

Puppetry and acting: a reflection¹

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Abstract: This article is reflection on the actor puppeteer's performance: the act of performing and the methods and processes an actor-puppeteer must develop when manipulating in full-view of an audience.

Keywords: Performance. Puppet. Techniques. Artistic approaches.

*Within ourselves, there is another, if not many others.*²
Christian Chabaud

*The puppet's possibilities are infinite: it is a game between our many selves, a tension between the many facets a performer carries deep inside and can express simultaneously.*³
Christian Chabaud

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² C. Chabaud. Bref glossaire marionnettique. In: *Cassandra* n°69 “Je hais les marionnettes”, Horschamp, spring 2007, p. 19. Christian Chabaud quotes Rimbaud with a wry sense of humour: “(Rimbaud), a poet born in Charleville-Mézières, is a puppeteer at heart for having written: ‘I is another.’ (2007, p.19).

³ M. Girard-Laterre, L’objet et l’acteur au corps à corps; une enveloppe corporelle commune dans la pratique d’Ilka Schönbein, in AGÔN, Revue des arts de la scène: <http://agon.ens-lyon.fr/index.php?id=2066> – tocto1n3

This article is about the puppeteer as performer, and what this form of theatre can contribute to the development of an actor's skill. It's about acting with a puppet, as seen through the lens of an actor-puppeteer, stage director, and educator. It is not my intention here to oppose or compare how actors and puppeteers approach a performance, but rather to reflect on the act of performing, and the methods and processes an actor-puppeteer must develop when manipulating in full-view of an audience. I use the term actor-puppeteer here because I believe the work of a puppeteer involves, in part, acting skills. The lack of documentation on the subject has prompted me to experiment with and develop various ideas and expertise. And thanks to over thirty years as an educator, I have developed an approach to acting with puppets based on my personal experience, my many encounters with puppetry artists from around the world, and on a many years of reflection fuelled by my endless curiosity. I have often wondered what kind of acting techniques for actors could be applied to puppeteers.

To quote Henryk Jurkowski from his book *Métamorphoses. La marionnette au XX^e siècle*:

The entirety of Stanislavski's system cannot be applied to puppet theatre, but that does not necessarily mean we cannot use certain elements, particularly those relating to working from the internal monologue as well as the external physicality. A puppeteer must keep in mind Stanislavski premise of naïve faith. The puppeteer must remain a child; he must believe the wonderful and not lose his talent for play. Only the naïve faith in the "given circumstances" from which all theatre originates, can bring about the miracle of theatre (JURKOWSKI, 2008, p. 46). [Our translation]

In my work as an artist and educator, I have allowed myself to be influenced by many approaches. My initial motivation was to transmit my passion for this art. Then I felt the need to develop and convey techniques and approaches that were for the most part unheard of in our Canadian artistic practice and training.

The Unique Characteristics of the Puppet

What does the puppeteer transfer to his character besides the actions

imposed by the stage direction? What are the possible relationships between puppet and puppeteer? What is the nature of the distancing effect when performing with a puppet? These fundamental issues, constantly discussed in my teaching of puppetry performance, add to my reflections on a puppet's unique characteristics, and therefore on what sets it apart from a human being. I am also interested in what I call "the illusion of real life". As we know, "the puppet allows dreams to take shape, to be manifest externally" (BENSKY, 1971, p. 47). [Our translation] The puppet is never troubled emotionally and can perform actions that are impossible for an actor. This, of course, is made possible thanks to the audience's willingness to adhere to the theatrical illusion and to believe in the puppet's existence, from the very beginning. Of course, the puppeteer's manipulation plays an important part in consolidating the illusion. With this in mind, the puppeteer can imagine and create circumstances and situations that allow his character to defy the laws of gravity, split its body into several parts, even be dismembered, or if the dramaturgy requires it to do so, produce a duplicate of itself, or make us believe in its physical death.

As a young puppeteer in Paris, I understood and experienced, for the first time, the "phenomenon in which an actor or a creator, using the diverse techniques associated with his art, fashions a certain reality that he tends to either imitate or transform and transpose; he garners the audience's support by communicating feelings that resonate as if they were real" (BENSKY, 1971, p. 47). [Our translation] Therefore, creating, and producing an illusion. Back in 1978, during the World Festival of Puppet Theatres in Charleville-Mezieres, the Drak Puppet Theatre of Prague performed one of the many tales of Russian folk hero Petrushka. Distracted after his engagement to his fiancée is broken off, Petrushka decides to hang himself. And he does just that! In complete silence, his glove puppet body dangles eerily from a hemp rope. The audience, myself included, is stunned, believing in the irreparable damage of this action. At that moment, I understand that puppeteers, thanks to their talent, their technical abilities, and how they project life and meaning into the characters they handle, can make us believe in the impossible.

What Does the Puppeteer Convey to His Puppet?

A puppeteer breathes life into a puppet; animates and "manipulates it" (gives it movement, and a soul). These philosophical musings admit-

tedly correspond to a certain truth, since as soon as the puppeteer gives movement and intention to the puppet, he gives it a semblance of life. In a more pragmatic way, interpreting a character requires that a puppeteer convey rational thought to his puppet. This rational thought makes it possible that the puppet's gaze on something or someone, for example, isn't just an empty, technical gaze, but an active observation filled with understanding, emotion and life experience. This in no way implies that the puppet is endowed with psychological rationale, but rather that its actions are the result of a thought process. Thoughts conveyed to a puppet are directly related to the character's dramaturgy. And when the character is true to itself in a given dramatic situation, the performance is believable: actions, emotions, movement, gestures, and rhythm are realistic. The same applies to the character's intentions that motivate its actions: what is it looking for, in a given situation?

The actor-puppeteer's role is, in part, to make the puppet's thoughts tangible (visible). This process is similar to the acting strategy whereby an actor creates and builds a character by imagining its interior monologue. This is where part of the artist-puppeteer's work lies. This is also what I call the puppet's interiority.

The manipulator does not identify with his character; he distances himself from it. The actor who projects himself into a puppet character must first externalize the emotions, physical attitudes, and feelings of an other, external being, through the puppet's body. For an actor, this is a great role-building exercise.

Distancing Effect

The **distancing effect** is a theatre concept initially related to the dramaturgy of Bertolt Brecht. It is designed to distance the actor from any emotional involvement in his character. It creates a sense of unsettling strangeness by using various distancing techniques such as addressing the audience directly, performing in the middle of the audience, using epic fables, making direct references to social issues, using dreams, changing the set in front of the audience, etc. These techniques aim to disrupt the spectator's passive and linear perception in order to break his tacit belief in the illusion (PAVIS, 2002, p. 119). [Our translation]

The audience must confront the illusion head-on, just as they would in puppet theatre. But the technical aspects of full-view manipulation must first be mastered. This can be achieved by establishing a certain physical distance from the puppet in order to position the actor-puppeteer as observer while still being intimately involved in the character's circumstance: the puppeteer does not embody a character; he simply shows it while keeping his distance.

Figurative and Fictional Performance

Francine Alepin is a Montréal-based mime and professor, and a colleague of mine at the *École supérieure de théâtre*. Together, we have developed and given many performance classes and drawn a relevant parallel between figurative and fictional performance. This is one of the theatrical notions we worked with when exploring characterization with our students. Figurative performance is associated with pantomime, demonstration, anecdotal references, illustration, exteriority, doing rather than saying, and with behaviour composition. When performing figuratively, the artist aims to either imitate reality, or convey it as accurately as possible.

Fictional performance is associated with suggestion and evocation, symbolism and metaphor, with the abstract and the invisible (emotion/thought dualism). It plays with notions of interiority, of actually experiencing a character's emotional circumstance, not simply showing it. It directs the performance toward a more symbolic or metaphoric representation of reality.

The puppeteer's paradox lies in the tension created by trying to be realistic with a doll, which, because of its very structure and aesthetic bias, immediately transposes this realism into signs and symbols. It also lies in the fact that the puppeteer must be 'accurate' in order to breathe life into the character, and in the necessary stylization required for a doll to unreservedly turn copied gestures into suggestive gestures (BENSKY, 1971, p. 82). [Our translation]

We created many exercises designed to challenge students' understanding of figurative and fictional performance. In one of these exercises, we ask them to perform a death scene. First, the puppet must die figuratively, and then in a more poetic way. Or we might ask them to create a scene where the character must get out of an awkward situation,

either with a figurative or a fictional, metaphoric approach. These exercises enable the puppeteers to consciously choose how they will build their character and secure its credibility. As we all know, imagination is an actor's fundamental skill. And the same goes for puppeteers. "This ability to develop new concepts and images, and come up with creative solutions to problems (THIBAUDET, 1936, p. 148). [Our translation] Transfiguring reality and drawing on poetic evocation are essential elements of puppet theatre dramaturgy and of the puppeteer's performance.

Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy is at the very heart of every puppeteer's training. It is also an essential part of their work as performers. Dramaturgy can be defined as "composing a story, written or otherwise, in a manner that can be performed on stage" (BENSKY, 1971, p. 47). [Our translation] We must first challenge the performer's relationship to the dramaturgy precisely because being an actor or a puppeteer does not automatically make one a dramaturge.

The importance of telling and building a story, whatever the choice of creative form, is at the heart of theatrical training concerns. And, issues of coherence and meaning with regard to artistic choices are inherently similar to those associated with directing. A scenography's meaning (conveyed through the choice of materials, shapes, and colours) as well as its connection with the text, the audience, and even the puppeteer's body and stage presence, are some of the basic issues that must be examined when creating a show. The same applies to performing with a puppet. A puppet's attitude, rhythm, actions, and gestures are part of the process of building a character and its own dramaturgy. Action and materials are an essential part of puppet theatre. The dramaturgy often emerges during rehearsal and from the various re-writes as the story evolves, an image being quickly replaced by another. Sometimes there are gestures that express more than words. A puppet *is* motion/movement, and the challenge is often in determining how to add the images and the words in parallel. Technical choices are also critical. Beyond aesthetic considerations, from the outset, a puppet's manipulation technique, its scale and materials influence stage direction and dramaturgy. However, the basics of performing with puppets remain the same. The actor-puppeteers are themselves the dramaturges. During their training, they must continuously examine the relationship between "form" and "content".

The Bodies of the Actor and the Puppet

Acting techniques provide good tools and methods for developing a puppet character that, by definition, embodies the distancing effect.

For every character we perform, beyond the specific gestures we use to define its personality and its feelings, there is a fundamental attitude, a posture that must unequivocally define it. It is therefore important to find this basic attitude, whether serious, light-hearted, composed, heavy, flippant, or laid-back. You must find the line that will give the character substance (BENSKY, 1971, p. 82). [Our translation]

As a rule, most manipulators – whether actors, scenographers or dancers – struggle to master a body that is not their own; a body with its unique weight, construction materials, size, articulations, body parts and gaze. There are many questions that arise when considering the puppeteer’s role as he performs with a puppet: How to position his body in relation to the puppet and the audience? What rhythm to adopt with regard to the puppets’ rhythm? How to accompany the puppet as it moves across the stage? Where should the puppeteer look? Are they each other’s double? Could they’re relationship be symbiotic? Or, maybe one simply exists only to serve the other? Claire Heggen, from the *Théâtre du Mouvement* in Paris, also offers a few questions on the subject: “What does the object teach me? What does it make me do? What can I do with it? What can we do together? Who is manipulating whom? For what purpose? And for whom?”⁴.

The Relationship Between Actor-Puppeteer and Puppet: From Subservience to Domination

In order to foster puppetry students’ awareness of the relationship between the actor-puppeteer and the puppet, I developed a simple and pragmatic training chart that I call “performance levels”. This chart facilitates dialogue between student and teacher, and helps students identify, chose and fine-tune their stage presence. It also helps them better understand what they bring to the stage. This chart is broken down as follows:

Performance level 0: There is no tangible interaction between the manipulator and the puppet. The manipulator is hidden from view.

⁴ *A la croisée du corps et de l’objet: un dialogue théâtral.* Exerpt from a workshop document. Claire Heggen, Théâtre du Mouvement, Paris.

Performance level 1: There is no tangible interaction between the manipulator and the puppet. However, the audience can see the manipulator. The manipulator keeps an emotional distance from the puppet. The puppeteer adjusts his stage presence according to the relationship he wishes to develop with the puppet. This is what is called a neutral attitude, when the manipulator consciously disappears behind his character in order to direct the audience's attention to the puppet, its actions, emotions, and presence. I prefer to use the term "jeu de l'absence" (absentee performance), the manipulator effectively disappearing, disengaging from the performance. In Japan, puppeteers dress in black, a colour they associate with emptiness and nothingness.

Performance level 2: There is a tangible interaction between the manipulator and the puppet. The puppeteer engages physically in order to breathe life into the object. He becomes the object-character; all at once manipulator, character and actor.

Performance level 3: Interaction between the manipulator and the puppet is intensified. The actor-puppeteer not only brings the object to life, he also reacts and responds to its emotions. He is all at once manipulator, actor and character.

Parallel performance level 1: Part of the puppeteer's body becomes the object.

Parallel performance level 2: Manipulators interact with each other.

Mastering Acting Technique with a Puppet

Mastering acting technique with a puppet requires more than simply manipulating a puppet while performing sounds and movements that support the character's role: the actor-puppeteer must first master full-view manipulation techniques and develop a certain physical distance with the puppet in order to position himself as an observer, while at the same time being emotionally involved with the puppet's character. Many aspects of puppeteer's performance must be practiced as if he were playing a musical instrument, demanding both technical skill and effort to discern subtle nuances. For example, the puppeteer must work on whether to use his gaze to direct the audience's attention from the puppet to himself or elsewhere. Developing ease and fluidity of gestures and action, coordinating the puppets' sounds and movements, and maintaining a composed stage presence must also be part of a puppeteer's practice routine. Gestures and

sounds intermingle as if the puppet is painting the performance space with sound. I believe that editing techniques, among others, can serve to foster a more precise and sober performance. The term is used here in its cinematographic sense, where images and gestures are broken down into very specific elements to create a series of coherent dramatic or visual scenes. And, finally, all the mechanical and technical exercises are also essential to mastering acting technique with a puppet: the puppet's gait, step and gesture coordination; joint mobility; repetitive actions; various gazes and looks; fluid hand changes; and sound and movement coordination.

Acting with a Puppet

The puppet and its various training requirements offer an extraordinary learning experience to actors who wish to hone their skills. Performing with a puppet helps artists develop the ability to act as a puppet's mirror or clone. It is a tangible demonstration of distancing technique. It improves concentration, mastery of how and where to direct the puppet's gaze, and awareness of the various degrees of stage presence. The puppeteer offers a window into his character's emotions and inner thoughts. Actors, for their part, have the opportunity to experience a creative technique that encourages them to further define the gestures, rhythm, and physical attitudes that are needed to promote the ongoing development of their character, from one moment to the next and from one scene to the next. An actor must also measure the effectiveness of his vocal presence and energy. He learns to take on and abandon a character, that is to say, to perform another's interiority with conviction, without any narcissistic implications.

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