

## Alternative Puppet ‘Bodies’

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I understand that this issue of *Móin-Móin* is dedicated to discussion of the puppet in collaboration with other art forms, or within interdisciplinary work. My intention, therefore, within this article, is to discuss the loss or alteration of the puppet *body* within contemporary puppet theatre: the blurring of boundaries within cross-disciplinary work has developed to such an extent that the puppet itself has frequently become hard to locate within work which designates itself as ‘puppet theatre’; instead, the puppet body has been replaced by a multiply articulated body created from different sources, which generates its own meaning. By this I mean that the unified puppet figure has been replaced in many cases by shadows, projections and multimedia technology; by objects; by matter; and by animated scenic action which creates its own perception of a puppet ‘body’.

Approximately fifteen years ago in the UK there was a move towards interdisciplinarity in puppet theatre; recommendations were made by arts funding organisations that, in order to increase its status and subsequently funding and popular perception, puppetry needed to collaborate extensively with professionals from other art forms including writing, design, music and performance to develop itself as an art form and to increase its profile within adult theatre. This, of course, was part of an international movement loosely located within postmodernism, where discrete and separate performance modes were dissolved to create new meanings of theatre, where boundaries were blurred and where the notions of character, narrative and plot were challenged by intertextuality and collage. Sectors of the puppet theatre community in the UK, however, took up the gauntlet, commissioning professionals from a wide range of artistic practices to develop collaboration and experimentation. In terms of funding and recognition, this was partially successful in that puppetry in the UK now enjoys a significantly improved status and audience and is no longer pigeonholed into children’s entertainment. An offshoot of this process, however, has been that puppetry is seen less as the realm of the specialist puppeteer, and more as an extra skill within the actor’s CV, and what is seen as puppetry within live performance is more loosely defined than ever. A further

development has taken place which is that the term puppet theatre, previously seen as reductionist in some way to serious contenders within the adult theatre world, is now seen as sexy and contemporary, leading to the inclusion of the word puppetry within shows which have little to do with simulated human forms. It seems, therefore, that the concept of the term 'puppet theatre' has widened to such an extent that the notion of interdisciplinarity is now inherent within it. Henryk Jurkowski suggested in his book *Metamorphosis* that the art of puppetry was possibly making itself obsolete through its application within live drama and its connection with other art forms, and certainly the puppet body itself has become different.

I have just returned from a festival of student puppet theatre in Bialystok, where the presence of puppet figures was scant; with a few exceptions, most of the shows presented at the festival were without puppet figures. These were replaced by the absolutely central place of the actor among things and objects, in some cases matter, and in some cases shadows. My musings therefore developed a line of my own thinking connected to the loss of the puppet body within puppet theatre. It is increasingly the case, particularly within adult work, that the term 'puppetry' is seen as embracing performance which goes beyond the animation of puppet figures, but as an *approach* to performance which may include human bodies, multi-media projection and interaction, and the animation of scenography, matter and other scenic elements. This approach is rooted in animation and transformation; and in the concept of animism. Interdisciplinarity within puppet theatre seems now, therefore, to be a given within contemporary theatre, and theatre which only uses the animation of puppet figures is often seen as old-fashioned or traditional. The separation of elements and forms is not clear-cut.

The article will discuss two facets of this contemporary interdisciplinarity: firstly, this absence of puppet bodies as a return to animism, where the human is seen as one part among many live elements; and secondly, as part of a contemporary perspective of the human body, and, by extension, the puppet body, where bodies are designed and temporary canvases for the projection of contemporary concerns about identity.

Animism is a term commonly applied to puppet theatre: the notion that everything somehow has life is easily transferred to the processes of puppet theatre, which is essentially about suggesting life within inanimate material. Until relatively recently, however, animism has been seen, in the light of scientific and technological progress, as a whimsical and primitive belief system which is played with in puppet theatre rather than seriously suggested as a functioning and cogent belief system. However, advances in those same technologies and medical research, coupled with concerns about environmental threats to the

planet, have led to a greater understanding of the world as an eco-system in which humans play only a part. The human, therefore, previously seen as a dominant and decisive force within world movements, has become reduced to part of a system within which she interacts, but does not dominate. This greater ecosystem is seen as a constant flow of interactions, processes and reactions between organic and inorganic matter, in the interrelationship between live and inanimate beings.

Within performance, over the last ten years, the puppeteer-actor has increasingly taken centre stage, partly as a result of the increase of the visible puppeteer as opposed to the hidden puppeteer within a booth or behind a playboard. With this rise in the visible puppeteer, meaning in puppetry performance has become connected to the idea of creation and transformation on stage rather than the fiction of the puppets as characters. Nowadays, it is more common to see puppets created on stage by the puppeteer from matter, objects or projections. The important aspect to note about this, however, is not that of the puppeteer as animator, but that of the puppeteer as one of many animated bodies; indeed, the puppeteer, rather than appearing in charge, often seems to be dominated and at the mercy of the animated bodies around her/him. Examples of this can be seen in the work of UK-based companies *Indefinite Articles and Improbable Theatre*. *Indefinite Articles* is a company run by Steve Tiplady and Sally Brown; it specialises in work for young children using objects and matter to create imagery and storytelling which suggests rather than defines. The company's production of *Pinocchio* was created using pieces of wood and objects to suggest characters and movements of the story; a later show, *The Magic Lamp*, used only two overhead projectors, oil, sand and torn shadow images to evoke the journey of the story. There were no previously constructed and defined puppet figures. The company's latest show, *Claytime*, is an interactive show in which the only puppets are pieces of clay which are sculpted, squashed and beaten into shape by the puppeteers in full view of the audience. The creatures made come from suggestions made by the audience. What is important about these shows within a concept of interdisciplinarity, is that there is no or little distinction between the storyteller/puppeteer, and the action created. The puppeteers create the story not from previously constructed puppet figures, but from the elements which surround them. The choice of objects, pieces of wood and elemental matter, also suggests a close relationship between the body of the puppeteer and the 'body' or 'life' of the matter and objects themselves. The overall impression is of a human body surrounded and in interaction with other bodies, or lives.

*Improbable Theatre* work in a similar way, in that the puppets and animated creations they use in their shows are frequently constructed from

raw matter on stage, in view of the audience. The puppets are therefore seen as temporary bodies which can be made and destroyed in a moment, as part of the existing matter around them. *Improbable* works extensively with improvisation, seeking to create theatre in each moment on stage. An early show by *Improbable*, *70 Hill Lane*, used sellotape and objects to narrate the story; improvisation with paper and tape has been a fundamental part of the company's work and progress. Again, in this work, it is the relationship of the human with matter and objects on stage which makes the performance animated and sustains the theatricality of the performance; the audience are complicit in a shared understanding that the theatre is a fiction but no more than the fiction of life itself; matter and objects share an equal space on stage with human bodies, which only form part of the scenic constellation.

At the Bialystok festival, the show presented by the Stuttgart Puppetry School, *Eden Games*, performed by Claudia Sill and Ulrike Kley, was an impressive experimental piece with two characters who vied theatrically with each other during the show for inventiveness of form and shape; one character was attached to a pile of soil or sand (which seemed to be a common feature in the festival) which she dug through to find various body parts which she turned into human shapes through the addition of her hands, or which revealed part of a snake; the other emerged from a huge hairy disc attached to the ceiling which changed shape variously. The show had a very strong, clear visual aesthetic and the themes seemed to be linked to primeval emotive responses, the human's fear of the unknown, and links to earth, gravity and other physical forces. This tendency in contemporary puppet theatre to use matter in place of constructed puppet bodies reflects, I believe, the contemporary concern for humans as part of a living environment, and as beings which continually interact with other forms.

It seems, therefore, that in the increasing use of animated matter and elements, including objects, in place of constructed bodies, contemporary puppetry is seeing a return to notions of animism in performance and a greater awareness of the inherent life in all matter and material. This seems to be, at least in part, connected to a greater environmental awareness and of human dependency on and lack of control over both natural and constructed phenomena, and a sense of the interrelatedness of all life through both micro and macro systems.

The second tendency in contemporary puppet theatre that I will discuss here is a concern with the constructed and hybrid nature of the body; this can clearly be seen as a reference to the increasingly cyborg nature of the human body, and the notion of the body as a canvas onto which humans paint, sculpt, tattoo, add or otherwise embellish their bodies either as statements of identity

or as necessary components to sustain healthy, mobile and viable life, as in organ or joint replacements, electrical impulses to monitor vital bodily functions, transplants, robot parts etc. Again, the traditional puppet body which is suggestive of a unified character within a fiction of performance is disrupted by the concept of bodies constructed from a multitude of elements, including discarded and found objects, parts of human bodies and parts of machines.

Within a theatre where boundaries between modes were clearly defined, puppet theatre essentially involved the presentation of puppet figures representing characters or concepts such as gods, spirits, etc; the idea of character resided in the puppet figure. Within contemporary puppet theatre, however, bodies are made and destroyed in the moment of performance, inviting the audience's complicity into the collective creation. This suggests several interpretations: firstly, that there is a shared awareness of the fiction of the performance and a complicity in the creation of that performance; secondly, that puppet bodies, like human bodies, can be *designed* to suggest whichever aspects of identity the audience/puppeteer would like them to suggest in that particular moment on stage; thirdly, that these bodies are eminently transformable, destructible and temporary; and fourthly, that the understanding and interpretation of character and performance is no longer attributable to the visual aesthetic and action presented by a puppet figure, but by a wider understanding of the relationship between the puppeteer and the puppet; what is done to their bodies, and how they interact. Thus, as mentioned above, puppetry becomes an *approach* to performance, where all elements of the stage space are animated, including the bodies of the human performers; the scenography can become a puppet, temporarily; the legs of the actor in combination with objects, as in the work of Hugo and Ines from Peru; parts of dolls in combination with finely carved wooden puppets, as in work directed by Luis Boy at Norwich Puppet Theatre. The overriding idea here is that there is not one single visual aesthetic, but that puppet bodies are made up of disparate and challenging elements.

That these concepts of the body should take centre stage within the contemporary world is hardly surprising, given current concerns and anxieties within society about the designed and constructed body. The human body has always served as a canvas for representing individual and tribal interests and formations, in clothing, jewellery, tattoos, piercings, etc. Transformations of the body, through plastic and medical surgery, implants, dye etc, have never been so readily available, however, and it is clear that the human body is currently seen as a resource for experimental cultural collisions and negotiations. The puppet body is therefore used to test cultural understandings of the human body and by mixing sand, mud, clay etc with plastic or synthetic body parts and live human bodies, the connection between the live and constructed body

is made increasingly more apparent.

This reconceptualisation of the puppet body is apparent in the work of contemporary artists of note such as Joan Baixas, Robert Wilson, and Rachel Field and Nenagh Watson of the recently dissolved company doo-cot. In much of the work of these practitioners, the puppet is deconstructed through examination of its separate and fragmented body parts; the illusion of the body is lost. The puppet body can be seen as emblematic of mortality, vulnerable and destructible, but linked intrinsically to the world of matter and the longer-lasting memories embedded in things. Within this kind of puppetry, the puppet has lost all traces of itself as character, or as complete thing; the puppet body has become *identification*.

It is this idea of the body as designed and constructed to represent concerns about identity which pervades much contemporary work. Faulty Optic have developed the genre to include manipulation of water, using underwater puppets, and puppets made up of part-body, part-object, as in *Snuffhouse Dustlouse*, where the main character has a sack for legs, and is constantly searching for his parents, whom he finds eventually pickled in his own kitchen. The performer *Marcel.li Antúñez*, though not a puppeteer, has developed performance where his own body is used as part human and part constructed figure to question identity and contemporary political and social concerns through using his body as a canvas to experiment with. One of the shows at the Bialystok puppet festival, *Transitions*, by the company *Yalla*, included scenes where the entire scenography became animated to suggest hostility towards immigration; thus the *marionetisation* of the entire stage has become part of puppetry as an approach. The shadow work of Catalan company *La Cònic/Lacònica* is developed from the projections of images of found objects, as in *Ombres d'Objectes Trobats*, their first show. The objects are found around the streets of Barcelona and its locality, and suggest memories of the city itself, questioning what it means to be Catalan. Another Catalan company, *Playground*, shows the actor-puppeteer surrounded by fragments of used and broken objects which bring him into a direct relationship with his own memories, thus exploring his self-knowledge.

While many of these tendencies have been present within puppet theatre for many years: object theatre and projection of shadows is not new, and puppeteers have always experimented with new means to construct puppets, including matter and objects; I would suggest that from a place of increased interdisciplinarity, the puppet body has changed from a constructed, fictional body representing a character or idea, to a scenic construction of puppetry, where all elements, including actors' bodies, objects, set and all scenic elements are now used as puppets. This includes aspects previously considered

as technical, such as lighting and sound. The contemporary body is clearly a designed body; the puppet body is now the entire stage. This development, as suggested earlier, takes us back to animism and the question of identification of puppeteers themselves: are they total escapists or total realists: escapists because they entertain the idea of life within matter; or realists in considering that in no way can the body be any more alive or important than the other things surrounding it. It can only exist in a relationship with all matter.