roman Paska (with Massimo Schuster in *Dieu! God Mother Radio*), to name just a few.

As I said previously, the categories are not absolute. Ronnie Burkett's interactions with the puppets, assuming a character role in *Tinka's New Dress* or in *Street of Blood*, can be seen as either extremism or adaptation, depending on one's view. In 2005, I had the great pleasure of seeing *Don Giovanni* in Prague at the National Marionette Theatre.⁴ The show utilized the puppets in ways that would define the company in each category, depending entirely on the episode and instance in performance. In the classicist spirit, Don Giovanni and his paramours were present, acting the Mozart opera to an orchestral recording, being the characters for the benefit of the audience and the storytelling. The extremists take charge when, during the finale of the play, one puppeteer loses patience with the duration of the concluding song and jumps down from the bridge onto the stage, a giant next to the puppet figures in performance. He grabs each character in turn from its puppeteer and places it hanging in the background. The adapter steps in during the intervening scenes, where audience attention span for prerecorded opera for marionettes might wane, by using the setting to explore the objectification of women in contemporary media and sexy photographs accompany the antics of the marionette Don Giovanni. For the puppeteers, he is an object to be utilized in the same way that he utilizes women. With each scene, a new tactic is employed to engage the puppet and audience in the opera. It is a captivating production, due in no small part to the company's acute awareness of the capabilities of the marionette.

If, as I argue, these categories exist, how can puppeteers utilize these distinctions to keep people coming to see their performance? Is there a way to use the persistent awareness of marionettes to further the medium? I think that there is a way to use the taxonomy I have created and it begins with the extremists. The exposure of extremist puppetry is particularly broad due to its dynamic nature that attracts people from a wide range of backgrounds in large numbers. If puppeteers can utilize the appeal of the extreme to present the public with additional opportunities to witness marionettes of the other two performance categories, the audience for marionette

performance could well grow. A person impressed by the gigantically orchestrated movements of an enormous marionette might also be impressed by the incredible precision of Phillip Huber or the thematic matter of a show such as *Flamingo Bar*. The existence of such work should be made known to these potential audience members and, through social media and internet video technology, the extremists might just provide the platform for broader communication about all marionette work.

In addition to reaching a potential public audience, it would be well for learning and experienced puppeteers to reconnect to the spirit of the classicist. So many of us, myself included, wish to operate in an adapter vein. Without the strong foundation in traditional methods of construction and manipulation that is the classicist's milieu, it is impossible to make the leap to adaptation. Before one can improvise on a theme, the theme must be studied and understood from within. An adaptation comes from knowledge of the source. We need to continue to offer a quality foundation in technique and history of marionette performance, through workshops and classes, as well as publication. Like the early puppeteers sharing their craft, contemporary artists continuing to present materials will result in a wider understanding and pursuit of the form, and, just possibly, a more refined version of the hand gesture that began this essay and that demonstrates the marionette's persistence.



FLAMINGO BAR, FIGUREN THEATER TUBINGEN

¹ *Team America: World Police*, dir. Trey Parker, Paramount Pictures, 2004.

² "The Little Girl Giant." YouTube, 14 Jan 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBXr15K2uSc>.

³ Frank Soehnle, perf., *Flamingo Bar*, by Figurentheater Tubingen, La Mama ETC, New York, 9 Sep 1998.

⁴ *Don Giovanni*, by National Marionette Theatre, Prague, Czech Republic, 15 Dec 2005.

Jennifer Stoessner has a PhD in theatre history, literature, and criticism from the Ohio State University, with a dissertation entitled "Building American Puppetry on the Jim Henson Foundation." She currently works at La Jolla Playhouse as the education programs associate.

The Invention, and Re-Invention, of Puppetry as a Modern Art

Patrick Le Boeuf, ed., *Craig et la marionnette*. Paris: Actes Sud / Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2009. 117 pages. 29€.

Jane Taylor, ed., *Handspring Puppet Company*. Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2009. 279 pages. \$85.

These two books, both handsomely illustrated with color photographs, help explain the development of puppetry as a modern performance form in two different eras: at the beginning of the 20th century in the work of Edward Gordon Craig, and then at the end of that century and the beginning of the twenty-first in the work of Handspring Puppet Company. Both Craig and Handspring have had a significant influence on American puppet theater, but from afar—the British-born Craig from his expatriate homes in Italy and France, and Handspring from its home in South Africa, and more recently, from the London stage.

Craig et la marionnette is a catalogue documenting an exhibition of Craig's work and its influence in Avignon, France, during the city's famous annual theater festival in 2009. Based on photographs, documents, and other artifacts largely drawn from the Craig Collection at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the exhibit and this fascinating catalogue chronicle the unlikely career

of the quirky, cantankerous, and difficult designer and director who is more than anyone else responsible for the revival of puppetry as a modern art form in Europe and the U.S. While Craig is most famous for his provocative writing

(in which, among other things, he asserted that puppets could do some things better than actors), *Craig et la marionnette* focuses on Craig's visual art, the photographic evidence of his various projects, and, most interestingly, the actual puppets and puppet stages on which he carried out those projects.

Craig's early sketches show him clearly under the influence of late-19th-century Art Nouveau aesthetics, but his notebooks from the same time show him also studiously designing puppets and puppet stages. He found early work as a stage designer in England, and the images of those projects for actors' theater show his flair for creating enticing and dramatic worlds on stage—a focus on theater as a visual form that would find its real completion in his visions for puppetry.

A fascinating window into Craig's influences in the early 20th century is offered by examples of the puppets he collected at the time he was stirring up the theater world. His household collection included Sicilian marionettes, Javanese *wayang golek* and *wayang kulit* puppets, Burmese marionettes, and Italian handpuppets. These are the typical range of global puppet traditions one can now find in almost any puppet collection or museum, but in the early 20th century, they amounted to an unusual and unusually conscientious effort to discover the world-wide roots of puppet theater as a serious art form, and it is important to know that these were the things Craig saw when he looked up from his desk for inspiration.

Craig is often cited for not actually constructing the kinds of things he dreamed about, but *Craig et la marionnette* gives us evidence of the puppets and stages he built with his colleagues at the Arena Goldoni in Florence, where he tried to set up a puppet school. We can see that the puppets he built there are interesting combinations of existing European marionette techniques and non-Western design aesthetics, including those of African masks and Javanese rod puppets. In other words, Craig was assiduously developing the kind of globally conscious puppetry that now characterizes the contemporary work of Bread and Puppet, Julie Taymor, and Handspring Puppet Company.

Some of the most fascinating elements of the exhibit touch on the importance of the young Americans who worked, disciple-like, with Craig in Florence. We can see a 1907 photograph of San Francisco artist Michael Carmichael Carr in the company of Craig and three young women; and also a newspaper article three years later from the *Kansas City Star* in which Carr, now back in the U.S. and somewhat estranged from Craig, explains how the Arena Goldoni experiment failed due to lack of funds and Craig's poor management skills. This article is marked up throughout with Craig's infuriated margin notes and sketches denoting his outrage at Carr's apostasy.



A SKETCH OF EDWARD GORDON CRAIG AT WORK IN ITALY BY MICHAEL CARMICHAEL CARR, 1907

Craig et la marionnette also includes a photo essay documenting puppet works of the last century that followed Craig's innovative thinking and finger wagging. These amount to an interesting collection of puppets from a European avant-garde perspective, but what really makes the book's portrait of Craig and his legacy thought provoking is the work of the master himself. There is clearly a lot more we need to know about this mercurial but always compelling *genius manqué*, and more to understand about the ways Edward Gordon Craig's revolutionary designs for modern theater came into being.

The situation of puppetry as a modern art form is also the subject of *Handspring Puppet Company*, a lavishly illustrated book of essays that not only documents the history of Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones's Cape Town-based theater, but also (continuing the arguments of Craig a century earlier) attempts to explain how puppets can work in the modern world as sophisticated art. This book is really quite marvelous in the way it combines wonderfully rich photographs of Handspring's work with a series of incisive essays about that work, ranging from a hands-on, how-to list of puppet performance rules from Basil Jones; to a poem by Lesego Rampolokeng about how he reworked Goethe's play *Faust* for Handspring's production of *Faustus in Africa*; and all the way to a high-theory essay by playwright and scholar Jane Taylor, drawing on Lacan, Heidegger, Freud, and other dense thinkers to make sense of Handspring's puppetry.

Since its inception in 1985, Handspring has benefited from Kohler and Jones's thoughtful and inspired approach to puppetry, as well as from an array of equally talented and inspired artists, writers, and performers from South Africa and beyond, including puppeteer Busi Zokufa, actor Dawid Minnaar, director Barney Simon, designer William Kentridge, the Malian puppeteer Yaya Coulibaly, and most recently, the National Theater of England. The richness of these collaborations can be seen in the book's stunning images of over fourteen different productions Handspring has undertaken since its inception.

While for many American puppeteers the idea of creating modern theater for adult audiences seems a difficult task, Handspring took on that challenge quite early on, in part because the company was born during "South Africa's tempestuous transformation from an apartheid state to a multi-party democracy" (as Jane Taylor puts it). Although Handspring did perform kids' puppet shows in schools at the start, it began to create puppet-and-actor theater productions that addressed South Africa's difficult situation, in ways that puppets could and actors alone could not. *Faustus in Africa* and *Ubu and the Truth Commission* were Handspring shows that dove right into the issues of race, justice, violence, and revolution that characterized the fall of apartheid; and the inclusion of William Kentridge's stage and puppet designs in these and other shows brought both Kentridge and Handspring world acclaim.

One of the most interesting Handspring collaborations has been *Tall Horse*, which Kohler and Jones created with Yaya Coulibaly. Coulibaly and Kohler split design responsibilities for the show, and the mixture of Coulibaly's Malian aesthetics and Kohler's essentially European style is quite amazing—a constant visual dialogue about the trans-cultural clash of global art forms which is essentially modern, and, moreover, seems to have worked onstage as theater.

The life-size giraffe of *Tall Horse* (operated by two puppeteers on stilts) was, in design terms, a clear precursor to the horses Adrian Kohler created for *War Horse* in 2007 at London's National Theater. *War Horse* is the most spectacular and spectacularly successful Handspring production to date, a highly affective World War One drama which, in unlikely fashion, focuses on the experience of horses just at the moment when machines are replacing them on the battlefield.

The fact that so many of the essays in this book are devoted to defending or explaining the definition, nature, and importance of puppetry shows us that even those puppeteers who are most successful at creating "serious" works of performance as "art" still, like the rest of us, have to constantly explain ourselves and our tradition's history, constantly reiterate the argument that, yes, puppetry is a legitimate modern art and performance form. Edward Gordon Craig's outrageous claims about the modern possibilities of puppetry a hundred years ago are still—even after the work of Obratzsov, Bread and Puppet, Julie Taymor, Philippe Genty, Janie Geiser, and countless other puppeteers—arguments that apparently need to be made painstakingly clear again and again. The images and words of *Handspring Puppet Company* should go a long way towards making that argument stick, for a while.

review by John Bell



PUPPETEERS DAVID MINNAAR AND LOUIS SEBOKO IN HANDSPRING'S *FAUSTUS IN AFRICA*, 1995

Passeurs et Complices

Passing it on

Institute internationale de la marionnette/École nationale supérieure des arts de la marionnette

A bilingual French/English edition under the direction of Lucile Bodson, Magareta Niculescu and Patrick Pezin. Charleville-Mézières, France: IIM/l'Entretiens, 2009. isbn: 978-2-912877-89-5



The Institute International de la Marionnette has once again produced a stunning book of lasting value to the field of puppetry. *Passing It On* has over 300 pages of essays, richly adorned by artwork—photos in color and black-and-white, notebook pages, graphic art—in which are chronicled the rise of two interlocking institutions: the International Institute and the National Conservatory dedicated to the art of puppetry. Margareta Niculescu has shepherded these institutions for much of the past three decades—if nothing else, the book would be a testament to her iron will.

The essays are written by some of the top men and women in the field: Gavin Glover, Josef Krofta, Terry Lee, Michael Meschke, Peter Schumann and many others. The book is divided into four sections: Founding Ideas, Encounters with Remarkable People, Pedagogy at Work, and Testimonies.

Section One, as you might expect, introduces the reader to the beginnings and mission of the Institute. Ms. Niculescu, for example, writes movingly about Jacques Felix, a man without whom there would likely be no Institute. And in a second essay—“On the Path of Experimentation”—she describes her own beginnings as Director of Tandarica theater in Bucharest (at age 23!), identifying herself as one of the generation of the 50s–70s. This was a time when puppetry was really being redefined by her company and others around the world—Compagnie Yves Joly in France, Bread and Puppet in the USA and others—as something multidisciplinary, metaphoric, socially engaged. This period laid the groundwork for the Institute, which, among other things, would help train a new generation of theatre artists for whom experimentation would be the natural *modus operandi*. After a number of years of hosting international puppet festivals and long summer workshops, the Institute named Niculescu as its director in 1985. She chronicles the development of ESNAM and a method of training for professional puppetry artists. It is a fascinating history, with faculty that represent the highest levels of the art form from all over the world. The photographs from this period are very inspiring.

Also in this section of the book, Josef Krofta, of Prague’s Drak theatre, describes the way Niculescu recruited him for the faculty of the new school, and how the force of her personality drew many artists to the venture:

The school opened its arms wide, but even if someone opens their arms, it does not necessarily mean that everyone will come running. There are arms that always remain empty and people walk by them cautiously. The personality of Margareta Niculescu and the appeal of her concept were so remarkable that the school’s open arms did not stay empty.

In the second section of the book there are essays about, and in some cases by, Edward Gordon Craig, Tadeusz Kantor, Peter Schumann and Jim Henson.

The third section—A Pedagogy at Work—includes essays by Terry Lee, Alain Recoing and Philippe Genty, among others. Genty’s essay held special appeal for me as I studied under him at the Institute in the summer of 1985. Again, he cites the persistent prodding of Niculescu as the force that finally got him to teach for the first time (a calling to which he has since returned many times). He has found that the teaching informs his work. I can attest that his influence on students has been life-changing, this man who has created some of the most memorable stage images of all time.

The fourth section includes many testimonials by faculty and students, lists of all the workshops and participants year by year, and the ESNAM students, who attend in three-year cycles. A look at the rosters is dizzying—hundreds of students who have since distinguished themselves in the field, all of whom left richer for the experience.

This is a beautiful and fascinating book, whether or not one has been to the Institute. That it is written in both English and French should make it useful to many people.

reviewed by A. Periale

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Skipitares erratum:



The Trojan War in Shadow:
Indian Performance Traditions in
the Puppetry of Theodora Skipitares

We recently heard from Dr. Lauren Hobbs Sexton. She clarified some of the information that had been included in her article on the work of Theodora Skipitares that appeared in PI #26 (*Art in the Shadows*). The third paragraph states: "Theodora Skipitares traveled with Ellen Stewart to India in the winter of 1999 to 2000 on a Fulbright Fellowship, where they collaborated on two pre-arranged productions: *Sita* in November of 1999 and *The Pied Piper* in February of 2000." Actually, Dr. Sexton had a Fulbright to India and brought Stewart to Bangalore for November. Stewart didn't travel to Ahmedabad and was not involved with *The Pied Piper*.



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the Magic & Wonderful
World of Puppetry



Bob Nathanson





THE JIM HENSON FOUNDATION

Congratulations to the 2010
Jim Henson Foundation Grant Recipients!

PROJECT GRANTS (\$5,000)

Black Forest Fancies
The Pomology of Sweetness and Light

Cave Dogs
Sure-Minded Uncertainty

Concrete Temple Theatre
Hudson to China

LOCO 7
Nostalgia

Lone Wolf Tribe
The Hobo Grunt Cycle

Erin K. Orr
Don Cristobal, Billy-Club Man

Ping Chong & Co.
The Devil You Know



Photo: Scott Irvine

The Devil You Know
Ping Chong & Co.

Poste Restante:
The Post Office Never Looked so Sexy
They Gotta be Secret Agents



Photo: Andrew Sokol

Joseph Silovsky
Send for the Million Men

Luis de Robles Tentindo
Mud Angels

They Gotta Be Secret Agents
Poste Restante:
The Post Office Never Looked so Sexy

Trouble Puppet Theater Company
The Jungle

Wakka Wakka Productions Inc.
Baby Universe



Photo: Gloria Sun

The Hobo Grunt Cycle
Lone Wolf Tribe

2010 Grant Review Board: Cheryl Henson, Jane Henson, Allelu Kurten, Louis Borodinsky, Leslee Asch, Heather Henson, Dan Hurlin, Mark Levenson, Roman Paska, Martin P. Robinson, Richard Termine



Photo: Jim Fossell

Sure-Minded Uncertainty
Cave Dogs

SEED GRANTS (\$2,000)

Aeolian Theatre

Epyllion

Drama of Works

Leakey's Ladies

Figures of Speech Theatre

At Sea

Justin Gebhard

Dinner Party

Janie Geiser

Clouded Sulphur

Laura Heit

*Bureau of Small Requests:
76 Departments of Tomorrow*

The Independent Eye

Frankenstein

Inkfish

Gilgamesh

Tom Lee

Kuruma Ningyo in Translation

Sandglass Theater

D-generation: an exaltation of larks

Spirit Cabinet Productions

The Narrative of Victor Karloch

Theater of Performing Objects

Harvesting Pomegranate Dreams

Tony Chioldes

Before Icarus Fell

Haverty Marionettes

The Colour of Her Dreams

Paul Zaloom

White Like Me

CHILDREN'S GRANTS (\$3,000)

Barefoot Puppets

Little By Little

Leslie Carrara-Rudolph

Entertaining a Thought

Swedish Cottage Marionette Theater

The Map

Corbian Visual Arts and Dance

Darwin the Dinosaur

Deborah Costine

Turtle's New Home

Crabgrass Puppet Theatre

*Haiku, Hip Hop and Hotdogs -
Puppets do Poetry*

Mobile Shadow Projection Theater

balloon, balloon, balloon, balloon, balloon

One Grain of Sand Puppet Theater

The Mysterious Case of the Missing Star

Museum of Contemporary Art

Seven Wonders of the World



Photo: Kevin McTark

The Narrative of Victor Karloch
Spirit Cabinet Productions



Photo: Letnicturnip

The Jungle
Trouble Puppet Theater Company

2011 GRANTING CYCLE

The Foundation awards grants at the end of each year for the creation and development of innovative and contemporary work for adult and family audiences. The postmark deadline for letters of intent is **April 16, 2010**. Guidelines are available at: www.hensonfoundation.org

To request an application by mail, please contact our office:

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Long Island City, NY 11101
Phone: 212.439.7504
Email: info@hensonfoundation.org



Evil ogre, BELU— traditional Burmese marionette, see page 15