

The World Through Wooden Eyes

Occasional Papers

THE DECLINE OF THE MARIONETTE

In the last Puppet Master Chris Somerville wrote about the decline of the marionette. Of all the various puppet techniques the marionette is one of the most complex requiring good design, construction, also lengthy rehearsal and general practise over a long period time. Yes, intending puppeteers, or actors looking for other options for performing those techniques that are easier to create are obviously inclined to avoid the marionette.

All puppet techniques require in depth study of the body language of different types of character and their inner life and actions. One problem of the marionette can be the length of strings, particularly long ones. The soul of the puppet is in the palm of the hand, and the further the puppet is away from the hand the less life, soul and character it has.

There is not only a decline in the marionette but other techniques too, in design, technical development, direction, writing, manipulation and fundamental stage craft and the craftsmanship of performance.

Regularly meeting intending puppeteers and students from schools of art, design and theatre who are hoping to make puppet theatre a part of their career structure, or who secure a commission to create puppets for productions rarely realise the complexities of the art and craft of the subject. They come with a concept for a project, but after assessing their ability to realise the concept you quickly discover that they have no basic skills, knowledge or experience of the puppet theatre. In some cases they are not prepared to undertake a period of preparation and research to discover what has been achieved by generations of puppeteers worldwide, also the components of puppet theatre production, and the competition that surrounds them. I usually request that they ask themselves three questions. Why do they want to do it, for whom do they want to do it and then how do they want to do it. This is followed by a SWAT Job, to assess their strength, weakness, opportunities and threats.

There is general concept that the puppet and the puppet theatre can be anything, and anyone can do it. There are short courses for intending puppeteers that focus on manipulation of disposable objects, but rarely the art and craft of the puppet theatre as a complex form of performance art of ancient origin.

It is important to explore new and innovative ideas, also attract new audiences, but by flooding an over stretched market with mediocre puppet theatre productions can result in the decline of the paying audience that is familiar with the exceptional levels of production values in the arts, theatre, film and television that are the puppet theatres competitors.

Some puppeteers start companies without any form of training or experience. The work produced is frequently copies of fashionable forms that demonstrate, and perpetuate, bad production and performance habits that are difficult to change later on.

We see puppet shows advertised where there are no puppets. There are efforts to remove the word 'puppet', replacing it with confusing titles. There are productions that have puppets in them that are totally dominated by the human performer, where badly made puppets become lifeless props lacking any individual soul, personality or character.

The puppet theatre is a rewarding career; not always financial, also a fascinating hobby. A strong amateur infrastructure is very important. Opportunities to explore ways and means of creating innovative work, free of the pressure to just making a living is important factor. There are opportunities to create multimedia and innovative puppet theatre productions with high levels of production values, but there is a real need to return to a sound basis of skill and craftsmanship to underpin the creation of new work. There is no future without the past, and we often need to go backwards to go forward.

The British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild is a well established organisation that plays a significant role in the development of the art and craft of the puppet theatre, and is a sustaining mechanism that is populated with a lively membership combining both amateurs, and professional puppeteers. What we need to do is to attract a new and vibrant, younger generation of individuals prepared to commit themselves to a programme of intense research and practise to discover ways and means of creating new and innovative work. There are interesting and talented young people with good ideas, but they will need to be supported and inspired by leading practitioners producing the most advanced and interesting work. Without them there will be very little development. There are some outstanding resources available for puppeteers to enhance their skills and experience but they are often ignored.

There are workshops and courses based on visual and physical performance art that frequently latch on a puppetry component as an extra tool, they are often led by people without knowledge or experience of the art and craft of the puppet theatre. We meet college lecturers asking for workshops for students, mainly short craft workshops of an hour or so. Others ask for a short basic workshop to take back to teach the students. If lectures take the view that the puppet theatre is an easy option, how are students expected to take it seriously. Like so many elements of daily living, the puppet theatre is led by finance rather than the art and craft of the subject. The craftsmanship of performance is not only a question of the making of the puppet itself, but also the many other components of production.

The puppet, and the puppet theatre, is open to exploitation. Fashionable forms tend to use performers that dominate the puppet as the central means of expression. The performers become technical operators, two or more performers' work with one figure that often loses its own independent character and personality.

The fashion for puppets appearing in dramatic theatre works is sometimes marred by the lack of knowledge and experience of the director in the understanding of the role, function and potential of different techniques of puppet, and how they are best combined in the structure of a play. The puppet is directed as a human being, instead of the puppet with its own unique qualities, role, function and potential.

Many years ago whilst we were involved in the development of the Charleville Mezieres International Institute for Puppet Theatre, in a dialogue with Sergei Obraztsov he stated that it was pointless training vast numbers of puppeteers if we first could not find, or train highly skilled and knowledgeable Artistic Leaders to make the best use of them. How right he was.

There have to be changes, and new and innovative ideas explored. There are some excellent performances using puppets, but there is a real need to find ways and means of involving young people in the puppet theatre, to create opportunities for them to learn the skills and craftsmanship in all components of the puppet theatre production and to provide them with challenges and the best artistic leaders to inspire them.

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