

## Puppet knowledge and the life of the puppeteer

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**Abstract:** How does one learn to become a puppeteer in a time when traditional forms seem outmoded, and new forms lack tradition? John Bell explores his own learning experiences with Peter Schumann's American troupe Bread & Puppet Theater, which combines avant-garde methods of invention with a strong respect for tradition, and explains how he combines both approaches in his own teaching, which wants to incorporate extensive knowledge of past practices of puppetry with an open approach to inventing new techniques with old and new forms of performing objects.

**Keywords:** Puppetry. Education. Bread & Puppet Theater. Performing Objects.

One always takes one's own experience as a marker of knowledge and a model for how things could (or should not be) done, and my own experiences as a puppeteer have in this way marked my own efforts to pass on knowledge of the form. Modern puppetry is now a network of vastly different techniques and approaches, ranging from centuries-old traditions of rod, shadow, hand, and marionette theater around the world, to object-oriented community rituals not necessarily defined as puppetry, and to the myriad forms of puppet, mask, and object performance influenced and defined by the possibilities of new technologies created in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

I came to puppetry in the early 1970s when, as a student fascinated

by the worlds of acting, drama, and theater, I saw Peter Schumann's Bread & Puppet Theater perform at our college in the state of Vermont. In my theater classes I had been learning the traditional western approach to theater as the union of distinct and discrete skills: the very separate crafts of playwriting, directing, acting, set design, stage management, costume design, and lighting, all with hardly any overlap. If you were an actor (like I wanted to be), you were not a director, nor a costume designer (like some of my friends), nor a set designer (like some of my other friends). This careful separation of trades wants to reflect the world of commercial theater, and at my College it was accompanied by another strongly held American conviction: that politics and art mixed together only to the detriment of each. Cultural responses to the Vietnam War then raging were already contradicting U.S. ideologies about art and politics, and Bread & Puppet Theater—perhaps the most eloquent theatrical response to the war in the U.S.—also shattered ideologies about the nature of theater as a combination of very separate crafts.

### **Different Visions of Theater and Training**

Bread & Puppet Theater, which I joined after graduating, immediately presented me with a very different vision of theater: a world of puppets of all kinds and sizes, masks, performing objects; various forms of music; texts in the form of poetry, drama, journalism, and theory; and performance styles including acting, recitation, stilt dancing, circus, narration, and chorus work in addition to puppet manipulation; elements of performance that could be combined in endlessly innovative ways to create new versions of puppet theater. To help organize all these elements, Peter Schumann has adopted a particularly modernist approach to directing, one that depends upon a strong understanding of the history of theater and performance in global contexts as the basis for creating new work.<sup>1</sup>

Let me explain. It seems to me that there are two strong strains of puppet theater training: a) the classic method of learning a highly defined

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<sup>1</sup> I have explained some of Peter Schumann's teaching/working methods in "Travailler et grandir avec le Bread and Puppet (Working and Growing with Bread and Puppet)," *Passeurs et complices (Passing it On)*, edited by Lucile Bodson, Margareta Niculescu, and Patrick Pezin. Montpellier: L'entretemps, 2009; 158-165.

and complete technique from an older master; and b) the modernist method of inventing new techniques that are technically free from, but aesthetically indebted to, a knowledge of classic forms. While an apprentice in the classical tradition in different parts of the world could (and still can) learn Punch and Judy or Mamulengo hand puppetry, Xingu ritual performance, Javanese *wayang kulit*, Bambara puppetry of Mali, or Chinese shadow theater as codified forms with specific rules of design and performance, an apprentice in the modernist tradition must learn how to create new forms of puppetry from the materials and influences around her or him. The quality of that modernist work is necessarily dependent upon a knowledge and understanding of what has gone on before. Good modernist work (in my experience...) relies on a solid understanding of the dramatic territories and aesthetic genres of previous work, which are the precedents, tools, and raw materials of the new work we make.

My work at Bread & Puppet Theater involved a whole new world of performance completely unfamiliar to me, areas of theater that my college education in western drama and acting had never mentioned. Hand puppets, giant puppets, ritual performance, Sicilian marionette theater, Noh drama, Chinese opera, *wayang kulit*, Kasperl and Punch and Judy, cantastoria and *bänkelsang*, Dada and Expressionist performance, Brecht and Piscator, Mexican modernist puppetry, Fluxus, New York City *Happenings*—these were all respected precedents to our own work in the Bread & Puppet Theater, but subjects not taught in the schools I attended (except for limited and wary explorations of Brecht).

By the time I began working with Peter Schumann and his colleagues in 1973, he had arrived at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont fresh from the intensity of the New York City performance world of the 1960s. Exposed to and nourished by his experiences with the Living Theater and Merce Cunningham's dance company, Schumann had gravitated to the major incubator of Sixties experimentation, Judson Church, where visual artists, dancers, musicians, and poets were defining an American modernist approach to performance.<sup>2</sup> This approach drew on European avant-garde precedents (George Maciunas, for example, the founder of

<sup>2</sup> See Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*. Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 1993.

downtown New York's Fluxus movement, saw himself directly connected to the European avant-garde), but infused them with American notions of a democratic openness, endless possibility, and a happy interest in new technologies. Schumann's particular version of this New York Sixties Modernism involved three important elements: an embrace of the lowly and ridiculous world of "puppet theater"; the idea that great art and performance could also be political; and a desire to connect with audiences and participants not only amid the rarefied atmosphere of avant-garde circles, but also on the street.

**Re-inventing Influences** - Peter Schumann's approach (like that of any teacher for their students) has strongly influenced my own methods of teaching, and my own sense of what can work in contemporary puppet theater. During the decade I spent as a full-time member of the Bread & Puppet company, a phrase we would routinely hear from our director, especially when we were embarking on the exciting and difficult process of creating a new show, was "it hasn't been invented yet." What Schumann meant by this, I realized, was that it doesn't make sense for contemporary performance to assume a particular technique as fixed or sacrosanct. Why should we try to emulate or copy traditional European marionette theater, Balinese *topeng* mask performance, or Chinese shadow theater? As 21<sup>st</sup>-century puppeteers, we do not have an innate cultural connection to those forms, and most of us were not born into them (this is particularly true in the United States, which, unlike Europe, lacks cultural and geographic links to western national puppet traditions).

What does such an approach mean for the training of puppeteers? For me, a knowledge of past practices, as well as a strong sense of current work, is a necessary background for making strong new puppet shows for today. Without a knowledge of the practices of puppetry, our work suffers from a lack of context, a lack of understanding, an ignorance of the possibilities of the form.

One of the first shows I helped create at Bread & Puppet (with Paul Zaloom and Katharina Balke, in 1973) was *The Golden Shoe*. This was a rod marionette show in a proscenium stage, based on an absurd or Dadaist text by Peter Schumann, about a normal everyday man, with a wife and an everyday home and television, who transforms into a monstrous destructive force (in the form of a yellow spray-painted rubber boot) that

rampages around everyday modern life. A kind of *Ubu Roi* for 1970s America. The puppets were small-scale cellastic Bread & Puppet figures that we manipulated with a simple, single wire rod, found objects (like a piece cloth for a Ghost) also manipulated by a single rod or string, an old empty shell of a television set for news reports, and a baby doll with a grotesque head as the television announcer. Schumann's inspirations, I later realized, were the simplicity of epic Sicilian *opera dei pupi* rod marionettes, which he had seen performed by the Manteo family, in New York City; the absurd outrageousness of Dada performance; and the found-object sensibilities of happenings and performance art he had witnessed in New York City. Schumann had considered all these striking object performance forms, allowed himself to be influenced by them, and with us neophyte puppeteers had come up with an extravagant and outlandish rough puppet show that nonetheless connected with mid-1970s counterculture audiences in central Vermont. Above all, Schumann did not want to copy the forms of marionette theater that to him typified U.S. puppet festivals: multi-stringed, fine and delicate figures whose cautious and precise movements were used to tell innocuous fairy tales and children's stories. The aggressive, thrilling, rough-and-tumble epic theater of popular Sicilian puppetry had a far greater effect on him, which he wanted to re-present, re-invent in some fashion. Without Schumann's knowledge of Sicilian puppetry and earlier avant-garde performance, a show like *The Golden Shoe* would have been impossible to conceive of and create.



Bread & Puppet Theater's *Joan of Arc* (John Bell with long nose puppet). Photo courtesy of Bread & Puppet Theater.

Schumann had equally been exposed to Beijing opera in popular theaters he had discovered in New York City's Chinatown; and many of his writer friends in the city had become fascinated by Japanese Noh Theater and that drama's slow, deliberate pacing and minimal plots. He was also aware of Japanese Bunraku Theater as well. A sense of all these elements did not lead Schumann to make Bread & Puppet shows in direct imitation of any of these forms, but it did inform his performance aesthetics. In such shows as *That Simple Light May Rise Out of Complicated Darkness*, *Joan of Arc*, *White Horse Butcher*, or the many *Gray Lady Cantatas*, the Bread & Puppet company wore simple black costumes with hoods and veils covering the entire body, in the manner of Bunraku performers; and operated life-size, giant, or miniature puppets, often in full view of the audience. Our movements were often slow—very slow!—and the plays used little or no language: gesture, choreography, and puppet movement instead, and texts presented on signs instead of by voices. All of this was new and odd to me (with my college background in Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Ibsen), but the more I worked with the Bread & Puppet company, the more I realized that what we were doing did not come independently out of the blue into our director's head, but instead reflected (but did not, importantly, directly imitate) strong performance traditions of cultures quite different from those championed in our western-oriented United States.

In the Bread & Puppet Theater there is one tradition we are not ashamed to emulate as faithfully as possible: Punch and Judy. Bread & Puppet members George Konnoff, Amy Trompetter, Paul Zaloom, Jason Norris and Adam Cook, Justin Lander and Rose Friedman, Damiano Giambelli (the Milano-based puppeteer who actually connected more with Pulcinella) and even myself and my wife Trudi Cohen, all at one time or another made and performed Punch and Judy shows, which we loved because of their rough and direct puppetry; the extravagance of their sculptural design; the anarchism and political satire of their dramaturgy, and their heritage in popular street performance. These were all things we aspired to, and they were quite different from the respectable, refined, children's theater that we felt defined contemporary U.S. puppetry. By performing Punch and Judy we felt we were connecting to the essence of puppetry as community ritual street performance, and we delighted in a connoisseurship of that form's witty dialogue, choreographed dances and fights, and such venerable prop tricks as the hangman's noose.

**Learning and Teaching About Puppet Theater** - My own sense of puppet history opened up on tour with Bread & Puppet across the United States, in the Caribbean and South America, in Western and Eastern Europe, and North Africa in the 1970s and 80s. Bread & Puppet was exceedingly popular at that time, and we could support ourselves by touring, especially to Western Europe, which at the time invested heavily in the performing arts. In every place we went, it was possible to get a sense of theater traditions: giant puppets in Catalunya; traditional rod marionettes in Brussels and Liège; carnival in Basel, Switzerland; an array of rich traditions in Italy; the state-sponsored municipal companies in communist Poland; the original Punch and Judy in London; and often avant-garde innovations on traditional European forms in France and Germany.

It is such an exposure to the variety of puppet traditions that I would wish to convey to students in my puppet history, theory, and practice classes. After my decade with Peter Schumann's company I studied theater history and puppet-theater history at Columbia University (whose first professor of theater, Brander Matthews, had, coincidentally, been fascinated with puppets in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century), and afterwards found myself teaching theater history classes and puppet workshops, in universities focused primarily on actors' theater and performance, not puppetry. It is only recently, at the University of Connecticut, that I discovered the possibility of teaching practice, history, and theory in the same place.

When I teach puppetry, I think my students (or workshop participants) should engage in the following ideas:

- That we need to know very well the history of our art form in order to make new art.
- That we are part of a continuum of artists upon whose shoulders we stand.
- That the inventions of our predecessors need not be re-invented or repeated, but instead serve as examples of what we can ourselves invent.
- That 21<sup>st</sup>-century puppetry need not imitate classic forms, but draw from them and be inspired by them to create new works whose solidity and sureness relies on an understanding of what made previous puppet shows work.

In practice, I try to encourage my students to invent new puppets, new movements, and new puppet productions with the following in mind:

- That we need to understand what the puppet wants to do, based on its design, its structure, and the way the object determines what actions with it are possible.

- That we need to approach the creation of a puppet show from two directions: first, in the spirit of pure play (the way children play with toys), freely trying out what the puppets can do with no specific object in mind; and second, using the other side of our brain, trying to understand how what we have found from the puppets themselves can be incorporated into the story we want to tell.

- That puppet shows are, above all else, a form of dance.

- That puppet shows can include texts, objects, images, and music, but need not at all depend upon dialogue or the Aristotelian dramatic structures we in the West are taught to revere as normative.

- That the fulfillment of the possibilities of puppetry is in shows that convey strongly held ideas that connect in fundamental ways to the communities in which we live.

- That puppetry can happen in any kind of performance space: big or small, indoors or out, private room or public space, legitimate theater or city street.

- That the success of puppetry involves accessing and utilizing the uncanny and ineffable “magic” qualities of puppetry, its ability to connect, confuse, clarify, and uplift those who see it.



University of Connecticut  
Puppet Arts Program  
Students improvising with  
rod marionettes in John  
Bell's Rod Puppet class in  
2015. Photo by John Bell.

**Challenges** - The challenges I face as a teacher very often involve the general lack of knowledge about puppetry. We know that in most societies puppetry is not valued as an art form with a tradition as noble and as long as those of the visual arts, music, drama, and literature. In consequence, popular conceptions of puppetry tend to be dramatically limited. When I ask students what puppet performances they have seen, most will mention sock puppets or the *Muppets of Sesame Street*, but not much more. They do not consider their experience with the wide world of performing objects, special effects, film animation, television advertising, theme park entertainments, sports mascots, robots, mechanical dinosaurs and other performing technologies, digital puppets and motion capture, the inflatable puppets of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, *The Lion King*, and other object-based aspects of contemporary American culture to be at all connected to, or representative of the puppet arts. Although, like most people today, they have been exposed to various forms of puppet and object performance throughout their lives, they have not been encouraged to think about the dynamics and history of material performance. In these contexts, helping students understand the global range and varieties of puppet and object performance feels like a real service, especially for students expressly interested in the art of performing with things as well as humans.

A related challenge is the power of modern ideologies that define puppet theater as inconsequential entertainment. As I have attempted to explain elsewhere<sup>3</sup>, the deep power of object performance to connect living humans to the non-living world and to other humans, which has always formed the basis of religion and ritual, was tamed and confined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to pertain to the worlds of children. Especially in the United States, the ability of puppets and objects to interpret and re-present the most important ideas, issues, and emotions of our time is a possibility we can sense but shy away from. It is easier and safer, even five decades after the emergence of "serious" puppetry in the U.S. in the work of Peter Schumann and others, to see the functions of the form limited to entertainment and teaching tools for children and comic amusement

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<sup>3</sup> See John Bell, "Playing with the Eternal Uncanny: the Persistent Life of Lifeless Objects," *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, edited by Dassia Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell. New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 43-52.

for adults. A continual challenge is to coax students to explore the older and deeper possibilities of puppetry as an essential art.

However, when we see a remarkable puppet performance, we can feel and perhaps even understand how the play with objects enables deep human connections, emotions, and thoughts. The challenge of 21<sup>st</sup>-century puppet theater is to re-invent puppetry's strengths, by understanding its older forms and contexts as a network of global traditions and using that understanding to discover and re-invent new methods.