

Nine questions on teaching directing for puppet theatre: a trans-cripping-re-creation of a dialogue¹

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Figure 1 - Cariad Astles at the conference *Practical approaches for directing puppetry: a dialogue*, during the event 3rd PRO-VOCATION in UDESC (2019). Photo: Jerusa Mary.

¹ Edited transcription of the conference-dialogue performed at the 3rd PRO-VOCATION International Meeting on Training in the Arts of Puppetry, on the 19 of May, 2019, at the Santa Catarina State University' Arts Center (UDESC), Brasil. The video version of the conference can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0oZ4aQFb0s&t=5136s>. Transcription: Mário Piragibe.



Figure 2 - Mário Piragibe at the conference *Practical approaches for directing puppetry: a dialogue*, during the event 3rd PRO-VOCATION in UDESC (2019). Photo: Jerusa Mary.



Figure 3 - Exercise at the conference *Practical approaches for directing puppetry: a dialogue*, during the event 3rd PRO-VOCATION in UDESC (2019). Photo: Jerusa Mary.

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Abstract: The essay is the transcription, with some editing, of the conference-dialogue presented by two trainer/teachers of puppetry during the 3rd PRO-VOCATION - International Meeting on Training in the Arts of Puppetry, in which matters related to directing for puppet theatre, and its training, were discussed from the starting point of nine guiding questions. The dialogues approached both technical and philosophical questions about the training of directors for puppet theatre and proposed to the audience some practical experiments as well as the writing of two manifestoes about what should be taught to trainee puppet theatre directors.

Keywords: Puppet Theatre. Stage directing. Directing for puppet theatre. Training for stage directing. Training for directing puppet theatre.

CARIAD: Last year [2018], when Mario and I were talking about the conference, I suggested that we start a dialogue and start writing to each other about directing for puppet theatre. So for five months we have been writing about directing puppet theatre, and its relationship to training. We don't have answers but lots of questions! We don't always agree; we argue, we disagree; we debate.

MARIO: You will see a sequence of slides, with a number of questions² that came up through our conversation; we came up with tons of questions, but we agreed to restrict it to nine.

CARIAD: It was supposed to be eight questions, but one slipped through!

² The nine questions are: 1. What does it mean to direct for puppet theatre?; 2. Does the director direct the puppet or the puppeteer?; 3. Which world do the puppets live in?; 4. Does the director have to know how to make or how to move puppets, to be a director of puppet theatre?; 5. What should you teach trainee directors of puppet theatre?; 6. How do you direct puppet theatre?; 7. What is a puppet?; 8. Why should puppets be on stage anyway?; 9. Is directing for puppetry puppeteering?

The partially improvised nature of the dialogue and lack of time meant that we were not able to fully address all the questions.

MARIO: The questions, like puppets, were rebellious...

CARIAD: So what can we say, Mario, about directing for puppet theatre? Puppet theatre is already a slippery, cheeky, mischievous, difficult to categorise area of work, so it seems that is no accident that there is very little that is written about directing for puppet theatre, and there is very little that has been discussed or said that goes towards explaining what this job is: how can we direct for puppet theatre? We are puppeteers and educators; we are also trying to understand how we can pass on skills; how we can open up questions about directing for puppet theatre. But the whole process of the discussion is slippery, rebellious, unreliable, uncategorizable, unwilling to cooperate. We are grappling with the thing that does not want to be named; the thing that does not want to be tied down. I know that in Russia, and in Eastern Europe there are four and five-year university courses dedicated to directing for puppet theatre. I work with young directors who are keen to understand the processes necessary for putting puppets on stage. But, I'm still often left without instructions, without steps. We should define our fields.

MARIO: Yeah, I think we should. The more we reach for questions than actual answers about that...

CARIAD: But there are lots of kinds of directors in puppet theatre, aren't there?

MARIO: Well, there's the first kind of director, who is a composer of space; there's a teacher/trainer of puppeteers. There's the puppeteer themselves. Another kind that is a theatrical director.

CARIAD: Is this a job in Brazil, this idea of being a puppet theatre director?

MARIO: I don't think so. We've got a couple of puppetry directors, but mostly we have puppetry creators.

CARIAD: Because we have directors who make their own shows, or creators; we have directors who are commissioned to make shows; we have directors who go into a live theatre show and direct the puppetry; we have those who direct somebody else's

vision, or somebody else's idea. We've got directors who work with text, who work solo, who adapt. We've got devising directors, ensemble directors. How can we bring all these ideas together to pass something on to students?

MARIO: This is a tricky thing. How can we reach a series of guidelines, a series of advices in order to define what – first of all – what the puppetry director is, what does s/he do? And, most of all, how can we teach somebody so that they can do this job?

CARIAD: Some people have said that directing is having *something to tell and finding the best way to tell it*. I am not even sure if this always the starting point. When I watch shows by Philippe Genty, Yngvild Aspeli, Fabrizio Montecchi, amongst many, I don't always know what they have told me, but I know how they made me feel. When I watched Theodora Skipitares' video *Blood at the Wedding yesterday*³, I knew the overall theme, but after watching it, I was more struck with how I felt having been shown this, not what I had been told. Making performance can be a phenomenological experience more than something to tell, opening up an idea, expressing ourselves, inviting audiences to share with us in something. For example, I found the presentation this morning by Elmira Kurilenko⁴ very interesting. But I am not sure that *conflict*

³ Astles mentions the conference presented by interdisciplinary artist *Theodora Skipitares* *Intermediality and creative processes*, presented on the evening of the 19th May in the PRO-VOCATION seminar. The conference can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zD5WkJ5HSCo>

⁴ The puppet theater director and professor of pedagogic sciences at the State Institute of Novobisirk (NSTI), Russia, presented a talk on 'Directors' analysis of cultural texts in exercises of mental experiments, alongside Viktoria Bogdanova, professor of the Department of musical education and speech in the same institute, and mediated by Anna Ivanova, Professor in the Theater Studies Department of St. Petesburg Arts Academy, on the morning of 19th May in the PRO-VOCATION seminar. The talk can be accessed from the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJOVsXZhQzs>

in puppet theatre is always a starting point for puppets. For sure, puppets have conflict and they enter conflict. But it struck me that the puppet on stage is more about **desire for** something than about conflict. Would you agree with this?

MARIO: I think that a puppet is a dramatic experience in itself. So, whenever you have a puppet on stage there's some kind of dramatic quality that is drawn to the whole space around it. In this sense we can get some kind of dramaticity, some kind of theme, by simply putting a puppet on stage. There's a narrative quality in the material. There's a dramatic essence in merely dealing with objects, colours and the feelings they portray.

CARIAD: So, what is the difference between a puppet theatre director and a puppet theatre creator, maker, author, auteur, writer (in the sense of physical, visual writing), dramaturg, deviser, shaper, finisher, creative genius? We have heard much about composition, dramatic writing, finding your own voice, finding the path, enabling and facilitating individual creation (we have privileged this); about collage, narrative, process, dialogue, objects and a fair bit about meaning. In some way we are looking for a grammar, a structure for training in directing. A kind of notation. Rules.

MARIO: Rules!

CARIAD: Rules. We don't really have a tradition of a puppet theatre director in the UK. Puppetry training in a formalised context in the UK is only around 15-20 years old in any case, and this training is mainly focused on three things: how to make puppets; how to perform with puppets and how to experiment with puppets. There isn't any bespoke training for directing for puppet theatre, except as small units or modules within bigger programmes and these seem to be mostly concerned with experimentation. A very few people work as puppet theatre directors, and there are of course many puppeteers who direct or create their own shows. But we have got this catch-all phrase: *puppetry practitioner*. *Puppetry practitioners* are often called into live theatre productions to "direct the puppets", which generally means to train the puppeteers or

performers to assist in the successful performance of the puppets. I am not sure if this is a puppet theatre director or a trainer in animation and outside eye; a dramaturg and shaper of performance. There are many outside eyes who work with performing puppeteers, who require someone to assist with the directing and visualizing of their work. There are directors of live theatre who would like to have a go with puppets, but these are not puppet theatre directors although they like to learn a few rules about puppet performance. But the role of puppet theatre director, as separate from puppeteer, puppet designer and performer, is a rare and unusual thing. We can't separate the roles as clearly as seems possible within live actors' theatre, and this leads me to see quite clearly that directing for the puppet stage is quite different from directing for live theatre. Some would disagree with this in that both wish to tell a story and find the best means to tell it; puppet theatre tends to use more visual and multidisciplinary means to do so. But the exploration of directing has highlighted for me the quite uniqueness of the puppet stage and the puppet world itself.

So, if we are thinking about pedagogy, as we are in Brazil, and because he has already been mentioned within this conference, I turn to Paulo Freire yet again in my life for these essential questions: "What knowledge and skills [about directing for puppet theatre] are worth learning"? And, secondly, "where does this knowledge exist? How is it acquired?" (LYONS, 2018)

Rather than telling you what we think, we are going to try and co-create this, and according to Freire. I quote Freire again, he says – not of puppetry, but we can think about it in relation to puppetry: "When I understand an object, rather than memorizing the profile of the object, I know that object and I produce the knowledge of that object. The reader (or in this case, the puppeteer/puppetry director) becomes co-author of the meaning of the object" (FREIRE, apud LYONS, 2001). And to misquote Freire further, who asks questions about fundamental human nature, let us ask questions about fundamental puppet nature: "What is a puppet?"

How does it differ from other species? What are the limits of puppetry potential?”. So, passing on to our questions, Mario, **what is the meaning of directing puppet theatre?**

MARIO: I guess this is the bigger question we are dealing with here. Because it is likely that directing for puppetry is an activity focused on searching for the meanings of putting puppets on stage, also finding ways to set in motion such meanings. It’s such an important word for us, meaning, that points to several fundamental directions, which enables us to discuss from dramaturgy, to teaching technique and professional ethics.

I can’t address to this question without considering how it pushes our reflections towards a kind of a hermeneutic/semantic consideration of the puppet on stage. Let me think: authors like [Steve] Tillis (1992) (creation and control) and Bensky (social satire and *féerie*) come to mind. [Roger-Daniel] Bensky’s (1969) identification of a couple of *main themes*, talks mostly about playwriting, and Tillis investigates the phenomenon of puppet performance. I guess both approaches make some sort of contact with issues to do with *mise-en-scène*, because it boils up to how puppets are shown on stage, and how the audience is expected to perceive them.

There are some approaches we can mention in order to discuss the meanings that emerge when you have puppets on stage. I think it’s unavoidable to be caught in the game of *alive-not alive* suggested by the simplest puppet play. Manipulation in sight highlights relationships of creation, freedom, power and violence between individuals and for individuals as they face powers such as nature, collective structures, ideas, so on (all of this is kind of political, isn’t it?). I’m saying that the in-sight manipulator has a way to highlight these relations, but I think it’s also valid when the puppeteer is hidden or plays no active part in the action.

Tillis points out how the double-vision effect is useful for discussing matters of creation and control with puppets, that are useful for deepening contact with existential and political themes. In my opinion puppets can be far more competent than living actors

in such displays. But I guess that the discussion begins to reach its central point as we return to the thematic analysis of Bensky. Fantasy and satire are different portrayals of existential conditions that are outside regular humanity (physical and social-political). For me, puppets are always moving away from the regular semblance of human condition to show humanity in its rawest, deepest face. It makes me assume that puppets have been used to talk about the human condition in political, psychological and metaphysical ways in depth.

They can discuss our physical boundaries by subverting (adding a tension to) them in at least two basic ways, being the first one the ability to go beyond them (flying, enduring violence...). The second one – which could be taken as the opposite of the first one – could be the frailty of its “life” as it’s perceived; I mean: how a single step, gaze or reaction can be acknowledged as an awesome endeavour and not the simplest thing to be made or seen. And it adds considerable strength and meaning to the smallest actions and challenges, stepping back to give new light to the dilemmas and struggles of “mere” existence.

This can be put into a social and political sense, but also in a metaphysical, holistic one: The puppet is outside law and society as it is **outside physical order**, and its power matches its helplessness, turning it into an interesting kind of jester. You know, so small, fragile and easy to obliterate, it has “safe pass” to defy power and expose our worst flaws relentlessly. This matched strength and frailty is also related to what the puppet means, since I sometimes think of a puppet as something familiar to an ideogram or a *hai ku*, that balances a simple form and a rich and complex meaning.

I guess that’s why we are frequently so deeply caught by simple, brief, puppet appearances. I have heard a lot about how puppet performances usually lack more complex dramaturgy, being often poor and repetitive. Well, leaving aside the (obvious) fact that there’s (always) plenty of uninspired material going around, a single puppet being moved at the corner of a room or street, following a

sequence of actions that barely shows a plot, may have the ability to conjure a dramatic quality that is not just based on the simplicity of its acting movements, but that also adds this theatrical, dramatic, quality to all of its surroundings.

Since the puppet sends us back to the very principles of existence it deals with the perception of the awesome endeavour that is to simply exist, it is also a doorway for the acknowledgement-imagination of what lies beyond regular existence. They guide and discuss humanity presenting what lies deep inside or beyond our imagination.

CARIAD: What does this mean for the director?

MARIO: I think it's another question, actually: should a director add plot and lots of unnecessary tension to the play, when the mere appearance of the puppet in a play is already full of this urge for life, this *dramaticity* that lies on the very struggle of the puppet to be seen as something alive.

CARIAD: So, the first question, or the first point, if you like, is to take a stance about this ontological meaning of the puppet as a performer. In other words: does the director need to address this question of life and non-life, the lived and non-lived experience of the puppet on stage? If the puppet is a constructed being; a designed entity or a symbol, then it suggests that to put the puppet on stage is already a kind of artifice. But in my experience of puppetry, the phenomenological experience of puppetry is a stark and startling experience of non-artificiality. The actual lived and not-lived experience of the puppet on stage thrusts us, violently at times, into the consideration of our very aliveness. So, for me the first question for the director is their own stance in relation to puppets. *Should* the director of puppet theatre always address the conundrum of power, life and non-life? Or does s/he do so inherently, even if not intentionally? Can the puppet even begin to tell a story with characters if the central concerns are shouting: are we alive at all? Can we even begin to tell a story if we don't know this yet?

And who has the power here? Anna Ivanova⁵ talked about this facet of the puppet as being a ritual being. I completely agree with this. The puppet is always in this in-between place. Last October, Mario, when we were in Paris at Théâtre des Mains Nues⁶, you might remember Eloi Recoing's workshop when he insisted that the puppet is always a *symbol* of death. I don't know if it is a symbol of death, but for me it is always a recollection of death and of the other world where death and other things live. So, for me one of the first questions is the director's stance in relation to what the puppet is and where it lives; and therefore, what its relation is with life and non-life. You know I am a little bit obsessed with this idea of the ghosting of the puppet, and how the puppet can be alive and *ghosted* at the same time. So I struggle with the idea that the main task of the puppeteer is only to bring life to the puppet. Is the director's job to facilitate life to come into the puppets or to recall death? I am with [Tadeusz] Kantor, [Roman] Paska, Dondoro [Puppet Theatre] in all of these questions about whether the puppet should try to show it's alive, or whether it should show that it is also not alive. For me the director's task is to show these worlds where death, non-life and other things coexist with the transitory and often repeated illusion of life, as is the case with Ilka Schönbein, Neville Tranter, Duda Paiva and other "great" puppet theatre directors/auteurs/creators. The illusion of life is always transitory with the puppet, isn't it?

MARIO: Yes, it is. I don't know if a director should always come up with stories about this kind of conundrum, this dilemma, but I don't think it should be put aside. I think it shouldn't be *disconsidered*; it's always there.

⁵ Astles mentions the same talk as mentioned in note 4.

⁶ Astles mentions the *Laboratoire International des Enseignements dans le Théâtre de Marionnettistes*, organised by Théâtre Sans Toit and the Théâtre aux Mains Nues, that took place in October of 2018 in Paris, France. At that meeting the conversations between Astles and Piragibe about presenting a dialogue about puppetry directing began.

CARIAD: We need some volunteers, five people. You are all puppeteers; we are not judging any level of puppetry here. We just want to try something. We are going to give you some puppets and we would like you in any way that you have been trained, or you have already worked, to show life in the puppet.

[Exercise]

Ok. So, we have some beautiful puppetry. Puppets showing life. Now we're going to do something else. Let's say, just because we know this story, that we are doing Romeo and Juliet. What we would like you to do now, in any way that you can, is to show that you have life, but you also recollect death. At the same time, simultaneously. Remember that you are doing life and non-life at the same time.

[Exercise]

So this is point one of the grammar we are trying to create for the puppet theatre director: where they stand on this continuum of life and death, or life and non-life.

Point two: where does the puppet live? Which world does the puppet live in?

The puppet lives in a different world from the human world.

MARIO: The puppet comes from a place of its own.

CARIAD: Point two is to understand what this world is. To allow us a glimpse into that world. We can't know because we're not of it. To be able to surpass the very limits of the human body by flying, breaking, coming back together, having really long arms or legs, two or three heads, for instance, this all seemed very sensible ways of organising a body to me. (Why is the human body so limited)? Philippe [Choulet] said, because I have a prolapsed disc in my back: "you have the misfortune of having a human body", and this is absolutely true. The puppet has a different kind of body

and comes from a different kind of world. So, we would like to do a second exercise.

MARIO: Yes, we're trying to get to some things like: what are the rules of these worlds, what is the shape of these worlds? It has something to do with writing with techniques of fantasy; about how to give materiality to the worlds created. This usually has to do with paying attention to the smallest things belonging to the structure of cultural behaviour, like: how do the figures in this world greet themselves; how do they eat; express love?

CARIAD: So, what we would like you to do for this second exercise is: each of your puppets, maybe one at a time, show us something about the world in which you live in. Show us your world in a way. And show us what the rules are in that world. And you can use the stools, the fabric, the table, anything you like. The puppet's world.

[People work on the exercise]

Let's remember the puppet knows this world. The puppets know where they live. So (observing the exercise), in this world, the puppets have puppeteers that are confused. And the other thing that is happening here is that we understand that the physical condition of the puppet is different. It's again from a different world. The physical possibilities and limits of this puppet and of all of the puppets are completely different.

MARIO: Since the puppet is outside regular physical order, what are the rules of the world? In which order does it transit, in which order does it live?

CARIAD: So, we've got three points in our grammar so far, or four points, I think. We've got:

1. Where is the puppet in the *alive-non alive* spectrum?
2. What is the world inhabited by this puppet?
3. What are the rules of that world?
4. And the fourth one is: the puppet is somehow outside physical order. It has a different kind of physical relationship.

MARIO: So, let's move on to the next question. Does the director have to know how to make or how to move puppets, to be a director of puppet theatre?

I guess it's important to know how to relate with material. I'm not sure if the puppet theatre director should have full training in skills such as sewing, carving or drawing but I think it could be useful to learn about the material, and about ourselves in the process, as Osvaldo Gabrieli ⁷so generously showed us in his workshop. The point is to develop acquaintance with materials and skills in order to set the creative mind to how to explore meanings through them and allow the inanimate to express properly. Building your own puppet could be a good exercise for students, for it allows you to deal with different materials and techniques, work with the meeting of methods and expressivity, address to the limitations of artist and thing, urge the student to try to communicate with the resources. It shows that the building process is a dialogue - or a dance (sometimes a fight!).

CARIAD: Here is something that Ida Hledíková says of post-traditional puppetry, but we can use it to talk about directing puppetry too:

Post-traditional puppet theatre ... is a form of puppet theatre that has attributes of the theatre of objects, usually involving figurative puppets, and that **deliberately engages with the elements of traditional puppet theatre dramaturgy, including inspiration, puppetry technique and specific staging procedures...** (HLEDÍKOVÁ, 2015, p.2019, my emphasis).

So, what does it mean for the director to: “engage with elements of puppet theatre dramaturgy, inspiration, technique and staging...”? What is an element of puppet theatre dramaturgy? I think this relates to the use of artificial bodies; the use of type,

⁷ The founder and director of Grupo XPTO (Brasil) ran a workshop called *The materials and objects we manipulate daily have a story to tell* on the morning of 17th May in the PRO-VOCATION seminar.

material, object rather than unitary character; the sense of the other world of the puppets; action rather than words (in some cases); questions of existence and the relationship between the immediacy of the puppet in action and its metaphysical conception of itself.

Technique – that’s a question –, framing devices; movement systems; appearances and disappearances; relationship to humans where appropriate; how the puppet is animated.

What should we teach them, trainee directors, of puppet theatre?

MARIO: What is most important?

CARIAD: Is there a hierarchy of things? What would you put at the top?

MARIO: For myself, I would put at the top the relationship with people.

CARIAD: What about the visual sensibility? What about the exploration of visual arts, scenography? For example, is it important for a puppet theatre director to know about dance? Or to know classical texts (including ones for puppets)? Choices often have to be made!

MARIO: Because there’s never enough time, never enough resources, never enough patience (from the students), and something that is really important is: how can you know what people will come to be educated in?

CARIAD: Do you think that puppet theatre lends itself more to the devising or ensemble way of working, because so much puppet theatre emerges from visual exploration and experimentation with materials, or does it instead require (this is not black and white; these are more like *poles*) precise action, movement, choreography, relationship, coexistence, codependence. The performers being directed as shapes, as geometry as in terms of visual choreography, as though they were things themselves. I’ve worked with both, as you know, as a performer I’ve worked with directors that left me/us to work out the choreography and interaction between ourselves, and the emphasis was on this interaction between the things and people, the things and the humans. And I’ve worked with direc-

tors who have told me where to stand, which arm to move, where to stop moving that arm, which little finger to lift, and so on. As someone coming out of a theatre training, I was rather shocked by the latter form when I started to work as a puppeteer, because I was used to question, to understand and to know the reasons and the purpose of the piece, and I was being told to “do that because it looks good”. Sometimes puppet theatre seems to be about that (it’s a bit reductive). That’s why all the earlier questions are so important: where does the puppet live? Who is it? Which world does it exist within?

MARIO: You introduced me to a really interesting director, Steve Tiplady who has a [particular] way of working with the actors and puppets. He says [to the cast]: “what do you think happens now? What would you like to do with the puppets?” Steve was leading this young bunch of puppeteers to be co-authors of the play in terms of action, dramaturgy, how to occupy the space and build their own puppets. I can also quote another experience I had here in Brazil. There was a show that Miguel had directed that was called *O Velho da Horta*⁸ (Old man of the [vegetable] garden). For the premiere, the play was rehearsed for the performers to do whatever was scripted, but as the performances progressed, the actors began to improvise, and the improvisation grew and grew meaningful and funny, so this play ended up as devised rather than a previously designed play.

CARIAD: I was thinking that we’ve been talking for something like 40 minutes, and I guess you need a break. So, what we would like you to do is make a manifesto of what you think directors of puppet theatre should be taught in their training.

(People from the audience begin to suggest things that should be taught in a ‘directing for puppet theatre’ course and the two teachers wrote down their suggestions. The results were as follow)

⁸ The show was based on the play by Portuguese dramatist Gil Vicente, and had its premiere in Rio de Janeiro in 2002.

Manifesto 1: What puppeteers think should be taught in a directing for puppetry course:

Music	Looking	Playing
Silence & listening	Listening to the actor	Observation
Breath	Synthesising	Empathy
Ilusion	Language	Affection
Perception	Good communication	Guiding
Memory	Searching for pain	Amnesia
Detachment	Patience	Psychology
Forgetting	Thinking	Inclusion
Boldness	Reading of signs	Doubt
Provocation	Quantum Physics	Composition
Openness	Defying gravity	Humanity
Art history	Analysis and interpretation of texts	Passion/Pleasure
Viewpoints (Bogart-Landau)	Composition	Stretching
Juggling	Mime and dance	Looking at the magic of the stage
Tradition	Ethics	Starting from zero
Light and sound design		Mechanics
		Bodily awareness
		Composition*
		Technical knowledge of the marionette

*The word *composition* appears three times.

CARIAD: So, the next question is: the same one! How do you direct for puppet theatre? García Lorca of course told us that the puppet does not want to be directed. The director says, in the play of Don Cristóbal:

Don Cristobal, get on stage.

Don Cristobal: I'm peeing.

Director: No, Don Cristobal, you have to get married.

Don Cristobal: Get married?! I'm going to the bull fight (LORCA, 2012, our translation).

We know that the puppet doesn't want to be directed in the traditional sense of directing.

MARIO: There's another example that I can remember, from Ilo Krugli in *História de Lenços e Ventos*⁹ (*Tales of Winds and Handkerchiefs*), when the kids want to play with the puppets and the puppets have locked themselves inside a chest, and then they had to come up with a play from pieces of newspaper. This shows us how rebellious puppets tend to be.

CARIAD: I am very interested in a word you've raised a couple of times in our conversations, which leads me to the next phase in this grammar that we're trying to create: instability. The puppet is *unstable*, and this is part of its power. Earlier, in the videos Didier Plassard showed us, we saw puppets made of ice; this is an unstable material because it will melt and disappear, and this is exactly what happens in the performance of by Théâtre de l'Entrouvert. The puppet is unstable; it exists in another place, with different rules; we don't know what those rules are. The body of the puppet is unstable, because it can be destroyed, and can die, or it can come apart. In performance terms it can play any character, dutifully or rebelliously, however it chooses. It expresses a kind of uncertainty

⁹ The play, from 1974, defines the birth of Ventoforte Theatre, directed by Krugli and represents a milestone for puppet theatre and theatre for children in Brazil.

about existence and self. This is a dangerous and fragile phenomenon. So the director must be aware of this fragile and dangerous sense. Victor Molina said of the puppet, that it can't die, or it can only die when the puppet's body has been completely and definitively destroyed (and even then, I am not sure if it is dead as its memory lingers); because a 'dead' puppet body on stage always contains potential. When a puppet dies on stage, we know it can always come back, but if the puppet's body is burnt, destroyed in some way, maybe it's dead, then. But it's unstable, and I think that this instability is one of the powers of puppet theatre and makes us so fascinated by it. How does the director deal with this potentiality?

MARIO: As it happens many times in any kind of theatre direction there are few – if not no – strict rules. As much as we manage to set up directing courses, there is one true remaining thing about directing for puppet theatre: that it is a difficult, personal task. Sometimes a particular and painful process you have to go through in front a lot of people who are counting on you. Irina [Niculescu] said earlier in the meeting that the puppet director is a mixture between a poet and an architect¹⁰. So one of the ways of understanding it is as a mixture of someone who works from their own intimacy and someone who needs the help of dozens of people to attend the needs of others. It's not just how you envision a play, but also how you can mobilise different kinds of resources in order to reach a glimpse of the original plan.

CARIAD: What about this other question, that you know is one of my other obsessions: this question of reverence, reverence for material: religious devotion, care, love, the caress of the puppet, for the material or figure. Actually, I was very excited that some people

¹⁰ Piragibe mentions the conference presented by Romanian puppetry teacher and director Irina Niculescu PROVOCATION 2. *Defining the stage director and teaching theater directing* in the afternoon of the 15 of May in the PRO-VOCATION Seminar. The conference can be accessed from the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kR7HJqUEk3g>

started talking about empathy and humanity in this manifesto, because for me the puppet is *returning to ritual*, it's moving away from technique and returning to animism. We are no longer in a world, thank God!, where the human is ascendant and dominant over everything. We are returning to a world, I hope, where we are part of a web of things, where we depend on things: we depend on matter, we depend on nature, we depend upon each other. And this is a strength, not a weakness. We've been trained to think of the puppet as a weak thing, a fragile thing, a vulnerable thing, because it needs to be helped, it needs to be given life, it needs to be supported by one, two, three, sometimes more manipulators and performers. But this also elevates it into a kind of strength: it's not that it's weak; it has four, five, ten attendants worshipping it. I believe we are returning to this power of the object, material, figure, puppet, in terms of religious devotion. I've been talking recently about the exquisite sense of care, and the exquisite sense of caressing that I experience when I'm performing with a puppet. You said in one conversation, Mario, that you are not the kind of person to treat a puppet like this. But this reverence is part of the process.

MARIO: I remember when we were driving back from Exeter University to your house and you were not happy about the work made by the students that afternoon. They came up with a couple of nice moments, indeed, but you were *caught* by the way the material was treated, and you were not pleased. Yes, I think that sometimes to respect the material and the puppet is just to make what must be made, to be iconoclastic and deal with the violence and instability it emanates. But that's not lack of love; that's still respect. But it's not that easy: I guess it takes a great amount of sensibility and willingness to understand the puppet's needs. It can be hard to get this at a first glance, so a cautious and caring procedure is always advisable.

CARIAD: I remember once in London we held a roundtable to discuss what the puppet could teach the actor. We had a number of

rather important British puppet theatre practitioners and directors, and different opinions. Stephen Mottram, an expert marionettist, likened the puppet to a musical instrument; you learn the technical process, you learn the anatomy, and its qualities, and when you are able to ‘play’ it, you can fly. In that same conversation, the director of Improbable Theatre, Phelim McDermott disagreed: he said *we don’t need to play the puppet well; we should be irreverent about the puppet*. I have seen lots of apparently casual and ridiculous handling which is breathtaking in breaking the frames; this is often what traditional puppetry is based on: not visual handling. I’d argue, however, that even in that subversive and silly handling, there is a reverence in its own right; the instability and recognition of the instability; the puppet in its mystique, its endeavor at being “something else”, “something beyond”, captures that very mystique as it is slippery; it escapes; it prays and it farts simultaneously.

MARIO: I guess there’s a difference between treating a puppet with violence and treating a puppet with disregard, with lack of attention. On the same subject, but a different approach, I remembered something said by Neville Tranter that November (2017) in Charleville. He was remembering when he directed an experienced actress (not a puppeteer) in a scene in which she had to manipulate a puppet. Tranter said that she treated the puppet with such respect and caressing that the very way she approached it, even before the beginning of the scene was already deeply dramatic and meaningful.

CARIAD: Should we ask the next question?

MARIO: Absolutely! **What is a puppet?**

CARIAD: You know this is not an interesting question for me (I am being deliberately provocative). I’m thinking about our conversation in the Italian café on Thursday evening. Let’s ask the audience: how many puppets do you think there are in the world? Ok, if that question doesn’t work, how many potential puppets are there in the world? Ok, we know the puppets are not in the world...Ok, so let’s not stick to the world.

MARIO: Everything can be a puppet. I really love this thing that you were saying about the ghosting of the puppet. Like there's an immaterial world where there are ghosts floating around and they can inhabit material from time to time, and that makes almost everything become a puppet.

CARIAD: The puppet is haunted for me and there's nothing in the world that *cannot* be a puppet. Nothing is not a puppet. Perhaps Nothing is a character, though, and then could be a puppet. Let us assume that the puppets are all there all the time and are just waiting to inhabit the material we offer up for them. We do not make puppets, we host them for a while and we ghost them. We find them; they arrive and then they leave.

In simple terms, do we go with Proschan's definition that the puppet is a "material image of humans, animals or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance"? But that's an old definition, and I'm not sure if it's enough to define a puppet. It's more a question of potential. Then we have the question of **why should the puppets be on stage, anyway?**

MARIO: In my particular opinion, wherever a puppet is there is a stage behind it.

CARIAD: We have puppets in museums, right? But there are only puppets in museums because they are either in a state of *having performed* or in a state of *could perform*. So there only can be puppets in the museum if they have potential for performance.

MARIO: Yes, I tend to think that when you look at a puppet, even if it's in a museum, there's a kind of dramatic tension that, I don't know, the history, the expression, the performative potential, maybe you can transport this potential action to inside your head. Whenever I see a puppet I see theatre.

CARIAD: Basil Jones from Handspring says the primary work of the puppet is the performance of life. As you may have discerned, I am not satisfied with this idea. But he says something more interesting later on; that the primary purpose of the puppet in its essence, is the *quest for life* (my emphasis). I will add to this

that one of the puppet's primary purposes may be not the quest for life, or life itself, but **to test out life**. *The Emperor of Atlantis* is an extraordinary opera written in Terezin concentration camp in 1943 by the composer Viktor Ullman. In the opera, the Emperor abolishes death, but later on, seeing that this has not served him well, begs Death to return. Death makes a deal with him; he will only return if the Emperor is the first to **try out the new death**. Puppets do this: but they try life out. But they don't always stay for long. I'd like to read a bit from the beginning of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*:

In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. We knew no boundaries. We played much because we were free. There were always those amongst us who had just returned from the world of the living. They had returned inconsolable for all the love they had left behind, all the suffering they hadn't redeemed, all that they hadn't understood, and for all that they had barely begun to learn before they were drawn back to the land of origins. There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living (1993, p.1).

So, to get back to the questions of why puppets should be on stage, I think they are trying out living for a bit. This quest may or may not be achieved, but perhaps then the work of the director is to *assist with or to impede this quest for life*.



Figure 4 - Exercise at the conference *Practical approaches for directing puppetry: a dialogue*, during the event 3rd PRO-VOCATION in UDESC (2019). Photo: Jerusa Mary.

So ...: **What's the task of the puppetry director?**

All of this means that for me the task of the director in putting puppets on stage is to create a space for the spirits amongst us to inhabit the material of the puppets for a while. It's creating a focus for ideas. Opening up a container for poetry, politics, purpose.

These are not answers; they are provocations, these six things:

1. Life and non-life;
2. Which world do they live in;
3. What are the rules of this world;
4. Being outside physical order as we understand it;
5. Being ideograms, or visual sentences;
6. And number six: they are unstable.

MARIO: And for this final moment, as we were saying in the beginning, it all boils down to the first question: "what does it mean to put puppets on stage?" I guess that directing for puppetry is something that takes into consideration that a puppet already carries a huge dramatic potential in its mere display. I remember

when Patricia Gomis¹¹ made that wooden puppet, the child with the big eyes, sit in front of the audience and simply let it be there; the eyes of the puppet screamed at us about its longing to life, right in front of us. Partly a wooden figure playing with our imagination, and partly the memory of a dead child.

CARIAD: We are going to do the second manifesto. This time it's not you telling us. We would like to give you these training puppets and the puppets will tell us what they want to tell the directors. The puppet can tell us what to write or, if you prefer, the puppet can tell the puppeteer what to write.

(What follows is the result of the second manifesto)

Manifesto 2: What PUPPETS think should be taught to puppet theatre directors

Freedom	Stop thinking of teenagers as children	Thinking
Get to know the periphery	Voice	Sensitivity
Be heard	Partnership	Voice
Balance	Be well treated	
Be well manipulated	Respect	
The puppet does things puppeteers can't		
How to have a dialogue		

¹¹ Piragibe mentions the show *Petit Bout de Bois* presented by Senegalese performer Patricia Gomis in the evening of the 15 of May in the PRO-VOCATION Seminar.

CARIAD: Ok, thank you! We have made two manifestoes, and we will share them with you. We had one last question, but it's already been answered, I think....

MARIO: **Is directing for puppetry puppeteering?**

CARIAD: Yes!

MARIO: Definitely!

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