

Puppetry research: between worlds

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of contemporary concerns within puppet theatre, including the importance of practice as research, autobiographical work and extensions of rehearsal techniques and processes; interdisciplinary contexts for puppetry, applied puppetry and the widening perspectives of intercultural studies, including the need for more detailed analyses of non-European forms. The article also highlights the role of the UNIMA Research Commission in pursuing the objectives of contemporary puppetry research.

Keywords: Puppetry. Research. Interdisciplinary.

I was privileged to be invited to write something for *Móin-Móin* as President of the UNIMA Research Commission during the period 2016-2020.¹ This is a period in which the Commission is thinking about the priorities to focus on in research terms: which projects we wish to support; the place of puppetry research in both the world of academia and also of practitioners of puppetry (our researchers are often both); how best to support quality research and to ensure that new ideas are fomented, fermented and come to fruition. Puppetry is a radical theatre art form that has a unique capacity to work across borders; to connect the unusual, the offbeat, the quirky and the mainstream; to enable discussion about metaphysics, neuroscience, emotions, anatomy and mechanics; tradition, cultural heritage, politics, narrative, childhood and literacy; song and religion; and almost any field you can imagine. It is a particular fusion of the material and immaterial; of physical presence haunted by ghosts of past and future; of vivid existence in an immediate world and of multiple, communal voices singing collective songs of shared culture and memory. Puppetry straddles worlds, concepts and stages of 'liveness'. It is both obscene and sedate; bounded by form and free from form; vulnerable and eminently powerful. Puppetry is vehemently interdisciplinary, multivocal and intracultural. It gives us great scope to dream, to imagine and to create. We live in a world where the corporate and the commercial dominate; where race, gender, religion and nationhood are once more fiercely contested sites of meaning amongst

¹ For more information about the UNIMA Research Commission see <http://www.unima.org/en/commissions/research/#.WA0I5-ArLFg>

hegemonies of fear and varying states of ‘otherness’. Puppetry – always to some extent ‘othered’ – enables us to disentangle these complex threads of cultural ambivalence and re-examine what it means to be.

It is a privilege to write something about puppetry research for this excellent publication which really addresses important issues within the contemporary world of puppetry and object theatre and makes them available to practitioners, researchers and networks across the world. Móin-Móin is a very important and innovative publication in the world of puppet theatre and I would like to start by praising the editors for their invaluable hard work.

Indeed, it leaves it somewhat tricky to write something significant about the field of puppetry research since the work that is published in Móin-Móin is *always* research in some way: whether it is reporting on particular aspects of performing, creating, directing, training, historical and cultural surveying and collecting of information: all this is research. The term is a slippery one since it encompasses so much; and yet the concept of ‘puppetry research’ is still so new in our academic/artist/networked/information-saturated world. What is it that constitutes research and what makes it worthy to call research? And what is its purpose?

To research means to study in depth, to investigate, to examine, to experiment and, crucially, to seek new meanings and understandings of the material we study. Traditionally, in academic circles, research is understood to be the academic or scientific study of a body of material or knowledge through careful scrutiny of case studies, evidence and data. The detached, scientific gaze which analyses and dissects is that which during the 19th and 20th centuries led to the concept of rigour and detachment in research; the removal of self and subjectivity within the body of knowledge to be scrutinised, leading to objective conclusions which could thus be shared with the wider research community. There is value in the careful evaluation of evidence and in the comparison and analysis of case studies and practices. This model of research, however, as the primary and somehow superior, reliable and tested model, has been questioned for several decades. Artistic work does not always easily succumb to the objectified gaze and theatre work is no exception: artists work with their bodies, themselves, their own dreams, visions and wonderings/wanderings. The artist may take their own subjective experience as material to create landscapes of visionary prophesying; the trade of the puppeteer is often the oneiric, the scatological, memory, despair, the meeting of the physical with the spiritual; how can these aspects of human existence be dissected and analysed without the experience of the subjective and the autobiographical? We should therefore be careful about divorcing puppetry research from the research we do into ourselves, our lives and our own bodies.

The other thing that I would like to comment upon is this idea that puppetry research is recent (which I myself suggest above). When travelling players moved from town to town with their booths and tried and tested out new routines, slapstick and repartee, was this not also research? Research is the trying and testing of new ideas to see which of these work and which have efficacy in the process of performance. It is clear that detailed, rigorous and practical research and experimentation has always been done by puppeteers in the practice of their art. What is newer, perhaps, is the validation of that practical research and the celebration of it as an important part of the development of the art.

I raise these questions and considerations merely to note that when we talk about puppetry 'research' we encompass a wide range of studies and experiments, and need to make place for all of these. It is certainly true that puppetry research has not really been talked about as such for very long: only from the twentieth century did academic studies into puppetry history, semiotics, practice and anthropology begin to emerge. Most prior studies were brief or undeveloped, without serious examination of its mechanisms and processes. It is worth noting also that the colonial history of much of Europe has led to European research being dominant in the field, with most well-known generalist studies of puppet theatre emerging from the privilege of European and North American academia. Undoubtedly there is much to be done to highlight the excellent research into specific modes of puppet theatre in Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Pacific region.

The early twentieth century brought about much experimentation within Europe, particularly within modernism: numerous artists, including Alfred Jarry, Garcia Lorca, Henri Signoret, Maurice Maeterlinck, Aleksandr Blok, Vsevolod Meyerhold and others saw a renewing force within the traditional puppet show and began to conduct experiments into its workings.² Their work has since become part of the oeuvre of puppet theatre history. The remarkable Russian innovator Sergei Obraztsov developed professional research in exploring movement and characterisation in the puppet through a process of training, and his influence on the idea of training for the puppet artist has been important throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.³

Puppetry scholarship in the traditional academic sense also emerged during the

² For further discussion of modernism and puppet theatre, see Segel, Harold B. (1995), *Pinocchio's Progeny*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press

³ Obraztsov's work, some of which is discussed in his work *Obraztsov, Sergei* (1981), *My Profession* (trans D. Bradbury), Moscow: Raduga Publishers, led to the founding of the eponymous theatre in Moscow, the Obraztsov Theatre, which continues to produce new works and to host seminars, debates and meetings concerning the development of Russian and international puppet theatre.

twentieth century, despite one or two earlier publications, including Charles Magnin's *Histoire des Marionnettes en Europe* in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴ Often cited as significant founders of puppetry research, the German scholars Lothar Buschmeyer and Fritz Eichler published studies in the 1930s about the specific characteristics of puppet theatre, differentiating it from other performance modes.⁵ This research was complemented by the work of the group of scholars known as the 'Prague Circle', who also explored modes and categorisation of styles of performance within puppetry.⁶ These initial attempts to codify and classify styles of puppet performance led to a renewal of interest in studying the field and academic puppetry research grew over the twentieth century, particularly in France, the then USSR and Eastern Europe. Beyond Europe, research into puppetry in the early to mid-twentieth century received some attention in Latin America (particularly Argentina) and parts of Asia where puppet theatre occupies an important place in relation to ritual, religion and culture. The rooting of puppetry as a valid form of research and practice in the English-speaking world has taken longer to establish, but recent excellent studies and compilations of essays from scholars such as John Bell, Claudia Orenstein, Dasia Posner, Matthew Cohen, Penny Francis, Jane Taylor and others have firmly established it as a wide-ranging, multiple and interdisciplinary art form which can interact with and have impact on theatre, fine art, science, sociology, ritual and many other areas.⁷ I would also like to highlight the unparalleled importance of the late Polish academic Henryk Jurkowski, who was perhaps the most well-known and prolific puppetry scholar in the world to date; his works on both the history of puppet theatre and on approaches to puppetry creation have formed the basis of many theses and further studies. Today, academic puppetry research exists in numerous universities and establishments across the world and there is a greater number of PhD theses

⁴ See Magnin, Charles ([1862] 1981) *Histoire des Marionnettes en Europe*, Paris: Editions Slatkine

⁵ See Buschmeyer, L. (1931), *Die Kunst des Puppenspiels*, Erfurt: Druk Oppelner Nachrichten Carl J. Pohl and Eichler, Fritz (1937), *Das Wesen des Handpuppen und Marionettenspiels*, Emsdetten: Lechte

⁶ See Jurkowski, Henryk ([1988] 2013), *Aspects of Puppet Theatre*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 14-16

⁷ There is an increasing number of books and journal articles dedicated to puppetry research but I would here like to highlight two for their reach and interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches: the collection arising from the puppet theatre conference held at the University of Connecticut in the USA in 2011: Posner, Dasia N, Orenstein, Claudia and Bell, John (2014), *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, New York: Routledge; and for its scope, Francis, Penny (2012), *Puppetry: A Reader in Theatre Practice*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

than ever before being undertaken. These studies range from puppetry history and criticism, analysis of anthropological and sociological aspects of puppet theatre; puppetry ritual; analyses of companies and practices; interdisciplinary studies into puppetry and other performance forms such as opera, movement and martial arts to puppetry directing; puppetry and science; applied puppetry, and many others. The studies include case studies analysing the work of specific companies or artists, genres and styles across time and in the contemporary world and the gathering of bodies of data from particular movements or artists.

Despite this proliferation of activity and the consequent validation of the status of puppetry research (often previously seen as a poor offshoot of theatre research), puppetry remains a relatively small and niche area within academic scholarship. Knowledge of the power of puppetry and its multiple modes beyond this niche world remains limited. This means that in order to enable the best kind of research, which not only provides insights into past practice but also offers new and innovative ways of thinking about current and future work, communication both within and beyond the puppetry world, and sharing of information and resources is key. The research centre at the International Puppetry Institute in France has made great strides in supporting, disseminating and validating existing research, and in exploring new avenues for scholar-led, collaborative research projects, and in supporting practitioner-based research⁸; more needs to be done in other countries to enable these efforts to have a wider reach.

I think it absolutely essential to highlight the essentially interdisciplinary nature of puppetry. Puppet theatre is a form that intersects with so many other areas and therefore researchers and practitioners are to be encouraged to work across boundaries; in particular it is of interest to break down the traditional boundaries between the sciences and the affective arts; puppetry research which collaborates with medicine, neuroscience, physics, urban planning, microbiology, rainforest studies, and so on, as a means to generate new knowledge, is exciting and forward-looking. Puppet theatre, which exists at the meeting place of science and art, has the potential to be a key vehicle for emerging and exciting studies which could enable us to understand the natural world. No less, the use of puppetry to develop new languages within the arts, humanities and social science, could lead to significant new understandings. It has been shown very clearly within practical projects throughout the world that puppetry has the capacity to enable people to speak out about areas previously forbidden, taboo or difficult to approach; what potential then for enabling communities to speak; to show the harsher or hidden aspects of history and contemporary culture;

⁸ For information on the Institut International de la Marionnette's research programmes, see <http://www.marionnette.com/en/ResearchCenter/Research-programmes>

a safe environment and conduit for channelling emotion, conflict and to develop oral and material culture. Puppets, as eternally 'othered', are a means for all 'others' to take centre stage. Puppetry in collaboration with dance offers new perceptions about the presence and immanence of the human body; in collaboration with opera lends universality to characters, gods or other beings; in collaboration with poetry brings the visual, the kinetic and the spoken or written together in startling ways, offering insights into our human condition.

Many traditional puppetry practices are in danger of disappearance, or of being hideously commercialised, or the puppeteers who for centuries have practiced their art form through transmission of skills handed down through families, face the challenges of globalised and corporate culture. Like any endangered species, these forms enrich our cultures and enable us to gain knowledge about peoples, practices and products. It is clear, however, that as society creates more demands on both daily living and on artists justifying their art, traditional forms are required to rethink their practices and approaches in order to survive; not merely physical survival, but also psychic and cultural. The relationship between the traditional and the contemporary is contested and is also an area of concern and research interest. How can artists find new ways of working to ensure survival (in the ways described above) and to ensure that their work is respected, understood and supported? How can audiences be educated to cherish tradition and the ways in which it develops across time? How can funders, arts and cultural authorities and governments find the information they need in order to support puppetry artists and traditions? Which are the most ethical and intelligent ways to bring traditions together with other forms for both new and old audiences? These questions are crucial if we are not to lose significant fields of cultural heritage across the world. Research into these forms is therefore essential; their history; their practice; detail of construction techniques, belief systems, rehearsal modes, community and family engagement and transmission, training, content, stories and performances themselves should all be recorded and analysed to better understand and celebrate the conditions of these forms' existence and future possibilities. The place of tradition and its relation to the contemporary is an essential area of research.

Puppetry and its uses in applied or community settings is so widely used, but so little theorised and discussed in academic circles. The term 'applied', a relative newcomer to the table of Theatre in Education and Community Theatre, to indicate the widest possible uses – indeed, *applications*, of puppetry to specific social contexts in order to develop certain goals in dialogue with others, gives purpose and focus to its use. Over the last five to ten years, interest in this area has grown hundredfold and the search for languages to comprehend and develop the particular skills and approaches within this terrain has likewise grown. I am

regularly asked to direct people to readings (students, practitioners and scholars of other fields) on applied puppetry which can assist them in developing their own understanding and approaches. There is scant writing in this area; not because practice or excellence is lacking, but because it is under-theorised and little written about; I am confident that in another five to ten years the picture will be very different here. Indeed, the areas described above are not discrete; traditional artists are seeking new ways of teaching and disseminating their practices and new social contexts for using the traditional forms; applied puppetry, interdisciplinarity, tradition and contemporaneity can be expertly woven in new projects.

I would like to dwell briefly now on the developments towards practice-as-research projects, in which the artist-researcher uses both theoretical bases and historical knowledge for the development of a new practice where they themselves are the subject of the research. A number of research centres, following on from the idea within theatre research internationally, that theatre was an art practised more than it was studied, have developed researcher programmes which enable the artist or researcher to test out ideas in practice, while maintaining a process of research through the questions that are set up and the process which is to be investigated. These excellent initiatives mean that new languages of theatre can be explored with the support of the 'research' imperative. Within practice-as-research projects, the puppeteer-artist is able to challenge her/himself to encounter unfamiliar ways of working and unfamiliar content; to collaborate with others in the laboratory exploration, no less scientific than the examination of cells under a microscope, of materials, performance modes, sounds, sculptures and meeting points. Rather than delivering an academic paper at a conference, the artist-researcher is more likely to present a new piece of work. The key idea within this kind of research is the personal and individual research path; the subject of the research is the artist her or himself and their research trajectory that of finding new ways to express their art. The way of working is not new; what is new, rather, is the acceptance of this kind of work as a valid and important methodology for developing new research. The traditional status of published work occupying higher status than practical research still holds but this is shifting. The question of how to document and hold the research done by puppeteer-practitioners in the interests of research has been a vexed one but in the digital age is becoming easier.

Much puppetry research to date has taken place as part of a university or research centre which hosts and supports that research. There are now many universities across the world offering and welcoming research projects on puppetry and the number of people suitably qualified and experienced to supervise and support these projects is growing. It is important to find a means to bring these researchers and institutions together to collaborate in sharing the resources, theses and the

research itself. The second way in which puppetry research has taken place is due to the individual and dedicated effort of the many puppetry enthusiasts around the world, in undertaking important works of research as their personal project and in their own time without support from an academic institution. These individuals are crucial to the development of the field and it is equally important to find a way of supporting their work and disseminating the findings.

I would now like to consider the role of the UNIMA Research Commission in supporting and developing international puppetry research. It seems clear that there is a vast range of puppetry research, both the more traditionally academic and the more experimental/practice-based. It also seems clear that the role of the Commission is not only to make connections with researchers worldwide and participate in the dissemination of research, but also to consider what research needs to be done and which processes for supporting research will need to be done in the future. What are the imperatives for puppetry research today? What kinds of questions are being asked, or should be asked? What processes and methodologies of research are important?

The above areas are fields to be prioritised: interdisciplinary, practice-led and applied techniques; the practices, approaches and detailed analysis of traditional forms, particularly those in danger of disappearance and the ways in which traditional practitioners can work with new approaches. Puppetry research needs to be more visible in wider theatre research circles; indeed, in wider areas of general research. Ironically, it often attains higher status within other research associations as a 'tool' than it does within artistic research.

Young researchers in puppetry need to be encouraged to find their own questions and research processes to better enable them to determine the fields of research in the future. Within this, I suggest that puppetry research initiatives highlight projects which explore hitherto unknown areas of research and which focus on individual artistic projections.

There is much work to be done in the area of ritual puppetry and its relationship to the cultural cycles and practices within the societies from which it has emerged. Puppets have accompanied humans through rituals of birth, sexuality, marriage, education, spirituality and death; yet there is limited research done into these ritual areas. In order to understand the rich cultural heritage we have inherited and to use this as part of developing practice much investigation is still needed in these areas.

The chapters offered in this latest issue of *Móin-Móin* address some of these questions. Above all, it is worth remembering that the impulse to create human and animal form from materials around us is an instinctive and natural process; this instinct is part of the human condition and in order to better understand our nature as humans puppet theatre in all its guises offers us unique opportunities to know who we are, how we are and what we are.