Premises and paradoxes

Little has been written in English about training for the puppeteer, and that which has been written focuses predominantly on understanding the nature of the puppet, not that of the puppeteer; or concentrates on exercises and techniques. The pioneering twentieth-century Russian director Sergei Obraztsov suggested experimenting with the qualities of 'puppet-ness' (in contrast to the puppet as imitator of the human). (Obraztsov 1938: 78) The Swedish puppeteer and director Michael Meschke elaborated a 'grammar' for puppetry action, through dividing and classifying types of training techniques. These included exercises such as the dead point, which he referred to as the state of concentration necessary in order to initiate clearly defined action, achieved through four clear steps: emptying the mind; abstracting the thought; focusing on the immediate task; initiating the task with passion (Meschke 1988: 54); he also analysed different categories of looks and leans, extensions, counterbalance, rhythmic and balance exercises and patterns of speed and focus engineered to develop the dynamic potential of the puppet. (Meschke 1988: 48 -- 68) Puppetry training, however, clearly goes beyond technical exercises (although these are very useful), and can be considered as a deep approach that seeks to understand the basic essence of the art of the puppeteer and their approach towards the animated object.

It is apparent that the practice of puppetry is the inherent practice of paradoxes. These paradoxes clearly differentiate puppetry from live theatre since, generally speaking, live actors wish to be seen and for the audiences to identify them as performing presences within a dramatic context. Puppet theatre presents us with a wholly different set of stylistic intentions: the puppeteer's intention is generally *not* to be seen, or if seen, as is usually now the case in contemporary puppetry, then *not* perceived as the primary focus of attention. Despite the puppeteers' so-called scenic 'invisibility', signified semiotically in contemporary theatre through devices such as the wearing of 'blacks', covering the head with caps or hats, not making eye contact with the audience, and so on, they are required by the dramatic purposes of the performance, to generate and transmit huge amounts of energy towards the inanimate figure, material or thing, to create a sense of presence beyond their own bodies. This is the first paradox, and consequently the main question for consideration here: what is the training of a sensibility which requires the performer to locate their focus of expression *outside* the body whilst keeping the source of energy *within* the body.

A further paradox concerns the presence, absence or projection of ego on stage: how can the puppeteer successfully work with a sense of self whilst serving something else? Is puppetry in performance therefore an act of generosity? Lastly, for the purposes of this article, (in the Western context, notwithstanding the claims of animism, shamanism and so on) how can the puppeteer work with opposing concepts of inanimate matter (for example, wood) and the abundant flow of energy (as in, say, a waterfall) required to animate that matter within view of an audience? Hence the title of this article: wood and waterfall. By 'energy' in relation to the processes of animation of a puppet, object or material, I mean the dynamic combination of force, movement and physical intention, organised differently through varying speeds, tensions, rhythms and stillnesses to give the impression of life in an animate object; by 'energy' in relation to the puppeteer about to animate something or between animating one thing and another, I refer to the acquired and

developed sense of *potential* force about to be used directionally and intentionally to indicate presence of the performing object. I seek, therefore, to analyse an approach which is a necessary process towards developing the pre-expressivity of the puppeteer: the development of this 'potential force' which is a pre-requisite for indicating presence and life in the animated object. I use the term pre-expressivity in reference to Barba's definition: 'The level which deals with how to render the actor's energy scenically alive, that is, with how the actor can become a presence which immediately attracts the spectator's attention, is the pre-expressive level … the aim … is to strengthen the performer's scenic *bios*.' (Barba in Keefe and Murray 2007: 256)

Fluidity and inter-dependence

The context for puppetry training in Western Europe (I exclude Eastern Europe here due to the development of the large-scale puppet schools under Communism) has altered hugely over the last twenty years or so, through an increase in awareness and support for the skills of the professionally trained puppeteer. This has led to a greater consciousness and hence a rise in puppetry as part of live theatre, in particular in visual and physical performance, devised theatre, circus and so on. Jurkowski notes that the actor-puppeteer as multifunctional performer replacing the idea of the puppeteer-manipulator first emerged during the post-war years. (Jurkowski 2000: 46) The puppeteer is now frequently called on to manipulate puppets as one *part* of a piece of live theatre. There are several trends within contemporary puppetry, but two still predominate in Western Europe: firstly, where the puppeteer is symbolically invisible (as in some of the horse manipulators in the National/Handspring collaboration of War Horse); and that where the puppeteer is clearly a stage performer (as in The Little Angel's 2008 production of The Giraffe, the Pelly and I), contributing to the articulation and animation of the whole dramatic event through combining skills in storytelling, manipulation and acting. In War Horse, giant puppet horses are manipulated by several puppeteers: all are visible to the audience, but only the lead manipulator plays a role, that of horse trainer/groom; the others are *de facto* invisible, and are only on stage to manipulate the horses. In contrast, in The Giraffe, the Pelly and I, the puppeteers play various roles throughout the performance, alternating between storytellers, manipulators of different puppet characters, scene changers, singers and character performers. Neither of these trends are mutually exclusive and the paradoxes expressed above apply to both, since in the first, the 'invisible' puppeteer expresses energy through the puppet they are manipulating, and in the second, the multifunctional puppeteer 'throws' their energy where it is needed. The New York-based director Roman Paska suggests that contemporary puppet theatre needs to adopt a 'primitivist' approach where both puppeteer and puppet are constantly present: 'Prmitivism differs from illusionism in consciously directing audience focus back and forth between the outward sign and the inner process of simulation'. (Paska 1990: 41) It is clear that contemporary puppetry needs to combine skills of neutrality and invisibility with skills of comprehending matter (such as wood) and skills of transferring, channelling or projecting energy through focus and attention. Within puppet theatre in global contexts, of course, the symbolic invisibility of the puppeteer is addressed in a multitude of codified ways such as having the puppets' speech distorted, using stylized movement or allowing puppets not being operated to hang in full view of the audience. (Tillis 1992: 42) In Western puppet theatre, however, it is necessary for the puppeteer to move fluidly between modes. Meschke maintains the importance of each element within performance remaining faithful to its principles so as to achieve the best kind of synthesis of the arts. (Meschke 1988: 35) Schechner, however, comments that: 'Masks and puppets actually constitute second

beings who interact with the human actors.' (Schechner 2002: 171) This contradicts a traditionalist view of puppet theatre where the puppets are protagonists, and emphasises the relational view of puppetry, where the puppet is an iconic figure which unites the performance elements. I would suggest that the training of the puppeteer requires them to see themselves as part of an ecological system of scenic inter-dependence which requires them to work generously at all times. The term 'generous' here refers to a process of training and performance where the performer is consistently required to focus their attention away from themselves, towards the performing object. The concept of the generous puppeteer, therefore, is less associated with the development of a puppet character which is expressed through the skill of the puppeteer, but rather with the development of the entire performance as animation through the movement of attention and direction towards the object(s) of focus.

Neutrality

In training the puppeteer to remain neutral and unobserved during performance, great attention must be given over a considerable period of time to the development of muscles of stillness and silence. There are many parallels with training in mask theatre, where the actors are required to attempt to empty themselves in order to be inhabited by the neutral mask. When training with the neutral mask or puppet, for example, performers are asked to empty their minds of thoughts, intentions and the sense of ego, in order to find a still place from which to respond to the impulses of the moment itself. The focus in neutral mask work on breath and energy awareness is useful for puppetry; to be stilled but alert and waiting for action: 'This object, when placed on the face, should enable one to experience the state of neutrality prior to action, a state of receptiveness to everything around us, with no inner conflict.' (Lecoq 2002: 36) Lecoq refers to the neutral mask as a 'stable position' where the performers are able to 'breathe freely'. (Lecoq 2002: 39) By this he means that it is a space where performers are freed from the necessity of ego intervention; the use of the neutral mask is to find a calm, quiet space where performers can develop openness and naivety towards performance. This approach towards performance, where performers are required to find a neutral space is part of training towards the pre-expressivity of the puppeteer. In Lecoq's work, however, the neutral mask and its attendant qualities are used as preparation for performance; in puppetry training, the focus on neutrality is maintained within the performance. The expression of the animated thing is not done following preparation through the neutral mask, but in concert with the neutrality of the mask-concept in the puppeteer. The puppeteer must therefore develop a dual mentality and purpose through training; neutrality within the body and expression through the manipulation of puppets or objects on stage. Exercises derived from T'ai Chi Chuan and other martial art forms have proved useful to the development of neutrality in their focus on rootedness and flexibility. A strong sense of the centre of gravity is essential for the puppeteer to enable them to move fluidly and smoothly, while not attracting attention. T'ai Chi is also concerned, like puppetry, with receiving and deflecting or directing energy; the practitioner receives energy into their body and moves it on in another direction whilst remaining in contact with the energy force. Jurkowski comments on the process of energy deflection as the act of dispersion: 'I would add … that this essential dispersion of focus by the puppeteer towards several simultaneous actions marks clearly the difference between the play of the puppeteer and that of the actor.' (Jurkowski 2000: 44 -- 45)

Pre-expressivity

Puppetry training shares much vocabulary with physical theatre training where the performer seeks to be open, dynamic and energetic towards the development of stage presence. Barba's concept of pre-expressivity as a prerequisite for the performer offers much to puppetry: his three essential elements of alterations in balance, the law of opposition and coherent incoherence have clear parallels with Meschke's (and others') 'grammar' of puppetry technique; the puppet operates largely through tension in balance, gravity and counterbalance. I would like to add here two further fundamental elements of pre-expressivity for the puppeteer: the law of distraction and the law of continuum.

The law of distraction is that of focusing elsewhere: a concentrated and profound act of attention derived from a sense of giving to something else. It suggests that while the performer is active and present, the act requiring attention is away from the site of the puppeteer's body. This requires, in puppetry training, the performers to work intensively through exercises concentrating their focus towards different and changing points beyond their own bodies. It also indicates not only that the audience's attention should be elsewhere, but that the thing requiring attention is alive.

The law of continuum is that which understands that all movement between puppets, puppeteers and other elements on stage is intrinsically linked, in constant motion and relationality. This law links the opposing designs of the modernists who were fascinated by puppetry's links to fine art and those of later puppet theatre directors who insisted on puppetry as a branch of dramatic art. Within a continuum, puppets can be seen as figures of geometry, symmetry, balance, or as dabs of colour interacting as in an animated painting, with misty shadows of the operators surrounding them; as the flicker of life at the end of the puppeteer's arm, a symbolic presence or distillation of the drama.

Within puppetry, there is always a physical and visual dialectic between the performers. The relationship between the puppeteer and puppet/object therefore needs to be active and in constant reaffirmation. The paradoxical co-existence of life and inanimate bodies on stage is therefore of multiple presences creating a collaboration of physical poetry. In order to prepare puppeteers for this kind of performance, they must understand the states of fluidity, where focus and presence is a moving concept, existing between things, and generosity, where they give life and breath to inanimate matter. The concept of generosity here has a dual purpose: it can be seen firstly as a physical process, where the performers simply direct their attention and energy elsewhere; on another level, it can be seen as a more profound process of giving life, not only through physical action, but through the belief in the intrinsic life qualities held in matter; and the transmission of this belief.

Duality of neutrality and expression

These concepts of continuum and distraction are those which enable the puppeteer to develop a duality of neutrality and expression. There are techniques to develop the practice of distraction, such as exercises focusing on the puppet's breath, eye contact, retaining a sense of gravity; maintaining a consistency of body position and shape through counterbalance and so on; these techniques, when repeated like music practice, become second nature and the puppet is seen to be animated. What I find more interesting, however, is the connection between the puppeteer and the puppet/object; this sense of the puppet as *part* of the puppeteer and not as a separate element. The

union of breath and movement is the factor linking the source and expression of the energy. Training the puppeteer is thus to train a bodily awareness of the breath as impulse to the movement, which in turn suggests life. The puppeteer's body is therefore embodied but accultured towards the giving of life elsewhere. This body seeks to distract the audience, not through trickery or semblance of invisibility as in old-style puppetry, but through frankness of intention. This body seeks to express a constant process of de-egoing, decentering, of grounding in which concepts such as flow, energy, rhythm, projection, transformation, transference and direction, which ultimately lead to animation, are more important than any sense of attraction towards it. This is an approach to the alchemical equation associated with animation: the intention to be a moving shadow; not to pretend not to breathe, as the ventriloquist intends not to be seen speaking, but to make the audience believe that *as* the puppeteer breathes, so does the puppet. This challenge both frees and demands much of the puppeteer: it frees since the puppeteer is freed of self-consciousness and the need to be important; it demands since the puppeteer-performer common in contemporary theatre must move through performance modes expertly. Meaning in the performance becomes that of a fragmented psyche in which all parts of the stage are animated. The magic of puppetry therefore is defined through a continuum of energy which is transferred appropriately through the live and inanimate elements on stage in accordance with the drama. This is achieved through intense concentration on the thing that is animated and on those relationships which emphasise the continuum between puppeteer and puppet/object/thing. Anna Furse comments that puppetry is the art of 'indicative attention-seeking' (Furse: 21) whereby the puppeteer indicates that they are fully present and that they would like the audience to look elsewhere. The puppeteer in this kind of enterprise is not a passive, invisible presence but a sign of directionality. Furse suggests that the puppeteer is a 'profound collaborator' in the scenic enterprise of creating explicit illusion. (Furse: 21)

Wood and Waterfall

According to Derrida, every experienced event is defined by its relationship to that which it is not; within puppetry there is a focus on the puppet or thing in contrast to the live human being or beings which operate it; the alchemy which creates life is in this opposition of consciousness of the impossibility of life within the thing. Whether the material animated is solid, unresisting matter such as wood, plastic, metal or paper maché, or soft, pliable matter such as fabric, clay, paper and so on, the puppeteer needs to demonstrate an awareness of the energy held in the thing, respecting the qualities of the matter itself. It holds energy through the attributes of its construction and its materiality, but the energy of breath/movement/life comes from the human source (excluding here all forms of animatronics or mechanical animation). The Western division between body/materiality and spirit/thought is less helpful here than a concept of organic unity between all elements of the performance environment, an idea which is growing in popularity as ecological and environmental philosophies demonstrate the interdependency of human and matter within the affective world. Within puppetry, this would include, for example, shows where the puppeteer is some distance from the things operated, as in the virtuoso solo shows by Ronnie Burkett where numerous string marionettes are manipulated at breakneck speed from a marionette bridge. The process of energy transfer is at the heart of puppet theatre. In considering the paradoxes suggested at the beginning of this essay, the importance for training the approach of the puppeteer is that they do not see themselves as separate from the puppet they operate, but as part of it, whether they are physically attached to it or not; thus the art of throwing energy into

something else is not the art of separation, but of continuum and distraction; the art of creating metaphor at one's fingertips through the direct interaction of live and inanimate matter; thus an ecology of performance is created where the human puppeteer does not dominate, but the process of creation is seen '…as a constant flow of interactions, processes and reactions between organic and inorganic matter …' (Astles 2008: 64) Through physical practice, handling matter collaboratively between performers, puppeteers can develop a sense of themselves not as separate performing bodies but as linked essentially to each other and matter within the performance, whether that is one puppet or many different elements animated collaboratively.

All translations by Cariad Astles.

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