

# Tradition and Innovation: provocations

## Tradição e Inovação: provocações

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## Abstract

What can be usefully said about tradition and innovation? This paper questions whether these terms are really the most useful in setting them up as opposing approaches.

**Keywords:** Theater of traditional animation; learning with traditional performances; tradition a gateway into innovation

## Resumo

O que pode ser dito de forma útil sobre tradição e inovação? Este artigo questiona se esses termos são realmente os mais úteis para configurá-los como abordagens opostas.

**Palavras-chave:** Teatro de animação tradicional; aprendizado com performances tradicionais; tradição um portal para a inovação

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What can be usefully said about tradition and innovation? This paper questions whether these terms are really the most useful in setting them up as opposing approaches.

I am not a traditional puppeteer myself in the narrow understanding of what that means; I do not run a programme which primarily focuses on *tradition* in contemporary puppet theatre. But although I am not a traditional puppeteer, and did not train as one, I am deeply interested in what is offered by traditional practices, especially that which goes beyond the form itself and into wider concepts of theatre; and I am personally inspired by traditional practices. And so my reflections have led to me to four main considerations:

### **Firstly:**

- We should consider some academic interrogation about meanings and understandings of tradition. In these meetings we have a mixture of academic and theoretical thinking alongside practitioner reports of work within pedagogy and other fields, which is the best kind of fruitful exchange. So my contribution here is to add a few academic ideas into this mix. I may be a little controversial but I hope I am not being naive about tradition.

Let us think about tradition.

I am doubtful whether this divide between tradition and innovation is quite so clear. I have been struck recently in puppetry conferences and gatherings by the attention that is given to binary oppositions. I wonder if these divisions are really useful. Here we are discussing the relationship between two apparent oppositions: tradition and innovation. In another conference recently I noticed the attention given to defining the differences between Eastern and Western puppet theatre. Perhaps instead we could look at the meeting places and commonalities. Is not traditional puppet theatre already innovative? Is Punch and Judy innovative? Yes! Is it traditional? Yes! The same for Sicilian Pupi, Wayang, marionettes from different geographical regions. Practitioners of traditional forms have to innovate in order to survive. The nature of tradition is that despite close links to ritual, religion and lineage, it generally responds to contemporary economic, cultural and political narratives. Our wish, however, to identify difference is natural. Cultural materialist theorist Raymond Williams tells us that tradition is always a living thing based on 'customary difference'. This means that tradition is identified by what makes it different from other manifestations of culture. What he does point out, however, is that tradition is not ever static.

Francis Mulhern further suggests that tradition is 'a process through which collectivities adapt their inheritance for changed conditions' (New Left Review: 2009). We have already heard how 'traditional' puppeteers are doing this: they are adapting their customary forms for new audiences, economics and contexts. Several of the papers published in the UNIMA Research Commission's recent publication (Tracing Past and Present: International Puppetry Research, 2016) talk about precisely this phenomenon. Tradition is the meeting place of the past and the future.

Within cultural studies, the theorist Stuart Hall tells us that tradition is always immersed in power relations: popular culture is inscribed with transgressive, subversive and sometimes repressive meanings (Cultural Studies, 1983).

This is no less so in puppetry. It is clear that some of the positioning of puppetry within the academy and within the arts is clearly linked to considerations of 'high' and 'low' cultural forms, such as those about the repositioning of puppetry within Czech training (Dolenska, 2017). I will reflect on this later in the British context.

So the performance of tradition is not a simple act of repetition of form; society, politics, economics and cultural meaning are deeply connected. Traditional puppetry performance, moreover, offers great flexibility and richness beyond the form itself: the ability to improvise and to respond to current circumstance, the content of political events, use of technology, the self-defining innovative qualities of tradition itself.

John McGrath, the theatre critic, tells us that through tradition, 'societies interrogate the myth of themselves' (A Good Night Out, 1981). I would suggest, therefore, that tradition is already a deeply reflexive and innovating activity.

I will add to this Gerd Baumann's comments that 'tradition is a mutually improvised jam session' (The Multicultural Riddle, 1999).

The performance of traditional forms can lead to *communitas*, the word popularised by Victor Turner (The Forest of Symbols, 1967), to mean, broadly speaking, the sense of togetherness experienced by a community which has gone through something together. This sense of *communitas* is learned by the child as they negotiate their place within culture. This is important for identity construction.

However, it is in the interstices and ruptures within tradition that interesting material often arises.

So the conclusion of this point is to suggest that traditions are politically and culturally meaningful; that tradition is already innovative, and that another starting point might be to seek existing meeting points between forms rather than difference.

Further questions to share:

How long does it take, or how many times does something have to be repeated, and in which context, to be a tradition?

What is innovation?

Is tradition only perceived in puppetry construction, social context or content of material? Could tradition also be perceived in the mode of the puppet world and in its relationship to the audience and other worlds?

**Now, to move to the second point: what do we actually understand as tradition?**

Here I speak particularly from the perspective of the UK.

The UK now is in crisis. This crisis has been coming for a long time. The UK now, more intensively than for a long time, is debating, internally and externally, what

its identity is in relation to nationalism, ethnicity, multiculturalism and world power. Long lauded among some circles as multiculturally progressive, now fierce and angry debate about what it means to be British is taking place. 80 people from multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds have just died in an impoverished tower block fire which successive governments failed to bring up to safety standards; a Welsh man adopted the method of murder by car in an attack on Muslims the other day; BUT the Prime Minister has been forced to promise humility in Brexit talks; the rhetoric of hate from governments and media seems to be leading to a profound re-recognition that Britain is a deeply multicultural society. Many generations of immigration, predicated on more than 500 years of brutal colonisation, have led to a society in which tradition is already hybrid.

This means, therefore, that *UK puppetry* tradition is not confined to Punch and Judy. Let us include in UK puppetry tradition Afro-Caribbean carnival puppets, Indian shadow puppets, performed throughout communities in the UK, Victorian trick marionettes and also, but not exclusively, Punch and Judy. These forms are already in dialogue. Punch and Judy giant puppets process within carnival and festival celebrations; Indian shadow puppets were used last term in a production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. We should not ignore the issues raised by Rustom Bharucha (*Theatre and the World*, 1993) and others, in relation to Peter Brook's work, for example, about cultural appropriation, but my thesis here is that we are already living in a post-traditional world where forms are not likely to be confined to one geographical, diasporic or cultural group. We must recognise history and be conscious of the multiple overlaps, textures and intertextual relationships in cultural forms. Let me go back to my question about how long it takes for something to become traditional.

The formidable company Welfare State International started a tradition of lantern festivals and giant puppet processions as part of popular culture festivities up and down the country during the 1980s and now, thirty years or so later, countless villages and towns have their own processions throughout the year which draw on Afro-Caribbean carnival, Catalan giant puppet forms and English obby oss festivals (themselves already hybrid forms). After ten years, twenty years, these communities consider their performances traditional.

From the work of Handspring, War Horse, Blind Summit and the English National Opera a 'tradition' of multi-operated animal puppetry in *high* art forms is emerging. Can we refer to this as traditional? Or is traditional perceived as only existing within 'low' art forms?

### **Thirdly: what do traditional forms teach us beyond the immediate form and content of the tradition itself?**

Working with traditional forms can enable us to learn other ways of working. We do not have to necessarily use the actual forms that we learn. When I was a student, I learnt Chhau dance from India. After a single intensive and engaging project, I never returned to Chhau dance as a performer or practitioner, but the project did instigate in me a sense of the importance of the earth below my feet in performance, gravity and mask work –all training techniques that have been invaluable in puppetry.

Through studying T'ai Chi, students are able to experience the importance of energy flow, resistance and balance; also all key elements in puppetry training.

From studying psychophysical theatre training under Philip Zarrilli (Psychophysical Acting: 2008) which draws on Kalaripayattu, Kathakali and T'ai Chi, they become aware of the bodymind connection within performance.

Through studying Italian Pupi, students are able to experience rhythm, the importance of the performance event and routine, theatricality and how to change puppet heads within one performance.

From watching a variety of traditional performance, students are able to realise that puppetry can break frames; puppets do not *always* have to breathe in order to emulate life; that they can be subversive, squeaky, ridiculous, energetic, dead-and-alive in the same moment, and that the whole aesthetic of WHY PUPPETS ARE DIFFERENT can be grasped more quickly and easily, drawing inspiration not from live theatre, but from art, the grotesque, microtheatre, which often leads to more exciting interactions.

They also learn that puppets can and do talk about gender, race, class and politics. This comes not from the 'high art' tradition of so-called innovation, but from the long tradition of popular theatre which comments incessantly upon its world. Of course, this has led to some friction between practitioners, scholars and students at times. An angry debate was unleashed a couple of years ago between some Punch and Judy professors at the presentation of Punch as a cross-dressing lesbian (Watson in *Tracing Past and Present*, 2016)

Within pedagogy, students often want to know and understand quickly, whereas traditional training does not always offer quick understanding. Immersion in a process is important for physical discipline. But within the fragile world of puppet theatre training that I am involved in, the question of tradition versus innovation does not arise. It is not possible for the students *not* to innovate. The whole premise of their existence as students of puppet theatre is to innovate using whichever materials and resources are available to them. They do not need to be encouraged. We could argue that this itself, this propensity to assume that they are the creators of new work, is also related to cultural traditions of what is understood to be good theatre: innovation over perfection.

What, then are these meeting places between tradition and innovation? Tradition invokes particular understandings: communal, local, old, mythological; innovation invokes the personal, individual, autobiographical, metanarrative structure.

Theatre is communication, drama, interaction. Rules can be broken. If they could not be broken, they would not be rules.

Here are some aspects of traditional training which are important beyond the form:

To show up; to get ready for work; to do physical work; to respect the space and most importantly perhaps: to have devotion to the form. To treat puppets with respect and remember that we are playing for gods (or whatever the greater-than-the-immediate is perceived to be) – this is not easy in Western atheist/agnostic/anti-religious contexts where devotion is presumed to be religious, but devotion

to the work can exist whether we are talking about paper puppets, object theatre, leather shadow puppets ...

So to learn tradition is also to learn discipline, activity, that theatre-making takes time, and devotion.

#### **Fourthly: how tradition can be used within pedagogy within UK puppetry training:**

Here I come back to questions of cultural politics in art. Puppetry training in the UK is fragile and under-resourced. Puppetry within Higher Education has emerged mainly as a result of the passion of key practitioners and scholars and has usually been offered as a module option within wider theatre or drama programmes or within scenography or fine art training. As many of you will know, there is one degree in puppet theatre in London: this has been running since around 1997. The course has only one permanent staff member attached to it plus a large number of part time visiting professionals. Since I have been there I have fought continuously for increased staffing and resources which have grown very slightly. But Britain has a long heritage of Protestantism which began the process of abandoning iconography in religion and art many centuries ago, and this has led to a somewhat utilitarian approach to theatre. Puppet theatre therefore has to be seen as 'useful'.

And here we have the question about high and low art. One dominant attitude towards puppetry training in the UK, responding to the interest within UK theatre at large, is to define puppetry as an option within live theatre and not as a separate and discrete art. This in part responds to professional opportunities: it is much more common to have puppetry as an element within a piece of live theatre and for puppeteers to find work in this way. There is a further point, however: that the impetus for increasing the status of puppet theatre, driven by puppeteers and the Arts Council, was to elevate the status. This meant a movement away from traditional forms and towards so-called 'high' art forms. This is definitely where puppetry has found higher status and is considered important: within the productions of the National Theatre, which includes *War Horse*, with the Royal Shakespeare Company and with English National Opera.

This to some extent has led to a marginalisation of popular forms. My own perspective has been that students of any form need to know where they come from. But the students do not come from the UK exclusively. They have therefore all had to study some traditional puppet theatre forms in their first year and to know how to use these in their own performance. This is not for them to repeat or continue these forms, but to enable a greater understanding of how puppet theatre works. Studying tradition teaches us how puppet theatre works. It is my belief that all innovation that we experience in puppet theatre has come in some way from the teachings of tradition.

Projects where students are asked to meet both tradition and innovation include: a UNIMA project, brokered by a group called Culture Studio, run by British Asians, which consists of a digital exchange with 'traditional' Indian puppeteers. In this project, students will learn shadow puppetry from online and skype teaching; they will then work with young performers in creating a new touring puppet piece which

will tour Slough, a multi-ethnic community west of London and in what is described as a deprived area. Traditional form will thus be used in new expressive media and with young artists in hybrid social and cultural contexts.

Other students will be working on a multi-cultural and gender-questioning Punch and Judy performance of Macbeth. First year students will be making processional giant puppets to use in carnival processions which draw on diverse cultural traditions in the UK. Recently, other students have performed shadow puppetry inspired by Indian tradition in a production of *The Empress* in London, a show which challenges the legacy of colonialism.

The cultural politics here are crucial. Tradition in puppet theatre means understanding the techniques and media through which society expresses and scrutinises (following McGrath, previously cited) itself. The students will be innovative. We don't have to teach them that. So for me tradition is always a gateway into innovation.

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