Training experiences in cyberspace and creative processes in social isolation

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Figura 1 –Conference by Cariad Astles at the ANIMA UDESC Seminar, with mediation and translation by Mário Piragibe. Source: Youtube screenshot. Available at: https://youtu.be/27p8r2gKA8A. Accessed on: June 21, 2021.

Training experiences in cyberspace and creative processes in social isolation [1]

Cariad Astles[2]

Abstract: This article was prepared from the conference that the author gave at the opening of ANIMA UDESC - Internacional Seminar of Studies in the Arts of Puppetry - Online Edition, on May 21, 2021. The conference had as its theme Training experiences in cyberspace and creative processes in social isolation, and addressed aspects of the link between Puppet Theater and the pandemic, and reflections based on the author's work with her students in the first six months of the pandemic.

Keywords: Puppet Theater; Cyberspace; Creative processes; Social isolation; Pandemic.

Experiências de treinamento no ciberespaço e processos de criação em isolamento social

Resumo: O presente artigo foi elaborado a partir da conferência que a autora concedeu na abertura do ANIMA UDESC – Seminário Internacional de estudos sobre Teatro de Animação – Edição Online, em 21 de maio de 2021. A conferência teve como tema Experiências de treinamento no ciberespaço e processos de criação em isolamento social, e abordou aspectos da ligação entre Teatro de Animação e a pandemia, e a reflexões a partir do trabalho da autora com seus alunos nos primeiros seis meses de pandemia.

Palavras-chave: Teatro de animação; Ciberespaço; Processos de criação; Isolamento social; Pandemia.

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Puppetry and plague. Puppetry and pox. Puppetry and panic. Puppetry and pandemic. The fact that theatre can, and does, intervene in the presentation and formation of health narratives within society is age-old. From the prologue of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* where the outbreak of plague is chillingly recorded to the terrifying and haunting masked social performances of medical figures during the 17th century bubonic plague which ravaged the world[3], to more contemporary performances of illness in the 21st century which seek to educate, raise awareness and destigmatize, illness, plague and pandemic are part of our ongoing theatre culture.

Artaud likened theatre to the plague[4]: a ravaging, wild, unstoppable beast which reduces the performer to a stripped-back version of themselves, the plague destroying the boundaries of physical, social and cultural behaviors: 'volcanic eruptions on the surface of the flesh violate the inside/outside borders which preserve corporeal integrity, as social, psychological and ethical structures implode' (GOODALL, 1990, p. 529)[5]. Goodall notes that plague – as seen by Artaud – enables revelation and transformation (ibid, p. 529). Grotowski too saw theatre as something contagious and challenging: the performer, in order to find authenticity in their work, must train until almost-collapse, must exhaust their body beyond the usual limits in order to discover its true potential in weakness, vulnerability and desperation. The self, without artifice, in direct communion with an audience who did not always completely know what the narrative was, but who were gripped by the physical extremity and starkness of the performers. Peter Brook, too, in 'The Holy Theatre', called upon theatre not to be a meaningless transaction, but a powerful ritual experience likened to life and death ceremonies[6]. These seminal directors of the twentieth century transformed a vision of theatre from something of entertainment to something which sought to speak to the heart of human experience. Actors, according to Grotowski, were

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[3] Blakemore, Erin (2020), 'Why plague doctors wore those strange beaked masks': https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/plague-doctors-beaked-masks-coronavirus

[4] Garner, Stanton B. Jr (2006), 'Artaud, Germ Theory and the Theatre of Contagion', *Theatre Journal* Vol. 8 No. 1, March 2006, pp. 1 – 14.

[5] Goodall, Jane (1990), 'The Plague and its Powers in Artaudian Theatre', *Modern Drama*, Vol. 33 o. 4, Winter 1990, pp. 529 – 542.

[6] Auslander, Philip (1984), 'Holy theatre and catharsis', *Theatre Research International* Vol. 9 Issue 1, Sping 1984, pp. 16 – 29.

like shamans who suffered for their tribes, subjecting their bodies to dangerous rituals, experiencing illness, trance and risk in order to heal the community[7]. The metaphor of plague, contagion, illness, is a powerful one for theatre. Theatre, after all, is both religion and healing. Again, referring to Grotowski, actors lived as outsiders, undergoing extra-ordinary feats of training on behalf of their communities. They often lived outside cities, inhabiting communes or artistic ghettoes where they worked on their art.

Plague, epidemic or widespread contagious illness has also been a means through which communities choose to scapegoat or blame others for the ills inherent within their societies. Carlo Ginzburg noted that throughout history, 'the prodigious trauma of great pestilences intensified the search for a scapegoat on which fears, hatreds and tension of all kinds could be discharged' (GINZBURG, 1989)[8]. Those with contagious illnesses were ejected from their societies or confined within them; they were isolated in limited physical communities with other sufferers; in some cases, those with illnesses had the city gates shut to them and were forced to become itinerant, seeking benevolence and support from other travelers or itinerants, living as homeless wanderers, travelling, whenever they were able to, from place to place. In this they share a history with puppetry. Traditional puppetry was often performed by 'outsiders'. The position of the marginalized, outcast, not-belonging itinerant figure, moving between cities, countries and continents, was familiar to the puppeteer, who also depended upon others' largesse for their survival. [9]

No less, puppets themselves can be compared to images of plague: traditional puppets often swollen, exaggerated, erupting, gargoyle-esque caricatures reminiscent of boils, lesions or exhibiting the traits of strange illnesses and tics. Puppets do not particularly represent the well human body in-health, but instead remind us of its frailty; its potential to disintegrate; it's ludicrous and unbalanced nature. Many of the most interesting puppets that we see in performance are like growths of some tumorous disease, emerging from our own

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[7] Schechner, Richard (1999), 'Jerzy Grotowski 1933 – 1999', *TDR* Vol. 43 No. 2, Summer 1999, pp. 5 – 8.
[8] Ginzberg, Carlo (2004), *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[9] Jurkowski, Henryk (2014), *Aspects of Puppet Theatre*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 115.

bodies, like viruses or bacteria, epiphytes or parasites; dwelling inside us, amongst us and dependent upon us for their survival.

The last year has turned us into puppets: confined to our own little living box or booth, unable to leave, or unable to go very far; over-familiar with our own kitchens, our own stairs, our own windows through which we peer at the world outside which once we knew. The English expression 'to bounce off the walls', which refers to the frustration at being confined, can be literally translated to puppets, who use the limitations of their booth or box, or playing area to dance the choreography of their confinement.

Limits, we are told, in theatre, are useful; they require us to define our practice; to concentrate our gesture and our expression; to become a tiny focus of energy in a small space radiating beyond it.[10] Have the limits of confinement and of the screen therefore been useful to puppetry over the last year? Despite the privations, confinement has forced us to focus. Theatre should certainly be an experience of consciousness, has the last year enabled us to question our art and our practice and to ask what it is that puppetry is and does?

Enough of these philosophical reflections. We have been turned into puppets in our confinement but within those confinements we have found ways to communicate and to train. The remainder of this talk will concentrate on those tendencies that have emerged in puppet theatre over the last year through the requirements to work online, on the screen or in confined and small spaces; and will discuss processes of student training. I will focus on those practices which have been enabled by confinement, not those which have been disabled. I will, additionally, not be talking in this presentation about the theoretical or practical considerations given to us by technology. It is clear that there are many of these and that the ways in which puppetry can and does intersect with technology is another field. Let it be assumed that our stage is (for the most part) the Zoom screen. Nor will I be talking about training in making or training in puppetry theory. I think, even if we sometimes prefer to be together, that making, writing, theorizing, and to an extent, even directing, can reasonably easily be discussed

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[10] Su, Tsu-Chung (2011), 'Bodies that matter: how does a performer make him/herself a dilated body?', *Tankang Review*, 42(1), pp. 103 – 126.

and practiced via digital means. Here I will be focusing on physical performance training for the puppeteer.

The title that I was asked to respond to was: Training experiences in cyberspace and creative processes in social isolation. To me there seem to be two parts to this: 'training experiences in cyberspace', with a focus on the word 'experiences'; and 'creative processes in social isolation', with a focus on creativity and social isolation. The last year has been unprecedented in forcing people to limit social contact and spend much or most of their time online for work, social activities and social engagement. We have done it; we have done it willingly or unwillingly; things are starting to change and the reflections of the last year being harnessed to future planning.

At the beginning of the pandemic, puppetry trainers and teachers across the globe began to reflect intensively about what using the screen could do for puppetry. A series of initiatives across the globe arose, ranging from the creation of short performances designed for the screen and meetings with puppetry trainers about how to share and compare practice in cyberspace.

My reflections are as follow, and are grouped into a consideration of what kinds of puppetry we worked on, and the thematic tendencies arising from the work itself. The reflections arose from work done with puppetry students throughout the first six months of the pandemic.

Initially I began to think about the beginnings of puppetry. We know that puppetry came from religious and funerary practices. Puppetry is ritual. Being at home constantly engenders ritual in daily life. How do we avoid the madness that comes from only communicating with ourselves and things? Reflections on the importance of ritual in a puppet's life; how repetition and ritual enable us to create the life of a puppet; recollections of wonderful puppet shows which showed puppets confined to small spaces; prisons or kitchens, going about their daily lives; their lives marked by small rituals. *Hermann*, by Enno Podehl in the 1980s; Chilean playwright Juan Radrigán's play *Human Strife* in 1988; a Russian play, the name of which I can not remember, about a man who deserted the Red Army and lived in a shack in Siberia for 40 years, too frightened to make any contact with humans for the rest of his life, for fear of reprisals, filling his life with small

rituals: scooping the snow up, washing in the melted show, reading newspapers from thirty years ago, doing his exercises. Incarcerated puppets, marking time. The ritual of the daily life of the puppet, seen via the screen, took on importance.

This work led to a series of philosophical reflections upon whether the puppet could leave the house; we know that puppets are transgressive and don't like rules; we also know that puppets get away with a lot more than humans do and get out of punishment by nature of their puppet-ness; could it be that a puppet could leave the house and avoid infection and return safely? As stand-ins for ourselves, students' puppets shimmied down fake drainpipes to tiptoe around the streets of their imagined cities, deserted and lonely.

This led us to the theme of dystopia. Without a doubt, the last year has been an experience of dystopia. Confined, masked, fearful, rebellious, critical, ill, dying, angry, punished, fined, unable to travel, unable to meet; full of national prejudice (which country is doing the best job; which is doing the worst job; illness either as a punishment upon the immoral or a visitation upon the heroic, whether they are populist leaders, martyrs, overweight, unwell, disabled, aged, unhealthy, or simply very very unlucky… our prejudices have run wild); we have become a dystopia in which to go out of your house you had to fill out a form gaining permission to mingle, or to visit your ailing mother. But isn't it the case that puppets always, or often, live in dystopias? In our 2019 talk and subsequent publication about directing for puppetry[11], Mario Piragibe and I identified this feature of puppets: that they live in *other worlds* and that there are a series of different rules for those worlds. They do not inhabit the usual human world. The world that we are now inhabiting under Covid is an-other world. As an example, the latest UK guidance is that we are now permitted to 'hug cautiously[12]'. How do you hug cautiously? That advice about how to hug is now a government directive is part of a strange and dystopian universe. Working on screen, the details and specifics of creating dystopian, or, let us say, weird worlds, became even more

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[11] Astles, Cariad and Piragibe, Mario (2019), *'Nine Questions on Teaching Directing for Puppetry: a trans-cripting recreation of a dialogue', Moin-Moin,* 15:11 (21). pp. 432-457.

[12] Swinford, Steven (ed), 'Boris Johnson tells people to hug cautiously as lockdown restrictions ease', *The Times* 17.05.21: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hug-cautiously-avoid-tight-clinches-and-restrict-physical-contact-to-outdoors-sage-adviser-warns-bj36ssbvm

important. In the 1980s, the UK company Faulty Optic[13] created a series of performances which showed strange characters living in strange worlds. The work of this company was characterized as the creation of micro-worlds. Puppets dwell happily and easily in micro-worlds. Under Covid, the enforced use of the screen has reminded us of the importance of these micro-worlds in which the puppets live in dystopian ways, with their own rules. In Faulty Optic's *Snuffhouse Dustlouse*, for instance, the characters keep their parents in their home pickled in jars. If we find this strange and grotesque, let us contemplate the efforts that people in, for instance, Ecuador in April 2020, had to make in order to preserve the bodies of their dead when there were no spaces in the cemeteries and, due to the high death rate at this time, insufficient personnel to pick them up.

With my students we spent some time creating micro-worlds for their puppets to live in. These micro-worlds varied. Some were plastic, some were paper; some were under water. All showed puppets in limited situations working through the rituals of their daily lives. If I insist on this point, it is because I am increasingly struck by the resemblance that human lives have at times to those of puppets. That freedom is always a concept contingent on perception and on our own dreaming.

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[13] http://www.faultyoptic.co.uk/

Figura 2 – Part of the scene *The story of the dice game and food,* made by one of Cariad's students, presented at Cariad Astles conference at the ANIMA UDESC Seminar. Source: Youtube screenshot. Available at: https://youtu.be/27p8r2gKA8A. Accessed in: June 21, 2021.

Alongside these creations of microworlds and dystopia, two other factors became important: the use of domestic space, the ordinary, and autobiography. The experience of being at home draws attention to the mundane, the ordinary, the presentation of our own living spaces. We worked in bedrooms, kitchens, living rooms. We invited others into our personal daily living spaces like never before[14].

In addition to this, people expressed shock at the experience they were going through. How long would it last? Governments were scared to say that it would last two, or more, years. The 'roadmap to release' became a catchphrase. But the emotional experience of suddenly being in danger; families in danger; lives changed so much led to a focus on people's personal experiences; their personal lives and narratives. Autobiographical theatre has often had a focus on the domestic: mental health, pain, illness and intimacy.

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[14] https://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/archive/2020/may/title_793064_en.html

Figura 3 – Part of the scene *Bella's Bag,* made by one of Cariad's students, presented at Cariad Astles conference at the ANIMA UDESC Seminar. Source: Youtube screenshot. Available at: https://youtu.be/27p8r2gKA8A. Accessed in: June 21, 2021.

This focus on the autobiographical and intimate became part of the puppetry work we carried out. How can a puppet, as representative of life in some form, a projection of self, narrate the detail and intimate experience of the internal and lived space, presented in one's own domestic space? Additionally, the domestic space is often messy, disordered, imperfect; autobiographical performance also imperfect, marked by the honesty of failure. Again, referring to the weirdness of puppets, they perform against the ideal of the dominant or normative hegemonies of physicality or psychology. In puppets, imperfection is all; intimacy of failure is all. The themes of puppetry and mental health are potent at this time, but autobiography does not only speak about mental health. It also speaks about the reality of the personal environment.[15]

Moving on from the intimacy of the domestic space and of autobiography, the experience of being on screen with puppets created a very intense intimacy of relationship between puppeteer and puppet. So much of pre-pandemic contemporary puppetry has focused on collaborative puppetry practice: table-top,

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[15] Árifa, Akbar, 'Barnes' people review: angsty monologues raging against life and death', *The Guardian* 18.02.21: https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/feb/18/barnes-people-review-peter-barnes

multi-operated puppetry, developed through a focus on collective breathing and close relationship between puppeteers. When breathing with others became dangerous, we had to breathe alone, with our puppet. This created a very particular and close relationship between the individual puppeteer and their puppet. Although the rupture with previous practices, particularly for those of us who came from a collective theatre devising tradition predicated on work with other peoples' bodies, I was led to reflect that in working so closely on our own with our puppet in fact brought us back to detail and relationship. Detail perhaps because on screen, even more so than on stage, each tiny detail of the puppet's movement is emphasized, and relationship because all focus is necessarily on puppet and puppeteer. Some puppeteers have of course specialized in this throughout their career: in fact, I would almost be drawn to say that much of the most significant and influential puppetry of the last twenty years has been that where a solo puppeteer has had a dissoluble and close relationship with her/his puppets. Let us consider, for instance, the tortured and intimate relationships between Neville Tranter and his figures; the creatures emerging from Ilke Schonbein's body as part of her own self, as examples. With students, working on screen, we were able to work through great detail and precision of the gaze and subsequent relationship between puppeteer and puppet, with great attention paid to the eyes of the puppeteer, such important signifiers of attention and the attention paid by the puppet, and the power relations between each of them. The theme of puppets being 'bubbles' within our own skins, or our own bodies took on greater relevance; we were able to use focused and individual, fragmented parts of our own bodies as backdrops for the body of the puppet, as has been seen previously in the work of Hugo and Ines, for instance. This detailed and precise work is incredibly useful for developing the puppetry concepts of power relationships, the idea of multiple selves or multiple psychologies and for simple physical puppetry practice: the training of detailed functions of parts of our bodies. Sometimes over the last ten or fifteen years I have felt that these details of training have received less attention, while there has been an overriding focus (which I also thoroughly enjoy and respect) on working with other people on one puppet. I recall the series of training exercises promoted by Obrazstov in the Moscow Art

Theatre, and the detailed training undertaken by Indian dancers of Kathakali and Orissa dance, where the eyes, facial expression, hands and finger gestures are all of prime importance.

I would like to comment on two more really important aspects of working on the screen and from home. The first pertains to microtheatre. I am convinced that in some way the pandemic has reminded us of key puppetry principles and practices. It was patently obvious from very early on that we were not going to be able to stage large productions with multi-operated puppets; that we were going to have to do puppet shows for tiny audiences, or on the screen, and that we were going to have to do solo performances for a while. Microtheatre, which had been growing already, before the pandemic, has become the norm for many puppeteers. Microtheatre is theatre done in small spaces, often with only one performer, often with only one in the audience, or done, these days, on the screen. But microtheatre has been part and parcel of popular puppetry practice since time immemorial. The itinerant glove puppeteer, touring with her/his booth, setting up the booth in a town square, was performing microtheatre. Let us look at this booth. What a perfect socially distanced and masked performance! The performer in their cloaked-off space, unable to breathe upon others as they are surrounded by the booth. In recent years microtheatre has also included forms of theatre such as suitcase theatre and the Brazilian form Lambe Lambe: theatre in a box. The beauty of this kind of theatre is that it can be made and performed with everyday materials – often with card and paper only – and quite cheaply. Over the last year microtheatre has mushroomed to a huge extent as performers, creating theatre from their own homes have used their own suitcases, bags and boxes to bring all that they need to the performance space. Microtheatre also enables precision and clarity. In this form of theatre, each student has their own story which they carry with them; they don't need to share props or puppets. It encapsulates the idea that each of us carries everything that we need for life with us already. We have all that we need and everything that we narrate or perform is already within us, or about us. Working with cheap and familiar materials is not something new to puppetry: Peter Schumann's essay about the benefits that it brings to puppetry to be 'low and ridiculous' and to make use of cheap and simple

materials reminds us of this approach.[16] Small family shows were part and parcel of traditional puppetry practice in many countries. The Christmas show popular in Poland, for instance, the *szopka*, has been part of family entertainment for a long time. George Sand and other intellectuals staged toy theatre and other microtheatre shows in their living rooms during the 19th century[17].

Finally, I will comment on outdoor puppetry. At first, we were not able to perform to live audiences at all. Then, last summer, some socially distanced outdoor shows were permitted. Then we were not able to perform to live audiences again. And so it has been over the last year. And now, in some parts of the world, people are able to perform shows outdoors again. Processional puppetry, or static boothed puppetry, or simply outdoor puppets with socially distanced audiences has been one of the few ways in which puppeteers have been able to perform to live audiences. Again, outdoor puppetry is part and parcel of the traditional puppeteer's repertoire. It gives you learning experiences that you cannot easily find in a closed theatre: the need to attract an audience, dealing with a noisy, distracted and itinerant audience and competing with real-life circumstances and events such as traffic, weather and noise are key practical training experiences which focus the performing capacity of the performer.

To consider all of these tendencies and to focus on the learning that has taken place over the last year, I would summarize that the last year has of course not been easy for puppeteers. Their touring circuits and incomes have disappeared and their habitual modes of working disrupted beyond our previous imaginings. What has happened, however, is a return to some of the traditional practices of our forebears. Puppeteers frequently worked alone; frequently worked with microtheatres; frequently worked outdoors. Puppeteers have also benefited from the detailed and focused attention on relationship, gaze and use of the body in their work. Additionally, the metaphorical relationship between the puppet, living in their weird and confined world and we humans, living within the absurdity of our living circumstances over the last year draws deep reflection about the nature of the worlds we live within and the relationship of our personal

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[16] Schumann, Peter (1988), 'The Radicality of the Puppet Theatre', *TDR* Vol. 35 No. 4, Winter 1991, pp. 75 – 83.
[17] https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Sand

lives and personal spaces to the creation of performance. And about the power structures that we live within.

I have sometimes said in the past that in order to gain status within mainstream theatre over the last twenty years, puppetry has had to absorb some of the tropes of 'high' art. Puppetry within live theatre, within opera and within landmark institutions, with large troupes and puppetry handlers has given much-needed status to the art. In being deprived of these possibilities however, I wonder if we have returned to some of the ways and means of popular puppetry where the puppeteer did everything and presented everything and where the puppet was an extension of the puppeteer's own body, at the end of their arm or climbing out of their pocket.

Puppetry is eternally adaptable. The puppets will come out wherever or in whichever circumstances we find ourselves. They are irrepressible!