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PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

the puppet in contemporary theatre, film & media

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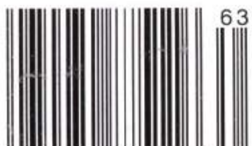

The Avant Garde

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PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

issue no. 40

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On the COVER:

Moby Dick, by Blair Thomas & Co.
photo: Joe Mazza – Brave Lux *see page 30*

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Editorial

"Every few months, new trends come into being, and nothing, it appears, is capable of stopping the triumphant march of the avant garde."

—Herbert Zbigniew
from the poem "What Mr. Cogito Thinks about Hell," 1974

"Avant-garde" has been used as a descriptor for a variety of things, many of which are not avant-garde. Once the term was applied to the early Modernist art movements, it evolved from adjective to noun—a proper noun for improper art—making the term problematic as a descriptor for later art that was also avant-garde. Punk was avant-garde, surely, but even art so radically original that it shocks us doesn't remain avant-garde indefinitely. Rap was avant-garde, it pissed a lot of people off and scared others. Then it became popular, then it became popular in the suburbs, and then it found its way into advertising jingles. Public art can be like that, too. It gets installed, unnerves us with the way it alters a once-familiar landscape, then we get used to it, and even start to like it. Then birds crap on it. Then we stop seeing it. That's the way of things; it's in our DNA. We cannot maintain any strong emotion forever, so we adapt. It is the job of the artist to come up with new ways of shocking us out of our complacency in order that we may once again see with new eyes, hear with new ears.

So can just we uncouple "avant-garde" from, say, Cubist paintings, and apply it to cultural phenomena on the thin edge of the self-consciously new? Probably not, but maybe we could try. Maybe we should start a new movement with just a few artists who, at the end of their brief terms, will be eaten by other artists determined to take their places (not literally eaten, of course, but all their ideas, manifestoes, values, judgments and pronouncements would be shredded and *not* recycled).

In this issue of *Puppetry International,* we will consider the avant-garde of the early 20th century, as well as later creations, genres, artists and teaching methods that work on us in the same way, making us question what we know about the world.

We are not suggesting that only "new" art is good art. The works of Shakespeare are still being revived, still move us, still "hold a mirror up to nature," but art that is shocking can be a useful way of adjusting our perspective on life. Some of it may even have abiding value. Time will tell. It is possible to be avant-garde AND enduring, just not at the same time.

—Andrew Periale

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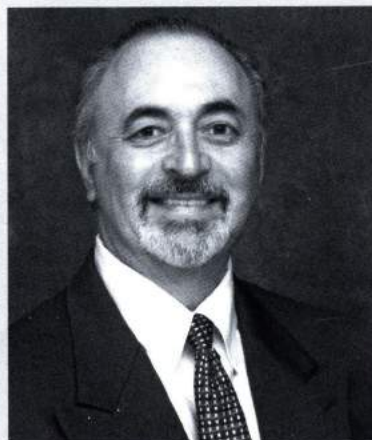
Major donors are named on page 31.

Thank you, Vince.

Vince Anthony has been General Secretary of UNIMA-USA since 1992. He has brought our organization to a new level of professionalism and has improved the profile of American puppetry here and abroad.
We are forever in your debt!



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Welcome, Dawn Tracey Brandes,
our current Peer Review Editor!

Dawn is a doctoral fellow at Dalhousie University/Kings College, Nova Scotia, where she teaches in the Foundation Year Program. She earned her BA in Theater there and her MA in Drama at Alberta University. Prior to returning to Dalhousie/Kings College, Brandes had been an instructor at Northwestern University. Brandes served as an editorial assistant on *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*. She has served as a peer reviewer for PI for the past several years.

------------- News ---------------

Dassia Posner, our longtime advisor and peer review editor, has a new book out from Northwestern University Press:

THE DIRECTOR'S PRISM: E. T. A. Hoffmann and the Russian Theatrical Avant-Garde

Though not a puppet book, Dassia assures us that she does talk about puppets in the text, and it is highly relevant to our current theme of the avant-garde!

It can be purchased through Google Books in cloth, paper or electronic versions.

Puppetry and the Avant-Garde

by John Bell

Alfred Jarry (left, with moustache), and his Parisian artist friends playing with puppets Drawing by Pierre Bonnard

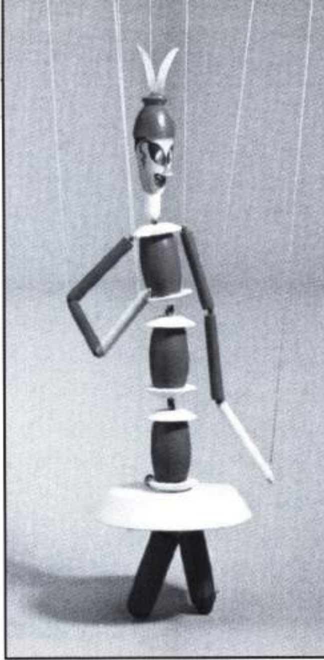
The concept of the avant-garde has deep resonance for the field of puppetry, especially in terms of modern puppetry's ongoing struggles to define itself as a dynamic and valuable performance form with relevance to contemporary culture, in the face of persistent and popular concepts of puppetry as an outmoded art form useful only for children. In the Call for Proposals for this issue, Dassia Posner aptly defined avant-garde puppetry as "radical artistic innovation that pioneers new forms, trends, or modes of creative thinking that later transform or become absorbed into how puppetry is practiced more broadly." I would like to examine a bit more the way that avant-garde puppetry has been fundamental to our understanding of the form's present and future possibilities.

The concept of the avant-garde emerged in the late 19th century as a new aspect of modernism, and puppetry became a rich field of avant-garde experimentation through the entire 20th century as artists sought ways to make old forms of puppetry function in new contexts, or ways to make new materials and technologies function in the old contexts of puppet and object performance.

The term "avant-garde" has military roots referring to the select vanguard of soldiers who advance into dangerous new territory. Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky developed his theory of an artistic avant-garde in his 1911 pamphlet *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, a manifesto that not only guided him through his own involvement with the avant-garde movements of Symbolism, Expressionism, and Bauhaus over the next three decades, but also inspired hundreds of other artists in the course of the century. Kandinsky saw the avant-garde as a spiritual calling, in contrast to the materialism, rationalism, and realism that marked the development of modernity in Europe since the 16th century. "The life of the spirit," Kandinsky wrote, could be represented by a "large acute-angled triangle [...] moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upwards," led by the narrow point of its apex. "Where the apex was today," he wrote, "the second segment is tomorrow; what today can be understood only by the apex and to the rest of the triangle as an incomprehensible gibberish, forms tomorrow the true thought and feeling of the second segment." At the point of this advancing spiritual triangle, Kandinsky imagined, was the genius artist (he mentions Beethoven), who, because of his vanguard position, is often misunderstood by the majority until the spiritual triangle advances far enough for the rest of us to recognize what the genius had alone seen first.

Kandinsky had already proposed his own avant-garde performing object piece, *The Yellow Sound*, two years earlier in 1909. He imagined that in it, light, objects and human performers would combine together onstage to create such images as "five bright yellow giants" with "strange, yellow faces"; "red, indistinct creatures, somewhat reminiscent of birds" with "big heads"; a hill-and-mist environment which moves and changes color; "tiny figures" that cross the hill; and a yellow flower that grows and moves– A vision of object theater radically different from early 20th-century norms! *The Yellow Sound* was not realized in Kandinsky's lifetime, but its visionary call to combine humans, objects and light certainly laid out a path for the multi-media performances that are now commonplace not only in experimental venues, but also in Olympic opening ceremonies, Super Bowl spectacles and pop music extravaganzas seen by millions.

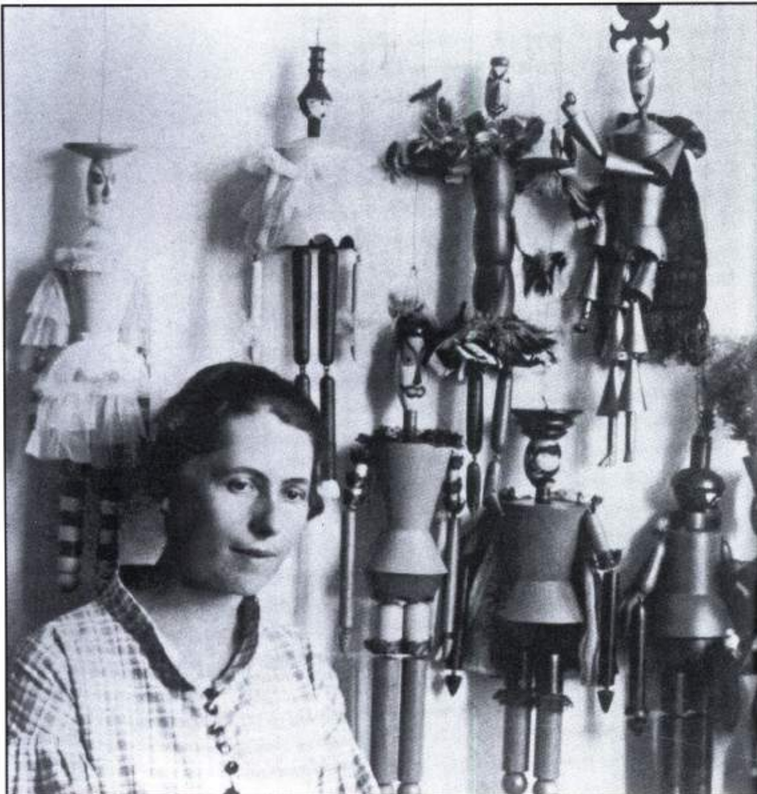
Alfred Jarry's 1896 *Ubu Roi* is often considered the actual starting point of avant-garde performance, and it was infused with the puppets and masks that inspired the author's theatrical spirit throughout his entire life. The play, performed at the French symbolist *Théâtre de l'Œuvre*, featured masked actors, hobby horses, and other performing objects, and it immediately set an avant-garde example with the first utterance of the drama: a variant of the word "shit." Jarry's desire to offend was no surprise to most of those viewing the first performances of *Ubu Roi* (they knew what they were in for, like the audience at a punk rock concert), but outrageousness became a hallmark of avant-garde performance, which some performers still consider its most important element.



In his 1974 book, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, German scholar Peter Bürger argued that one of the functions of avant-garde experiments (a lovely noun that places such work in the realm of scientific research!) is to draw attention to the different forms of art by "defamiliarizing" them—pointing out the nature of more familiar performance methods by proposing radically different forms: Kandinsky's indistinct bird-like creatures with big heads rather than the traditional characters of opera or ballet; or a vulgar, mask-wearing regicide named Ubu instead of his more familiar theatrical cousin Macbeth. Bürger suggested that "shocking the recipient becomes the dominant principle" of the avant-garde's "artistic intent," and that because such art always defines itself in opposition to existing norms, it was incapable of developing its own particular style. I think both of these suppositions are problematic, that avant-garde puppetry (as Dassia Posner has suggested above) did not depend upon shock alone as its dominant principle, and that it has in fact developed its own style, which, as Kandinsky suggests with his triangle metaphor, has over time become accepted and dominant (despite continuing misunderstandings of puppetry in popular media!).

In 1918, in the rich environment of mask, puppet, and object play thriving in Zurich's Dada scene, the Swiss dancer and puppeteer Sophie Taeuber-Arp created a marionette version of Carlo Gozzi's 1762 comedy *King Stag* at the Zurich School of Arts and Crafts (where she taught textile design). Using lathed wooden parts instead of traditionally carved and costumed realistic puppets, Taeuber-Arp created (in the words of fellow Dadaist Hans Richter, three decades later) "the first abstract puppets ever used at puppet shows." According to Richter, "they consisted mostly of thread spools joined together, decorated with feathers (to make a prince) or with pearls (to make a princess) or rags (to make the villain)." Despite their "defamiliar" form, Richter said, the puppets "moved with a grace not of this earth" and "would have out-circused even Calder's circus in their purity"–a reference to American artist Alexander Calder's own puppet experiments in Paris eight years later.

Waldemar Jollos, who also saw Taeuber-Arp's *King Stag*, said of her puppets "they reveled in a new world of spatial rhythms, of objects reduced to their most elementary forms." Taeuber, he went on to say, "uninterested in external bodily attributes, moved toward an idea as unreal as a dream, and yet tied to a more important reality which everyone feels in himself when the familiar external world suddenly appears singularly impassable." Taeuber-Arp's avant-garde innovation was to take a classic 18th-century comedy and the traditional technique of European string marionettes and force audience members to see puppetry anew by making her marionettes from machined pieces of wood. It is clear from both Richter's and Jollos's responses that she succeeded, as her puppet show inspired them to re-think the nature of movement and material performance, and to allow abstract, non-realistic puppets the license to affect them as much as (or more than) the realistic European marionettes they were no doubt familiar with.



SWISS DADAIST SOPHIE TAEUBER-ARP AND SOME OF HER GEOMETRIC MARIONETTES FOR *THE KING STAG*

Taeuber-Arp's avant-garde work did not depend upon the outrageous shock of Jarry's scandalizing obscenity (which did characterize the performances of many of her male Dadaist friends in Zurich), but her decision to use simple geometric shapes as the elements of puppet form "shocked" her audiences into seeing puppetry from a new, "modern" perspective. And her *King Stag* production was definitely an important element in the development of an avant-garde style of puppet making. Oskar Schlemmer used geometric shapes and objects for his 1922 *Triadic Ballet*, Calder created his own abstract wire-sculpture puppets for his circus, and puppets based on geometric shapes appeared in the work of Italian futurists like Fortunato Depero *[see the review of Dan Hurlin's Depero*

shows on page 8], and spread throughout Europe by means of Czech toy and puppet manufacturers *[see the review of* The Puppet and the Modern *on page 34]*.

In one way, the real work of the avant-garde, and avant-garde puppet and object theater in particular, has been not so much to "épater les bourgeois"—to shock the middle class (in the words of late-19th-century French avant-gardists)—but instead to incorporate new methods of art-making that naturally develop from the new technologies which have emerged directly from modern culture, such as innovative mechanical operations, image projection, photographic processes, and synthetic materials. All of these new technologies have easily lent themselves to new performance techniques thanks to the puppet-friendly perspectives of artists intrigued with them. Taeuber-Arp's use of lathed puppets for *The King Stag* represented a turn away from realistic and traditional European marionette woodcarving and, instead, an embrace of the machine aesthetics of turned wooden parts that could reflect more abstract designs based on geometry instead of realism. An endless wave of new technologies has buoyed western modernism for at least two centuries, but it takes artists (and particularly puppeteers) to understand how to turn these new types of objects into performing objects.

Alexander Calder and his circus puppets in Paris in the 1920s

In another way, the real work of the avant-garde has been, counter-intuitively, to look to the past as a means of opening up the possibilities of the future. By this I mean that much of the high avant-garde performance in early twentieth-century Europe—and specifically the puppet and object performances of Symbolists, Expressionists, Futurists, Constructivists, Dadaists, and Bauhaus artists—involved a reclamation of low-culture popular puppet traditions as well as a willingness to be influenced by the new knowledge of Asian, African, and Native American art practices (including amazingly rich traditions of object performance). Alfred Jarry's avant-garde radicalism in *Ubu Roi* was not simply the outrage of his variation on the French word for "shit," but more strikingly his conscious, heartfelt desire to embrace the rough-and-tumble aesthetics of popular French puppet theater, whose tricksters and warriors were always insulting propriety and doing battle in low-culture venues outside the gaze of high-culture audiences. If part of the formula of the avant-garde involved "shocking the recipient," what better way to do that than to bring the energy and traditionally anarchic principles of traditional European puppet theater onto the refined stages of high-class Paris?

Similarly, when Wassily Kandinsky moved to Vienna to co-found the expressionist Blue Rider artist posse, and decided to finally publish his scenario *The Yellow Sound* in the group's "zine,"the *Blue Rider Almanac*, what better way to articulate his desire to create dynamic object performance than to illustrate his play with images of ancient Egyptian shadow puppets and a Sri Lankan shaman's mask?

Over a hundred years later, in the same manner, but in many other contexts, continuing experiments combining new and old forms, characters, technologies, and materials have allowed avant-garde traditions of puppetry to respond to changing technologies and cultural hybridity and to present to us visions of modern life that resonate with our own experiences. It is hard (and perhaps unnecessary) to decide which puppet performances are avant-garde and which aren't, but the avant-garde tradition certainly rears its head every time a puppeteer seizes new technologies and forces them to perform, or puts her hands on old-style puppets and makes them play in new contexts.

John Bell is our historian and book reviewer. He is the director of the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry at UConn.

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Demolishing Everything with Amazing Speed

Futurist puppet plays by Fortunato Depero

Translated, designed and directed by Dan Hurlin
Original music by Dan Moses Schreier
Created by the ensemble
Produced by MAPP International Productions

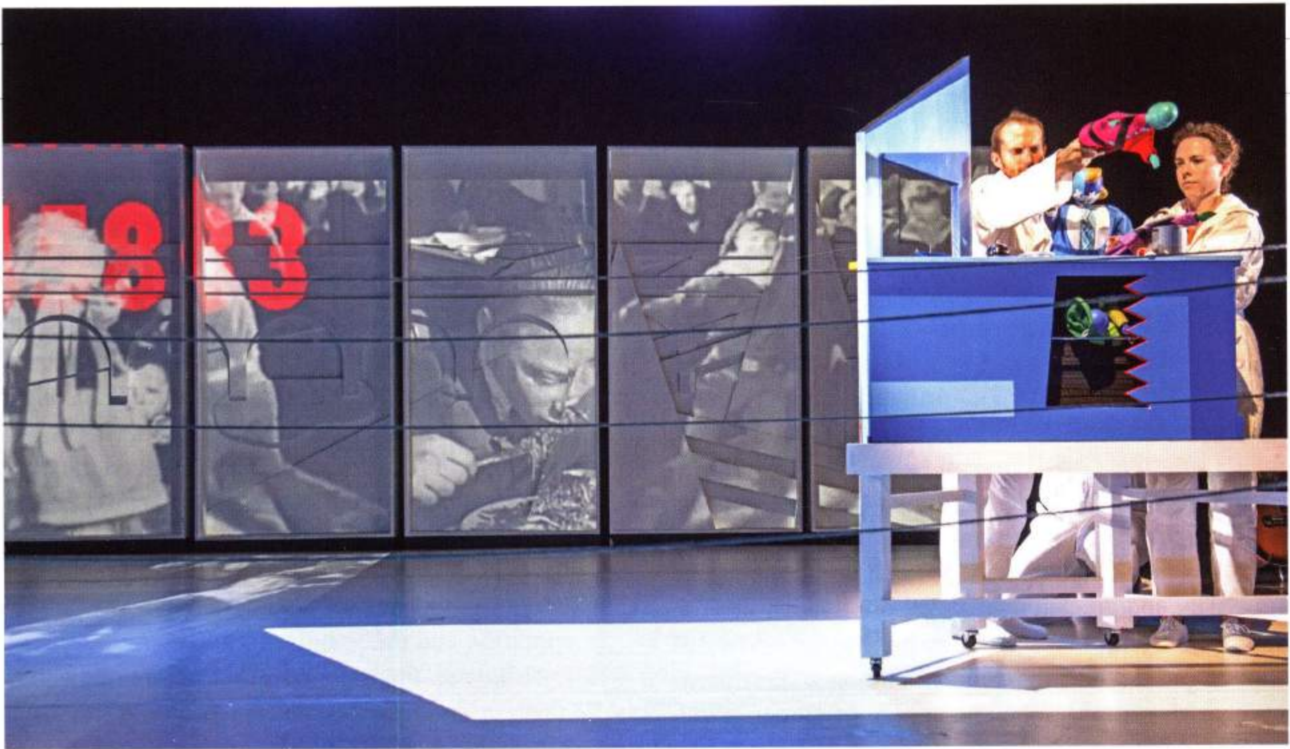
The Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College
July 08, 2016

In *The Founding Manifesto of Futurism*, published in 1909 in *Le Figaro*, Fillippo Tommaso Marinetti proclaims that Futurism, his new artistic movement, will "sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. Courage, audacity, and revolt will be essential elements of our poetry." Futurism celebrated technology, industrialization, the urban environment, and even war in its embrace of all that was modern. In performance, Futurists eschewed traditional dramatic structures in favor of short theatrical bursts, which drew on music-hall style formats and thwarted any expectation of deep character development or intricate plot-lines. Fortunato Depero, a Futurist visual artist, brought his sculptural interests to the theatre with *I Ballet Plastici* (1918), a dance performance for puppets, whose bright colors and geometrical, mechanical figures exemplified the aesthetics of Futurist visual art. One year before *I Ballet Plastici* premiered, however, Depero wrote four other puppet plays, under the title *Dramma Plastico Futurista,* that were never produced. While in residence at the American Academy in Rome, as winner of the 2013-14 Rome Prize, Dan Hurlin tracked down the texts of these plays, which consisted of a series of bold, descriptive images and a few quick visual sketches, (no dialogue). These texts provide the basis and inspiration for Hurlin's masterful multimedia performance, *Demolishing Everything with Amazing Speed*.

Of Depero's four plays, *Sicuro* or *Safe*, missing its middle portion, serves as prologue and epilogue to the show. In between, the other three function as acts of a single piece: *Suicidi e omicidi acrobatici* or *Acrobatic Suicides and Homicides*, *Ladro automatico* or *Automatic Thief*, and *Avventura elettrica* or *Electric Adventure*. Jennifer Kidwell, dressed in dapper, colorful vest and tie, gives voice to Depero, narrating the scenes with descriptions taken directly from the scripts, as the events are realized around her through puppets and projections. The concurrence of act and word highlights Hurlin's translation of Depero's exuberant imagination into stage action.

The somewhat abstract and disparate stories of the plays connect through the violence that imbues them. Premiering directly in the aftermath of the sniper shootings of five policemen at protest rallies in Dallas, Hurlin has found his production gaining unexpected contemporary relevance, especially as the first section depicts a sniper. A curtain speech from Gideon Lester, Director of Theatre at Bard College, warned the audience that the production, long in development, had unexpectedly crossed paths with recent events. However, the violence in these plays, written in the wake of World War I, offers us important, if initially unintended, food for thought on our own increasingly strife-filled times.

In section one, the Red Lady, drunk after too many glasses of wine, balances precariously on a staircase that keeps re-arranging itself before her as she climbs. She eventually plunges to her death. The Count, stealing bicycle and rifle from a soldier of the bicycle infantry, rides to the cemetery and shoots all those mourning at her graveside. A projection on the back wall, dripping in red, tallies the body count of this massacre. This brutal act, however, is only prelude to further violence: A couple's marital quarrel escalates from hitting with chairs to pulling off each others' limbs; the Automatic Thief blithely murders the lines of police chasing him as he strips shops bare of their merchandise; an architect, a railway worker, and a cook fall to their deaths as their train speeds off its tracks from a great height. Even seemingly innocuous events betray a violent energy: In a fine restaurant, the architect's girlfriend ravenously eats through a seemingly endless parade of foods, "demolishing everything with amazing speed."



The Futurists would have applauded this production's engagement with new technologies and dynamic movement. Through scrupulous projection design by Tom Lee, with help from Chris Carcione, a series of screens, backdrop to the action, reflect continually changing projections, sometimes encompassing all the screens at once and sometimes splitting the panels in several parts as words and images consecutively or simultaneously shift in and out to display the title of each new section, in Italian and English, along with images of Depero, and the stage puppetry action, filmed in real time but, on the screens, enlarged, intercut, or otherwise manipulated. Indulgence in new technologies infiltrated the show's creation process as well: a 3-D printer streamlined building the myriad objects that flow on and off stage. After hand-sculpted items

PHOTOS: © STEPHANIE BERGER

are scanned in 3-D, a 3-D printer can put out multiple copies of a single object or the same object in varying sizes. A red wine glass that features prominently in *Acrobatic Suicides and Homicides* reappears on several occasions, each time in a different scale. The lines of policemen who chase the Automatic Thief and the people he robs were all produced in painless multiples with the 3-D printer.

The skilled company of puppeteers (Eric F. Avery, C.B. Goodman, Catherine Gowl, Takemi Kitamura, Rowan Magee and Joh Rice) manipulate large *bunraku*-style puppets and smaller figures and take turns filming the scenes and moving tables and other objects on, off, and about stage with the clarity and precision of a well-oiled machine. The white, workers' jumpsuits they wear and the efficiency of their movements evoke the biomechanical experiments of Vsevolod Meyerhold, a contemporary of Depero, who also celebrated technology, but as a way of creating a new worker's theatre within the Russian avant-garde movements in the early days of the Russian Revolution.

The technological interests of the show do not preclude visual allure. Bold, joyful reds, purples, greens and yellows blast forth from the objects and their surroundings. The large *bunraku*-style figures have compelling abstract faces: the Automatic Thief's light purple head is shaped like an eggplant with two white rectangular eyes that he removes to hypnotize his victims. The Red Lady of the first play boasts a single large round green eye on a circular red head crowned with a rakish red feather, all matching her vibrant red pants suit. The puppets' clothes display meticulous craftsmanship and attention to detail, the work of Costume Designers Anna Thomford and Thayaht along with Costume Associates Priscilla Hurlin and Sophia Micahelles.

The lively visual colors and playful, childish imagery intentionally conflict with the escalating body count projected on the back wall, which eventually racks up to reveal the full, monumental death toll of World War I in 1917, the year the plays were written. While Hurlin's production echoes the Futurists' indulgence in technology, speed, and high energy, and captures the playful spirit of anarchy they celebrated, it also offers a more somber assessment of the cost of war and violence and stands as a grim warning for our own times of the creeping escalation of violent acts and their eventual consequences.

–review by Claudia Orenstein,
Associate Professor at
Hunter College, NYC

Program note by Dan Hurlin

I've spent much of my career believing that narrative structures in theatre are no longer valid for the contemporary world. The notion of having a "plot," it seems to me, appeals to a centuries-old desire to make order out of chaos. Art has long since given up on that and, in an effort to reflect our time more accurately, has embraced the chaotic, unknowable, immediate and multifaceted way our lives *actually* unfold. Yet like a monkey on my back, both my training and my love of history keep dragging me back to Aristotelian narrative, representation and the impulse to tell a story.

Like me, the Italian Futurists were dedicated to abstraction in theatre without knowing exactly how to achieve it. In *Dramma Plastico Futurista* the signifiers of narrative are there – characters, settings and sequentially developing events – but the narrative logic is outdone by chaos, nonsense and style. These plays, having been created by a painter/designer (Fortunato Depero), use visual languages, as opposed to the spoken word. Visual impact is employed to eschew reason and correctness, and to embrace non sequitur and impossibility. They are wonderful expressions of a liminal moment during the transition from representation to abstraction in art, which mirrors my own development as an artist. The plays provide a rich opportunity to uncover for myself a new way of making theatre that honors my story-telling impulse, while allowing for a more abstract evocation of the madness, violence and playfulness of the world in which we live today.

Scene I from ACROBATIC SUICIDES AND HOMICIDES

rich WOMAN. FIERY - RED - ONLY ONE EYE
of concentric green disks
adorned with azure pearls and jewelry of gold and
silver - She dances - with an enormous GLASS - RED
luminous
drunk-
RHYTHMIC FALL
DOUBLE - She and her shadow
in a zig-zag-
on a grand staircase - in a SPIRAL ---
THUD - DARK – the eye is a single glowing disk.

staccato shooting
of bright stars
from the eye's center

(feeling of deadly dizziness)

the appearance and geometric descent
of limb-sticks
Extremely slow
(final convulsions of the limbs, thrown
very far from the fatal fall---)

---DARK---

the table above illuminated
Pink
the glass below illuminated
Red
THE GLASS rises – oscillates, disassembles itself, reassembles itself - places itself on the table.

DARK

SLAM: The New Avant-Garde Puppetry

by Vanessa Gilbert

Providence, RI has always been a strange city that thrives on and in its shadows. Those shadows (and the cracks between the ivy-covered towers on College Hill and the soot-covered mills of Olneyville and other villages of the city) bred life. Providence supported gay bars long before it was safe to fly a rainbow flag. It nurtured warehouse shows before and after the reign of Lightning Bolt.[1] It fostered H.P. Lovecraft and his dark-loving creatures. On the shadowy western edge of downtown Providence, beyond the reach of the universities' ivied halls, but within range of their more adventurous students, was a street where the real estate was cheap enough. And on this strip that would eventually trade its underage prostitutes and empty storefronts for valets and eateries, a small theater thrived in the shadow of a large theater by exploring the limits of its small black box. This was Perishable Theatre, whose mission was to create and present new and wide-ranging performance in Providence, including such genre-bending offerings as the MA & PA (Multi-Media and Performance Art) Festival and plays by living writers. It was where I worked: my artistic laboratory. Within its shadows, something grew.

The seed for Blood from a Turnip, Perishable's second longest running program, sprouted in 1997, as my design collaborator Jeremy Woodward and I became more curious about puppetry in general and who was using puppets in our area. I had been directing theater and noticing that I was consistently employing performing objects in my work. Jeremy, trained as an architect and working as a scenic designer, delighted in the ways that puppets created a bond between a performer, object, and an audience, encouraging audiences to engage their imaginations and wonder.

> Whereas we were all once children who turned sticks into wands, built sandcastles, made dioramas, played with dolls, [and] built forts ... we understand that we were once all artists without knowledge of the term and once made art without knowledge of its distinction from life. (David Higgins: *Puppetism Internationale 2012 Manifesto*)

We started performing as The Lunchcart Circus, the "only circus in the world with a snack for the audience at the end of the show," a direct homage to Alexander Calder's puppet circus, but with foam rod puppets, huge foam mustaches and an embarrassment of foam-like candy circus peanuts. We also participated in an annual community May Day celebration complete with a Mummer's Play in which anthropomorphized Chinese Zodiac animals represented through masks and costumes played out a timely social or political problem. Each Halloween we worked with the same folks on a séance, paying homage to those who had passed away over the preceding year by rendering the deceased in puppet form, usually a metonymic visual pun or a grouping of objects that evoked the dead celebrity. We, and seemingly all the artists we knew, were deep in the flow of performing objects. Together, Jeremy and I dreamed up a venue for all the artists we were meeting who were finding their way to puppetry. In this way, Blood from a Turnip, a "late night puppet salon for adult-style audiences, with charming and personable musical interludes," was created.

> Hospitality is both the grease and the point. The sharing of food and shelter lubricates the exchange of ideas, which are the building blocks of performance. (Gilbert: Manifesto for a Hospitable Theater)

Over 16 years, Blood from a Turnip adhered to a simple set of guidelines, outlined below. All we changed were the frequency of the outings, from monthly in our first year to 4-5 times annually.

1. Blood from a Turnip would be a salon, not a slam. Slam connoted competition and we wanted to create a space where there was no pressure to win at art.
2. We would welcome anyone who had a puppet show or thought that they had a puppet show whether they considered themselves puppeteers or not. It was important to open the door to people who were new to puppetry in addition to the seasoned professionals. We adopted an "If you are so moved to do a show, we will present you" attitude that delivered some exciting and wonderful surprises over the 16 years that we presented the program.
3. We would limit the acts to 10 minutes. While some artists tested our (and our audiences') limits, most artists came in around 5 minutes per show, a quality that we found more and more as the puppet slam circuit was established.

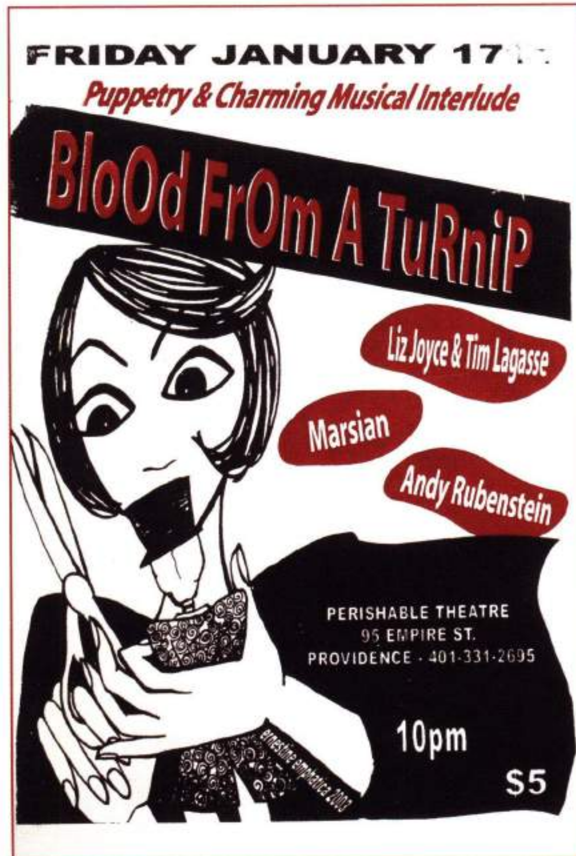
4. We would be a late night event; we wanted to serve adult audiences both to reclaim puppetry as a form for adult enjoyment as well as provide an alternative to going to a club. We wanted to make watching short form puppet shows as ubiquitous and as accessible as going to hear a band.

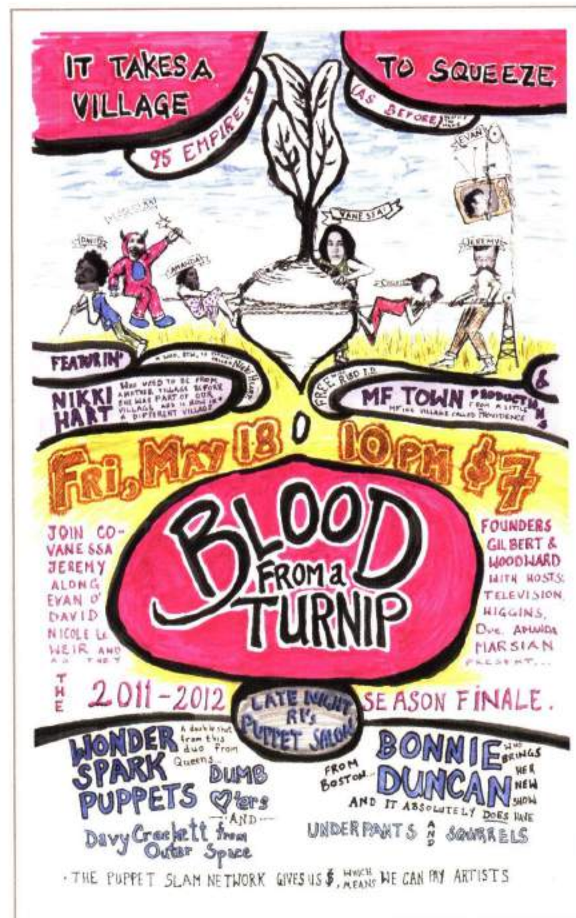
5. We would celebrate art forms besides puppetry. We asked bands and solo musicians to provide "charming and personable musical interludes" between the acts. We commissioned a single graphic artist to design and print posters for an entire season, giving each year a hallmark "look" while increasing the portfolio of the artist.

6. We would provide a communal meal before the show and that meal would always feature a dish with turnip as a main ingredient. Although this tradition fell away as people's schedules became more packed, I have learned so many ways to incorporate a turnip into a meal. Hit me up if you want recipes.

7. We would pay all artists. While we couldn't afford actual artists' fees, we pledged to divide the proceeds among the participating artists. As the Puppet Slam Network and its grants were established, this was easier to do, making us less reliant on admission fees.

From the very first event, we knew we'd plugged into a rich conduit of energy. Our shows attracted students studying in the Puppetry Program at UConn looking for performance opportunities and as well as painting and sculpture students from Rhode Island School of Design, whose inquiries into their own practice pushed them into time-based art with performing objects. Our first show featured a vagabond from the stand-up circuit who performed alongside his own televised image. He would not be the last person from the stand-up circuit to find a home among our puppet-loving audience. Over the years, a carpenter was moved to create a wearable replica of an American Revolutionary War frigate to use as his stage and a film/video artist created a toy theatre space for others to use called the Theatre of Hope and Intimacy. Dancers and animators, visual artists and musicians, all used Blood from a Turnip to explore how their bodies and objects could merge to tell new stories. And artists already dedicated to working with puppets found a new audience in the delighted people of Rhode Island.





One memorable performance consisted of a single person, covered from head to toe in a coverall that resembled a crocheted blanket, constructing a life-size game piece in the form of a spinner, upon the needle of which he placed a series of small, cast plastic barnyard animals. He then spun the needle, gently. Once an animal had fallen, the performer consulted a Fisher Price See n' Say Farmer Says, selected the image of the animal that had fallen from the board, then pulled the See n' Say cord, triggering the sound of the chosen animal. This continued until all the animals had fallen off the board at which time the artist left the space, eschewing any applause. Dealing with scale and found objects and expectation,

the performance didn't have much in common with what most people considered a puppet show, but for Blood from a Turnip, the work fit right in.

Why? Because we were curious about what a puppet is, what a puppet could be, and what a puppet isn't. Our attempts to trouble the definition of puppetry were meant to encourage more people to "dream" in puppet. So, because we loved puppets of all types and because we were excited to see what other people might create under the guise of puppetry, we did something that seems revolutionary in retrospect, although simply quite natural at the time. We created a stage that veterans and novices would share equally, and on which they could explore the chinks between disciplines or the shadows on the edge of their own practices.

This commitment to being both in the middle of the flow and on the fringe was maintained through a cycling roster of MCs, including Evan O'Television (the video ventriloquist who performed at the first BfaT event), Marsian DeLellis, and David Higgins (who, like many others, answered the closing call at every salon to go build a show and transition from audience to performer). Blood from a Turnip functioned as an invitation and a deadline for nascent puppeteers creating a project. It gave veteran puppeteers a chance to flex new muscles. It provided a safe haven for children's performers to tell darker or racier stories. It invited visual artists to explore storytelling in new ways. It dissolved the barrier between creator and enjoyer of art. And, it collected people together from myriad artistic disciplines (as well as those who didn't identify as artists) to form a community, as they suddenly found themselves in an affinity group centered around telling stories and communicating ideas with objects and bodies, sometimes objects that looked like bodies.

Perishable Theatre closed in 2011, and Blood from a Turnip ceased hosting salons in 2013, but I feel their presence in the shadows constantly.

Vanessa Gilbert is a interdisciplinary artist and creative producer. She recently completed an MFA in Performance and Interactive Media Arts at Brooklyn College. For more information about Gilbert and her work, visit
www.vanessagilbert.com

[1] A Providence-based "noise" band

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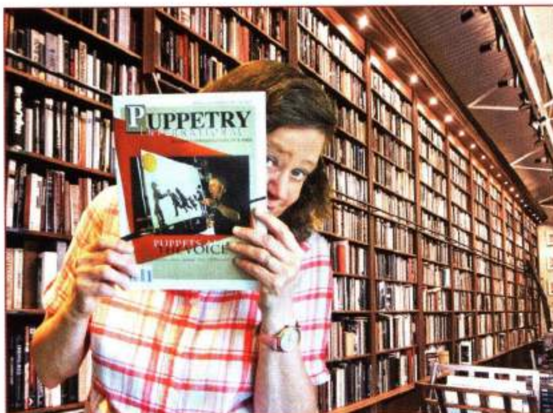

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Teaching Puppet Plays of the Historic Avant-Garde

by Matthew Isaac Cohen

The historic avant-garde movements of Europe and North America from the 1880s to the 1940s produced a rich stock of puppet plays, some of which have been intensely studied, while others are practically unknown. This was a period characterised by what Erika Fischer-Lichte (1997: 116) calls "retheatricalization," which was:

> aimed at countering naturalist theatre, the prevailing form at the turn of the century. In place of a realistic-psychological theatre of illusion, dictated by literature, members of the historic avant-garde movement.... wanted to propose an "other" theatre, different in every way from what had gone before: a theatre freed from the chains of literature, constituted as an autonomous art form; a theatre that did not imitate a reality that already existed, but which created its own reality; a theatre that nullified the radical split between them, so that the chasm between art (theatre) and life, so typical and characteristic of bourgeois society, might be bridged.

One mode for retheatricalization, ably explored by Fischer-Lichte, Innes (1993), Savarese (2010), and others, involved the appropriation or emulation of Asian theatre. This presented Western theatremakers with new options for stylization in gesture and speech, figuration of actor and character, use of music and sound effects, makeup and masks, silence and stillness, non-naturalist costume, theatrical lighting (or lack thereof), stage décor, the visibility of ancillaries such as stage hands, the space of performance, and spectacle.

Another mode of retheatricalization, only rarely studied by theatre historians (Segel 1995 being an important exception), involved puppetry and performing objects. Distanced by their social locations from fairground traditions and street entertainments and nostalgic for childhood play with dolls, juvenile drama and toy puppets, two generations of artists strived to claim puppet theatre's anarchic energies and anti-naturalistic possibilities as their own. Residual traditions of European folk puppetry were creatively appropriated, non-Western puppets provided inspiration for new puppet technologies, new forms of puppet theatre emerged, and human actors were enjoined to imitate puppets. A major ideological thrust of modernism was the negation of the past and dismissal of tradition. But for many of the creators of avant-garde puppet plays there was a much more appreciative, if not reverential, attitude to the puppetry of precursors. In this line, Dada artist Jean Arp's famous poem *Kaspar is Dead* of 1912 is not an epitaph for German folk puppetry but a recapitulation of the form's word salad dialogue, insouciant heresies, and iconoclasm, and the truculent anti-heroism of its protagonist (Arp 2007). The avant-garde puppet plays of this same period, as will be evidenced, enable the appreciation of past aesthetic accomplishments and artistic movements, while stimulating creativity and theatrical know-how.

Learning from the avant-garde

Over the last 10 years I have had the opportunity to explore the repertoire of the avant-garde puppet theatre through practice, largely in the context of introductory puppetry courses I have taught in the Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London. Students customarily spend the first term learning about the history and theory of puppetry and practicing techniques of glove puppets, rod puppets, string puppets, shadow puppets, bunraku-style puppets and other puppet forms. They build simple puppets and do exercises out of Latshaw (2000) and Engler and Fijan (1973). In the second term they work in small groups (2 to 6 students typically), applying these techniques and ideas to an assigned avant-garde or modern puppet play. Students are responsible for developing a *mise en scène* for their plays, storyboarding and building their shows, directing themselves, performing,

FROM THREE MEN OF GOTHAM BY E. GORDON CRAIG

writing program notes—essentially, all the creative labor involved. As tutor, I provide feedback and advice, and on occasion we also bring in outside practitioners, including professional puppet makers and directors, as consultants. But though often produced to a high standard, productions are student work to be marked according to sophistication, inventiveness, skill, group commitment, organization, and grasp of the play's issues. We conclude the class with a showing of the work, an annual Evening of Puppetry that also includes moments for discussion with the public.

Avant-garde playtexts offer many pedagogical advantages, as I have discovered through tutoring more than twenty productions. Many of these plays were written for cabaret presentation and are short – typically 10 to 20 minutes in performance – and thus can be enacted in their entirety. In undergraduate theatre degrees, students are frequently called upon to devise their own plays or enact scenes from well-known and often-performed plays. They are only rarely held responsible for introducing a whole, "prescripted" play to a general audience. While I sometimes allow for minor updating in topical references, or slight editing of the more "talky" plays, I generally insist on fidelity to the text to teach about responsibility to an author.

FROM SPHYNX AND STRAWMAN BY OSKAR KOKOSCHKA

Some avant-garde plays are written for particular forms of puppetry. The earliest avant-garde puppet play I have taught, Maurice Donnay's *Elsewhere* (1891), was for example written for the Parisian cabaret the Chat Noir (Black Cat), which starting in 1885, developed cinematic techniques for shadow puppetry involving zinc figures on grooves, magic lantern projections, a small orchestra behind the screen, and front-of-screen narration. Students who performed this play in Laurence Senelick's translation (Donnay and Senelick 1988) studied the Chat Noir in its historical context. They figured out the play's "in jokes" and topical references, and familiarized themselves with the means by which the Chat Noir, as an artist's cabaret, subverted normative relations between spectators and performers. To arrive at their own original interpretation of the piece, they also looked at recent reconstructions of shadow plays of the Chat Noir era, including a production of Erik Satie and José-Maria Patricio Contamine de Latour's shadow play *Geneviève de Brabant* (c. 1900) in the Chat Blanc Project staged in 2012 in Alberta, Canada. The student *Elsewhere* began by screening a tableau representing Paris in the late nineteenth century and a dialogue between finely-carved shadow figures of Voltaire and Paul Verlaine in a visual style not dissimilar to that of the Chat Noir. But when Voltaire and Verlaine dove into the Seine and travel through Paris's Inferno-like underbelly, the puppeteers emerged from behind the screen with handheld lights, contemporary references, shadowboxes, multiple screens, and pop songs. Projecting shadow images into the auditorium and onto the ceiling and walls of the theatre, they aimed to create a reality that challenged theatrical norms in a way that extended, rather than replicated, the Chat Noir.

George Bernard Shaw was commissioned to write a puppet play for marionettes that had already been built by the Lanchester Marionettes—resulting in his late farce *Shakes versus Shav* (1960 [1949]). But the student director-designer of the Royal Holloway production of *Shakes versus Shav* was a young Punch professor named James Arnott who discovered that a combination of glove puppets and tabletop puppets could be just as effective for Shaw's knockabout humor as string puppets. Forms of theatrical animation that did not exist at the time plays were written – such as object theatre – can be employed in ways that open up interpretive possibilities. The student ensemble that produced Edward Gordon Craig's *Something Prophetic*, the second prologue to Craig's *Drama for Fools* cycle written in the 1910s (Craig 2009), enacted the creation of the world and conflicts of gods, heroes, and demons set in and around the tree Yggdrasil from Norse legend through object play in the *mise en scène* of an English garden. They figured, in the words of one student, that "a garden is a microcosm of life in which [a diversity of] creatures... dwell," thus justifying the incorporation of different types of beings into a single scene. Craig's notorious desire for control over every scenic aspect and his continual reminders to the audience of the artificiality of theatre could "be achieved because a garden environment is controlled and coordinated in a similar way to the theatre." In this imaginative interpretation of cosmogenesis, garden gnomes became heroes, gardening tools became demons, balls of different sizes became planets, and clothes on a rotary clothesline became dancing gods.

Some undergraduate students have only limited experience with non-naturalistic theatre and seem almost as challenged by avant-garde puppet plays as audiences were a century ago. The group of students who encountered Gertrude Stein's puppet play *Identity: A Poem* (1993 [1936]) were initially stumped by this non-linear theatrical text that does not propose characters

nor signal where stage directions end and dialogue begins. In the end, they realised that it was their responsibility to create *dramatis personae* and allocate lines to each of them. Harking back to early modern European puppet theatre, they elected one of them to perform the role of interpreter who pounded on the ground with a stick and barked out orders to a group of hapless short-stringed puppets on a tabletop. Much later, I came to realize that, in mocking the puppets, cutting them off and demanding repetitions, the interpreter's actions perhaps caricatured my own identity as a teacher.

Selecting the forms of puppetry to be mobilized in a production has allowed students to play to their strengths and deepen their skills. *A Quarrelling Pair* by Jane Bowles and *A Sentimental Playlet* by Charles Henri Ford were originally performed in 1945 as a double bill by John Bernard Myers in the New York nightclub Spivy's Roof, with surrealist puppets by the Swiss artist Kurt Seligmann (Ford 1945; Bowles 1966 [1945]; Myers 1970). But the students who performed the first play, a dialogue between two bickering sisters, cross-dressed as humanettes, thereby exploiting their skills as comical performers. Ford's text was interpreted quite movingly as a memory play in which a bunraku-style puppet representing a dying matriarch named Enid was lovingly attended to by her family. Inspired by the collaborations of William Kentridge and the Handspring Puppet Company, the student ensemble decided that when the puppet stared out into space, we would glimpse Enid's past being played out on a shadow screen behind her. As her family packed away her clothes, her possessions became animated and played out Enid's romances of earlier years. Period music readily signalled the different years Enid revisited in her inner life. The production made sense of Ford's poetic style, dream-like transformations, and period references. The audience empathized with the play's sketchy characters through Enid's subtle micro-gestures, uneven breathing, and fluctuating levels of agitation. When the principal actor-puppeteer who was onstage with Enid at all times as both her animator and carer stepped away and the puppet stopped breathing the audience was noticeably consternated. The puppeteer reported that although she did not speak a single line of dialogue she has rarely been more challenged.

From In the World to Come by Moishe Nadir

Most of the productions I have tutored remain student work, performed once or twice for the public, and then abandoned. The beautifully crafted puppets for *Shakes versus Shav* resided for a time in display cases in the Department's foyer and have since been shown at a number of puppet events. Productions build individual performance skills, talents in making, dramaturgical sensibilities, historical knowledge and research proclivities, ensemble work, and awareness of spaces and audiences. Their quality of retheatricalization make them ideal vessels for teaching the fundamentals of theatre as a medium. But these student shows tend not to be developed further. An exception to this has been a staging of Lothar Schreyer's *Moon Play* (2006 [1923]). This was interpreted in its first outing as a ritual fashion in which two white bunraku-style puppets are initiated into the mysteries by a group of six black-clad young women. The puppets were both what Eileen Blumenthal would call constructed actors and also tools for the communing and coming into mutual awareness of the human animators. After the production, two of the puppeteers, Carmen Nasr and Faith Brandon-Blatch, formed a company called Trembling Hands, reworked their concept for a smaller cast, added more elements, and toured the play around Europe, including a residency at the Bauhaus where the play originated.

Audiences look forward to the Department's Evening of Puppetry showings as these exhibit unknown talents among students, exotic puppet forms and styles, obscure texts, and overlooked playwrights. At first reading, some of the avant-garde plays appear dramatically flat. There are exceptions, of course—the puppet plays of Alfred Jarry, Federico García Lorca, and Moyshe Nadir make for good reading, and translating them from page to stage is relatively unproblematic. But I have found that, for most plays in the avant-garde repertoire, their theatrical potentials spring to life only in production. Thornton Wilder (1978: 95) wrote a propos of Stein's puppet play *Identity: A Poem* that "the reward of difficult thinking is an inner exhilaration." The puppet plays of the avant-garde are indeed quite difficult on the page. But when they are fully thought through in dramatic terms and animated in space with performers, figures, props, scenic elements, music, and lights, they are exhilarating to encounter.

Matthew Isaac Cohen is a Professor of International Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is also a *dalang* in the *wayang kulit* tradition.

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Appendix: Avant-Garde Puppet Plays Produced at Royal Holloway, 2006-2016

2006
Edward Gordon Craig, *Romeo and Juliet: A Motion for Marionettes* (1919)
George Bernard Shaw, *Shakes versus Shav* (1949)
Gertrude Stein, *Identity: A Poem* (1936)

2007
Edward Gordon Craig, *School, or Thou Shalt Not Commit* (1918)
Edward Gordon Craig, *Three Men of Gotham* (1918)
Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Colonial* (1901)

2008
Alfred Jarry, *Puppet Play* (*Guignol*) (1895)

2010
Edward Gordon Craig, *The End of Mr. Fish and Mrs. Bones* (1916)
Jean-Claude Van Italie, *Motel* (1965)
Oscar Kokoschka, *Sphinx and Strawman* (*Sphinx und Strohmann*) (1907)
Lothar Schreyer, *Moon Play* (*Mondspiel)* (1923)
Thornton Wilder, *Proserpina and the Devil* (1916)
Jack B. Yeats, *Onct More's First Circus* (1901)

2011
Georg Trakl, *Bluebeard: A Puppet Play* (*Blaubart: Ein Puppenspiel*) (1910)
Moishe Nadir, *In the Other World* (*Af Yener Velt*) (1932)

2013
Hugo Ball, *Nativity Play* (*Ein Krippenspiel*) (1916)
Jane Bowles, *A Quarrelling Pair* (1945)
Edward Gordon Craig, *Something Prophetic* (c. 1918)
Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Prologue to a Puppet Theatre* (*Vorspiel fur ein Puppentheater*) (1906)
Kurt Schwitters, *Shadow Play* (*Schattenspiel*) (1925)

2014
Maurice Donnay, *Elsewhere* (*Ailleurs*) (1891)
Kurt Schwitters, *Shadow Play* (*Schattenspiel*) (1925)

2016
Edward Gordon Craig, *Shopping* (c. 1918)
Charles Henri Ford, *A Sentimental Playlet* (1945)

The Third Genre: Oleg Zhugzhda and the Art of Puppetry

by Maria Ignatieva

"If we try to determine Oleg Zhugzhda's puppetry style, we think of avant-garde..."

At the age of fifty-five, Oleg Zhugzhda (pronounced Zhoog-zhdah) is the successful artistic director of the Grodno Regional Puppet Theatre. He has worked in the theatre since 2000, and became its Artistic Director in 2003. Under his directorship, the theatre has become the pride of Belarus: It has toured Europe and Russia, and its productions have been showcased in numerous international and domestic theatre festivals. The theatre and Zhugzhda have been showered with professional awards and recognitions, including two Belarus President's Awards and even the presidential medal. Zhugzhda is a symbol of a truly international mixture: His shows are in Russian and Belorussian, but his multiculturalism developed long before that, in fact – from his early years. His first language is Russian, but he was born and grew up in Vilnius, Lithuania, and is fluent in Lithuanian, too. His degrees are Belorussian and Russian, and he has directed all over Russia and in Poland, Lithuania, Slovenia and Slovakia. The Lithuanian, Belorussian and Russian cultural milieus are essential parts of his style, and the mixture always gives a European aura to both his shows and his offstage behavior.

Zhugzhda graduated as an actor-puppeteer from Minsk Theatre Institute in 1983; the director within him started to evolve immediately after his appointment to the Mogilyov Puppet Theatre, and he went back to school to get a degree as a professional director of puppet theatre. In 1961, LGITMIK (State Leningrad Institute for Theatre, Music, and Film, now called St. Petersburg Academy of Theatre, Music, and Film) opened a program for training actor-puppeteers, and later, in the 1970s, directors of puppet theatre. The program's graduates filled vacancies and established new theatres all over the USSR; among the greatest successes of those students was the creation of a new trend in puppetry, called the *Ural school of puppetry* because many of its creators – the most well-known were Victor Shraiman, Mikhail Khoussid, and Valery Volkhovsky – worked in the Ural region puppet theatres. They established the *Ural Puppetry Laboratory*, which, in turn, taught their methods to new generations. Following in the footsteps of their beloved LGITMIK master Korolev, and against the wishes of the great Muscovite Sergei Obraztsov (who was opposed to puppeteers performing like drama actors in puppet shows), they worked, as they all called it, "fifty-fifty": In their productions, puppets and actors played as partners. *The Ural school of puppetry* is not only a method, but was their philosophy, as well, and was their daring attempt to revolutionize theatre as art in the severe times of Soviet censorship. Oleg Zhugzhda, who graduated from LGITMIK in 1990, would follow the Ural puppet school: Puppets and actors would perform together, would take turns, and actors would play parts (or some portions of the part) without puppets at all. Thus, Zhugzhda became the second generation of the Ural puppet school; interestingly, his daughter is also a student-director in the same department, and will be the third generation of the powerful puppet trend.

The Third Genre: Oleg Zhugzhda and the Art of Puppetry

by Maria Ignatieva

"If we try to determine Oleg Zhugzhda's puppetry style, we think of avant-garde..."

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Oleg Zhugzhda has been in professional puppetry as a director, actor, and playwright since he was in his early twenties: At the age of twenty-six, while in Mogilyov, Belorussia, he became the youngest artistic director in the entire USSR. The Grodno Puppet Theatre, where he started in 2000, is the state repertory theatre. Theatres in the Soviet Union were run by the state, just like schools, hospitals, and universities. One might say that today's actors' salaries in Grodno Puppet Theatre are small (about $300 dollars per month), but it is a standard monthly salary in Belarus, and everyone has a month-long paid vacation. Thus, actors are envisioned as "civil servants," where job security on the one hand is combined with various bureaucratic and hierarchical forms of functioning (for example, the number of actors in the troupe is determined "from above"). The Grodno Puppet Theatre has everything that a theatre needs for successful work: stages, rehearsal rooms, shops, and foyers. Its staff consists of a puppet designer in residence, a composer, assistant directors, a dramaturg, a box office manager, ushers, and the pedagogical department. So, despite the fact that we (Zhugzhda and the author belong to the same generation) all scolded the socialist system, it has managed to accommodate the creation and smooth functioning of puppet theatres in the Soviet Union, having spared the artists from hunger, humiliation, and desperate searches for financial support. In return, the state demanded loyalty to the political regime that paid your bills, and rather strict observance of hierarchy: Actors did not audition, but rather were appointed to play parts. Failure to comply resulted in sacking.

As with many other puppet theatres in former socialist republics after the collapse of the USSR, the Grodno Puppet Theatre preserved the Obraztsov theatre model, which is secured by government support. Just like every other state puppet theatre, it targets all age groups—children, adolescents, and adults. The theatre has thirty-five shows in its repertoire, playing for children under age three, for youths, and for adults ages sixteen and up. The program for adults includes such titles as Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *A Winter's Tale*, and its crown jewel of the Shakespearean collection, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. The latter participated in eleven theatre festivals in six countries, and became a winner of fourteen awards and diplomas.

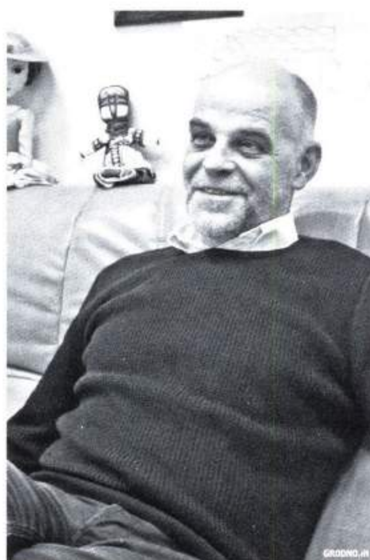
Macbeth is Zhugzhda's oldest show, and it has run for fifteen years with the same success. It is his artistic calling card, and, in fact, his artistic manifesto. In the early 1990s, Zhugzhda saw the ballet *Macbeth* choreographed by the great dancer Vladimir Vassiliev at the Bolshoi Theatre. In our Skype interview, Zhugzhda said that even the idea that Macbeth *could be* danced was already revolutionary to him. But Vassiliev went much farther in his groundbreaking ballet: The witches were danced by men, and all three of them danced en pointe. It took Zhugzhda twelve years to direct his own M-play, and to be able to compose the visual and auditory world of Shakespeare, where puppets and actors were "partners in crime." And yes, quoting directly Vassiliev's revolutionary ballet (which, in fact was choreographed in 1980), the three witches in Zhugzhda's *Macbeth* are men, too. Sometimes one of the witches is played by Zhugzhda himself: He played in the performance that was brought to Moscow as part of the International Puppet Festival in November, 2014.

Macbeth is often played on stage with the audience being seated on stage as well. It has been performed in a church, and in a castle – essentially, it is easily adapts to any space and place, with the surroundings giving an additional theatrical touch. The performance space is created by rows of chairs on three sides of the stage. Actors enter and put three high back chairs on stage: The chairs will be multifunctional, serving as a throne and a puppet screen, among other things. In the center of the stage there is a pile of sand – a popular device in late Soviet theatre of small forms; here it creates the metaphorical battlefield. The witches, who look like monks with hoods on their heads, start the show. In a rhythmical dance they move around a glass bowl, which catches glimmers of light and the shadows of the actors' movements. They perform a magic ritual, and from that ritual the Boschian universe of the play is born. As soon as the ritual is over, the witches start playing a children's game of war. They have tiny soldiers and cannons, and they laugh, throwing sand at each other in a goofy battle. And then the first puppets enter.

In this production Zhugzhda employs three types of puppets: two glove puppets for a funny pre-show exchange between Punch and Judy, traditional marionettes on strings (Lady Macbeth), and the Liege-style marionettes (combination of strings and rod) for the battles. Almost every puppet, including the puppet of Lady Macbeth, can be and is operated by different actors in turn, and sometimes two actors operate one puppet. As much as the "live" Lady Macbeth is individualized by Mikulich, the puppet Lady Macbeth is not individualized by her personal technique and manner. Observing this device created an interesting sensation within me – can you imagine an orchestra in which the musicians switch instruments during the concert? However, the idea of the production as a whole, where many hands participate in the creation of, presumably, highly individualized characters seems both attractive and hard to achieve. The constant metamorphoses – from puppets to live actors, to actors communicating with the puppets, to puppets talking to each other when the audience acts as if does not see the puppeteers – happen from the beginning to the end in the

complicated, intertwined texture of the show. Larisa Mikulich is the center of the production. The two images of Lady Macbeth are diametrically opposite. Mikulich as an actress is determined and confident: In a see-through dress with her reddish hair flying, she delivers Lady Macbeth's monologue with a passion that takes the audience's breath away. "...Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums and dashed the brains out..." As if commenting on Brecht's warning against the hypnotic theatre, the meaning of the monologue escapes the audience, which is mesmerized by the astounding portrayal of a woman's lust for power. However, the very next moment, Lady Macbeth appears as a marionette of a spider, with female breasts and the face of a little space alien. Mikulich now operates it, and the look of the spider makes you cringe as squeamishness envelops you. The two Lady Macbeths merge into one, creating a philosophically ambivalent portrayal of the Shakespearean character. It is the spider that kills, and it is the woman who loses her mind. Throughout the production Zhugzhda masterfully juggles with traditional paths of perception: The battles are not serious because of the toy soldiers, the dead puppets do not create empathy, and the peak of strongest emotion is focused on Lady Macbeth in both her live and puppet presence.

The so-called *third genre*, as Zhugzhda jokes (first is dramatic theatre, second is traditional puppet theatre, and third is puppets and actors together), gives him, as well as many other contemporary Russian puppeteers who work in the same genre, access to multidimensional interpretations of world repertoire and literature. Not only has Zhugzhda directed other Shakespearean plays, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *A Winter's Tale*, but in Grodno and other theatres Goethe's *Faust*, Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Seagull* (premiered in July 2016 in Grodno). Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* at the Riazan Puppet Theatre (2014) was also Zhugzhda's attempt to give a new interpretation to the well-known novel. For many years, Zhugzhda kept wondering why the Russian intellectual tradition interpreted Raskolnikov as an almost positive character, emphasizing his inner struggle and suffering rather than the fact that he murdered two women. As is customary for his productions, there are two Raskolnikovs: One is a puppet, and the other an actor—his alter ego. The clash of the character's feelings and ideas, as with Lady Macbeth, is portrayed through interactions of the actor and the puppet, creating the intellectually challenging and emotionally ambivalent texture of Dostoevsky's prose.



OLEG ZHUGZHDA PHOTO: ILYA GALEI

Over the past fifty years, first Soviet and later Russian or Russian-educated puppeteers have experimented with Zhugzhda's "third genre." Shows where the puppets play in parallel with real actors has formed an important trend in the art of puppetry. Oleg Zhugzhda, undoubtedly, represents the successful artistic fruition of the style, enriched by his own artistic discoveries. But, as with every style and genre, there are limitations and dangers. Boris Goldovsky, the former director of the Sergei Obraztsov Center and a puppet theatre historian, shared his opinion about contemporary Russian

puppeteering in my interview with him: "I have observed with bitterness for some time the increasing loss of technical excellence in the profession of the Russian puppeteer, and the tendency to believe that the puppet's power itself is limited. It is not. The limits lie not with the puppets, but with the puppeteers who are leading them." One can hear echoes of the old disagreements between the schools, between the cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg), and between the masters in their passionate and dedicated service to the art of puppetry.

If we try to determine Oleg Zhugzhda's puppetry style, we think of avant-garde, which since Dada has pushed the boundaries of traditions, genres, and styles. Zhugzhda, by combining puppets and people playing together, is promoting a genre that is neither pure puppetry nor live acting – we just don't have a name for it yet. Continuing the innovations of the Ural puppetry school, he let go the notes of social protest, so important in the Soviet Union in the seventies and eighties; instead, he increased the aesthetic and philosophical values of the mixed genre. As he said in our conversation, "Lady Macbeth (when she is played by an actress) becomes a puppet, too, but a puppet which is operated by the universe."

THE SPIDER

THE MACBETHS

Dr. Maria Ignatieva is Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre, The Ohio State University-Lima. Ignatieva's research expertise is Russian and Children's theatre; her book *Stanislavsky and Female Actors* was published in 2008; she authored over 40 essays in English and Russian. Ignatieva is the author of 10 plays for children and puppet theatre; her play *The Journey of a Duppy Boy* was translated into Croatian, and performed by the student-puppeteers at the International Puppet Festival at the Croatian Drama Academy in Osijek, Croatia.

PHOTOS: BY NADEZHDA YAKOVLEVA COURTESY OF THE GRODNO PUPPET THEATRE

An Avant-Garde Approach to Creating Comprehensive Puppet Performance Training

by Deborah Hertzberg

Last fall I had the great pleasure of premiering the first "Puppetry for the Theater" course for the Brooklyn College Department of Theater. I conceived, designed, and developed the class to be open to actors, directors, and designers with the goal of enabling all students to add puppetry to their artists' toolbox by developing another language of theatrical expression. Connecting related, but previously uncombined, schools of theatrical thought in an inventive approach resulting in a comprehensive and avant-garde advancement of puppeteer training was one of my main goals.

BACKGROUND

Throughout the semester, we focused on three areas of study: table-top rod, shadow, and moving mouth puppets. In each unit students built puppets, developed short works, and performed those works. We practiced the Liz Lerman method of critical and constructive feedback to promote a supportive environment of artistic growth, developed non-verbal storytelling skills and tools, explored a variety of puppet design and construction techniques, and examined traditional to contemporary forms of puppetry.

Relaxation, Strasberg style

For quite some time, I have thought about how better to train puppeteers and find more openness in the creative process. Often the training of puppeteers begins with the puppet: A performer will move the object through space, examine how the object moves, and identify the best way this particular object can communicate the story. By relying on the audience's imagination and the magic of the puppet itself one creates a believable story and characters. However, what is it about those most memorable puppet performances that sticks with us for a lifetime, those performances that have touched us in a profound way? What is it that makes the performance resonate for the viewer?

All of my students were new to puppetry, providing an excellent opportunity to explore my methodology for puppeteer training. Throughout the course, I sought to develop a way to bring the performer to a place of total mental, emotional, and physical engagement whereby the resulting performance emanates from a deeper and more truthful place. This methodology is the result of exploring the combination of the elements of three performance techniques that I have studied during my own education: Lee Strasberg's actor training relaxation technique; Jean Sabatine's movement for the actor training; and the puppeteer manipulation skills I received from UConn and the O'Neill.

These classroom experimentations have led to a new approach to puppeteer training. Let us not forget that Lee Strasberg's notion of using relaxation and real emotion memory to create a truthful performance was indeed radical. Jean Sabatine's daring to use organic, kinesthetic movement that is not reliant upon dance technique, to create characterization: also radical. What I am asking of student puppeteers, whether they intend to be designers, builders, directors, or performers, is to start from their own physical beings first before ever handling a puppet, and with the instructor's facilitation utilize the fundamental lessons from Strasberg and Sabatine. These experimental lessons in my class were the first steps in offering an advancement in puppeteer training by clearly defining a new mode for puppet artists to become more fully engaged and connected to the work.

RELAXATION

Lee Strasberg, considered the father of modern acting, developed the performance technique known as "the Method."* In his book, *A Dream of Passion*, Strasberg defines the Method as "the procedure by which the actor can open control of his instrument, that is... his affective memory to create a reality on stage."

The basis of the actor's ability to control his instrument is rooted in Strasberg's relaxation technique, which is the first lesson in any class at the Lee Strasberg Theater Institute and is the first exercise all students carry out at the beginning of each acting class. As a student at the Institute many years ago, this relaxation training carries me through to this day. Through the relaxation exercise, performers identify areas of tension in the body and learn to release that tension using movement, breath, and sound. The continued practice of this relaxation exercise aids in achieving not only an ability to release physical tension, but mental tension as well. Further, it promotes a freer but more focused concentration. Strasberg said, "all that is necessary to achieve relaxation is to try to release the energy, to feel the energy oozing out... permitting muscles and nerves to sag as when we are asleep." To achieve this kind of relaxation and control over one's physical and mental state takes time, practice, and patience. Applying Strasberg's relaxation practice as a component of almost every class session provided students with a defined pathway to mind/body regulation and allowed the puppeteer to be more present in performance and to transmit energy and emotion more freely to the puppet. Trembling hands, a clenched shoulder, mental distractions, inhibit the puppeteer's movement, stunts concentration, and blocks emotional pathways. Students were successful in carrying their new relaxation technique throughout performances, quelling tensions as they arose throughout performance and maintaining a consistent state of focus.

DEFINING AND EXPLORING MOVEMENT

Jean Sabatine, author of *The Actor's Image: Movement Training for Stage and Screen*, was my professor of movement while I was a student at UConn. In her book, she defines the properties of movement, establishes class exercises to examine movement, and applies those exercises to the creation of characterization through movement. Sabatine's movement training stems from the analysis of the basic principals of movement: "Space, Time and Energy." Space is defined by the space you occupy. Time is the tempo or rhythmic quality of the character, and Energy is the quality of the movement. While training in all aspects of Sabatine's movement technique would be important for all puppeteers, my introductory puppetry class focused specifically on the fundamental property of Sabatine's approach to characterization: Essence Studies. Sabatine defines Essence Studies as "seizing on the essence of something, capturing the epitome of an emotion or thought or gesture, getting into the center. By seeking the essence of a physical or mental occurrence the student is forced away from the literal contexts." To break through the barriers of gesture and indication through Essence Studies, we practiced Sabatine's gesture exercises (with our own bodies first before transferring the movements to the puppet) by taking everyday gestures or simple movements, abstracting those movements

(putting them into a different part of the body, slowing down the movement, enlarging the movement), and arriving at the essential qualities of the movement. Employing Sabatine's Essence Studies in class provided a formula for movement analysis as well as a freedom within the performer's own body. Sabatine's work "reinforces… general body awareness, while stimulating the imagination." These lessons, applied to the creation of puppet scenes, resulted in performances that were derived from a more truthful place and relied less on indicative or empty gestures.

PUPPET MANIPULATION BASICS

Most of you reading this article already have an intimate understanding of the basics of puppet manipulation: breath, focus, economy of movement, and pause. In class we practiced using breath to initiate puppet movement, making Strasberg's relaxation technique particularly useful; if the puppeteer was relaxed, then transferring breath from puppeteer to puppet became a much more connected and natural process. The same was true when applying Sabatine's Essence Studies during rehearsal of the students' short works. Essence Study provided a support structure for students exploring how to economize frenetic puppet jiggling, developing the focus of their puppets' gaze, and recognizing the need for pauses within the manipulation. The Essence provided a road map for breaking down movement to its essential properties, abstracting the movement, and making it work for a puppet's body. When rehearsing a puppet performance it can feel like every rehearsal is tech rehearsal: adjusting lighting, reinforcing or repairing a puppet, mocking up necessary props. These can all be a distraction to the important work of puppet manipulation. To mitigate that pressure, I tried to instill in my students the importance of scheduling equal time for building and manipulation.

In conclusion, the combination of internally derived exercises applied to the externalism of puppet manipulation created a comprehensive performance that was smoothly transmitted from the puppeteer through the puppet and to the audience, joining those three worlds and truly bringing the work to life.

Deborah Hertzberg is a New York based puppeteer, costumer and theater maker. She is the Adjunct Lecturer of "Puppetry for the Theater" and the Costume Shop Supervisor at Brooklyn College. As a puppeteer, she has collaborated on both commercial projects and original works for theater and film.

**Built on the fundamentals of Konstantin Stanislavski's "System," the Method was developed while Strasberg worked at New York's Group Theatre with Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner. Each of them has claimed to be the rightful heir to Stanislavski. [Editor]*

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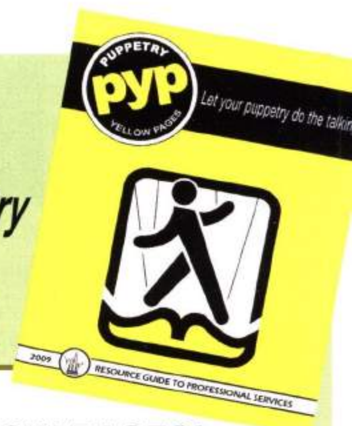

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Baby, Said Alice B. Toklas:

Self-Performing Object Theatre for Times of Upheaval

What is the purpose of avant-garde theatre, a genre often criticized for being willfully inaccessible to ordinary people? How can creative innovators help audiences make sense of their worlds in profoundly uncertain times? Hanne Tierney, an acclaimed puppeteer and performance artist, recently explored these questions by transforming Brooklyn's Five Myles Gallery into the stage for an imagined debate between Gertrude Stein and her life partner, Alice B. Toklas. Titled *Baby, Said Alice B. Toklas*, Tierney's project to understand the value of Stein's interwar plays coincided with a particularly violent spring: 300 terrorist attacks besieged the world in March and April 2016 alone. The subtle insights into human relationships arising from Tierney's fully automated puppetry project are as relevant to today's sociopolitical landscape as Stein's experiments with language were during the early 20th century.

Baby, Said Alice B. Toklas is a 15-minute piece of object theatre that engages with two plays from Stein's years in Paris. First is *A Circular Play* (1920), written after World War I, when Stein was in her mid-40s. Second is *Listen to Me* (1936), written during the build up to World War II, when Stein was 62. With the flick of a switch, Tierney's project comes to life on visual, oral, and musical levels. Blue, green, and pink spotlights cut boldly through the initial darkness, illuminating a trio of satin dresses that twirl in a circle near the center of the space. Though Tierney's choreography is elegantly regimented, the dresses tilt and sway in strangely human ways, as if real women were inside of them, dancing. In traditional puppetry, a puppeteer controls such objects with strings or other hand-held means. By contrast, Tierney worked with Oskar Strautmanis, a twenty-year old self-taught engineer who built the twelve motors and "robot brain" that power this self-performing piece. During an artists' talk at Five Myles on 15 May 2016, Strautmanis said he often watched Tierney enact the precise physical motions she wanted various objects to make, and adjusted his motors to mimic her gestures. A second level of action in *Baby* is orality. Tierney's voice (inflected by her age, gender, and German accent) reads all of the excerpts from Stein's plays. Tierney also wrote and gives voice to both sides of the quarrel between Stein and Toklas. Lastly, the piece performs a range of changing moods via the music of Eric Satie, a French composer whose piano scores evoke the zeitgeist of the Parisian avant-garde.

HANNE TIERNEY'S CREATION, *BABY, SAID ALICE B. TOKLAS*

Baby begins with brief excerpts from *A Circular Play*. In a recording that plays alongside a buoyant score by Satie and the dresses' meticulous dance, Tierney reads

Stein's opening lines: "Papa dozes mamma blows her noses. / We cannot say this the other way." The overall mood seems cheery and frivolous. Perhaps due to time constraints, Tierney omits the bulk of Stein's lengthy play text, offering only a few samples of her disjointed, nonlinear style:

> Jennie dance to Marguerite. / Vera dance alone. / And what can you say about tuberculosis? / It was not a circle. / Amelia and Susan were not scared. / They said we are refreshed by the news. / I can never forget the slaughter.

Tierney's thesis about *A Circular Play* is that a youngish Stein did not fully grasp her intentions when she wrote it. She argues that many sentences in this piece are "total nonsense." Tierney's Toklas, represented by a shimmering housecoat, launches her critique just as bluntly: "Baby, what were you thinking when you wrote that circular play?" Stein, represented by a stiff brown robe seated across from the feminine housecoat, seems unruffled yet patronizing in her response: "Pussy, that which I was thinking, you would not understand. Because that which I was thinking, only *I* was thinking. And how would anyone understand that, which I was thinking?"

Baby's first half embodies clichés about avant-garde theatre's glib disconnection from everyday life. Viewers focused on the luminous beauty of Tierney's self-performing dresses and hula hoops might overlook, as I did, Stein's jarring lines about "slaughter" and "tuberculosis." Only after reading Stein's play on my own did I notice its abundant wartime imagery. "Can a circle enlist?" Stein asks. Soon after, she describes a "Crushed circle. / Red or cranberries. / Strawberries or meat." Stein's imagery in *A Circular Play* is far from clear, yet it often connotes violence or menace. At times, she writes of death in frank yet moving ways: "Do you know the brother? / Poor brother he is dead. / He was killed in the army. / Let us circle." Tierney's staging largely sidesteps these complexities.

Tierney's performance of *A Circular Play* is technically dazzling, but too reductive on a semiotic level. By contrast, her staging of *Listen to Me* takes Stein's title to heart. Audiences not only see, but also hear the comparative depth and darkness of this piece. Having survived World War I, Stein watched with bewildered horror as Hitler prepared for another fatal crusade. Tierney's rendition stages the intense but unconsummated relationship between Stein's protagonist, Sweet William, and his love interest, Lillian. The two objects representing William and Lillian perch on copper rods at the back of the space. Lillian consists of a shiny dress topped by a black lace shawl. William is even bleaker. Slumped in a long black robe, William wears a vacuum hose attached ominously from metal rods near his arm to the area where his face should be. The contraption evokes a gas mask. It also suggests that war is near, and William is faceless, anonymous, and inconsequential in its wake.

As Tierney reads from *Listen to Me*, the figure of Lillian swings toward William, yet always just out of his reach. William trembles, barely moving. Stein asks Toklas what audiences notice more on stage: "Is the thing *seen*, or is the thing *heard*?" At that moment, a fence made of pipes abruptly shifts from side to side; the pipes strike each other and clang. Metallic din drowns out the next section of Stein's play, except for one poignant line: "In no time at all, there is no time." Tierney ends her rendition with what is perhaps Stein's strongest statement about the human fragmentation wrought by war: "Sweet William, not after. Sweet William. Not ever after. Sweet William. Ever After. Smart words. Two syllables. [. . .] There's *never* any ever after in a war." I suddenly realize with great sorrow that William and Lillian will never touch or meet.

In *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant Garde Theatre* (2005), Sarah Bay-Cheng argues that Stein is often excluded from avant-garde theatre studies due to her "perceived lack of aggression or antagonism toward her audience," yet she was "fully aware of the relationship between art and war" (51). Specifically, Stein credited World War I's "frightening new technologies" with producing vanguard viewers who intuitively related aesthetic upheaval to the ravaged, unsettled world in which they lived. Stein's own interwar plays rarely featured tangible characters or settings, let alone direct references to com-

LIUSTEN TO ME

The Motor Sculpture

The Digital Brain

bat. Stein wanted her audiences "to rest untroubled," yet her plays "convey the chaos and confusion of the modern era [. . .] through language as distorted and twisted as the terrain of war-torn Europe" (Bay-Cheng 52).

Today's citizens live in constant proximity to spectacles of violent extremism. Our era's self-performing technologies include automatic rifles, unmanned fighter jets, drones, and a robot bomb first deployed in July 2016 to kill a Dallas sniper. Often dismissed as incoherent, Stein's avant-garde dramas start to make sense again as agitators and world leaders alike reject or undermine treaties of transnational unity, edging us closer to what some call de-globalization. Tierney's *Baby* reminds us to look with wonder and pleasure at self-performing objects. Yet her nuanced and tender reading of Stein simultaneously warns of bonds forever severed by technology's lack of humanity.

–review by Theresa Smalec
Assistant Professor in Communication Arts and Sciences
at Bronx Community College/ CUNY

Puppethappenings.org
Find out what is happening in contemporary puppet theater

Futurism is celebrated as one of the most important avant-garde movements of the 20th century.

Dan Hurlin's *Destroying Everything with Amazing Speed* is the recipient of two Jim Henson Foundation Grants: 2016 Production & 2015 Workshop

Photo: Stephanie Berger

Blair Thomas & Company

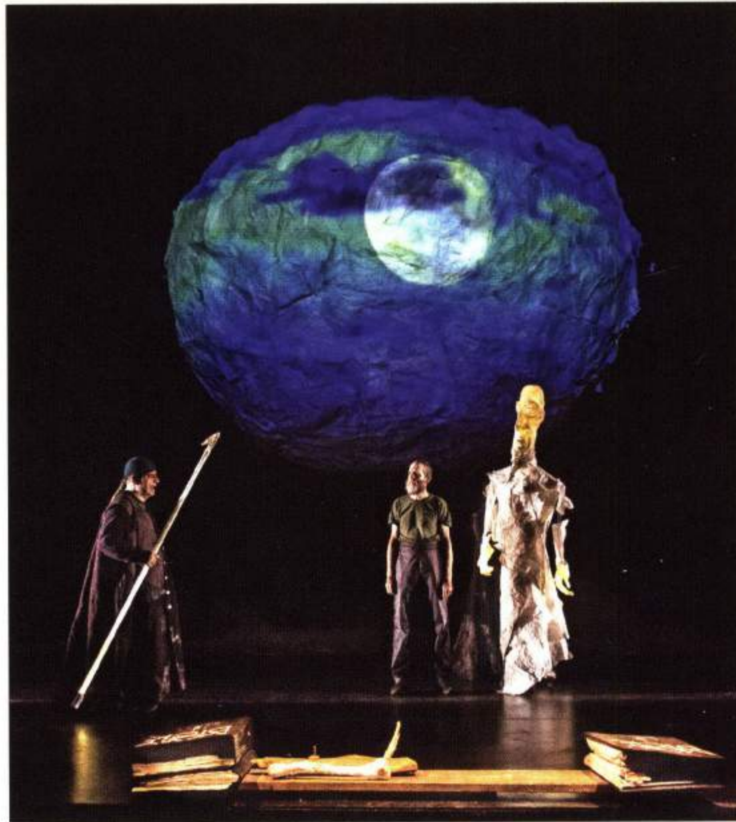

PHOTO: Joe Mazza - Brave Lux

The Blair Thomas & Company adaptation of *Moby Dick*, presented in the spring of 2016 at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, takes the source text by Herman Melville and converts it into a modern ritual under the full title *The Brotherhood of the Monastic Order of Ancient Mariners Purges the Ills of Society Through a Reading of the Tales of Moby-Dick*. Through years of development, the company has created a powerful piece of what puppetry scholar Penny Francis calls "material theatre," in which the creative team uses a "fabric or substance as a metaphor for a theme" (45). In this case, production designer Blair Thomas and his crew tap into the properties of paper to emphasize the fragility and hubris of humankind. On the surface, paper is an obvious choice for a performance that evolved from a novel. Many times during the production, props and puppets emerge from large, hollow books as a series of scrolls, screens, and manipulated objects tell the stories. However, the paper also contributes on a less literal level through its delicacy, translucence, and even sound by creating breakable relics and sweeping landscapes onstage.

The monk-like brothers of the title, played by Michael Montenegro, Michael Smith, and Blair Thomas, enter dressed in thick, black robes that have been distressed to give them an air of antiquity. Accompanied by a wheezing hurdy-gurdy, they begin the ceremony by gently setting a small boat "afloat" in the audience where it is passed from hand to hand toward the back of the house. It is made of tissue-weight paper, stretched over a dainty frame, and ethereally lit from within to emphasize its magic and its breakability. The audience is implicated in the unfolding of the ritual when they are granted the charge of this seemingly sacred object.

The translucent quality of unblemished paper is also used to create shadow screens. One vignette recounts the Pequod's docking with the Jeroboam, including the "prophecy" of the mad-man Gabriel that foreshadows the death of harpooner Harry Macy. The light source winds around a fixed screen alternately revealing and obscuring the shadow figures in time with the narration. Only at the end does the light pull back to show the tale from start to finish. This reveal showcases the whole intricate cutout that forms the shadow. It also works on a metaphorical level to show how the fate of individuals is unknowable, and their time in this world finite.

In other scenes, fresh tablets and scrolls of paper are painted to create visuals for the brothers' narration. In one sequence the style of presentation helped to draw a poignant parallel between the old world and the new. The brothers give facts about the profits of the whaling industry and its consumer products, balanced against the corresponding loss of human and animal life. The prioritization of profit over sustainability and humane labor practices is still applicable today. The flip-chart format of the paper in this particular scene calls to mind a board-room presentation to help establish the link.

These smaller screens are dwarfed by a paper curtain used to project images upstage. The high definition projections are beautiful, introducing an oceanic blue into an otherwise neutral palette, but sometimes out of tune with the plethora of hand-operated devices. The disconnect is exceptionally apparent when they fall out of synch with the speech and action. In time, the paper curtain reasserts its materiality when its function as a set piece undergoes a radical change. The screen is released from above, falling dramatically to the floor with an audible rush. This opens up the space, shifting the onstage world from the closed cloister to an external landscape. The crumpled curtain is bathed in blue light, becoming the sea. A massive paper globe hangs above the stage, evoking the full moon when lit from within.

As the paper sea begins to heave, one of the brothers is swallowed by the waves. In contrast to fabric, normally used for this kind of effect, the paper gives off a rustling sound that resembles waves on the shore. When he emerges, washed clean of his black shroud, shades of older, shamanic rituals are invoked as he is re-dressed to embody Ahab. Large hands envelope his own; a piece of wood studded with a gold doubloon is tied to one leg; and a mask is placed atop his head like a crown. Once transformed, he is armed with a harpoon. As the lights go down, the paper constructions illuminate, transforming into puppets without a visible operator. The erstwhile "moon" dims, becoming opaque. Contextualized by Ahab's harpoon, it becomes the body of the whale in order to stage this production's iteration of the chase. Suggesting the bulk of the beast, rather than presenting it in full, preserves its mystery. As the program states, in the eyes of the novel's narrator Ishmael:

> The whale can never be seen because once it is caught and pulled from the ocean, it is no longer what it was, and when it is swimming below the surface of the water it is too vast to be conceived. Thomas uses puppet theater to stage this paradox and to also unsettle our trust in what the eye sees.

When quiet returns in the wake of Ahab's inevitable loss, the brothers complete the ritual by calling the little ship back into safe harbor onstage. Like the titular "Mariner" borrowed from Coleridge, they are doomed to tell the tale in hopes of saving the listeners, and their own restless souls. The clarion call of the brothers is not for adventure or vengeance, but the comforts of hearth and home that were denied to the men who went to a watery grave. They implore the audience to learn from their mistakes. Once you have found it, they tell the listeners, do not forsake that "insular Tahiti of peace and joy."

–review by Skye Strauss,
a PhD Student, Interdisciplinary PhD in Theatre and Drama at Northwestern University

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FEATHERS OF FIRE: A Feast for the Senses

SEA MONSTER AND ZAUL

To a packed audience in the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium of the Metropolitan Museum of Art/NY on May 15, Hamid Rahmanian and a host of puppeteers, dancers ("shadowcasters") and technical experts brought a key story of the tenth century classic, the *Shahnameh (The Epic of the Persian Kings),* to life.[1] This was one of several introductions around the country of this feast for the senses.[2]

Feathers of Fire was conceived, designed and directed by 2014 Guggenheim fellow Hamid Rahmanian who opened the performance with a short introduction in front of the screen.[3] Wisely, he brought a shadow puppet with him to show the audience, many of whom were probably unfamiliar with that ancient art form. In an odd mirroring of art and reality, a baby crying in the audience was suddenly eclipsed by the sound of a baby in the story—the birth of Zaul, the albino son of Saum and Dastaneh. Abandoned by his father because of his strange appearance, Zaul was rescued and raised by the great mythical bird, the Simorgh. When Zaul was sent back to live as a young human, Simorgh gave him three magical golden feathers to burn in case he ever needed her.

The *Shahnameh* was written by the great poet Ferdowsi of Tus (b. 940 C.E.) in what is now the eastern part of Iran. In the shadow play, the story is narrated in English by Rustam, son of Zaul and Rudabeh (the protagonists of *Feathers of Fire*). In the scenario, Rahmanian decided to focus on the section of the *Shahnameh* about the star-crossed lovers Zaul and Rudabeh. Rustam only makes an actual appearance near the end of the performance.

Behind a cinema-sized (15' x 30') screen, the puppeteers and eight shadowcasters kept the story moving forward, employing two high-end projectors donated by Canon USA for this purpose. The story is projected through 160 shadow puppets and over 100 digitally animated backgrounds (orchestrated by Mohammad Talani).

Feathers of Fire plays with shadows in a multitude of ways—from changing the image size, to interacting with a host of special effects, to an evocative final moment when the puppeteers and actors walk in random directions behind the screen, awakening us to the bodies of the performers. In the next moment, when the performers emerge in front of the screen, we become even more aware of the illusion-makers. The sparkling colors of the puppets (handcrafted from a special kind of cardboard and colored celluloid by Neda Kazemifar and Spica Wobbe), and the surreal shapes of the masks continued to enchant the audience even when in full view.

While the puppets and masks were indeed effective, the real splendor of *Feathers of Fire* lies in the vast collection of backdrops and digital projections that provided a sense of depth, movement and detail. As soon as I saw the cityscapes, domes and minarets, the work of Lotte Reiniger came to mind. Her *Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) was the first full-length animated feature film (predating *Snow White)* composed entirely of expertly cut silhouettes. So I was not surprised to learn that Rahmanian was inspired by Reiniger's work. From cities to gardens (where flowers changed colors as lovers passed) to astrological discs whirling in the sky, waves crashing, horses galloping and fireworks exploding, each visual moment was more splendid than the last.

The performance picked up in smoothness as the seventy minutes progressed. Particularly effective was the performance of the Simorgh (performance and voice by Rose Nisker) whose bearing conveyed a nobility difficult to portray with shadows. Her costume combines a feminine grace with a sense of other-worldliness.[4]

Among the comic moments was the speech of an Italian merchant-emissary (reminiscent of the one in ShadowLights's *In Xanadu*), the giggling of Rudabeh's maidservants and an almost southern Iranian music style dance during a wedding celebration. Rahmanian worked with Larry Reed, founder and director of ShadowLight Productions,[5] as well as Banu productions. *Feathers of Fire* was two years in production and three months in rehearsal with the present cast.

An original score was composed by Loga Ramin Torkian and Azam Ali, using a mix of Middle Eastern and western orchestral instruments. [6] The 62 minutes of music, and over 1,000 pre-recorded sounds, helped to set the tone and also provide clues about distance and proximity of the characters and settings.

Fictionville Studio's Melissa Hibbard was the head of production, with Ahmad Kiarostami (son of filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami) as co-producer. Major funding for the Met production came from the Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute and the Mossavar-Rahmani Fund for Iranian Art. The San Francisco performance at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, Cowell Theater on January 16-19 (2016) received funds from the Jim Henson Foundation, among others. The entire project is sponsored by Canon USA, with major funding by a host of foundations with connections to Iranian culture.

Rahmanian expresses the hope that *Feathers of Fire* will offer a view of the Middle East that allows the audience to see a rich history extending beyond recent wars and acts of extremism. He sees himself as a "cultural activist," using an art form (the shadow play) that has ties to Iran, Egypt and Turkey, as well as to nations in Southeast Asia and China. Certainly this tale—with aspects reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Rapunzel*, the *Firebird*, and the *Jungle Book*—has universal appeal for audiences of all ages.

For more photos, links to fabulous books on the production and The *Shahnameh* and more, go to www.unima-usa.com.

–review by Linda C. Ehrlich,
Associate Professor at CASE Western Reserve University

Endnotes

1 The *Shahnameh* covers the reign of 50 monarchs (including three queens) and continues on to the life of Alexander the Great. It was often recited by itinerant story tellers (*naqqals*). It is the longest poem written by a single poet and is responsible for the preservation of the Persian language from Arabic. For more information about the *naqqals*, see Kumiko Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Person Epics* (Leiden, 2003).

2 The world premiere was held at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) on Feb. 5-8 (2016). The cast includes: Aureen Almario, Ya Wen Chien, Caryl Kientz, Rose Nisker, Fred C. Riley III, Lorna Velasco, and Dina Zarif. For more information please visit: www.kingorama.com and the *Shahnameh: The Epic of the Persian Kings* Facebook page about upcoming performances.

3 Rahmanian is also a documentary and feature film director whose work has premiered in a host of film festivals and television channels nationally and internationally.

4 In Sufi mysticism, Simorgh is considered a metaphor for the Divine. She has also been compared to the Western phoenix.

5 ShadowLight Productions has been located in San Francisco since 1972. Reed, trained as a *dalang* ("shadow master") in the Balinese *wayang kulit* tradition, combines multimedia and live actors in ShadowLight's many striking productions.

6 Loga Ramin Torkian and Azam Ali were nominated for a Canadian JUNO Award for their album *Lamentation of Swans*. Loga Ramin Torkian co-founded the World Music groups Niyaz and Axiom of Choice.

ZAUL AND RUDABEH

PHOTO: KINGORAMA.COM

Marie Jiráskova and Pavel Jirásek, eds., *The Puppet and the Modern*. Řevnice (Czech Republic): Arbor Vitae, 2014. 472 pp. $59.27.

Josef Krupa's iconic puppet character Spejbl, carved in the 1930s by Karel Nosek

Marie Jiráskova and Pavel Jirásek's fascinating and inspiring coffee-table book *The Puppet and the Modern* is not, as the title suggests, a comprehensive analysis of puppets and modernity. Instead, it is something perhaps more valuable: a tightly focused look at the aesthetics, techniques, and personalities involved with Czech puppetry in the 20th century.

Czech puppet and performing object culture has always been a source of immense fascination for American puppeteers. Drak Theater and Josef Skupa maintain a semi-mythic status; Jan Svankmajer's and Jiri Trnka's puppet and object animation films are held in high esteem; the Forman Brothers' *The Baroque Opera* (using classic Czech family-theater rod marionettes) is still remembered by those who saw it at the 1996 Henson International Festival of Puppet Theatre; and Vit Horejs's Czechoslovak American Marionette Theater has been a consistent presence in New York City since 1990. Scholars of the Prague Linguistic Circle began to write the first substantial 20th-century theories of puppet and object performance in the late 1920s, and in 1929 the Union International de la Marionette was founded in the same city. Since the 19th century, Prague has been considered the home of the Golem, the clay object brought to life by Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, and in 1920 Karel Čapek invented the enduring term "robot" for his 1920 science-fiction play *R.U.R.* to define a more modern variant. An amazing heritage!

The subtitle of *The Puppet and the Modern* is "Visual Style of Czech Family Puppet Theaters, Theater Clubs, and Art Scenes in the Early 20th Century as a Unique Reflection of Avant-Garde and Modernist Currents by Czech Artists." Puppetry and modernity have always had a difficult relationship because the essential mystery and shamanic status of puppets (what Freud termed "the uncanny") doesn't quite fit into the strictures of reason, logic, and scientific method that have determined modernity since the 16th century. *The Puppet and the Modern* gets at the details of these developments in one place and one century by examining the trajectory of Czech puppet theater from "traveling families of marionetteers who wandered from village to village with their wagons" in the 19th century to the growth of family puppet theaters, puppet theater clubs, educational puppetry, and professional puppet companies that fully embraced the avant-garde aesthetics sweeping Europe in the early 20th century. The ubiquity and richness of Czech puppet culture throughout this period is impressive. In 1928 there were 2,600 puppet theaters throughout the Czech Republic, representing a fertile ground of puppet culture ripe for variety, experimentation, innovation, and debate. Prominent features of the 20th-century Czech puppet scene include finely carved wooden marionettes; a consistent focus on specific stories and characters including Faust and Mephistopheles, fairy tales, and the Czech trickster hero Kašpárek; and a constantly growing array of type characters ranging from regional stereotypes to global caricatures.

Jiráskova and Jirásek are multivalent artists and academics who have assembled one of the most comprehensive collections of puppetry in the Czech Republic, upon which this book is based. Their impressive large-format photographs and illustrations are intimately and successfully tied to short, concise chapters about specific designers, puppeteers, artistic "circles," and commercial developments. Thus, *The Puppet and the Modern* becomes a fascinating step-by-step guide to the development of Czech puppetry from early 20th-century perceptions of it as "a kind of contradictory relic of the 19th century" to its 1950s status as a "family heirloom of the republic." Focusing on puppet and stage design rather than dramaturgy and performing style, the authors note an early 20th-century "Puppetry Renaissance" celebrating "Czechness" (typified in the work of artist Mikoláš Aleš); a shift from traditional and Baroque marionette carving to Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles; and an increasing popularity of string marionettes instead of traditional rod marionettes. The proliferation of theater clubs and family puppet theaters produced a continuing demand for new puppet and stage designs, which were met by a succession

of fascinating scenic artists, architects, visual artists, and puppeteers throughout the century. In the 1920s, mass-produced geometrically-based puppets and children's toys made from lathed wooden parts (echoing similar work by German Bauhaus puppeteers and the Swiss Dadaist Sophie Taeuber-Arp) became increasingly popular, eclipsing the more traditional and realistic hand-carved puppets. The expressly modernist lathed figures (and the abstract stage scenery designed to accompany such puppets) encouraged scores of designers to fully engage with avant-garde aesthetics as an aspect of commercial toy and puppet manufacturing as well as experimental performance.

While 20th-century Czech puppetry reflected modernist trends across Europe, the particular status of the form in Czech contexts made for an intense array of designs and practices – from student efforts to home theaters, commercial toy and puppet manufacturing, and avant-garde cabaret performance – reflecting an unusually concentrated and consistent development. Of particular interest is the creation of new mouse-like Czech national puppet heroes Spejbl and Hurvínek, a 20th-century father-and-son team who to a large extent superseded Kašpárek as the epitome of Czech national character in puppetry (a development fascinatingly parallel to Guignol's emerging dominance over Polichinelle during the previous century in France). The rise of Spejbl and Hurvínek was similar to what Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse did in the U.S., but the Czech heroes were adamantly marionettes rather than animated characters.

While Jiráskova and Jirásek pay meticulous attention to specific designers and works, their segmented and abbreviated writing style lacks a consistent sense of social and political context. The 20th century was a period of immense upheaval, as Czechs emerged from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 to become the Republic of Czechoslovakia, lost the Sudetenland to Hitler in 1938, and then were occupied by the Germans until 1945. After World War Two, the Czech Communist Party took power in a 1948 coup d'état, and the liberalizing currents of the "Prague Spring" twenty years later were repressed by invasion from Warsaw Pact countries. The persistent Czech resistance to Communism flowered in the Velvet Revolution of 1989, and in 1993 post-communist Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. *The Puppet and the Modern*'s strict attention to design (and relative inattention to performance and dramaturgy) means that these powerful social and political changes essential to the nature of 20th-century modernity appear as enigmatic, unexplained details.

We learn that during the German occupation, Josef Skupa was imprisoned, "and the puppets of Spejbl and Hurvínek were deposited in a safe in the Gestapo headquarters in Plzeň," but we don't quite know why. Other Czech puppeteers continue to work during the Nazi occupation, and modernist puppet innovations continue, but we never get a sense of what that meant and how it worked. In her 2014 play anthology *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape*, Lisa Peschel documents how Spejbl and Hurvínek were part of puppet plays performed by imprisoned Jews in the Terezin concentration camp near Prague, and how in the same environment the fourteen-year-old puppeteer Hanuš Hachenburg channeled the richness of Czech amateur puppet theater into a brilliant satire of Hitler before dying in Auschwitz in 1943. But no aspect at all of that particular branch of modern Czech puppetry is mentioned in *The Puppet and the Modern*.

Equally fascinating, the career of Jan Malík, perhaps the most central figure in Czech puppet modernism, remains tantalizingly sketchy here. A brilliant theorist and historian of puppetry since the 1920s, Malík became director of the Central Puppet Theater in Prague after the post-war rise of communism, overseeing the centralization and standardization of Czech puppetry along Soviet lines, and specifically the example of Sergei Obraztsov's Moscow State Puppet Theatre. It was at this time that the Soviet preference for "puppets manipulated from below" (rod and hand puppets) superceded traditional Czech rod or string marionettes – certainly one of the key moments of 20th-century Czech puppet history. However, Jiráskova and Jirásek's approach studiously avoids analysis of such complicated cultural/political moments and their complex roots in puppet history, as if an understanding of the development of modern puppet techniques could somehow be divorced from the political contexts in which they grew. Such analysis might be the province of a future study; if so, that book will need to pay close attention to the electrifying achievement of *The Puppet and the Modern*.

–review by John Bell

Young Lady, designed by Ladislav Šaloun, carved in 1924 by Josef Chochol. Prototype for a mass-produced puppet