

Dramaturgias no Teatro de
Formas Animadas

Dramaturgy for the puppet theatre
yesterday and today

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Abstract

Until the twentieth century notions of dramaturgy were closely bound up with the Poetics of Aristotle, often leaving out of account less 'regular' forms from Shakespeare to the melodrama.

From the 17th to the 19th century live actors and puppets could be virtually interchangeable, performing the same or similar repertoires. Adaptation of plays from the actors' theatre was the general rule. Comparatively few authors wrote directly for the puppet stage, and when they did it was usually under special circumstances. In the nineteenth century a juvenile market began to grow,

Two main streams in European puppet theatre are: 1. puppets used in conjunction with story-telling and 2. puppets as substitutes for the live actor.

The fact that the puppet is usually a small humanoid figure means that it has always been a valuable vehicle for parody and satire.

The theatrical avant-garde that came onto existence in the late 19th century had an enormous impact on puppetry and the direct links between the puppet and the human began to disappear.

Gordon Craig's idea of the complete man of the theatre, which led to the modern one of the director, changed the whole concept of the puppeteer who ceased to be a mere operative becoming instead a creative artist in his or her own right. Increased exposure to other artistic forms, notably the visual arts, also resulted in an increasing divergence of puppetry from mainstream theatre and eventually the puppet theatre, instead of following the actors' theatre, has come to be a leader in contemporary experimental and alternative theatre.

Keywords: Aristotle, Melodrama, Parody, Total theatre, Adaptations.

What is dramaturgy? In English the word ‘dramaturge’ meaning the composer or writer of a play came into use at the end of the eighteenth century and often had a slightly negative connotation. If the word means no more than writing a piece for dramatic performance the definition is so wide as to be virtually meaningless. Rediscovering Aristotle’s *Poetics*, seventeenth-century France developed theories as to how to write plays and evolved the theory of the unities. This remained the basis for much of European playwriting, and criticism, and led to Eugene Scribe’s idea of the ‘well-made play’ in the nineteenth century and to many courses on playwriting today.

The question of dramaturgy for the puppet theatre has been examined by Penny Francis in a chapter of her book *Puppetry, a reader in theatre practice*. With particular relevance to the puppet theatre of today, the special number of *Puck* 8 (‘Ecritures et Dramaturgies’) is also valuable. More recently in *The Routledge Companion to puppetry and material performance* there are several very useful essays.

Henryk Jurkowski’s *Ecrivains et marionnettes* is a valuable survey of work written for the puppet stage, but focuses on published material, including pieces written for very limited social groups and frequently receiving no more than a handful of performances. Left out of account is the vast bulk of dramatic fare offered to popular audiences on a daily basis in Europe from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. This survives for the most part in hand-written scripts, not printed books, especially in Germany, Italy and to a lesser extent in France.

Most of these were adaptations of plays from the actors' theatres and were specially copied out in large tomes that might be propped above the proscenium and read. Having a script copied by hand could be relatively expensive but these volumes were seen as part of the capital of the company, and ultimately this may be another reason why puppet repertoires gradually became rather out of date. Companies often kept scripts over a few generations and were unwilling to let outsiders see them, although they might be passed from one company to another. Access to these texts often posed a problem for earlier researchers, but today, especially in Italy, many have found their way into libraries and museums and now constitute an important resource for the study of puppet dramaturgy.

Some of the first easily available scripts were those collected by nineteenth-century folklorists from Karl Simrock onwards. They performed an invaluable task in recording repertoires of companies, but their interest was not primarily the dramaturgical aspects of these pieces. In France the Guignol repertoire was published by the magistrate Jean-Baptiste Onofrio in 1865. His interest was perhaps less theatrical than a desire to preserve something of the flavour of a disappearing popular culture and language.

Some adaptations of plays from the actors' theatre were relatively close to the original text, though frequently shorn of more extensive dialogue or less necessary characters. Others were loosely based on the original, whose title if well-known was also valuable for publicity purposes, even if the author's name was never mentioned. Many of the pieces selected for adaptation came from the repertoires of the popular theatres and were virtually formula written. They had all the right effects, but most remained profoundly unmemorable. Puppet texts were also drawn from chapbooks, cheaply-produced pieces of fiction and, in the later nineteenth-century, from the newspaper serial stories such as Paul Féval's *Le Bossu* (1857). In many cases the 'text' was little more than a synopsis with a few important speeches written out more fully, and the rest was improvised. Generally, the showman put together the text himself and once performed this became part of the repertoire of the company.

Few professional puppet companies had the luxury of a 'dramaturge' or playwright. In early eighteenth-century Paris when there were many restrictions on the presentation of dramatic material outside the official theatres, the booths of the fairs of Saint Germain and Saint Laurent were theatres where showmen used puppets and this led to the creation of an extensive repertoire.

Comparatively few authors have set out to write plays for the puppet stage. In Rome in the 1840s, Adone Finardi wrote a number of plays for the popular Piazza Montanara theatre in Rome. These were based on chivalric material and the comic scenes in dialect were fully written out rather than left to the improvisatory skills of the showman.

Franz Pocci, who provided a large part of the repertoire of the Münchener Marionettentheater, of which he was also one of the creators, was one of the

first to write original plays designed for the young. These plays often have a fairy-tale or exotic plot, the dialogue is functional and little space is allowed for the psychological niceties of the Aristotelian drama. The central figure is Kasperl, now adapted for his new audiences.

From the later eighteenth century onwards, childhood began to be perceived as something very precious, and the child ceased to be simply a diminutive adult. Once puppet showmen realised that one of their main markets was the juvenile one, the repertoires began to modify. To encourage parents many showmen went to considerable lengths in the publicity to emphasise that their shows were moral and instructive. The idea of the educational value of puppet theatre acquired momentum in the early twentieth century and this sometimes became a main objective when it came to be seen as a tool for taking control of young minds. Such was the case with the German *Kraft durch Freude* movement. In Soviet Russia in the 1950s this led to the setting up of puppet theatres in the various socialist states of eastern Europe. All this was a type of puppet theatre that was recognisably distinct from the mainstream actors' theatre and closely linked to the idea of creating model citizens.

Henryk Jurkowski in *Écrivains et Marionnettes* covers a wide range of plays written for the puppet stage, but most are of a more literary nature and do not correspond to what was the mainstream puppet theatre. These include Maurice Sand's plays for the puppet stage at the home of his mother, George Sand, at Nohant, or the plays written by artists and literary figures exploring the possibilities of the puppet stage.

Rappresentanti figurati' and 'commedianti pupazzanti'

The seventeenth century Italian theologian Domenico Ottonelli divided puppetry into '*rappresentanti figurati*' and '*commedianti pupazzanti*'. For Ottonelli the *rappresentanti figurati* initially were shows where the performer had something of the role of a story-teller and the figures illustrated that story which, initially, was often a biblical narrative. This involved an episodic form, in which situations are more important than a study of the individual characters. That tradition today is most obvious with the Sicilian *Opera dei pupi*, where the 'puparo' frequently does all the speaking in a way that relates closely to that of the 'contastoria' or street story-teller. In the north of France in the later nineteenth century it was quite common for puppeteers to use cheaply printed popular fiction in this way, extracting pieces of spoken dialogue from the original story. Today many performers, especially solo ones, appear onstage with the puppets and use them to illustrate story-telling. This presentational mode lends itself to direct communication between the performer and the audience and may even allow for a degree of interaction between the actor and the puppet, thus offering a different dynamic from the situation where the puppeteer is concealed.

Outside the story-telling mode there are two main, but not always distinct, lines. One corresponds to the Aristotelian model with a clear line of plot development and character, the other has a more loosely episodic structure and was specially suited to the marionette stage. In the episodic mode, especially with pieces based on the lives of brigands, saints and others, the characters usually have little development and are essentially fixed roles in terms of a plot which may span a number of years. The puppet figure stands for a character, but, unlike the flesh and blood actor, has no need to persuade audiences that he or she is that character

The *commedianti pupazzanti* heralded the long tradition of the puppet, especially the marionette, as a miniaturised actor expected to behave in a way that approximates to that of the human performer. The popular theatres of the nineteenth century presented melodramas with emphasis on situations and narrative, and such pieces were eminently suitable for the marionette stage. Companies had sets of figures roughly corresponding to the roles of the popular theatre (leading man, leading lady, villain, comic, father figure etc.) and these reappeared with changes of costume in the different shows of the repertoire. With wooden actors, plays depending on psychological nuances or studies of character were generally avoided. By the early twentieth century the idea of the puppet theatre as a mirror of the actors' theatre was fading although much of the older repertoire continued to be performed. The new realism of cinema meant that there was no way that even the most naturalistic of marionettes might be mistaken for human beings.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe there had not always been a very clear distinction between actors and puppeteers and depending on the circumstances the same troupe might play themselves or use puppets in the same repertoire.

Showmen had to earn a living, and in earlier years there were many restrictions on live actors which might then be replaced by puppets. In some areas of Europe, the appearance of a live actor was considered immoral, and in such cases companies might resort to the use of marionettes. Marionettes in Italy were sometimes used for operatic performances, as this allowed female singers to perform, without appearing on the stage. There could also be economic considerations. The Scottish showman Billy Purves in the early years of the nineteenth century ran into problems over paying his actors and replaced them with marionettes. The puppet show was also the only stage performance that many audiences not living in urban centres, or too poor to attend the theatres, might ever experience. Showmen often emphasised the lifelikeness (and stature) of their figures in a further attempt to blur the distinction between the marionette and the human performer. They stressed the human qualities of their puppets and the scaling down of scenery made it hard to realise that these were not human actors. What was perhaps only perceived subconsciously at the time was the rapidity with which an audience will project life onto the inanimate puppet.

When we look at the dramaturgy of the puppet theatre, we may easily assume that this refers to pieces of writing intended for dramatic performance, as in the actors' theatre. However, where the greater part of mainstream theatre today still focuses on the interpretation of a text written for performance, this is no longer the case with puppet theatre where spoken text may be minimal or non-existent.

With the onset of the twentieth century, puppet theatre was ceasing to be perceived as a reflection of actors' theatre and plays written for the puppet stage could enjoy a degree of freedom which the actors' theatre did not really permit. Many were now being written directly for the puppet stage with its specific conventions in mind.

By the later nineteenth century most of the live theatre was moving in the direction of naturalism and trying to blur any distinction between scenic fiction and everyday life. Some marionette performers made an exceptional effort to convince audiences that they were watching real human beings, but this was not universal. The celebrated Thomas Holden focused on the trick and variety items and much of the enjoyment came from the combination of puppet-like qualities (and appearance) with recognizably human behavioural tendencies.

Parody

With its superficial resemblance to a human being, from the seventeenth century onwards, the puppet has been a vehicle for parody and satire. Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* uses the kingdom of Lilliput to write about the government of Walpole in England. Perceived as a diminutive version of a human, as well as being a wooden figure moving in a rather jerky way, the puppet has always provided a, usually unflattering, imitation of a living person. The idea of a ruler or politician as a puppet-master is also a common cartoon theme.

The puppetization of important people has continued into modern times and is most notable in such television programmes as the British *Spitting Image*.

From the late sixteenth century marionette performers in England were showing their 'motions', often drawn from Old Testament pieces. However, Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) included a puppet show parodying a classical theme and transposing the Ovidian subject of Hero and Leander to contemporary London.

The parodies of Lesage, Fuzelier and others presented at the Théâtre de la Foire in Paris in the early eighteenth century centre on the character of Polichinelle. They include parodic versions of operas and also make fun of the monopolies held by the official theatres (most notably the Comédie Française) which regularly attempted to have other theatres closed down or prevent the use of human actors.

Henry Fielding's *Tom Thumb* staged at the Haymarket Theatre in London in 1731 was written as a satire of the heroic tragedy popular at the time and

contains many elements that have a puppet-like quality, including the presentation of the military hero as the diminutive Tom Thumb. Some 40 years later Kane O'Hara adapted *Tom Thumb* for the Patagonian marionette theatre. Fielding's joke allowed for a really diminutive hero, and a Queen who is a giant, and this could be expressed far more effectively on the puppet stage, as could a final scene in which Tom Thumb, swallowed by a cow, has to be regurgitated.

In Rome in the 1830s the Fiano marionette theatre, often mocked the mores of the Church in an indirect manner through the character of Cassandrino (in whom it was easy to recognise an ecclesiastic with a fondness for women). When *L'Italiana in Algeri* was staged the title was modified to *L'italiano in Algeri* to please the censors, but the double-entendre of the piece remained, and this was heightened when the figure of Cassandrino was cast as the slightly ridiculous Taddeo. In 1872 the Lupi company of Turin, offered an *Aida*, which had been premiered in Egypt in 1871. A comic prologue was added centring on the popular figure of Gerolamo, but the opera itself was turned into a ballet without words and supplied with a happy ending. In the 1880s Pierre Roussel presented productions of well-known operas at Lyon's Gymnase Dramatique with Guignol in the lead role.

Plays for the twentieth century

The symbolist drama, unlike the more naturalistic theatre of the late nineteenth century, was far closer to the puppet theatre for which it would become a serious source of inspiration with the move away from the whole idea of the puppet as a miniaturised stage actor. The avant-garde theatre also moved in an abstract direction that has proved exceptionally fertile for puppet theatre. At the same time this has left a degree of uncertainty as to how we may define puppetry which, today, is sometimes thought of as being closer to the plastic arts than the performing ones.

With the twentieth century and its various artistic movements, new audiences were beginning to appear, but many of these were seeking in the puppet a form of aesthetic satisfaction rather than straightforward entertainment. While many companies continued, as they had done before, using existing scripts or adaptations, there was a growing feeling that a new concept of dramaturgy was required.

Miles Lee, who created a puppet theatre in Edinburgh in the 1950s, published a valuable book: *Puppet theatre and manipulation*. In his chapter on play selection he says:

As a result of the lack of puppet plays which suited the style of work we were attempting, we finally cast our doubts aside and started adapting for ourselves and making plays out of existing stories and themes. Because of our lack of experience, we adhered far too closely to the ideas and characterization of the original story. But the original

story had been written about human beings, not puppets. As a result of our failing to realize this fully, a form of compromise resulted. The lines and dialogue were too greatly influenced by the human emotion conveyed in the original and the value of puppet characteristics and satirical caricature were not, as they should be, the basis upon which our dialogue was written.'

He made some unsuccessful attempts to collaborate with a writer, and reached the conclusion that:

There is a great need for playwrights to specialize in the medium of the puppet stage if the art of puppetry is to take up its true position as an art and entertainment form.

Puppets today appear in many forms and guises and it is comparatively rare for a puppet performance to have a script that can be preserved and performed by other companies. Pieces are usually linked to the work of a specific company and either written as a commission or else created by the director of the company.

Total theatre – the puppeteer as complete man of the theatre

In the theatre what was called the stage-manager in the nineteenth century was being developed into the director thanks to Gordon Craig and others. A similar evolution was taking place in puppetry with the development of the 'figure-worker' into a creative artist in his or her own right. By the 1960s the opening up of the entire stage space to be shared by puppet and puppeteer was becoming increasingly common, and this would have an enormous effect on the dramaturgy of the puppet stage. The word 'manipulator' was becoming out of date (and sometimes seen as politically incorrect), but by the last decades of the century the term 'puppeteer' suffered much the same fate as the parameters of what might be thought of as puppet theatre widened out. Today it is more usual to speak of the 'puppet actor', who is often central to the performance, sometimes the only live performer, and who is often the creator/dramaturg of the show itself. In some cases, the puppet actor is also the subject of the performance. Sergei Obraztsov showed how the actor can use his or her own hands as puppets and this has been taken further by others, such as Hugo and Ines, using parts of their own bodies as puppets.

Henryk Jurkowski (*Puck 8*) goes back to Gordon Craig, not so much for his famous essay on 'The Actor and the Übermarionette' as for his emphasis on the notion of the director (producer) as a complete man of the theatre. This affected the whole avant-garde theatre movement of the early part of the twentieth century, and eventually proved of even greater significance for the

puppet theatre. What Craig was looking at was a theatre not based on the written playtext of an author but one that introduced the idea of the director as a creative artist in his or her own right. A few years later the French director, Gaston Baty, drew a storm of protest with his essay 'Sire le mot' in his book *Le Masque et l'encensoir* (1926) where he attacked the hegemony of the text in contemporary theatre. He had earlier published an essay 'Les sept voix de la lyre' in which he described theatre as a bringing together of different art forms on a level of equality. Baty's seven 'voices' are painting, sculpture, dance, prose, verse, singing and symphony. This reduction of the role of the text became increasingly important in more experimental puppetry, most notably in some of the work of the Bauhaus where performance did not necessarily require a text and where the human actor was sometimes puppetised, as in the *Triadic Ballet*.

Despite his sallies about 'Sire le mot' Baty remained an interpreter of an author's text and did not take the step that increasing numbers of directors would begin to take in the 1960s when some began to treat text as raw material out of which to create performance.

In 1957 Tadeusz Kantor wrote in his notebook:

Tous les éléments de l'expression scénique, mot, son, mouvement, lumière, couleur, forme sont arrachés les uns des autres, ils deviennent indépendants, libres, ils ne s'expliquent plus, ils ne s'illustrent plus les uns les autres.

This shows a huge development beyond the ideas of Baty. The different elements of the performance no longer fuse in a harmonious whole allowing for an interpretation of a text. Instead, a new type of dramaturgy was beginning to emerge in which the written text was not the starting point for a piece of theatre, but could be incorporated as element of performance.

Today there are many puppet companies who have tried to move away from text-based work. The Italian company Controluce have spent a quarter of a century trying to find a dramaturgy in which music, rather than speech, is the central element. In the eighteenth century the operatic parodies of the Théâtre de la Foire must have demanded close collaboration between the performers and the musicians who would have adapted the music accordingly. In the case of Cardinal Ottoboni's theatre in Rome the puppets, operated by servants, probably did little more than illustrate the operas they had to stage. With availability of high-quality recordings of operas in the twentieth century, companies such as the Salzburger Marionettentheater and more recently the Colla company of Milan have given beautiful operatic productions, but the puppets have done little more than illustrate the work. The idea of music as one of the languages of the puppet theatre was essential to Vittorio Podrecca's Teatro dei Piccoli, and the interplay between marionette and music is given lively expression with his famous pianist. Where the music is written, adapted or played in terms of the performance, it becomes an integral part of the show,

and a number of contemporary productions use music as a fundamental element of the creative process, an excellent example being Stephen Mottram's *Seed Carriers*. Here, in performance, the music is recorded, but it was composed in terms of the evolution of the production.

Not specifically composed, but carefully arranged as a total soundtrack, the music for the Brazilian João da Silva's *O principio do espanto* (2004), a solo performance with a single semi-abstract figure, was also an indication that in many cases the dramaturgy of a production can be effectively a choreography.

O principio do espanto was deceptively simple in appearance, but had a highly sophisticated lighting plot. Lighting has moved from mere illumination to becoming a major element, and sometimes replacing text in the dramaturgy of the puppet stage. An early twentieth-century example of this is Stravinsky's *Fireworks* (1917) conceived by Giacomo Balla for Sergei Diaghilev which had a complete choreography of moving coloured shapes lit both externally and from the inside. The revolution in shadow theatre, especially in the work of Fabrizio Montecchi for *Gioco Vita*, takes light as a raw material out of which a show is created.

Rhythm and internal logic

Once we move away from the notion of dramaturgy consisting merely of words written down to be spoken, other factors come into play, especially in more modern work where there is not necessarily any spoken text. The writings of the Polish semiologist Tadeusz Kowzan make the point that a performance exists at the intersection of arts which involve duration in time (music, literature) and those in which the spatial dimension is important (painting, sculpture).

Traditional notions of dramaturgy simply do not fit much that happens in puppet performance today. Dramaturgy might be redefined as a quality that makes a given performance work when played to an audience. The key element is the overall rhythm, but even this is far from fixed. In the past a folk puppeteer had an instinctive sense of the rhythm allowing for variety of pace from one performance to the next according to the audience, something that the actors of the *Commedia dell'Arte* understood well. The street puppeteer has to be specially sensitive to this, as otherwise the audience will simply drift away. Many puppeteers will not perform to a pre-recorded script, as this cannot be varied according to the individual audience's concentration span.

A verbal text is often as important for its sound value or poetic resonance as for its more literal meaning, and shows where there is little or no text have to maintain interest through visual elements, music and, above all, the rhythm of the performance. A cliché of the English puppet stage was, and still is, the undersea scene where fish and other coloured objects drift around, but often such scenes are prolonged for their 'beauty' and at that point any notion of real dramaturgy is put on hold.

Maurice Maeterlinck emphasised the value of silence on the theatre and showed that a pause can be far more eloquent than actual dialogue. It is not the words, but what lies under the words that matters. Over-reliance on spoken language can have a negative effect in the dramaturgy of the puppet theatre, but also an interruption of the action in the wrong way can easily destroy the overall rhythm of the performance.

In the 1980s I met Samuel Beckett in Paris and we chatted a bit about his short television plays that were produced in Stuttgart. What was particularly interesting was that Beckett gives very precise stage directions with relation to timing and pauses, and this is part of his scenic writing. However, when in the television studio he found that this needed further fine-tuning. Most theatre directors try to stick meticulously to his printed directions about how many seconds pause should be made at specific moments, but Beckett himself was quite ready to admit that what looks good on the page is not necessarily what works in performance and was prepared to modify accordingly. It is interesting to note that a number of Beckett's shorter pieces lend themselves remarkably well to puppet production.

In the nineteenth-century melodrama a pause ensured that dramatic situations could be frozen as a 'tableau' so that the audience might absorb the visual significance of that moment. Any puppet performance is a series of tableaux or moments, but the important thing is the transition from one to the next. One of the first puppeteers to realise this consciously was perhaps Thomas Holden in the 1870s. He understood that every attitude or movement has to be prepared giving a sense that the whole body of the puppet is behind it – it is not enough just to raise an arm or a leg. This is illustrated superbly in the Japanese Bunraku whose three manipulators co-ordinate their operation of different parts of the body creating an impression that the figure is imbued with life. In so doing they reveal the subtle importance of visual sequencing on the puppet stage.

In the eighteenth century the 'changement à vue' was one of the delights of the opera and was invaluable in allowing for the smooth transition from one scene to the next. In the older puppet theatre scene changes often took the form of unrolling a new backcloth and continuing the action almost unbroken as a fresh group of figures came onto the stage. The Lupi company in Turin were still doing this in the early 1990s in their production of *Peter Pan*. The notion of the scene-change has lost much of its importance on the contemporary puppet stage, especially when a full theatre stage is used with performers sharing the space with the puppets, and the 'scenery' has become a number of objects/locations, a bit like the mansions of the medieval religious theatre. Well-managed this allows for a fluidity and flexibility, which may easily be lost in productions where each scene ends with the closing of the curtains or a blackout.

Every performance has a visual logic as much as a verbal one. The internal logic of a performance allows the spectator to engage with what is happening

on the stage, whether in the context of a full-length piece or of an individual item. Holden's tight-rope walkers, drunken stilt-walker, musicians and others, had their own dramaturgy. It was no longer a question of simply showing a trick to amaze audiences. That scene, lasting only a few minutes, and without the help of any speech, had its own development and left audiences with the feeling that each puppet figure was propelled forward by its own inner motivation.

This same sense of motivation is essential to any puppet production, even once it has gone well beyond any 'traditional' notion of the art. A visit to a puppet festival today, introduces the spectator to a plethora of different and overlapping art forms. Dramaturgy has become the way in which an individual performance is put together. Once it had liberated itself from any idea of the puppet as a substitute for an actor, puppetry was free to develop its own dramaturgy with the result that today it finds itself at the forefront of experimental theatre.

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