

## Postcolonialism and hybridity in British puppetry

Puppetry is by its nature a hybrid form. It is in its essence a hybrid of the visual and performing arts; hybrid in its construction and conception: alive and not-alive; anthropomorphic but not human; straddling worlds, cultures and identities. Puppetry forms arise and are born from cultural narratives and politics. Popular puppet forms have been present within most of the emergent and assertive nationalisms; puppetry has so often been a mouthpiece for politics and identity that it is not surprising that it has something to say about postcolonialism. Homi Bhabha's discussion of hybridity as a disturbing and unsettling force which enables the position of hybridity to challenge hierarchy is a seductive idea, as is his idea of hybridity within postcolonialism as a position of strength: 'We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population.' (Bhabha 98)

This article is dedicated to the late Margareta Niculescu, former director of the Romanian company Tandarica and the first director of the École Nationale Supérieure de la Marionnette in Charleville-Mézières in France. Niculescu's vision was the collaboration between forms: between puppetry forms, between traditional and contemporary practices and between puppetry and other performance forms. She wished to establish performer-puppeteers as innovative, creative practitioners who transformed tradition and collaborated across disciplines, to enable a hybrid and flourishing puppetry practice to be considered alongside other contemporary performance forms: '(puppetry)..has come down to us through the ages and across continents, mixing with the forms of other cultures and centuries, becoming a multifaceted art form with uncertain and shifting limits' (Niculescu 40). In these days of fragile and contested national boundaries and identities, it is important for puppetry scholars to consider how traditional puppetry forms can be supported in their transmission; how these forms translate, transgress, cross borders and forms, meet and merge with other forms; and what these new forms mean in practice as well as in scholarship; how they intersect with cultural identities, economies, rural and urban contexts; and how new articulations of traditional and contemporary forms in collaboration can and do articulate politics, cultural positions and new identities. Puppetry has sometimes been considered a traditional or old-fashioned form which does or should not address politics, identity formation and intersectional positioning. And yet puppetry has always been a migratory, itinerant and evolving form, commenting upon and responding to its surrounding culture(s).

The article will explore some of the ways in which postcolonial questions emerge in contemporary British puppetry. Once considered opposing poles, it has been shown that tradition and innovation can now be considered as sisters in dialogue (Balme 69). Tradition (which has often been considered within performance as primarily, if not exclusively, deriving from Asian cultures) and innovation (often considered to be a Western concept) are now terms which have become blurred. The multiple performance traditions within puppet theatre which have emerged from colonised territories have in their turn given rise in the ex-colonising countries to hybrid identities, performance practices and political narratives. These hybrid identities in puppetry are able to mediate diverse cultural positions. Postcolonial discourse notes that colonised and colonisers exist within networks of relationships predicated upon the experience of colonisation for all parties and embraces the idea that to exist in the postcolonial space may mean to exist simultaneously within different environments. These environments may be separated by geography but are linked by common cultural experiences and relationships (Amkpa 12). Post-colonial narrative, in Alan Lawson's words:

'is a critical discourse which seeks to dismantle the effects of colonialism in the material, historical, cultural-political, pedagogical, discursive and textual domain' (Lawson 156). Post-colonialism, therefore, seeks to acknowledge and challenge unequal systems of power in cultural and economic products; but also to dismantle concepts of binariness as can be found in 'West and East'; 'tradition and innovation' and indeed, perhaps, high and low art. It works at the margins of cultural hegemonies and celebrates what Bhabha refers to as active hybridity: a hybrid identity proud of its multiple cultural heritage as a source of strength; it opens up dialogue and questions at the interstices of its being; it is a shifting and unsettled state.

What, then, of British puppetry as hybrid, postcolonial theatre? Puppetry has sometimes been a relative latecomer to the table of political debate, perhaps due to its low status; and yet, perhaps because of this low and ridiculous status, being aptly positioned to question hegemonies of power. Puppetry, no less than other art forms, operates within systems of power and cultural capital: possibly some British puppetry practitioners, keen for the art to be respected more, have adopted the tropes of high art: *War Horse*, with its multi-operated puppets, character-based and cathartic story, could be seen as 'high art', despite its own hybrid heritage: South African animal puppetry mixed with British physical performance. Certainly, those puppetry forms which have gained greatest recognition on the British theatre stage seem to be those drawn from contemporary puppetry techniques (sometimes referred to as *bunraku*-inspired forms)<sup>1</sup> rather than popular tradition and those where puppetry is seen as part of live theatre rather than a discrete and unique form working alone: we can see examples of this in *Madame Butterfly* at the English National Opera with puppets by Blind Summit<sup>2</sup>, *The Little Match Girl* at Shakespeare's Globe<sup>3</sup>, and *War Horse* itself. Although all of these examples employ the collaboration between forms, it is arguable whether they could be seen as examples of postcolonial puppetry, according to Lawson's definition above. Postcolonialism actively and consciously delves into and dismantles systems of power caused by colonialist encounter and draws attention to the workings and effects of colonialism. Attention might thus be drawn to race, ethnicity, economics or hybrid cultural identity. Perhaps, rather than appearing within mainstream puppetry performance on the West End stage, these performances take place, like critical multiculturalism itself, on the edges, in the streets and in the margins.

It is no accident that popular puppet theatre draws on extremes of size. The grotesque and carnivalesque, rebellious tropes, are vigorously present within puppet theatre with its emphasis on exaggeration, overgrowth and juxtaposition. It is not surprising, therefore, that postcolonialist discourse appears most clearly in both the smallest and the largest of puppet forms. Indeed, systems of power relations can most clearly be seen through direct representation of power in visual form. Both giant puppets and small glove puppetry form part of the popular puppet theatre canon. Giant processional forms are commonplace in British and European ritual festivals; glove puppetry, including, but not excluded to, Punch and Judy, the local form, has been an element within British festive celebrations for many centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Bunraku*, which references traditional Japanese puppetry, is widely used to refer to puppets which are operated by two, three or more puppeteers, often on a table-top or other surface. Other terms now commonly used are 'table-top puppetry' or 'multi-operated puppetry'.

<sup>2</sup> This production, which uses a puppet child, premiered in 2005 and is still touring.

<sup>3</sup> This production, in which the figure of the little match girl is played by a table-top puppet, ran between 2017 and 2018.

Contemporary puppet companies using giant forms have overwhelmingly used hybrid tradition to create spectacles which tend to the political, the multicultural and to satire. The dramatic and powerful performances by the extraordinary street theatre company Welfare State International drew extensively on giant puppet and processional traditions, the imagery often drawn from Caribbean or African influences. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of Welfare State International for British puppeteers and theatre-makers. Like Bread and Puppet in the USA, Welfare State epitomised not only festival modes of making performance but also political, postcolonial theatre of contestation. The company openly embraced diverse imagery, craft, folk narrative and egalitarian methods of creation to make work that opened up space for social critique in their outdoor spectacular and often pyrotechnic works. The company was also notable for the numerous training courses, workshops and residencies they undertook during their lifespan, giving rise to a number of significant companies and practitioners also working in this field. These included Puppetworks, known for its use of imagery, textiles and traditions from the Indian continent and working closely with the Anglo-Indian population. The carnival group Kinetika, run by Ali Pretty, was also influenced by Welfare State; Kinetika's work, like that of Puppetworks, deliberately foregrounded hybrid cultural forms with influences from Indian, Caribbean and African cultural forms. Similarly, later companies such as Walk the Plank and Emergency Exit Arts continued to work with cultural stories, heroines and narratives from contemporary third and fourth generation British people of hybrid heritage to showcase and discuss local stories. Key themes in the work of all these companies are participation; the desire to work in an inclusive way, with all sectors of society, but perhaps those traditionally excluded from discourses of power, through community-based workshops and projects; the ability of giant forms to occupy public space and hence define it, even if for a short space of time; and the desire to imprint a vision of culture which is drawn from diverse ethnic, religious and historical experiences upon people's perception of street performance. The performances by these companies offered up for scrutiny the relationship between politics, power and local narratives. Processional puppetry, as it is known worldwide, makes space for the vision of the community to be larger than itself.

The smaller form of glove puppetry, including Punch and Judy, the 'traditional puppet form' of the UK, is no less at the forefront of political and cultural critique. During the 1980s and 1990s, Parachute Puppet's *Punk and Judy* explored gender roles; this controversial performance saw Judy going to a women's group in the evening, leaving Punk to babysit. It should be noted, however, that while this production was hugely popular, it was not considered to be traditional Punch and Judy but rather a puppet show drawing on the Punch tradition. Later, Punch Professor Glyn Edwards created a version of Punch and Judy which addressed IVF and infertility. Whilst these shows can be seen to address social issues, however, they do not particularly position themselves as postcolonial narratives. More recently, however, the Bollywood *Punjeet and Judygee* show, which presents the main puppets as Indian, uses the Punch and Judy format to examine arranged marriages, domestic violence and infanticide, all through the comic interaction of glove puppets. It is still unusual in the UK to see a black or Indian Punch figure. Most black or Indian Punches, or hybrid cultural presentations of the show have taken place in festivals as giant puppets or as imagery of Punch and Judy appearing in another show. Glove puppets are, however, in their essence, self-reflexive in that they are often shown to be aware of their condition as temporary, manipulated or 'other'. This relates closely to the stance of postcolonialism, where identity is considered to be a result of history, local and contemporary encounter and individual choice; and above all, in flux. Punch and Judy is a

dramatic and changing form which comments constantly upon its world and where the figure of Mr Punch, representative of the underdog, or the common person, rebels constantly against hierarchy and against hegemonic power. We are told by Stuart Hall that tradition is always immersed in power relations: popular culture is inscribed with transgressive, subversive and sometimes repressive meanings (Cultural Studies: 1983). So the performance of tradition, as in the Punch and Judy show, is not a simple act of repetition of form; and the development of forms derived from multiple cultural sources is deeply connected to society, politics, economics and cultural meaning. 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. I will add to this Gerd Baumann's comments that 'tradition is a mutually improvised jam session' (Baumann 26). Certainly Punch comments regularly and coherently on contemporary political issues, such as Brexit, terrorism and cultural relations; the 'jam session' referred to by Baumann can be seen in the improvised dialogue and banter between audience and puppet. Glove puppets, then, can be seen to work within frameworks of postcolonialism due to their ability to change, comment and improvise.

We see hybridity perhaps most clearly within shadow puppetry in the UK. During the 1980s a shadow theatre company run by artist and educator Jessica Souhami created shadow puppet shows which presented Indian and African folk stories, with imagery drawn from Indian, British and Anglo-Indian cultures. The stories presented were traditional tales, without any particular discussion of contemporary cultural politics. They did, however, foreground the power of shadow puppetry to present diversity whilst acknowledging the roots of shadow puppetry in Asia (primarily India, Indonesia and China). These performances therefore provided a starting point for contemporary companies wishing to experiment with shadow forms. The company Indigo Moon, based in Hull in England, is made up of Indonesian and British puppeteers. The company is pioneering in presenting shadow shows in which a hybrid puppet form, drawn from Indonesian tradition and experiments undertaken by the company can present stories which are based deliberately in hybrid cultural settings. Similarly, much of the work that is undertaken in Universities and colleges by students of theatre embraces hybridity and dialogism within the work. We should not ignore the issues raised by Rustom Bharucha (1993) and others, in relation to Peter Brook's work, for example, about cultural appropriation, but it is clear 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. At the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, in a production of Tamika Gupta's *The Empress* in 2017, a play critical of the colonial experience which considers what it means to be 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> generation British Indian, shadow puppets were used to evoke memories of India whilst object theatre in the form of shoes and brown fabric puppets were used to suggest the children lost or displaced through colonialism. During the same year, production of *The Winter's Tale*, by students of Musical Theatre, the character of Mamilius was cast as a puppet child with a hybrid cultural status, forced into exile to consider his own identity and place in the world.

The UK now is in crisis. The country, more intensively than it has done for a long time, is debating, internally and externally, what its identity is in relation to nationalism, ethnicity, multiculturalism and world power. Puppetry, with its visual representation of bodies in relationship, in situations of power and control, and as critical, improvising commentators, offers us excellent scope for postcolonial discourse. Deeply self-reflexive and painfully conscious of its temporary and given

status, the potential here is immense. We live in a post-traditional and postcolonial world; puppetry, as outsider, rule breaker, trickster, permanently held in the state of in-between-ness, is an excellent medium for the shifting and unsettled state of hybrid identity.

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