

Ancient into Modern Perceptions of an onlooker

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I offer a picture of contemporary developments in European puppetry, in the hope that the reader will find it intriguing to note the similarities and contrasts with those of Brazil. On the briefest acquaintance with Brazilian puppetry and theatre, I am daunted not only by my ignorance of Portuguese, but also by the immensity of Brazil's landmass and the diversity of its cultural heritage. It is surely as difficult to speak of and compare this one country's puppetry aesthetics and styles as those of all the countries of Europe combined. Yet through my description of the latter – with a heavy accent on Britain - the reader may well find the pleasure of recognition in some characteristics shared between our worlds.

In Europe, the puppet's actual *modus vivendi* in performance is still most often practised in a traditional context. The earthly secular godfathers and heroes of European puppetry, i.e. the extended family of Punch, Pulcinella, Polichinelle, Petrouchka, the German Kasper and the Czech Casperle, the Hungarian Vitez Laszlo, the Portuguese Dom Roberto and many more are perennially popular, because their 'heroism' lies in their anti-authoritarianism, their fight for individuality and independence (from the tyranny of matrimony and parenthood, the medical profession, the Church, the Law). Most of us can identify with their rebelliousness, to a greater or lesser extent. They are there on behalf of the Common Man, ending their show with a confrontation with the Devil, sometimes in the guise of a Bogeyman or a Crocodile or a Bull or, rarely, a Skeleton, come to take the comic hero down to hell. In the most satisfying folk shows Death and the Devil are defeated too.¹⁰¹

There are scores of Punch 'Professors' in Britain, and there is surely more than one such folk hero in Brazil, although I know only of the Mamulengo show. There too the 'hero', represents the downtrodden, the exploited and the poor. All of them still exert their power to make us laugh (we call it slapstick humour – broad knockabout action involving hitting and tricking the opponent:

¹⁰¹ SPEAIGHT, George. *Punch and Judy, a History*. Plays Inc. USA pp.139-1440

the slapstick, I would remind you, is a wooden rod split down the middle so that it makes a satisfying noise when used but inflicts minimal hurt). A more profound reason for the staying-power of these coarse characters, even in the richer countries, is an ongoing need for the impotent spectators to witness a revenge they dare not practice, a humorous catharsis, you may call it. With his big stick Punch kills the 'tyrants', in turn (and inexcusably) wielding power himself on behalf of all of us, Authority's victims. The message is comically crude, openly violent and usually sexist, so that today's Authority, or its more puritan and petty representatives, often voices its indignation in the name of Political Correctness and removes the Punchman's licence to perform. It happens regularly, at least in England.

If you were to visit a number of puppet festivals in Europe you would perceive the influence of Punch and his cousins, most of them descendants of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, itself a descendant of a tradition of folk entertainment that is traced backwards from classical Rome, to ancient Greece and to civilizations even before that. In every country the show has absorbed national characteristics and local lore: the folk hero is more or less coarse (in England he is at his most violent, I regret to say), more or less refined.

Punch and his cousins are a manifestation of modern mankind's deep-rooted irreverence, manifested as far back as the 17th century and probably long before. Punch can be said to be an example of Enlightenment Man in these respects: he thinks for himself, he defends his individuality, he cocks a snook at [mocks] his masters' hypocrisy (including that of the priest) and his ill-gotten wealth. In the person of Guignol in 19th century France the anti-hero was 'elevated' to a new role, becoming a servant of the bourgeoisie, an endearing trickster from the industrial working classes, much less violent than Punch. But the line of inheritance is clear, and all, including Guignol, are popular still.

The 3000 year tradition is pervasive enough to make it easy to imagine how most 'puppet shows' still owe it their vitality and their stories. The inheritance is perceptible even in the work of some of Britain's most highly regarded modern groups. Take as examples Green Ginger of Wales and Faulty Optic of Yorkshire (in north England). Green Ginger's dramaturgy is broad, noisy, comic, as is the design of glove puppets and sets: the influence of Punch is strong. With Faulty Optic the influence is more subtle, the dramaturgy far more convoluted, the scenography an exquisite juxtapositioning of junk objects, a celebration of detritus (including the characters). The grotesque figures are manipulated from the back, hands-on or with short rods. High technology in the form of a miniature camera, hand-held, tracks a part of the action to magnify and focus attention. One of their latest productions, Horsehead, introduced

stop frame animation to disturbing effect (insects eating the innards of the decapitated head of a circus horse), heightening the grotesquerie. In spite of the technology their shows incorporate repetitive, violent action; the humour is darker than in the Punch show, but the debt is obvious. Both these companies hide the puppeteers, as in the traditional puppet show.

On television during the eighties and nineties, there was the series *Spitting Image*, a viperish satire on the famous and powerful in Britain, owing its vitality in the same way to the Punch tradition. The concept was adopted by other countries and still runs in France. It even enjoyed popularity in Russia, surprisingly - post-glasnost, of course. The puppet caricature had returned to its rightful mode, or one of them. Television puppetry had, before *Spitting Image*, a soft, charming and mostly infantile character. It came as a relief to see it adopt again a hard-edged satirical role.

At a more radical level of protest, you will not find much political puppetry remaining, at least not in Britain. There is no equivalent of Bread and Puppet here, although once there were several groups descended from Peter Schumann's gutsy work. It was once the same in Britain, but is hard to find nowadays, for two reasons: first, the Punch and Judy show, that fount of satirical social protest in the nineteenth century, does not find enough to protest about in our relatively bland political landscape; second, the professional puppetry companies are increasingly well-funded by our arts councils and municipal authorities. There may be many groups to disagree, but puppetry's political teeth have been mostly extracted by the suffocating demands of the official funding bodies, without whose support it is near impossible for a company to survive. Two of our most outspoken companies that used to create splendidly anti-establishment theatre have been awarded buildings, their own headquarters. A cynic might conclude that the tactics of the arts donors – conscious or not – are to grant the rebel groups money and even a permanent building, and then to impose impossible conditions: of form-filling, accounting, health and safety requirements (including the most demanding and expensive fire regulations), the production of detailed attendance figures and so on and on. The vigour of the artists that gave rise to the protests is soon worn down, and as I write Britain has only one or two groups ready to expose some of the contemporary excesses and injustices of power. Welfare State International, inspired by Bread and Puppet, for years thumbed its nose at government through giant scale displays of superbly designed street theatre, beautiful puppetry and breathtaking pyrotechnics.¹⁰²

The company closed down last year. Its leader John Fox blamed the end

¹⁰² See *Animated Encounters*, Puppet Centre Trust, UK. 2007 p.20 et seq., also the WSI website, also *Eyes on Stalks*, A and C Black, UK. 2002

of his project on the demands of the new building the company had recently been granted; the reason was, he said, 'mainly because the gatekeepers were institutionalising us'.

However the dictatorship of the arts funding bodies has by a paradox given rise to an ever-growing generosity to and appreciation of puppetry as a valuable contribution to the nation's theatre, and this is to be acknowledged.

A clear break with the past came in the nineteen seventies when European puppet schools produced the 'actor-puppeteer', skilled in performance as an individual personality, an actor at least as much as a puppeteer. Since then few productions have consisted of puppets operated entirely by hidden manipulators and speakers. A Brechtian desire to suppress illusion, to reveal the tricks of the trade, as it were, alongside the liberated ego of the actor-puppeteer has changed the aesthetics of performance with puppets, probably forever.

Nevertheless you will occasionally see a puppet performance with no visible human presence (as with the two companies I have cited). For devotees such as me they come as a breath of fresh air, a seduction remembered, renewing my love of the puppet theatre and my belief in it as a unique and thrilling discipline of theatre with its own language.

Professional training for puppetry is available in most European countries, and in many is offered at university level. In these schools the high levels of manipulative skill necessary to 'pure' puppetry are little taught, except perhaps in the four-year courses for actor-puppeteers in Eastern Europe. Most puppeteers are still self-taught or apprenticed to others to learn the traditional manipulation skills. The schools concentrate the students' attention on making interesting and original theatre: they study theory and dramaturgy, new media technologies, the staging of productions under the tuition of experienced practitioners. In short, puppetry is taught as an element and tool of modern mainstream theatre.

In the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, where I have been a tutor in puppetry since 1993, an inter-disciplinary approach to theatre-making has flourished in two programmes at university level (Bachelor's and Master's degrees). The ethos is that of a collaborative, non-hierarchical creativity in which writers, actors, directors, dramaturgs, producers, puppeteers, sound, light and set designers and students of new 'visual media' develop an understanding of modern theatre and the location of each discipline in that context. Puppetry is simply a part of a whole. The puppeteers attempt to integrate the language of puppet and object animation into the laboratory. The result has been startling: most students on the two programmes gain an understanding of a formerly little known art form, and many of the graduates who would not call themselves puppeteers place it in their toolbox of knowledge and skills and integrate puppet and object play into their professional work.

Taken as a unique and separate art form with its own specialist practitioners, its own specialist skills, what then is this language? What can this medium of expression transmit, in terms of a dramaturgy, in order to attract a paying public?

Europe being largely secular in its politics and societal customs in this the 21st century, biblical stories and legends rarely feature in new productions. The Christian church has comparatively little power or influence, so the old tales of saints and gospel stories are hardly in the public consciousness, although I have seen many in Poland, as seems logical. This disregard of religious sources is true in Britain and becomes increasingly true in every European country.

Theatre audiences in Britain have since the 1920s become a conservative, educated minority, the kind that reads books, entertains at home, tends the garden and the family - and looks to art for reflections of the familiar. Animism – belief in the spirit life of Things - is viewed with suspicion and ridicule; it has been stifled in bourgeois society and the schoolroom. Alas, animism, as we know, is the essence of puppetry. We have to accept the marginalisation of religious belief systems, of transcendental references, of the supernatural and the ‘unscientific’ taken together with the already noted fading of polemic, parody and satire and puppetry’s primary sources are dammed up. A dramaturgy which arose from the medium’s natural affinity both to things spiritual and to comic protest has been almost erased. If either is found in 21st century European puppet theatre it is through our fascination with matters exotic and unfamiliar, such as ‘magic realism’, which hails from South American literature. Through this fascination we are allowing some of our old irrational, unscientific beliefs in spirit and magic to bubble to the surface like the source of the Nile, dammed but not dried up.¹⁰³

A revival of interest in the theatrical animation of figures and objects throughout the richer countries is surprising but undeniable. Many leading theatre-makers are now employing puppetry in all kinds of productions, from commercial musicals to opera, from dance to ‘total’ or mixed-media theatre. So far most are inclined to use it only timidly, for depictions of the near-naturalistic: the puppets are often substitutes for babies, children and animals. The flights of imagination and invention are brought to the stage only by true puppeteers, understanding as no other can, the singularity of the genre and the dramatic potential of animated imagery. Only they (whether they label themselves puppeteers or not) can bring a prodigious imagination to the interpretation of realms of transformation and enchantment, surrealism and

¹⁰³ NELSON, Victoria. *The Secret Life of Puppets*. Harvard Univ. Press, USA and England, 2001, p.xi

symbolism. The puppeteers' companies still work mainly for children (who are still in touch with such otherworldly matters), but there is plenty of evidence to prove that a younger adult audience is developing a taste for a non-naturalistic theatre into which puppetry slips naturally as a perfect element. At the most recent festivals I have attended, the adult work has been surprisingly more interesting than the offerings for children.

I mentioned the great difference in the aesthetics of traditional and contemporary puppetry: where in past centuries the artistic, visual value of the show was hardly regarded as more than a rough background (in the scenography, costuming, choreography). Today the estimation of good puppetry is founded as much and more on the visual elements as the written text. The greatest puppeteers are visual artists by training, rarely theatre performers. Matthew Cohen in an essay on THE ART OF PUPPETRY has examined the widespread subsuming of puppetry into their work by contemporary fine artists, and concludes that: *Contemporary artists bring a new eye to old practices, and help puppeteers remember that their performance tools are also sculpture in motion.*¹⁰⁴

The most gifted of actor-puppeteers must collaborate with designers. The most able of craftsmen must interpret the work of artistic scenographers – but in the practice of this singular art form it is curious how often the performer and the craftsman are themselves fine artists.

Joan Baixas of Catalunya, who founded his company La Claca in the 70s when he collaborated with the painter Joan Miró, is a leading figure in the modern world of animation. Starting as an innovator, in that he animated objects more than figurative puppets, he has recently experimented with the transformation of paint on canvas. You may call it animated painting. He performs it live, to a musical score, and the effect on the audience can be – if not quite mesmerising – entrancing, an intense aesthetic pleasure, both sensual and spiritual. The fact that one of his productions was called Terra Prenyada or Pregnant Earth, and that the prime ingredients of his paint, manually spread on the screen, was in fact earth and water, forced the spectator to contemplate a past age when the elements were objects of worship

Shockheaded Peter, designed and directed by Julian Crouch and Phelim McDermott, two of the founders of the Improbable Theatre company, was first staged in 1997 by the production company Cultural Industry. It is no exaggeration to state that it was a watershed in modern European theatre, heralding an era of productions based on a rich tapestry of interwoven media far removed from naturalistic text-based work. It mixed artistic resources

¹⁰⁴ COHEN, Matthew Isaac. The Art of Puppetry. In: *Animated Encounters*. No. 1, Puppet Centre Trust 2007. London, England.

(puppetry, toy theatre, acting, live music, song). Most importantly, the show broke the rarefied confines of ‘alternative’ or ‘experimental’ theatre in attracting large audiences of every age. It played in major theatres in the West End, on Broadway and all over the European continent over a period of several years¹⁰⁵. The text, all of it set to music, was a series of cautionary verses telling of the wrongdoings of children and their inevitably fatal consequences – for example, not heeding where they are going, refusing food, thumb-sucking, playing with matches and similar venalities. It opened a floodgate of productions in which image and visual imagination rule, and re-stated the attraction and profitability of the artificial and the fantastic. In its wake came more productions introducing puppets as powerful symbolic representatives of the grotesque, of caricature, the ghostly, the horrific, the supernatural. In the cinema this was already known, but theatre critics and commentators – all but a few – found the phenomenon of the new genre hard to deal with, hard to lay down criteria of critical evaluation. They were trained for word-based plays and musicals, literary experts to a man. Most were ignorant of the vocabulary of fine art and design in relation to theatre productions. Most were unable to recognise the dramaturgical dimensions of a soundscape integral to a total theatre. Most were thoroughly distrustful of subject matter steeped in the non-naturalistic. Interesting that women critics came to appreciate the new dramaturgy earlier than the men, even if men were in the majority as its practitioners.

Other instances: in 2006, a young company, Sketty, staged a successful play about a father unable to accept the death of his child, who appeared as a ghost in the form of a speaking, lifesize puppet character, invisible to the mother. The father and mother were human actors. Although he is from Canada, the incomparable plastician, playwright and marionettist Ronnie Burkett enjoyed loud applause from European audiences with his ambitious production *Happy*. The frame of the story was the setting of a ‘halfway house’ where various characters, dead in the earthly sense, are trapped, restrained by those who have loved them and are unable to ‘let them go’, to allow their spirit to rest in peace. The National Theatre staged an ambitious trilogy of plays in which every human character was attached to and accompanied by his animal ‘daemon’, a portrayal in puppet form of the spirit of the character. Burkett regularly fills a major London theatre for three and four week runs.

You sense that European puppetry is gradually, timidly, looking again at its roots, in parody, satire, the outlandish and the spiritual, for their dramatic potential more than as an obvious reflection of any societal change, much as I would wish it.

¹⁰⁵ See the website www.shockheadedpeter.com. The show was produced by Cultural Industry.

Children's theatre has always been far more courageous about breaking into the supernatural world, into stories of magic, spirituality and folklore which are full of otherworldly beings, good and bad. For children puppet productions serve as an introduction to the fine arts, to drama, to poetry, to music and to living itself. The best children's theatre, including that which addresses itself to the special needs of children in hospitals, homes, refugee centres and the like, is receiving good financial support these days and the groups, such as *Theatre-rites* and *Oily Cart*, concentrate on themes to which they can bring their extraordinary visual invention, often in non-theatre spaces. The 'site-specific' work involves the children in sensory experiences and in environments made unfamiliar through the installation of transformed and animated objects, poetic reflections of childhood dreams and adventures. This kind of work receives encouraging subsidy, if the work is outstanding.

Practically speaking, the scales are positively weighted in favour of the puppet and object as theatre media. On film, animation has been widely employed almost as long as film itself, and I would be surprised if it were not the same in Brazil. In television programmes one would expect the incidence to be much less, of course, since for the moment at least tv is the medium of naturalism, of the soap, of the detective story, featuring 'ordinary' people that mirror their spectators. Not so, of course for the young children's programmes, where fantasy reigns. If television is reflecting back adult reality, what does that say about the reality of children? They seem to rejoice in unreality, in colour, in caricature. In our present stage of European civilization, the adult sheds childhood by shedding a love of the unreal and adopting (often with great difficulty) a love of the literal, the scientific, the rational. In theatre, this has meant a belief that text is the supreme means of communication, perhaps especially in Britain, home of Shakespeare.

One caveat – in productions by non-specialist companies such as the National Theatre – the employment of and respect for the puppet is not yet matched by the employment of and respect for the puppeteer. There are at least two reasons for this: puppetry has so recently been an enclosed, almost secretive specialism, that the fear of the professional puppeteer as an insular, inflexible practitioner with little understanding of the wider world of theatre persists. The second reason is the producers' perception that other kinds of performers – actors, singers, dancers – can operate puppet figures as well as any specialist. New forms of training, such as I described above, in which would-be puppeteers learn alongside other performance disciplines is, I hope, gradually expanding horizons and eliminating this perception.

The European picture would not be complete without a reference to the

fast growing recognition of the value of puppets in education, therapy, adult rehabilitation and child psychology, but this is not my field.

The infrastructure, still weak, is strengthening all the time (training opportunities, publications, analysis, criticism, associations like the Union Internationale de la Marionnette or UNIMA, agencies for the development of the art form such as the Puppet Centre Trust, now 33 years old); production values constantly and measurably improve, the international festivals reveal ever new pathways. The future seems to reside in experiments with new technologies, greater sophistication in the use of lighting, live music and sound attracting excited and exciting young composers. As for modern scenography, the breathtaking designs of some artists who thoroughly understand the medium have enormously extended the recognition and respect given to it as part of creative new theatre. Puppetry forms part of a genre of theatre growing more strongly than any other – for want of a better name I must call it total theatre (we publish a magazine with that name). All over Europe there are thousands of practitioners causing this industrial revolution, and among them are hundreds of puppeteers. It is time that they should be supported as text-based theatre is supported, with a comparable infrastructure and public funding, and informed publicity.

The bandwagon is rolling and gathering speed.

