

The Story and the Telling – Perspectives on Training in Contemporary Puppetry

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Abstract: Quality design and virtuoso performance do not always produce a good play. They are not enough; neither is the sum total of the stage elements. Staging is a craft primarily focused on constructing complex evolving relationships between the various elements: between the story and the interpretation, the puppets and the performers, the characters and their function, and between the story and the narration. This article looks at the teaching practices established by Ophrat through four exercises dealing respectively with (a) the function of the body as it reflects on the relationship of the performer and the puppets, (b) the separated use of sound and action, being originated from different sources, (c) The idea of duality of the puppet as major dramatic role, and (d) understanding that everything in puppet theater can be manipulated, including space.

Keywords: Visual Theater. Story telling. Object-subject.

Do we love or appreciate a certain play because of the drama? Or is it because of the narrative? The answer is neither. I have seen many stage versions of *The Little Prince* (an undoubtedly good story), but I have never seen a good one.

Is it the design of the puppets? Is it the manipulation?

Quality design and virtuoso performance do not always produce a good play. They are not enough; neither is the sum total of the stage elements. Stage positioning is a craft primarily focused on constructing complex

evolving relationships between the various elements: between the story and the interpretation, between the puppets and the performers, between the characters and their function, and between the story and the telling.

True drama does not play out on stage, in the visible dramatic space, rather it is found in the space between the event and its staging. This is also true in cases of familiar tales, retold time and time again (such as, Red Riding Hood), the manipulated framework (the disguised wolf and the seemingly innocent girl – depending on the interpretation) refers to reality but maintains a certain distance from it. This is a multi-dimensional poetic space of metaphoric, sometimes archetypal language that incorporates design patterns, movement, sound, and visual and linguistic metaphors. The stage is a poetic space, because language is image, the dramatic role is a metaphor, and the puppet is a trope. All non-functional artistic action is a metaphor; it enables self-perspective. It is a type of loop that establishes a reflective dynamic.

Let us consider the functionality of the poetic space in Puppet Theater through the figure of Sergey Obraztsov's drunk. He drinks from the vodka bottle, drowning his sorrows, and then squeezes his face with his hand. The puppet's sculpted-foam head absorbs the water (vodka), and when his hand squeezes his wrinkled face, water drips out transforming alcohol unto tears. This is excellent for a short dramatic scene, but is not enough for a complex dramatic sketch. Drawing this out over a more complex sketch would undermine or render the metaphor (vodka and tears) ineffective, and there is also the risk that it would revert back into its former material state (a fluid-absorbing foam). It is possible to utilize this staging approach, of employing alternative materials (foam), for a range of utterances, actions, associations, metaphors, and to establish, in this way, a relationship between the foam and the character it embodies and between the puppet and the conceptual essence it represents. This is an example of interactive-visual syntax, in which the material is not merely an aesthetic characteristic or consideration (the foam looks like skin, easily takes makeup, reacts well to lighting), but has material qualities (absorbency, squeezable, elastic, etc.) that can be appropriated or transformed into physical features and can have emotional attributes ascribed to them. Thus, the foam figure is a character for all intents and purposes.

The same syntactic logic exists in Patricia O'Donovan's play *Head in the Clouds* (1989) – a dramatic adaptation of four stories by Eugène

Ionesco. Here, Patricia created an environment for each story, a contextual world in which everyday objects function as the characters. For example, objects found in the mother's purse function as forest animals. Shoes function as a means of transportation (bus, taxi, etc.); each shoe has its own distinct character and characterization; the laces function as the steering mechanism, etc.

If the puppet is simply a figuration, the metaphor is weak. It may have a didactic, descriptive, or illustrative value, but its artistic value is inferior. It is necessary to "stretch" the metaphor, that is to create distance between the signifier and the signified, between the simulator and the simulated.

In this article I will sketch out the practices I employ in teaching artists, based on my past experiences as a director and designer, and my current experience as a performance artist, and as the founder of The School of Visual Theater in Jerusalem. As part of the framework of this school, I established, in collaboration with fellow artists, a teaching approach that views Puppet Theater as an artistic language that encompasses both performative art and visual theater.

The four dramatic exercises below are part of the teaching method that we employed at The School of Visual Theater in Jerusalem (and I continue to implement this method today also at The School for the Art of Puppetry in Holon, Israel).

First Exercise: The place where the body ends

The performer's body does not have a metaphoric status. The body is a "cultural text", a linguistic system of signs that form a legible language and syntax. Therefore, it is not only the puppet's movements that embody a dramatic statement, also the body of the puppeteer, positioned behind or to the side, has an essential part in the situation. The facial expressions and body language of the puppeteers in Japanese Bunraku Theater, from the moment they reveal their faces at the end of the first act, add a fascinating dimension to the stage performance. The puppeteer amplifies the puppet's pattern of movement (*kata*) with his own body. Similarly, there is a powerful beauty in the emotional intensity of an old puppeteer operating a puppet of a young woman. An aesthetic analysis focused solely on the puppet's pattern of movement will miss or fail to see the true drama unfolding on stage before our eyes. It is not only the physical body that gives meaning to the dramatic text. It is also the

composition of puppet and puppeteer, the amalgamation of synthetic and organic material that creates either a visual and thematic integration, or conflict.¹ When we say “body” we are referring to gender, form, look, appearance, resonance, voice, posture, gesture, energy radiance, intention, desire, emotion, and above all personality. As Simon Shepherd stated, “Theater is a practice in which societies negotiate around what body is and means” (SHEPHERD, 2006, p. 12).

The Gertrude Show (1995)², by Yael Inbar and Revital Ariely, employs a hybrid representation – the upper half is composed of the puppet’s body and the lower half is the body of the puppeteer. The puppet constructed of carved foam with a very fine texture, integrates surprisingly well with the bare legs of the puppeteer. Inbar, like the Belgium puppeteer-dancer Nicole Mossoux and the performance company of the French choreograph and puppeteer Philip Genty, represents, in her training, the trend of combining puppet theater with contemporary dance. The puppeteer’s body is subject to the whims of the designer and director, like raw material. One minute she is a puppet, sitting in a chair, legs crossed, and in another she lies on her back, while the puppet holds an oar and she – the puppeteer – floats across the stage on her back, like a rowing boat.

Similarly, it is possible to discuss the body-costume-mask-puppet relation in Hoichi Okamoto’s *Kiyohime Mandala*.³ Exposing the puppeteer’s body with its male presence, as a partner to and stand-in for the role that the puppet is meant to play, undermines the puppet’s autonomy. Okamoto asks: “Does illusion exist?” and offers the following answer:

This is a delicate question. The puppet is alive one minute and the next it isn’t. It oscillates from one state to the other. The puppet is inherently an inanimate being. I give it life, and I also transform it into an object; from

¹ Foucault refers to the discourse as “event-discourse”. The event does not belong to the physical world, but nevertheless it is not non material. “The event is not of the order of bodies. And yet it is not something immaterial either; it is always at the level of materiality that it takes effect, that is effect; it has its locus and it consists in the relation, the coexistence, the dispersion, the overlapping, the accumulation, and the selection of material elements [...] Let us say that the philosophy of the event should move in at first sight paradoxical direction of a materialism of the incorporeal.” (FOUCAULT, 1981, p. 69).

² <http://vimeo.com/113907686>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkY8VDQmEjU>

life to death, from animate to inanimate. I believe that humans and puppets are similar to one another. That is what interests me – to play on the border; I walk and dance on it (In: PASKA, 2000, p. 39).

Second exercise: Remix of voice and action

In the puppet theater, movement and sound originate from different sources. The puppet moves seemingly independently, but its voice springs forth from another body! The principle of this animation is based on the conventions of ventriloquism. H el ene Cixous stated:

A voice is foreign to a puppet. This creature's poignant mystery lies in its two separate entities, its body and its voice. Its voice comes from outside, lent to it by the impassive singer sitting to one side. It is as if it needed two to express the enormity of its inner turmoil (2000, p. 21).

Josef Sprinzak in *Tapeman* (1994)⁴ operated a radio-tape-recorder as if it was a puppet. He controlled it through an attached antenna and its electric cable. It is a loose rendition of Peter Pan's song *I won't Grow Up*. The child's reluctance to mature and grow up was expressed via the raising and lowering (opening and closing) of the antenna. The puppet-object broadcasts the voice of the puppeteer while at the same time representing the 'body' of a child.

Another example of the unraveling of the relationship between voice and action may illuminate the directorial process as an editing of the elements of the work: in 2005 I created the performance, *The Laughing Man*.⁵ On top of my head I placed a wig styled in the shape of a red and blue medieval jester's hat. I emphasized my laugh lines with makeup pencil. My mouth was frozen in an expression of paroxysm of laughter, with the aid of an oral dentistry apparatus used for maxillofacial surgery. Over the course of three hours I adopted the movements of someone in a mad frenzy with the bodily gestures of a laughing person, but I was not really laughing. The sound of my laughter played off a recording, enabling me to create a separation between physical gesture and emotion. In attempting to express the inverse relationship between Man and

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL0cTfow2yc>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUzLILu2o8U>

puppet, I embodied a laughing mask, a mute laugher. Instead of the traditional process, in which we design a puppet which is a representation of a human being, I fashioned myself into a human representation of a puppet. In the performance of *The Laughing Man*, the separation between the movement and the soundtrack creates a disjunction. The laughter was pre-recorded and broadcast through a small speaker inside a microphone (disjunction) placed in the audience. The laughter was meant – supposedly – to be the public's mockery (disjunction). In addition, during the performance I altered the speed of the soundtrack. Slowing the speed of the recording changes the pitch. When you slow laughter, you hear weeping (disjunction). The basic principle of manipulation, the cornerstone of puppet theater, supports the emotional action, the mechanical alteration of the emotional component is manipulative in its essence. In other words, I played with the emotions of the audience (OPHRAT, 2012, p. 50).

Third exercise: The Allegory of the Cave

The visual narrative offers an integral visual syntax. The spectator is challenged through the need to weave together the contextual relations of the signifier and signified. There is a constant tension in the transition from the realm of reality to the realm of the imaginary. The name of the game is manipulation, in the psychological sense, achieved through the creation of an illusion or deception as a staging tactic; superficially so, since we are a self-aware audience. Unlike Plato's philosophical allegory we, the audience, are seated in the theater not the cave, and are not restrained in any way (PLATO, 2015, p. 365-401).

The third exercise focuses on the fact that the puppet is a double of its manipulator. The image of the double and the idea of duality have, probably, the most important dramatic role in puppet theater. It is from this idea of duality that secondary concepts have evolved, such as duplication, copy, model (different scaling), assembling and disassembling, contradictory and complimentary (positive-negative, light and shade, etc.). This duality expresses a longing for a different reality, physical or spiritual, stemming from a state of absence or desire. Duality is a basic pattern that enforces a harsh dualism on our perception of reality. For example, beauty and the beast, the beautiful maiden that appears in the guise of an animal or monster through the mediation of a mirror or a moon-lit lake.

Just as Plato's allegory identifies the shadows as the rudimentary stage of learning and knowledge of truth, this exercise of 'the allegory of the cave' offers to construct self-consciousness. At the pinnacle of a staged piece the students are asked to create a situation in which the puppet arrives at the realization that it is a puppet, aware of the fact that it is operated by a puppeteer and/or that there is an audience watching it as part the reality of theater.

There are countless examples within contemporary puppet theater of puppets that attempt to become emancipated and sever the physical or conceptual strings by which they are manipulated. Artists such as Philip Genty, Henk Boerwinkel, Albrecht Roser (1922-2011), Enno Podhel, Frank Soehnle⁶, Shari Lewis (1933-1998), and many others deftly walk the tight rope between the animated puppet and the inanimate material. Between being active and activated, between being independent and dependent.

Fourth Exercise: Stage for the face (or limbs)

In the performance *Eleven Moving Pictures from the Life of Eve in the Garden of Eden* and in the video *The Face Dance of Eve* (1992), by Marit Benisrael, the image of Eve is painted onto the artist.

I have always loved to make faces in front of the mirror, and one day I discovered that I have a small woman on my face. Many of her limbs were already 'marked,' and all that was left was for me to complete the picture: my protruding nose was her large chest, the rounded indentations that descend from the nose to the sides of the mouth were her rounded thighs, and my brow was her wavy braid. I merely emphasized the lines with a makeup pencil and added the missing parts: legs, arms and small face in profile. The moment I started to make faces the small figure came alive. She jumped and swayed. She made a belt for herself from animal teeth when I bit my lip [...] after Eve ate from the apple and realized that she was naked, I placed a small fig leaf on the tip of my finger, placed it against my lips and whispered shhh... (ISRAEL and NELKEN, 2009, p. 134).

This methodology, based upon the principle of "pre design," recalls the idea of "pre staging." Peter Brook claimed in his book, *The Empty*

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esg_STUnhag

Space, (1968, p. 101-2, 123) that the director/subject/designer relations determine pre-conception of a theatrical process: “Rehearsal, form and content have to be examined sometimes together, sometimes separately. Sometimes an exploration of the form can suddenly open us up to the meaning that dictated the form...”

Transparency of space and with it the exposure of the puppeteer and the technic of manipulation have led to the realization that space is also a material, and that it is possible to design it and use it just like all other stage elements. The dramatic action in contemporary puppet theater requires a turn from the subject to the object, namely towards formal relations between space, form, material, light, projected images and shadows. In this there is a bold statement regarding the material and formal dimensions of existence: Man, the object, and space are equal and can, accordingly, confront each other, and constitute material no less dramatic than the written script.

Also the space of the puppet theater cannot simply be perceived as having only a visual or mimetic function. Space can be manipulated. The possible means for utilizing space are limitless, they are a byproduct of the style and the technological means employed within a theatrical company. Examples of unusual employment of space can be seen in the work of the French Compagnie Céalís. Through the combination of technics borrowed from industrial design, architecture and Puppet Theater, they *de facto* activate the space. They tie themselves to a chair, lintel, or the floor and cause the entire space of the stage to move as a result of their body movements.

According to these rules, anything – raw or fabricated material, a functional or abstract object – is a puppet. Even the stage space or scenery is a puppet, as in the instance of the play *Motel* by Van Italie, so long as it is possible to activate and animate it.

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