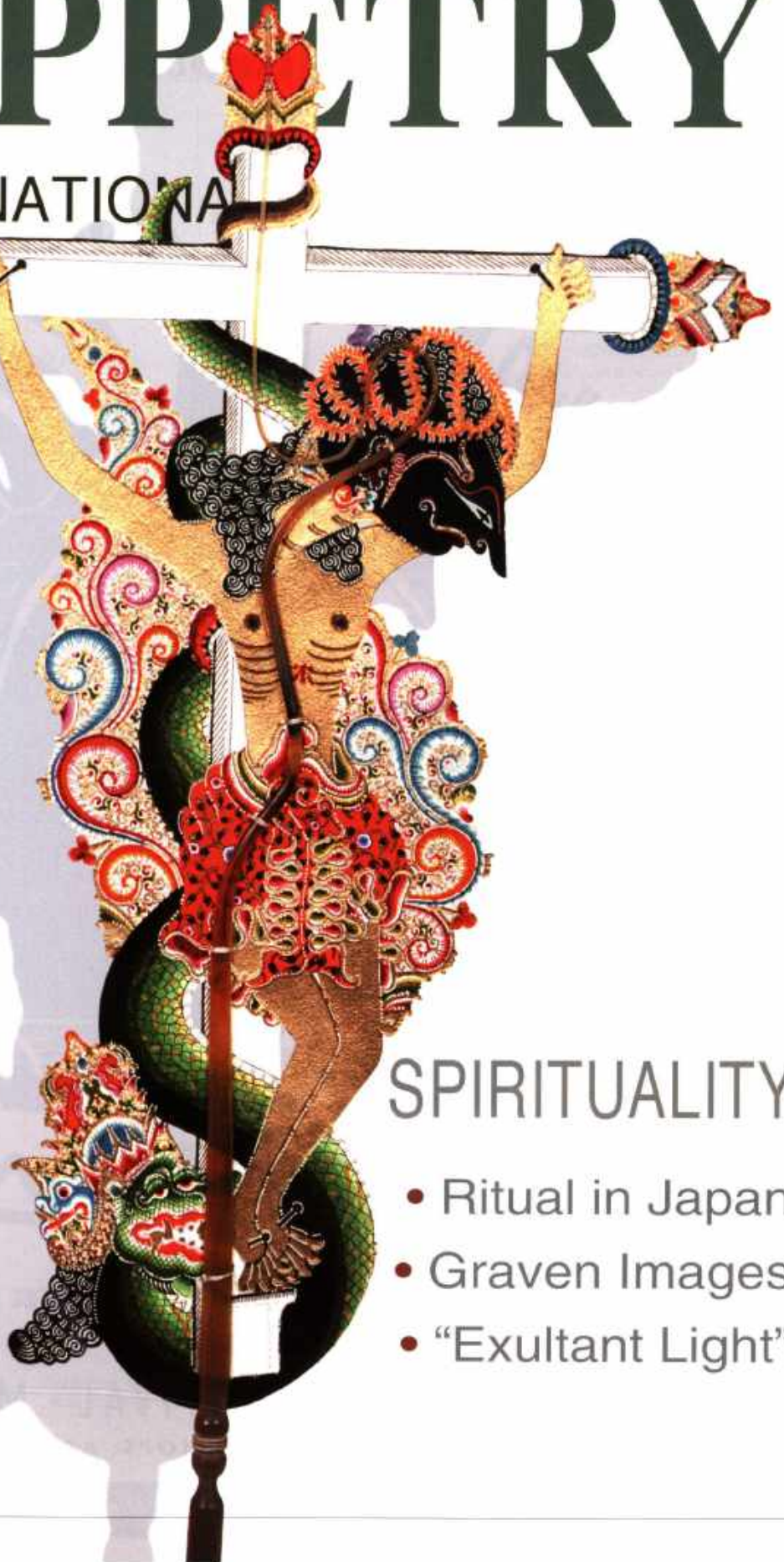


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SPIRITUALITY

- Ritual in Japan
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issue no. 11

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ON THE COVER:
Wayang Christ figure
(see Tamara Fielding's article
on page 11)



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Editor's Page—

A great treat for Bonnie and me is when, twice a year, we set off from the wilds of New Hampshire for the wilds of Manhattan. It is there that we meet with our board of advisors (an extraordinary lot— their names are listed on page 1), and it is there, over a long cup of coffee ("Or tea!" says Bonnie), where we assemble the basic outline of the upcoming issue of *Puppetry International*. Our last trip occurred this past September, shortly after the attack on the World Trade Center. The smoke had lifted, but the atmosphere was still charged. The topic seemed timely: Puppetry's Spiritual Dimension.

Actually, my proposed topic— the Spiritual Dimension of Puppetry— proved controversial, as it treated our art form itself as the subject, rather than as an instrumentality in humankind's search for, or direct experience of, a higher power, Truth, spirit, godhead or what have you. I hope that this distinction will better reflect our intent for this issue. It has been said that we "cannot catch the universe in a net of words," but words can, perhaps, lead us closer to the edge of the abyss. Here, therefore, are a few words by way of defining the common thread which holds this collection of essays together.¹

Spirit: the etymology includes the Old French and Latin *esprit* and *spiritus*, spirit and breath; akin to Old Norse *fi'sa*, to break wind (by Thor, those Vikings were an earthy lot!); Latin *spirare*, to breathe, and perhaps to Old Slavic *piskati* to play a reed instrument. Usage includes (but is by no means limited to): 1) the breath of life (animating or vital principal), 2) a supernatural being, 3) the active essence of the Deity, 4) the soul (either of a living person or disembodied), 5) the immaterial, intelligent or sentient part of a person: the vital principal in a human coming as a gift from God and providing one's personality inward structure, dynamic drive and creative response to the demands it encounters in the process of becoming, 7) the activating or central principal of something, 8) life or consciousness having an independent type of existence [e.g., idealists maintain that the essential nature of the universe is spirit, pantheists assert that spirit pervades the universe], 9) the flammable liquid containing ordinary alcohol and water separated

by distillation from any alcoholic liquid or mash. [This last is not included merely to be perverse, but because of the many associations of alcohol with various sacraments, rites, etc.]

Even this very incomplete definition of spirit covers a lot of ground. Our human bodies distinguish us, and separate us from one another. The spirit which animates us, however, connects us to one another, to other beings living or dead, and to all entities in our universe from the almost impossibly small to the almost unimaginably huge. We perceive the universe in terms of the human scale— an arbitrary and egotistical frame of reference, perhaps, but eminently practical. Though science has greatly refined our understanding of both the micro- and macrocosms in which we find ourselves, and the forces which hold the whole thing together, humanity still looks for meaning beyond those things-which-can-be-measured. Should science ever finally succeed in nailing down the exact moment of the Big Bang, the exact moment at which the universe will surrender its last ounce of energy, and everything in between, we will still ask: "Why?" and "Why us?" and "Is it meaningful that we perceive the universe and can question the significance of our own existence?"

The finite mind of our species, when attempting to commune with the infinite mind of the "creator," needs an intermediary. Priests, Shamans and other spiritual leaders have provided this mediation, and have accrued an enormous "bag of tricks" over the millennia to assist in these efforts: incense and rosaries, sticks and bones, masks and puppets, meditation and mortification, tantra and mantra, trances and dances, walking on hot coals and even the handling of live rattlesnakes. I call these "tricks" not as a disparagement, but because I believe that our rational minds hold so tenaciously to the quotidian as a strategy for survival, that we need to "trick" our egos in order to temporarily transcend the world of things-that-can-be-measured-in-space-and-time (also referred to, sometimes, as "the world of laws").

Our focus in this issue, then, is the puppet as a means of more fully experiencing our own spiritual nature, as well as the nature of Being. The puppeteers in these theaters are shamans, high priests and their descendants. They are the storytellers and mythmakers, and their audiences are seekers and pilgrims.

Mark Levenson writes eloquently of the role of puppetry in his own spiritual journey, and of the (relatively brief) history of Jewish Puppetry in "Graven Images" [page 4], while John Bell recalls a 19th century English gentleman's "shock" at the glimpse of Islamic life he gets while watching a Karagöz shadow puppet performance [page 43]. Tamara Fielding relates how the mere display of an Indonesian shadow figure of Christ nearly landed her in a Greek prison [page 11]! Dassia Posner introduces us to the Russian tradition of *vertep*, or, puppet nativity plays [page 22], while Stephanie Green reviews a very different sort of Russian nativity from the Ural Mountains [page 34]. Kathy Foley looks at ritual practices in a number of traditional puppet theaters [page 37], and your Editor reviews a new book— *Puppets of Nostalgia*— the fascinating story of a Japanese ritual puppet theater dating back to the 16th century, where the puppets " . . . which exist in the shape of the human, are not simply metaphors for the human but actually comprise a world of their own, a parallel world bridging the domains of the human and the divine." [page 28]

Undoubtedly there is a dark side to all of this. Individuals who use spiritual practices as a transport to the obscure penitential of the spirit may tread a thin line between ecstasy and madness. The recent film *A Beautiful Mind* provides an excellent metaphor for this, and if you haven't yet seen it, you may want to skip ahead to the next paragraph, as I do not wish to ruin it for you by exposing a major plot device. Very well then, it's your choice. The audience sees the world through John Nash's eyes, and it is not until quite late in the film that we

realize that Nash has been seriously delusional since at least the first moment of the film. I found this to be a shocking yet brilliant device, as all these completely imaginary characters had, over an hour and a half or so, become as real to us as they were to Nash. The truths revealed through spiritual practices may be both useful and true, though not necessarily in a literal or obvious way. I once met an Indian who was both a neurosurgeon and a noted translator of ancient Hindu religious texts. He deconstructed one of the ancient stories for me so that I might see a layer of meaning beyond the story. Then he deconstructed it further, and then further, and then further, each layer revealing an entirely different sort of truth. "It does no good to simply tell someone these things," he said, "they will understand when they are ready to understand." And how do they get ready? Spiritual practices.

The challenge, it seems to me, comes not when groups of people follow particular religious tenets, but when they believe in them literally, absolutely, and as the ONLY way, in other words, when their particular "bag of tricks" are no longer means to an end, but ends in themselves. Then, things can descend into madness, as they did on September 11th. In this issue, you will find Sam Kerson's (excerpted) journal of a collaborative production for the most recent Day of the Dead in Queretaro, Mexico. It is a collective and beautiful moan for the souls of the dead from the World Trade Center [page 16]. Ultimately, we revisit one of the simplest, yet most powerful portrayals of spirit (both human and divine)— Martin Stevens' *The Toymaker*.

So, find a comfortable chair. Now, breathe deeply . . . again . . . again . . . Good. Now you may turn the page.

¹ Aided by Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged

—Andrew Periale



Graven Images:

The Long Road to Spirituality in Jewish Puppetry

by Mark Levenson

When people ask me why I've become increasingly observant of my Jewish tradition— for example, wearing ritual fringes, *tzitzis*, under my clothing; observing the prohibitions of the Jewish dietary laws and of the Sabbath; attempting to follow ethical laws promoting modesty and forbidding gossip— I generally mention how, many years after enduring an extensive and largely ineffective synagogue-school education as a child, it was an adult class in Talmudic law that showed me the beauty of my religion for the first time. Or I say something about how my adult exploration of Torah— the “Five Books of Moses”— left me in awe of a tradition that, some 3,300 years ago, had created a society of universally-applied ethical standards and social values that parts of the world are still laboring, and would do well, to adopt. Or I say something about a long-term crisis of faith that reversed itself as slowly and imperceptibly as it had first come. But I don't generally talk about the puppets.

In part, that's because, in a tradition that prizes conformity over nonconformity, behavior or interests outside of an expected range, while often permitted, are suspect. In part, it's because Judaism, virtually alone among ancient religions and cultures of the world, lacks a tradition of puppetry. And in part it's because puppetry continues to play an evolving part in my spiritual and religious journey.

It was puppet show— a version of S. Ansky's Yiddish theatre classic, *The Dybbuk*, which I co-produced with Tears of Joy Theatre— that quite unexpectedly fanned the fires of my religious interests almost a decade ago. Was I interested in a play about (among other things) God's deep involvement in human affairs because I already sensed a greater closeness to God in my own life— or did I come to sense that greater involvement as I delved deeper into the play? It must be both. And a very different puppet show of mine— a one-person version of *The Wise Men of Chelm*, silly stories about a mythical village of fools— conveys a far lighter and gentler, but still deeply compassionate, as-

pect of Jewish sensibility, so much so that the post-performance compliment foremost in my mind came from someone who graciously offered that the show, despite not a reference to God or religion, had come from a *Yiddishe neshama*— a Jewish soul.

Despite the dearth of puppetry in Jewish history, Jewish tradition is replete with teachings that there are multiple paths to Torah. (A rabbinic story relates that the Red Sea parted for the ancient Hebrews not once but in twelve curtains of water, one for each of the twelve tribes. Each could see the others as it crossed, but each made its own journey.) Perhaps one of the lesser-travelled paths to Torah is paved with a bit of velcro, elastic and duct tape.

The Problem of the “Second Commandment”

If so, that path is, if anything, of recent development. Virtually every ancient culture— African, Egyptian, Greek, Native American— has an equally ancient history of puppetry, tied to its religious practices. Ironically, Judaism, the oldest western religion and among the oldest extant religions anywhere, has one of the briefest and newest flirtations with puppetry, spanning not much past the last century. Why that relationship began, and what it now represents, are additional ironies in themselves.

God Himself put the longstanding kibosh on Jewish puppetry 3,300 years ago when He gave the Torah, including the first ten commandments, at Sinai. The “second commandment” includes the injunction:

“You shall not make yourself a carved image nor any likeness of that which is in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the water beneath the earth.” (Exodus 20:4)

Fairly comprehensive, that. The prohibition was a necessary fence around the more-specific prohibition against idolatry, a hearty and prolific weed that might easily have smothered the seed of monotheism planted in the inhospitable soil of the ancient Near East. If Jews could not make physical representations like those all



Brenendike Likht (Burning Lights) by Bella Chagali at Puppet Theater Hakol-Bakol, under Simkhe Shvarts, Paris, 1948

photo: Yivo institute for Jewish Research

around them, they would be far less likely to worship such representations. The prohibition was strictly observed during the 1,300 years of the Biblical and Temple eras that spanned into the dawn of Christianity. Abstract designs and representations of vegetation were the sole adornments of art and architecture during this period. When the soldiers of Bar Kokhba captured Roman jugs with representations of faces on their handles, they slashed the offending objects with their knives.¹

Christianity ultimately defeated Roman paganism and, thus, minimized the threat of idolatry. By the fifth century of the common era, the great sages of the Talmud could be more lenient in their view of 'graven images'— although such images remained limited (animals were in, people were out) and generally were used to adorn objects and architecture of ritual use. To this day, the prohibition remains in force in this limited form; traditional synagogues, cemeteries and Jewish ritual objects eschew visual representation of human beings.

The Birth of Secular Jewish Culture— and Puppetry

For more than a millennium after the age of the Talmud, Jews lived in segregated communities throughout Europe, North Africa and the Near East, often with minimal rights in Gentile society but with some degree of autonomy— an autonomy almost universally placed in religious authority. In such circumstances, all life was religious life and widespread rejection of religious authority was, if not inconceivable, at least not much in evidence. Theatre existed, albeit in the modest forms tied to religious observance: the *Purimshpiln*— comedic, often satiric retellings during Purim of the story of Esther and other Biblical stories— and the antics of *tumblers*, the acrobats and performers at wedding feasts.

The rise of democratic philosophy and revolution in Europe, however, finally spilled over into the ghettos and Jewish quarters. Many Jews were attracted by Gentile advocates of universal brotherhood and liberty because their call offered a potential end to the material squalor of much of Jewish life. Also, for the first time,

Gentile society was opening doors to its Jews, making it possible for them to enter that society.

The resulting *Haskala*, or Enlightenment, movement of the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented explosion of Jewish creativity in literature, theatre, and fine arts. This revolution lacked precedent not only in the quantity of its output, but also in its type: for the first time, Jews, no longer limited by religious authority unless they chose to accept that authority, felt themselves free to explore secular, anti-establishment and even anti-religious themes. The *Haskala* thus served as the midwife for the birth of secular Yiddish literature and theatre.

Eighteenth century Portugese puppeteer Antonio Jose da Silva may be the first Jewish puppeteer and the first to explore non-Jewish themes, although not because of the liberation of the *Haskala*. He was born to a Jewish family that had converted to Catholicism in an attempt to escape the Inquisition. Da Silva had the freedom, as an apparent Catholic, to indulge in secular arts. He founded the puppet theatre Casa des Bonecos in Lisbon in 1734 and wrote eight comic operas in five years before facing the Inquisition not for his art, but for the crime of "relapsing" to Judaism. He was burned at the stake in 1739.²

As secular Yiddish culture—particularly Yiddish theatre—flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the puppet rode its coat-tails. For writers, performers and other theatre artists exploring the limits of their new artistic freedom, puppetry provided a theatre without limits—that is, no limits between the presentation of reality and fantasy, past, present and future. Whatever could be conceived could be presented onstage. It was a theatre of comedy and drama, of music and satire. And it had as little to do with religion or spirituality—at least, from a reverent perspective—as possible.

"In Krakow [Poland] during the winter of 1919-20, the local Labor Zionists sponsored a Jewish puppet theater which, although originally Polish-language, also used Yiddish. In 1922, poet Moshe Broderszon, composer Hennekh Kon and painter Yitzhak Brauner staged Yiddish puppet shows in their Lodz [Poland] cabaret, *Had*

Gadye."³ Brauner made and manipulated the puppets. "They made a cartoon out of well-known figures, especially local personalities. In 1934, Brauner made a new set of marionettes for a theater that became the rage for a while at the Warsaw writers' club. And there were also some more local marionette theaters, especially the Vilna Maydim, whose splendid posters, so people said, were bigger than the tiny stage."⁴

In the United States, the European-born puppeteer Yosl Cutler (working with co-religionists Zuni Maud and Jack Tworok in the theatre Modjacot, an acronym of their names) began presenting puppet shows in New York in 1925. Their repertoire ranged from traditional *Purimsbpiln* to political satire. They toured the Soviet Union and Poland in the late 1920s, played



Yosl Cutler Puppets (Rabbi, Cossack, Shammes)

photo: National Center for Jewish Film

Catskills Yiddish camps and union halls, and toured the Yiddish theatre circuit before disbanding in the early 1930s. Cutler was increasingly identified with Communist Yiddish culture; the Worker's Laboratory Theater presented his *marionetn* under the billing "Punch Goes Red."⁵

Cutler starred in the only Yiddish puppetry film, *Kotlers Marionetn*, a recording of several puppet skits. The film features a pompous emcee, a couple who complain about being evicted from their tenement but conclude with a lively song and dance, and an old-world rabbi who solemnly explains that Saturday—the "Shabbes"—is the holiest day of the week—because it's payday! *Kotlers Marionetn* can be viewed today—the film is available as a video from the Center for the Study of Yiddish Film, at Brandeis University—and it makes fascinating viewing. Primitive, these puppets are not. Their ears wiggle, eyes blink, furrowed brows lift, legs step precisely in time to the music, even their fingers curl when the puppets point back to themselves.

Cutler was also known for a 15-minute satire based on Ansky's *The Dybbuk*. In a version performed in 1930, the "tzadek" [holy rabbi] was a caricature of [Yiddish theatre great] Maurice Schwartz and the playlet ended with the puppets chanting "The Song of the Volga Boatmen"

as they attempted to pull the dybbuk from underneath Leah's skirt.⁶ By 1935, the piece had become more political, with Mae West, as "Prosperity," possessed by the dybbuk, as "Depression," while "rabbis" represented by Franklin Roosevelt and the Ku Klux Klan attempted an exorcism. That year, Cutler was on his way to Hollywood to raise funds for an even more elaborate, filmed version of this satire when he was killed in a highway accident in Indiana. Some 10,000 mourners attended his funeral at New York's Public Theatre.⁷



From Mark Levenson's Between Two Worlds

Puppetry During the Holocaust

The decidedly non-spiritual puppetry of the Yiddish theatre had satirized authority and even religion as artists flexed their secular muscles. But things changed with the Holocaust and its decimation of Jewish life. Now, the puppet helped to preserve the Jewish spirit even during these unspeakable horrors. A 20-minute silent film— "The Puppets Against the German Soldier"— smuggled out of Czechoslovakia during the War, depicts the psychological resistance of a people who could offer too little physical resistance.

Puppetry in the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp— which saw more than its share of writers, artists and musicians— helped children to celebrate Purim and other holidays, provided a memory of opera and the civilized world, and enabled a defiant blast of satire and scorn at Hitler and the Nazis. The very creation and performance of any puppet show was a great act of spirit— because it was an act punishable by death. Puppets helped these Jews to remain human in the midst of unprecedented inhumanity; puppets served as a bridge to a very distant world otherwise denied to them. Remnants of the Theresienstadt marionette and shadow puppet theatre exist today and are maintained at the Givat Chaim Ichud kibbutz in Israel.

Ironically, while this puppet theatre was performed by the Jews in secret, a beautiful, elaborate puppet theatre was constructed by the Nazis at Theresienstadt— but

only for the propaganda purposes of Red Cross inspections; it was never used.⁸ At the Kaiserwald-Riga camp, women prisoners were allowed Sunday evening concerts; in gratitude, they organized a marionette show to celebrate the commander's

birthday— making puppets from their own dresses, and constructing a stage from benches and blankets.⁹

Yearning for both the Past and for the Future

After the Holocaust, Jews could hardly afford the luxury of noting the devastation to their scholarship, religious life, art and culture; most of the Jews themselves— the majority

of Jews in Europe and up to 90 percent in countries such as Poland— were no longer alive to do the noting. For many of those who remained, the palpable sense of having lost a limb— or were they the limb, cut off from a now-missing body?— was hardly bearable.

For some, the puppet theatre was a medium in which to find solace— and something more. It was a way to recapture, if not preserve, the Jewish culture that seemed so close to extinction, and to build a bridge to a past otherwise unreachable. Certainly that was the case for Holocaust survivor Simcha Schwarz. Schwarz was born in 1900 in a shtetl in Romania, "and his childhood was filled with the vitality, music and traditions of Orthodox Judaism and the warmth of Romanian peasant life and Balkan folklore."¹⁰ Like many Yiddish artists before him, Schwarz began to reject Orthodox Judaism and drifted toward socialist politics in the 1930s.

During his years in refugee camps in France and Switzerland during World War II, Schwarz began a personal journey toward his Jewish roots, creating a traveling Jewish folklore theatre, organizing Hasidic dances and other cultural activities. After the war, Schwarz moved to Paris and was dismayed by the lack of Yiddish performers and the feeble state of Jewish life there. In response, he created the Ha'Kol-Ba'Kol Theater "to recreate the lost worlds of his childhood. The theater blended

his training in bible and Talmud with his love for the Hasidic spiritual experience and his fascination with nature as expressed in Balkan poetry and song.¹¹ And unlike the work of virtually every Yiddish puppet artist before him, Schwarz's work came to celebrate, preserve and share the Jewish spirit and heritage, rather than to ignore or, worse, reject it.

He attracted the attention of Russian Jewish artist and eventual collaborator Marc Chagall. One of the plays they presented was *Brenendike Likht* (*Burning Lights*) by Bella Chagall and designed by Marc Chagall, in 1948. The following year, Schwarz and his troupe performed by invitation at the first Independence Day celebration of the fledgling State of Israel.^{12,13}

Many Jewish artists of the past few decades have rejected or never known their tradition, have no interest in it and show no evidence of it in their works. But for many others—such as the Spiro Puppet Company and Lily Herzberg in England and Ray Querido and William Kentridge in South Africa—Judaism is something to be explored in their art, if not wrestled with as Jacob wrestled with the angel of God.

Perhaps the most thoughtful, accomplished and talented Jewish puppet artist of the last two decades is Eric Bass, artistic director of Sandglass Theatre in Putney, Vermont. His work shows extraordinary range, including intimate vignettes, autobiographically-inspired explorations of Jewish culture in contemporary life, and adaptations from other media.

Bass says that being a Jew is “pretty high up” on his list of self-identifiers, followed by father, artist, puppeteer, teacher, American. Bass was reared with little formal Jewish education and didn't think much about his Judaism while living in New York, where it hardly amounted to a distinction. But four years living in Germany changed that.

“When you find out the rest of the world isn't Jewish, when you suddenly have the absence of that familiar element, you have to find a way to fill what's missing,” says Bass.¹⁴

“Filling what's missing” first requires one to understand what's missing. For Bass, Jewish identity was based on connection to, and love of, family. Out of that identity came Bass' early Jewish work, the Reb Zeydl segment of *Autumn Portraits*. In it, an aged Jewish cobbler argues with the Angel of Death, attempting to gain even a few more precious moments of life (“Oh, it's *Reb Zeydl*

you want? I'll see if he's in”) before acknowledging and accepting the inevitable. Arguing with God, while ultimately accepting His authority, is an essential thread in the tapestry of Judaism and its way of connecting with the Almighty— one that dates back to the Prophets, to Moses and, ultimately, to the first Jew, Abraham.

“I don't know if I believe in God,” says Bass. “But I believe in the argument. In my more rational moments, the argument is with myself. But it's more interesting to externalize it.”

Talking— or, talking back— to God also figures in Bass' most overtly Jewish work, *Invitations to Heaven*, a portrait of his grandparents that moves between the worlds of heaven and earth to tell its story of two people who loved, and, sometimes, hated, each other in the complex jumble that is life. Bass created *Invitations to Heaven* not only to build a bridge to the world of the past, but also to build a bridge to the world of the future, to pass on the tradition he inherited— especially, to pass it on to his youngest daughter, who was born too late to know her great-grandparents.

The friction between two worlds figures in virtually all of Bass' work— the Jewish and German identities of *Sand*, the life and the holocaust of *The Village Child*, and the clashes of war and peace in the life of Jewish literary critic Walter Benjamin, the subject of Bass' newest work.

“That dialogue between two worlds is the connection between my Jewishness and my puppetry,” says Bass. “Puppets in actors' theatre are ideally suited for the dialogue between two worlds. My work is about integrating two worlds, about integrating the worlds within myself. That's what my religion is about, what God is about. I can't tell you what that other world is, though— perhaps it's memory, perhaps it's dream.”

For Bass, the definition of those worlds is almost beside the point. It's living in the tension between them that matters.

“A lot of the spirit of Judaism that I like has to do with the yearning for something unattainable,” he says. “The mood that I connect to is one in which one lives in that state of yearning, rather than trying to satisfy it. This isn't pessimistic, but it is contradictory. Art is my way to live with the yearning, to express it, to celebrate it. Just as mystical Judaism is a system to do the same thing, since the goal of mystical Judaism is the unattainable goal of knowing God.”

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v w w . u n i m a - u s a . o r g

When I decided to adapt and produce *THE DYBBUK*, it wasn't because it was a Jewish play or even a "religious" play. It was because it was a love story. It is still, to my mind, one of the greatest love stories of all time—that of a poor student, Chonnon, in love with Leah, a rich man's daughter. Unable to marry her, he dies and returns—under the wedding canopy—as a dybbuk, a spirit, to take possession in death of what he could not have in life. Exorcisms fail and the rabbi must convene a court including witnesses from both "this world of illusion" and "the true world" above. The father's sin—in failing to honor a pact made years before that the two children

—though, he had already seen that Eastern European Jewish life was itself becoming a dybbuk, a spirit of something lost, and he set out to preserve it through ethnographic research, recording Jewish music and folklore before it vanished forever. His re-immersion in Jewish culture became the impetus for his own journey toward tradition, a journey that culminated in the breathtaking and heartbreaking spirituality of *The Dybbuk*. Ansky could never win a production of his play; the premiere was hastily mounted thirty days after his death as a tribute, making the writer something of a dybbuk himself, living on through his work. It's difficult

Eric Bass and puppet
from *Invitations to Heaven*, 1990

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· *Dybbuk* and Chonnon's pain
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Eric Bass and puppet

from *Invitations to Heaven*, 1990

Too Many Dybbuks

Ironically, religion, mystical or otherwise wasn't the reason I was attracted to the most mystical of Jewish plays, S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk* (subtitle: *Between Two Worlds*), almost a decade ago. At the time, I had already begun to move closer to a religious observance that I had never really rejected. For many years, I had unconsciously drifted into a lack of belief in God. And if God isn't at the other end of the line, why bother praying to Him? Why bother observing otherwise antiquated laws and rituals? Like so many Jews, my understanding of our tradition was based on the education I had received as a child. As an adult, I had unthinkingly rejected that childhood's idea of God as childish. It wasn't until a lunchtime class in the *Mishna*, the core of Talmudic law, that I began to understand the deep intertwining of faith and ethics and their application to daily life. Little by little, my study laid the foundation for my own return to faith.

When I decided to adapt and produce *The Dybbuk*, it wasn't because it was a Jewish play or even a "religious" play. It was because it was a love story. It is still, to my mind, one of the greatest love stories of all time—that of a poor student, Chonnon, in love with Leah, a rich man's daughter. Unable to marry her, he dies and returns—under the wedding canopy—as a dybbuk, a spirit, to take possession in death of what he could not have in life. Exorcisms fail and the rabbi must convene a court including witnesses from both "this world of illusion" and "the true world" above. The father's sin—in failing to honor a pact made years before that the two children

should eventually be wed—is revealed and the dybbuk departs. He returns, urges Leah to come to him—and she dies, the two spirits united in the only way now left to them.

It was in the aftermath of a failed romance of my own that I came to *The Dybbuk* and Chonnon's pain was mine. While I had no desire for life to imitate art, I was drawn to the play's merging of souls, which seemed the essence of romantic love. If only I could reveal my soul as plainly and fully to my beloved as Chonnon the dybbuk was able to reveal himself to Leah—then, surely, she would have understood and all would have been different.

That's what was on my mind going in. But *The Dybbuk* had other ideas—and a tradition of such independent thought. Ansky himself, like so many Yiddish writers at the turn of the century, had moved away from his religious tradition. In the first decades of the twentieth century, though, he had already seen that Eastern European Jewish life was itself becoming a dybbuk, a spirit of something lost, and he set out to preserve it through ethnographic research, recording Jewish music and folklore before it vanished forever. His re-immersion in Jewish culture became the impetus for his own journey toward tradition, a journey that culminated in the breathtaking and heartbreaking spirituality of *The Dybbuk*. Ansky could never win a production of his play; the premiere was hastily mounted thirty days after his death as a tribute, making the writer something of a dybbuk himself, living on through his work. It's difficult

to watch the 1937 Yiddish film version now without reflecting that most of its performers would perish within a few years, themselves to become dybbuks of light floating across the screen. And so it goes, too many dybbuks.

The surprise that *The Dybbuk* held for me was its unshakable belief not only in God, but in a just God who had created an ultimately just universe. Man may seek to thwart justice— even after the truth of the father's sin is revealed, the rabbi attempts to expel the dybbuk on a technicality of Jewish law— but justice will prevail. God will unite the lovers, perhaps in His way, perhaps in the only way that man leaves open to Him. I was also struck by the enormity of the enterprise: All of Heaven cares about what happens in this little Polish shtetl to two otherwise anonymous people. Both God and the dead are aware of, and involved in, the world of the living (a conclusion reached by the Talmud 1,500 years ago). And there's another aspect to the magnitude of Chonnon's death: It's not just a single death; it's a mass murder, the death of all the unborn generations that should otherwise have come from him. It's a death that leaves no one to recite the memorial prayer for him or for his dead father, another injustice of immeasurable proportion. It's a death that hammers home the infinite value of every human life.

Puppets and actors were the ideal media to tell this story, allowing us to create an analogy between the relationships of puppeteer to puppet and of spirit to human character. We could show the spirits of Chonnon and Leah in their ultimate unity, something only alluded to in the original version. And above all the action of the play we hung a *ner tamid*, the eternal flame found in every synagogue, representative of the eternal light of Torah



Puppet, Stout Man, from play "Inheritance"

*Gift of Ruth Schwarz, Museum of Jewish Heritage—
A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*

Photo by Peter Goldberg

and, in this case, a metaphorical representation of the eternal and watchful presence of God.

I had already begun to open my heart and my mind to the great ideas of my faith when the dybbuk of *The Dybbuk* came along, not coincidentally at the right time, to take up residence within me. I can't know where we'll end up until my final days. In the meantime, I'll have to be satisfied with the journey between two worlds.

===

¹ "Ancient Near East" by Prof. Michael Avi-Yonah in *Jewish Art and Civilization*, edited by Geoffrey Wigoder, Walker and Co., New York, 1972, p. 27.

² Da Silva is the subject of the 1997 film *O Judeo (The Jew)* by Jom Tob Azulay, released by First Run Features.

³ *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds* by J. Hoberman, Museum of Modern Art/Schocken Books, New York, 1991, p. 357.

⁴ "Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater" by Nahma Sandrow, Syracuse University Press, 1996, p. 328.

⁵ Hoberman, op. cit., p. 351.

⁶ Hoberman, op. cit., p. 352.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Puppetry in the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp" by Lily Herzberg, *Animations*, April/May 1990.

⁹ Sandrow, op. cit., pp. 349-350.

¹⁰ "Suspended Animation: Puppetry of Simcha Schwarz and Marc Chagall," exhibition notes, B'nai B'rith Museum, 1981, Center for Puppetry Arts, 1982, including "the History of Simcha Schwarz and the Puppets" as told by Ruth Schwarz to Andrew Ackerman, January 1981.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sandrow, op. cit., pp. 367-9.

¹⁴ All quotes from conversation with Eric Bass, Jan. 7, 2002.

SPIRITS PLAY IN PUPPETS' SHADOWS

by Tamara Fielding



As if born on the winged back of the great spirited bird Garuda, Rama and Sinta ride straight up on their journey through the Tree-of-Life, the great Gunungan.

GODS AND REINCARNATION

God is spirit and spirit reincarnates. Spirits play in puppets' shadows and Shadow Master is mastered by Spirit.

Rooted in the ancient belief that ancestors' spirits return to earth at night, inhabiting the puppets' shadows, the Dalang (Shadow Master) casts his puppets' shadows on the illuminated story cloth. All through the night and into dawn, the Dalang makes his shadows dance, fly, wander, fight, grieve, triumph and love. He speaks for each of his puppets in different voices, retelling ancient tales of the cycles of life, reincarnation and the forces of good and evil. Watching the shadows play, called

to spirit world, the viewer experiences God's invisible spirit, incarnated in the puppets' shadows and visualized on the story cloth. Thus, a sense of illusion, or a spiritual happening, is strongly felt during the performance.

ANIMISM AND THE WAYANG CULTURE

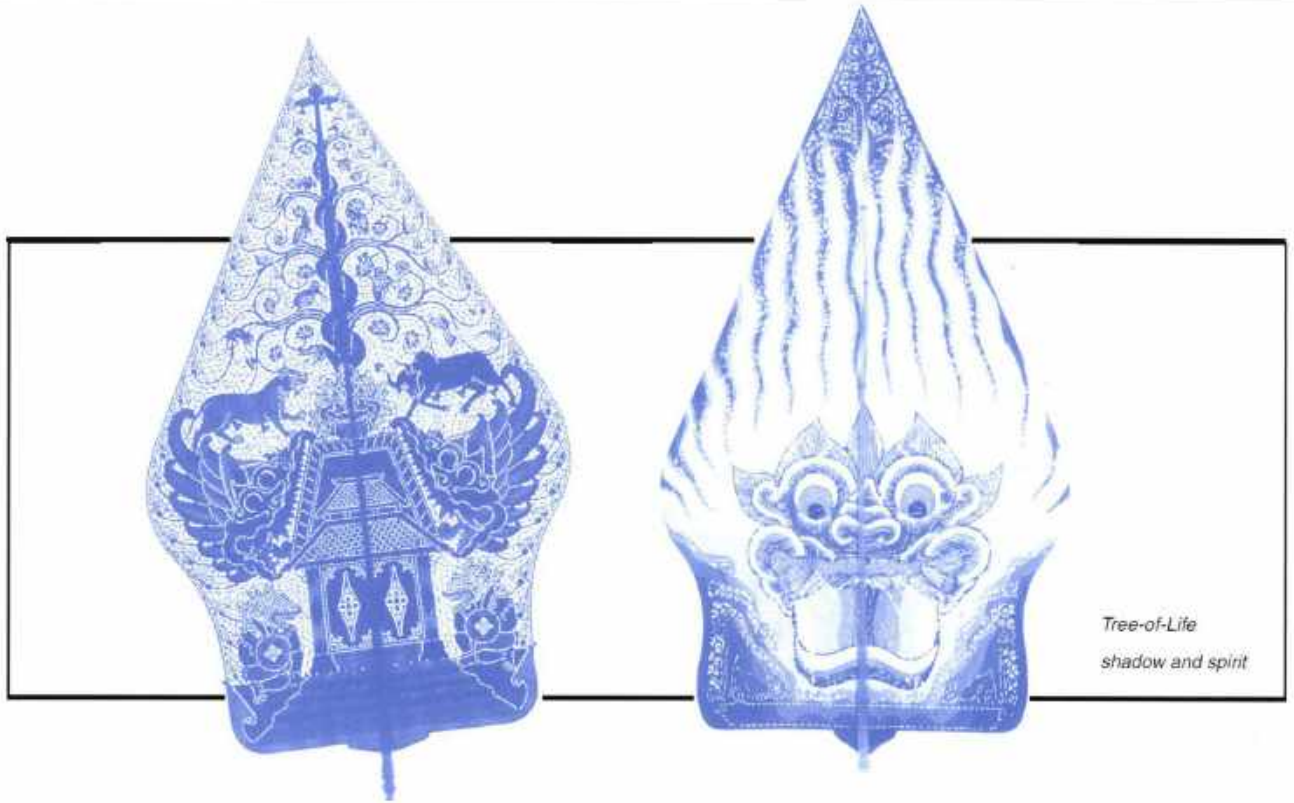
In a belief system deeply ingrained in the Indonesian people, Animism connects spirit to all that exists. Ancestor worship and communication with the spirits have been practiced for centuries throughout the Archipelago. Animistic beliefs hold that everything has a spirit or "energy force" that connect us to all other things. The spirit survives the body and remains suspended in the general area where it lived before and continues to take an interest in its family members. At times, the ancestors' spirits may become infuriated when the living forsake their traditional duties; they must be appeased with prayers and offerings and a shadow play.

HINDUISM AND THE WAYANG CULTURE

Indian seafaring merchants came to Java to trade and introduced Hinduism to the Javanese. Hinduism appealed to Javanese thinking. It spoke of the spirit surviving the body and reincarnation of spirit. It taught that the spirit, or "soul," would return to earth again and again to fulfill Karmic destiny through multiple life cycles. Embracing the Hindu pantheon, Javanese kings viewed themselves as direct descendants of Hindu Gods dwelling on Earth. This needed to be communicated to the people, and who could do this better than the storyteller, the Dalang?

"Wayang Beber," the earliest form of storytelling by the Dalang was done by reciting and chanting the tale while unrolling a long scroll that revealed images and scriptures about Rama and Arjuna from the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata.

At some point in time, as if the images had sprung off the ancient scrolls, "Wayang Kulit" took its place with



*Tree-of-Life
shadow and spirit*

delicately-carved leather puppets that danced on the cotton story cloth. Lit by the light of a flickering oil lamp, the spirits played in the puppets' shadows, making them spring to life in the able hands of the Dalang, chanting his golden tales.

WAYANG PURWA AND THE DALANG

In the year 905, a Wayang performance in "honor of the Gods" took place at a Royal Court in Central Java. Wayang Kulit enjoyed popularity among Java's common people as well as Java's royalty. If rituals such as weddings, birth of a boy, or the cleansing of a village from evil spirits were reasons why a Dalang was invited to do an all-night shadow performance, a Dalang's role was that of a shaman or a medium between the spirit world and the physical world. He would not leave his place behind the screen for the entire night so that the spiritual connection between him and the upper world would not be broken.

"Wayang Purwa" divides the universe into three distinct spirit worlds: The "upper world" (of gods), the "middle world" (of mortals) and the "lower world" (of demons). All three are interdependent and essential to maintain universal balance. The middle world (mortals) keeps the forces of good (upper world) and evil (lower world) in balance. Horizontally, the universe is divided

between right and left, good and evil, with a "playing field" the width of the Dalang's arm's length, in the center of the story cloth. Here the ritual drama is played out which may last all night. At the conclusion, when universal balance has been restored, the Dalang places the Tree-of-Life in the center of the screen which signals the end of an all-night play. The music stops, the musicians stretch their limbs and the Dalang gently returns his 200 or more puppets to their box and closes the lid. A long night has slipped into dawn.

The vendors have closed their stalls and the elders among the audience sip their morning coffee, contemplating the Dalang's last words. Feeling sleepy but spiritually uplifted, the audience slowly gets up. Some yawn while they roll up their grass mats; parents pick up their sleeping children and begin to walk home. A few hours from now they will go to work on their rice paddies or in their shops.

THE GUNUNGAN (*Tree-of-Life*)

The Gunungan has three spirit energies: The *positive*, the *negative* and the *whole* spirit energy.

The positive spirit energy

The over-all shape of the mountain (the Gunungan), reveals at the base a number of steps leading up to two

temple doors. On either side of the doors stand two Raksasas, giant gate keepers, which guard our spiritual temple. At the beginning of the performance, when the *gamelan* music begins to play, the Dalang symbolically opens the temple doors of the Gunungan for us to enter and to experience the magical world of Wayang where our perceptions will change.

The roof of the temple is flanked by two Garuda birds. Garuda's flight sets us free. From the temple grows our Tree-of-Life, its roots nourished by spirituality. Like our family, the Tree-of-Life spreads its branches, creating shelter and harmony for all living creatures in the universe to exist and multiply. It is positive spirit energy.

As we strive through many lifetimes to ultimately reach Nirvana, symbolized by the blossom of the "Tundjung flower" at the top of the Gunungan, we must first pass *Nagga*, the snake wrapped around the tree facing downwards. *Nagga* is our grounding or earth attachment. Centered is the face of "spirit" - symbol of protection which guides us on our life's journey.

The negative spirit energy

The mountain reveals consuming flames and fire. Centered is a huge demonic face with its tongue hanging out and eyes bulging. Not a pretty sight! Unleashed, this evil spirit energy consumes and destroys. It is negative spirit energy.

The shadow, whole spirit energy

The shadow is the third dimension. Whichever side the Gunungan is placed, its shadow cast is always one and the same. The shadow does not reveal its colors or symbols on either side. The shadow holds both spirits. It is our "whole spirit" energized.

HISTORY AND RELIGIONS

Western civilization, together with Christianity, was introduced to the East Indies by the Portuguese, Spanish, English and Dutch seafarers, who came for the lucrative spice trade and chose to stay.

The Javanese kings had already recognized the importance of the Dalang's role in teaching Hindu spiritual and moral values through shadow puppet theatre. The Catholic and Protestant missionaries who settled on Java, wished to spread the Gospel to the indigenous people. Recognizing the value of the storyteller, they commissioned Javanese puppet carvers to create shadow figures

in the image of David and Goliath, Joseph and Mary and Jesus. The Dalangs were instructed in Biblical stories and performed what became known as "Wayang Wahyu" and "Testament Wayang," telling of the birth and crucifixion of Christ. This form of puppet theatre is not commonly performed anymore in Indonesia and the puppets are often hard to come by.

It was several years ago that I visited my favorite puppet maker in Yogyakarta. He is one of the finest Wayang puppet makers in Java. He told me that he had something very special for me and proceeded to carefully unwrap a shadow figure which I recognized to be that of Christ's crucifixion. I was struck by the figure and asked him to explain the puppets' symbols and colors.



The flat, filigree-perforated figure is carved out of buffalo hide and exquisitely painted in fine detail with many brilliant colors.

Carved out of water buffalo hide and painted with great detail in old Wayang tradition, Christ is imaged, like the Hindu Deity Krishna, with a black face. The color black symbolizes wisdom, serenity and attainment. Christ's body is gold, a color reserved for kings. *Naggar*, the snake wrapped face down around the cross, signifies Christ overcoming and rising above worldly attachment. A thorny crown placed on his head... his white cross crowned with a King's crown.



DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BLACK FACE

I barely escaped arrest because of my refusal to comply with the demand to remove this shadow figure from a fine art exhibit Festival in Larissa, Greece, in 1998, to which I had been invited to lecture and perform. A Greek Orthodox priest had visited the gallery and was appalled by the crucifixion figure. He was outraged at seeing a shadow puppet image of Jesus Christ depicted with a black face and an "ugly long nose"! He deemed it offensive and insulting to the Christian faith and demanded that "it" be removed immediately! The art gallery was Government funded and the priest was a respected religious leader in the Larissa community. The museum curator told me to take it down.

I narrowly escaped jail by giving in to the two uniformed police officers who had come to the gallery to oversee the immediate removal of the controversial Christ with the black face. No matter how I tried to explain that colors can mean different things to different people and that art should stand on its own, I met with little tolerance from the Greek authorities and had to yield to their demand. However, perhaps Christ was on my side after all! At that moment, a local newspaper reporter was at the Gallery and overheard the heated argument. She

promptly interviewed me and gave the confrontation front-page coverage. An Athens television crew was dispatched to Larissa to cover the story for that evening's news and the broadcaster asked that the gallery apologize for not protecting their foreign artists from "provincial politics"!

The media's coverage of this spirited, global controversy about Christ's black image stirred the conscience of the art-loving public in Greece and, at the same time, raised questions about those who judge others by their own perceptions of color, creed and spirit.

In truth, does not the beauty of art and color lie in the eye and in the heart of the beholder?

TAMARA was born in Chimabi, Java, of Dutch and Indonesian parents. She is a professional Dalang and lives in New York. TAMARA lectures and performs regularly at universities, museums, schools and international festivals.

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*Dragon Dance...
 Queretaro Update...
 August 29, 2001...
 Hunger Mountain...*

Our project will be in Mexico . . . at Queretaro, which is about three hours north of Mexico city. We will be there September 27 to November 4, and we will make and perform a Day of the Dead spectacle. This will be a collaboration between Dragon Dance and Roberto Villaseñor's Mexican company— Eco Rodante. We have been working with Roberto since '94. We are puppeteers and our work will especially be: making a number of skeletons— human and horse— and other masks and puppets. We will rehearse the dramatic incidents and spectacles using local musicians and dancers, and then we will perform them for four nights in a row during the Day of the Dead weekend in the central plazas of Queretaro.

from the e-mail journals of Sam Kerson
excerpted and edited by A. Periale

We will share a house, and the theatre will arrange our meals. We will work in an open air outdoor workshop with volunteers from the community, and with our host theatre company. It is going to be a memorable, in depth, Mexican cultural exchange experience. We are sure to meet many people who are in the arts and especially the performing arts.

Date: Wed, 26 Sept. 2001

September 11, plus 15 . . . a fantastically perplexing world we live in . . . tumultuous beyond our greatest expectations. Spontaneous and incredible— it was only a few months ago that we were amazed at the judicial coup that gave the elections to George Bush, and now, as if the Taliban had contributed to "George the Second's" campaign coffers, we see a terrible drama unfold as if it were scripted. All the players are stunningly perfect for their awful and devastating roles. With diabolic calcula-

tion and rationality we are suddenly plunged into the desert— Yeats' *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* ringing in one ear and Tennyson's "noble six hundred" thundering in the other.

It is the eve of our departure for Mexico. We are a small company— Sam, Sophie and Tomas. We are going to celebrate the Day of the Dead— to build the flowered gateways, and decorate the paths that reflect the *via lactia*— as above so below— so the souls of the dead will be able to pass among the living for these two days at the beginning of November. In '94 and '96 we were in Oaxaca for Day of the Dead, in '99 I was with the mountain Zapotecs at Laxopa, Sierra Juarez east of Oaxaca, and in 2000 with the Blasenos at San Blas Atempe, near Tehuantepec— also Zapotecs. The challenge of this project— the Queretaro Day of the Dead project: to join forces with our colleagues from Mexico and to honor the dead— our dead, their dead, all the dead. To celebrate, to acknowledge, to recognize and to honor in a traditional American way, all of the dead, and to heal ourselves and the souls of the dead in the process.

Dragon Dance in Queretaro, Sat, 29 Sept. 2001

We have been meeting and discussing the theme and the scenario. I think we are agreed that we will make a kind of living Day of the Dead altar to the twin towers. The theatre phrase, "tableau vivant" comes to mind. There will be a number of tableaux and scenes between them— like clown acts— from the literature of Day of the Dead. We'll be using some ideas we developed during the summer, like multiple simultaneous events. Plus, we will try to stick to the original idea of representing Day of the Dead over the centuries, that is, pre-Colombian, Colonial, Revolutionary and Modern eras.

First we will do an ancient dance in the space— the plaza called Guerrero— to set the ritual tone and to prepare ourselves and our audience for what is to come.

Then there will be an episode by the clowns. This will be the work of Roberto's theatre, which will create a series of skits to be performed throughout.



Rehearsal with horse dancers

Next we will set up the twin towers, with the falling figures on the front. The reliefs of falling people (four foot by sixteen foot) will be attached to the structures of the towers. They will initially be hidden from view by burnable crêpe paper banners. We continue to be short-handed, short of money, short of musicians, short of photographers and video

people, but we are working and moving the whole concept forward. Join us in Queretaro.

Date: 05 Oct., 2001

Our apartment is quite a march from the workspace— about thirty minutes— but we have been getting into it— warming up in the morning and cooling down at night. We open the workspace at 9:00, but people don't start to arrive until 10:00. We are growing quickly, but at the moment we have three big sculpture tables. On the biggest, Sophie is finishing up the first large panel, bas relief, of falling people. There will be four of these. Tomas and I have finished two large horse skeleton heads which are being papered. We'd like to make eight of them. We have a table of skulls going. Meanwhile, Tomas is putting the finishing touches on the mounted "horsemen of the apocalypse."

Nice crew, but we could hardly proceed without the help of many hands. They arrive at four and are from the National School of Dance. They are seventeen to twenty three years old, mostly girls— a nice, funny, happy crowd of people who pour into our space for two and a half hours in the late afternoon. They are the solution to the paper maché problem, and we also expect them to dance and puppeteer in the performance.

Our idea about the twin towers altar for Day of the Dead is advancing, Katah has been sending the list of victims from Montreal. They are very provocative, and reading them gives a better idea of the dimension of the catastrophe. Some of the lists have biographical details which are sometimes very moving. People were upset by the declaration of war. On Sunday— the beginning of the bombing— some theatre people came to sit with us

for a while in the late afternoon. We copied the names and glued them to the panels of falling people.

Wednesday, Sophie sculpted the second five meter panel, this one a single figure falling. Sophie is choreographing fire dances with a group of young women—first year students—from the national dance school.

Date: 19 Oct., 2001

Why Here? Why Now?

Day of the Dead is an ancient tradition that has been practiced here in Mexico since well before the conquest. It is an astrological holiday based on the seasons and the Milky Way, based on the stars and the moon. The premise is that on these days, every year, the earth is in such a relationship to the Milky Way that the souls of the dead are able to return and visit the living. To that end, the living build altars of marigolds and candles and incense—altars which are like guide posts to the ethereal travelers. The dead come to the altars to be remembered and to be refreshed on their travels.

The Mexicans practice an ancient ritual which acknowledges their dead and offers the living a significant and profound opportunity to respect and remember those who have died.

Our theatre community has been interested in this holiday for some time. There was a coincidence of timing with the Halloween shows we were doing. Our Halloween shows included the implicit idea that there was a special moment of opportunity at this time of year. Harvest, the beginning of winter, and the end of summer were a time of reflection when we could bury what went before and rest our spirits for what was to come in the spring. This was a time, we felt, when we could travel to the underworld and commune with the spirits of the night. Our culture did not offer a solution to this enigma. We were free to explore and experiment, but there was very little guidance. Here in Mexico the enigma exists, but also there is a concerted communal effort to follow the rituals and accept the meaning of those rituals, to dance the dances, to light the candles and to prepare the altars. The cultural environment here is supportive.



photo: Katurah

Ritual Dancers Paseo de la Muerte

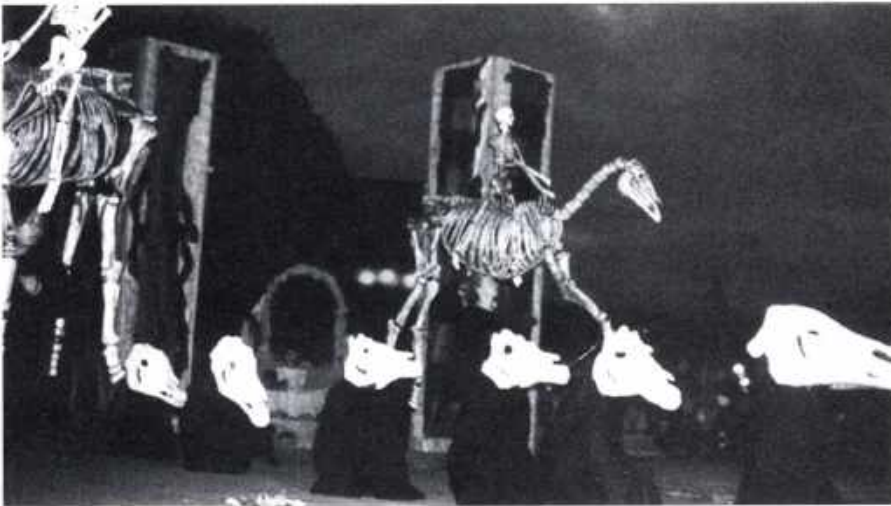
Elizabeth Torres will bring her dancers from Guadalajara. They dance the ancient dances as a devotion. The dances to the dead, the dances of the Day of the Dead. They play the ancient instruments and dance the ancient rhythmic steps. They establish the vibration that makes the altar authentic and that ties it to the ancient American tradition. Their dances will establish the psychic and timeless moment of and for the ritual. "El Paseo de la Muerte." This is the title of the piece we are working on. It means "the passing of death." The title comes from Roberto's work—the book he edited last year which was a collection of songs, poems, stories and images from the Day of the Dead. This book will be the primary source for traditional material we use in the production...

The Mask and the Puppets: Falling People, four panels sixteen feet high, including larger-than-life figures. The figures stand out in stark contrast to the white background composed of the lists of the names provided to us by CNN, of the people who died in the twin towers. The towers will stand on either side of a traditional altar. We will use the falling people to create an image that reminds us of the World Trade Center twin towers. The image will burn.

Bears: We are going to try to use the bears as a means of representing a manifestation of nature. They will act on their own in their animal nature to intervene, to carry humanity, to offer a spiritual retreat, to propose a return to nature, and to imagine and allow the possibility of "nabuals."

Sacred clowns, developed by Roberto, will help us see ourselves.

I am the Falling Man. Isn't this the nexus of the idea? We all fell. All. The suicides and the innocents together. The illusion was smashed. We came quickly to the concrete reality of our experience. We have abandoned the flaming eightieth floor of the World Trade Center. We are falling This is the moment of transformation.



Date: Sat, 27 Oct., 2001

Arguably, the main thing that happened this week was diarrhea. Sophie, Sam and Catherine have it bad. Tomas less, but Marco actually went to the hospital, and Roberto was out all day on Wednesday. We are losing weight, feverish and cold, shivering, goose bumps, weak, dehydrated . . . plus the gas company cut the water line to our apartment and we have been out of water! But there was a lot of progress made anyway— Marvin and then Katah arrived Tuesday and Wednesday. Katah got an article on the web page of the Mexico City News and is working on photo documentation and publicity. Marvin has gone right to work building the towers and the altar and assembling the tall bears. Tomas continues to concentrate on the large horse and rider assemblages. We have one of the horses in rehearsal now, it is magnificent— extremely detailed and proportional. It is operated from the shoulders of the puppeteer, and somehow we are going to manipulate and manage a puppet skeleton riding on its back. We continue to be on a pretty intense schedule— 9 to 5 at the workshop— then we taxi over to the rehearsal space. Two hours later we are back in the workshop to put the puppets away. We are finished by about 8:30. The days off did not work out. We got one in the first week, but since then the best we have been able to do is go to work late on Sundays. The rehearsals provide an opportunity to develop the ideas we have formed first as masks. That is, once we start to operate the masks, they lead us on to new ideas. Sure, there is the scenario, but the masks influence the way we proceed, so we start with experiments.

Date: Sat, 03 Nov. 2001

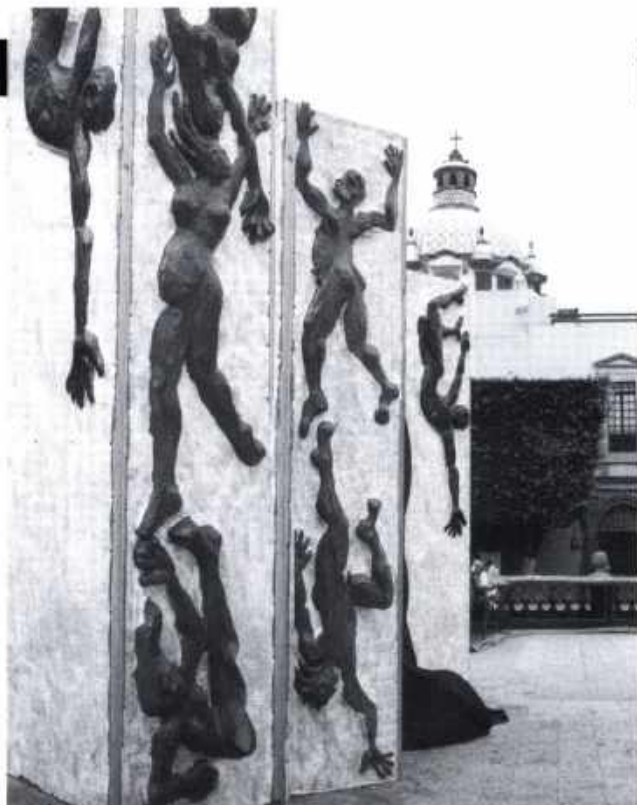
MORIR PARA VIVIR (we must die in order to live).

This is the week of Day of the Dead, and there are all sorts of celebrations going on all over the city. The clearest thing is that each significant space has an altar. They are all impressive

and feature some aspect of Day of the Dead— Baroque, or Otomi, or Colonial Queretaro. The one in the central Plaza has easily one thousand candles— some as big around as hassocks! It has six stages which climb up toward the heavens. The others are more modest but they are all lavish and rich, featuring skeletons in various forms as well as fruits and vegetables and pictures of the deceased. Wendy and Nathan varnished Sophie's sculptures of the falling figures, which Marvin had mounted on two wooden towers. We invented a tissue paper curtain which stretches over the figures. Finally, when they are burned the curtains disappear, revealing— in a very dramatic moment— the falling people. Elizabeth is lively and energetic, ageless with her light step and friendly spirit. She is determined to create a pre-Columbian altar and an authentic ritual to the pre-Columbian spirits of the Day of the Dead. "No Metal" is Elizabeth's organizational cry. She declares: "No metal on the altar, no metal in the music."

Date: Sat, 10 Nov. 2001

The Performances.... Did we achieve the objectives....? There were four performances. They began at 5:30pm on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday night, November 1 - 4. November 1 and 2 are the nights of the Day of the Dead. The moon was full on the first of November. The shows lasted one hour and a half. The performances started in the last light of the afternoon and ended in the moon light. The performances took place in the plaza in front of the Municipality, in a space about 30 yards square. The audience surrounded the performers and numbered 600, each night. There was no admis-



World Trade Towers altar
photo: Sam

sion charge. There were theatre lights and a powerful sound system from the municipality.

The set consisted of the two towers, ten feet apart, with a ten foot high, black curtain, between them. They flanked the altar, which was four feet wide and featured four steps or levels, each of which was decorated with fruits and vegetables, chiles and cactuses and typical ritual objects like candles and skulls, and the offerings of salt and lemon and chili and honey.

The shows started with a *comparsa*— a parade— of clowns and actors and puppets and musicians who canvassed the surrounding streets notifying the public that the shows were about to begin. Elizabeth led the *comparsa*, and when we returned to the playing area, she began her ritual. Elizabeth's assistants carried ceramic urns that burned charcoal and copal. She stationed her assistants at the cardinal points of the circle and one of her assistants followed her to the center.

Elizabeth blew her conch to the six directions, including above and below, and for every direction she made an offering, which the assistant carried to the altar. Each direction was also honored with a dance. While Elizabeth executed the very precise ancient dance, she directed the pre-Colombian band from the center of the ritual circle with her hand drum.

These rituals were very beautiful and moving. The intention was to open the gates to the old understand-

ing— to salute the ancient entities Tlalli (the earth), Mictlantekuhltli (the essence of Peace and Rest) and Zenteotl, (knowledge of nourishment), to the north, plus those of the other directions, all as one aspect of Tetzkatlipokas consciousness and awareness. It was quite exhilarating for me, and obviously for the audience, who were hypnotized by the shamanic dancer.

As Elizabeth finished her dance and left the stage, Roberto's clowns entered. The scene started with a complete change of energy and sensibility. His clowns were all dressed in white, with white faces and bare feet. With their various stylizations and extravagant gestures, their idiosyncrasies and foibles, they took the stage by assault, with full energy, dramatic hyperbole, and ridiculous scenarios. It was a clown act— a clown's interpretation of the four ages of the Day of the Dead. The clowns could touch on all the taboos without breaking any rules, free to interpret as they saw fit. Everyone understood their special freedom— to go where no one else could. One of Roberto's clowns acted the part of the horse trainer. This scene also became an introduction to the horses— showing them in their normal state of existence— doing as they are told, acting in unison, being a herd of trained animals. As the horses exited, the recorded music came on very loud, and the clowns rushed onto the stage, and in their frenzied way acted out the Day of the Dead in Colonial times. This was a kind of twisted, ribald, romance. A mother tries to prevent the daughter's lovers from reaching her and, to hide from the mother, the lovers dive under the daughter's skirt. Both suitors end up under the girl's skirt. The actress, Brenda, made great fun out of their intimate presence. As the scene develops and the mother and father become more and more angry, the daughter's suitors flee, this time hand in hand having fallen in love with each other during their confinement. Everyone laughs as they flee the stage.

Now the same horses emerge in terror, running from one side of the stage to the other pursued by a stilt figure dressed all in white and wearing a sort of turban and brandishing a torch on a long pole. The tall white torchman taunts and terrorizes the horses, driving them from one end of the stage to the other. Finally, he controls them and commands them to sit in a diagonal line across the stage from front to back. The sound shifts, there is a drum roll, and the mounted skeletons on skeleton horses enter. These figures are very eerie to look at.

In the evening light they are exquisite illusions and very effective.

When the skeletons pause, the music shifts. The horse masks— the trained horses— frantically flee the stage. The white figure with the torch and the two apocalyptic horsemen begin to circle one another. Finally, the two horsemen take up positions down stage left and right, while the white figure, with his torch, moves toward the towers. He methodically lights the shrouds on the towers and, one by one, they burn, revealing the falling figures and the names of the thousands who died. As the fire reaches the top of the towers, the three dancers from the National School of Dance appear in their fire costumes and dance the fire dance which Sophie choreographed.

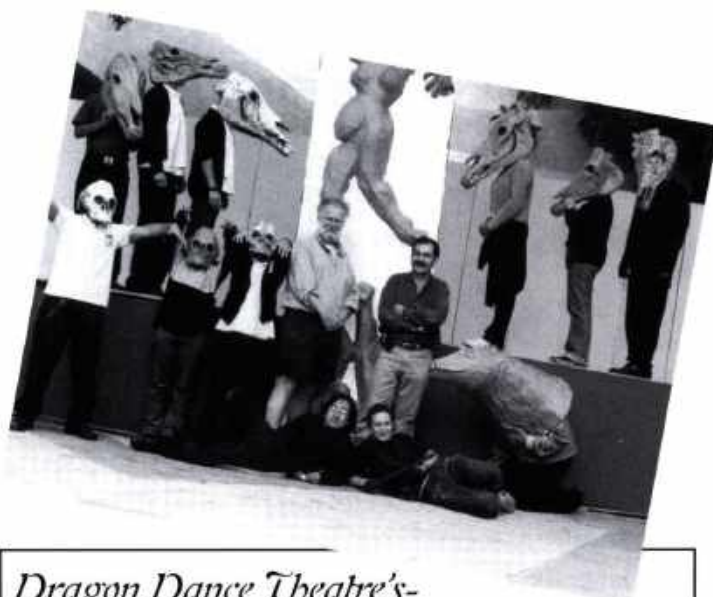
As the dancers exit, Roberto and his team of energetic forceful clowns once again rush on. This time they are doing Day of the Dead in the time of the Revolution. The woman makes the tortillas and her husband abuses her. The revolutionaries come with their guns, and the husband is afraid of them and hides under the table. The woman, who they threaten to rape, seizes their guns and overcomes them. They flee, and in her anger she finds her husband and forces him to make the tortillas. Raunchy and gross, fast moving and funny.

As they exit, the sound shifts to bear growls, and four figures with skull masks (one of them in neon), enter the stage hand in hand. They are running before the fire, and they die elaborately in front of the towers. Four bears enter— two human-sized bears and two ten foot tall bears. Their movement is slow and the sound is pre-Colombian with plenty of silence. The bears slowly study the stage and the fallen figures lying on the ground. The tall ones rise to their full height and four *brujas* (people of knowledge) come out from under their skirts. The *brujas* go to the dead, and slowly raise them to their feet. Then the *brujas* take the dead on their backs and the bears move to shelter and hide the victims, which are now joined to the nature spirits. The group of bears and *brujas* and dead make their way off stage.

Again there is only a moment to savor the scene before the clowns enact the Day of the Dead, this time in the Modern Age. This time, it is most possible to see that they have the clowns' right to act as they will. In this excruciating scene of the modern Day of the Dead, the clowns actually have envelopes of "anthrax" with them. They open them and blow the white powder on

each other and on the audience. They laugh, make it all look preposterous, and run off stage.

From backstage, Elizabeth beats her drum and the pre-Colombian musicians follow her lead, and the whole company follows the ritual dancer into the circle she has made. The public joins us there and the talk-down begins. There is a great round of applause, and there is an hour of talking and explaining and meeting people and taking pictures and doing interviews and listening to people's doubts and appreciations about the piece. •



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VERTEP: *The Eastern European Puppet Nativity*

by Dassia Posner



Victor Novatsky's domestic vertep. Also in the photo are Novatsky and two neighbor children. Photo by Alexei Victorosky.

When one thinks of Russian puppetry, the images that come to mind tend to be from twentieth-century Soviet puppetry: the numerous state puppet theatres, the innovations of Sergei Obraztsov, and puppet adaptations of fairy tales for children. Russian puppetry in the nineteenth century was very different. There were no permanent puppet theatres; rather performances were given at fairs, on street corners, and in drawing rooms. At Shrovetide¹ and Easter fairs, one could watch Petrushka shows² and the occasional marionette performance. At Christmastime, a puppet Nativity show was carried from house to house, often accompanied by carolers. This Nativity show is known as *szopka*³ in Poland, *balleika*⁴ in Belarus, and *vertep* in Russia and Ukraine. These three branches are very similar in staging and structure, but in this article, I will provide a short history of the vertep only, focusing on its typical characteristics in the folk tradition and on its modern-day revival.

Although Nativity shows are performed all over the world, vertep has few parallels with puppet Nativities outside of Eastern Europe because of its unique staging. What makes vertep so distinctive, especially at the time of the earliest recorded texts, is its presentation of the spiritual and the earthly. The stage space is divided into two sections: an upper stage, on which the story of the birth of the Christ-child is told, and a lower stage, on

which the story of King Herod as well as a number of unrelated comic scenes are presented.

Vertep, which literally means "cave" or "den," referring to the location of the birth of Jesus,⁵ is a portable cabinet theatre. There is considerable variation in the theatre's size and appearance depending on region, individual artist, and time period. Usually between three and five feet in height, the vertep stage is most often an elongated cube with an open front and two playing levels. Both upper and lower levels have doors or cloth-covered archways to allow for the entrance and exit of puppets. Each level also has a number of narrow slits cut through the floor which serve as grooves along which the puppets can be guided by the puppeteer from a hidden compartment underneath the stage floor. The floors of the levels are traditionally covered with fur to hide the slits. There is a great deal of variation in how the boxes are decorated; some are simple boxes with a front that can be removed to reveal the playing area, while others are highly decorated and resemble small cathedrals.

The Polish puppetry scholar Jurkowski and several others⁶ point out that some vertep stages have three levels, corresponding to the heaven, earth, and hell of the medieval mystery play. Most vertep stages, however, have only two full levels, although a peaked roof or cu-

pola sometimes appears at the top, often adorned with what appears to be a many-rayed star of Bethlehem, lit with a candle. In the recorded scripts as well, the action is played on two levels which symbolically represent heaven and earth.⁷ When a third, "basement"⁸ level is used, Satan emerges from below to drag King Herod back into the depths of hell with him.

On the upper level, all the sacred scenes relating to the birth of Christ, the adoration of the Shepherds, and the gifts of the three magi are played. The upper level has several stationary puppets in the interior which represent the holy family; there are also sometimes animal onlookers such as sheep and oxen. The "good" shepherds and the three magi, although they begin their action on the lower level, move to the top level when they go to worship the Christ-child.

The lower, profane level contains King Herod's throne. This throne is the only piece of furniture permanently attached to the stage of this level, indicating that the earth is Herod's domain. On the lower level, "profane" scenes such as King Herod's massacre of the innocents and the mother Rachel's lament over her murdered child take place, as well as comic scenes unrelated to the main plot. In the vertep tradition, these scenes come as a sort of comic second act after the religious portion of the performance is finished.

The puppets themselves are usually carved out of wood and costumed or painted to make the character types easily recognizable. The smallest puppets are four to five inches in height, and increase in size proportionate to the size of the theatre. The puppets are very simple; they have a single operating rod protruding from the base of the puppet which, when stuck through one of the floor slits, allows for a simple back-and-forth movement. Some of the puppets have an arm that can be manipulated, and a few puppets are designed to hold candles that provide the light for the performance.

Vertep was performed most frequently in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was originally performed by seminarians between Christmas and the New Year. V. Perets describes this in his book *Puppet Theatre in Rus'*, published in 1895: "Vertep appeared as did the other similar Christmas plays, in the seminary environment and soon became the property of the seminarians..."⁹ Perets describes the church staff's performances at the houses of their parishioners: "The front wall of this box is taken off, revealing a landscape with shepherds, hunters and three kings; in the interior of this little stage is the vertep in which the Virgin Mary holds in her hands the newborn Christ; above the vertep are stars and angels." It later was also performed by boys who took the little stages from house to house, and eventually by pro-



Vertep puppets. Top row, from left to right: a sexton, two angels, Aaron, King David, King Herod, the three Magi (all on one rod), two soldiers. Bottom row, from left to right: a woman with her child, Death, the Devil, the Yid, a Russian peasant, a goat, a gypsy, a Polish Pan, a Polish Panna. Courtesy of Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library.

fessional showmen as well. In its simplest form, vertep is performed by a single puppeteer, while performances can also include musicians, singers, or even an entire choir.

In his book, Perets also gives a plot summary of the Ukrainian (or "Little-Russian") vertep text, which is actually a composite of two texts: one published by Markevich in 1870 and another published by Galagan in 1882.¹⁰ Perets summarizes the religious portion of these two texts thus:

The show begins with the singing of the choir...

On the lower level a sexton appears... he invites [everyone] to proclaim the birth of Christ and rings a little bell hung between the pillars...

The choir continuously sings canticles, interrupted by the conversation of shepherds... with moustaches and in Little-Russian folk costume, [they] come out to worship Christ; one of them carries a lamb under his arm...

The choir sings...

King Herod, preceded by soldiers, enters onto the lower stage and sits on the throne... The magi appear and the well-known conversation takes place, moreover Herod speaks...with a mix of church-Slavonic...The magi cross to the upper level, worship Christ, receive the order from the angel not to go [back] to Herod, and exit.

The action continues on the lower stage. Herod is angry at the deception of the kings and orders the massacre of the Innocents.

The choir sings...

During this song, soldiers bring in Rachel with a little child in her arms; she is dressed in Ukrainian fashion... Rachel is ready to 'exchange her life for that of the child' but Herod is inexorable; the soldiers, at his command, lift the child on a spear and exit with him, and Rachel, sobbing, rushes about the stage and hurls curses at Herod. The soldiers throw her out. Herod...begins to think about Death...he orders the soldiers to stand at the threshold and not to let her in.

The choir sings...

The terrible guest [Death] appears, portrayed as a skeleton with a scythe. She calls for the help of the Devil (with popping eyes, black, with a tail, horns and black wings)... Herod... talks in vain about his fame and strength. The Devil... drags him to hell.¹¹

In this example, there is actually very little action on the upper level. The Herod story is of primary importance; there is special emphasis on the scenes when Rachel laments the loss of her child and Herod is dragged off to hell.

The religious portion of the vertep is typically followed by a number of unrelated comic episodes. There is a great deal of variety in these comic scenes, depending on when and where they were performed. There are typically a whole host of local stage types: Jews, Poles, the Polish Pan, Cossacks from various regions, Germans, Russian peasants, pretty young girls, doctors, pigs and horses, a dancing grandpa and grandma, a Hungarian hussar, a gypsy with an old nag, a quarrelsome gypsy girl, and various military figures. In the Ukrainian tradition, one of the most common vertep heroes was the Zaporozhets, a Cossack from an island in the Dnepr River, and a hero in Ukrainian folklore. Here one can see the more nationalistic and anti-Semitic aspects of the folk tradition: the Zaporozhets in the vertep performances usually ends up beating a Jewish tavern keeper (known as the "Yid"). The humor in the comic scenes relies heavily on puppets getting drunk, puppets dancing, puppets beating other puppets, and other slapstick conventions. The comic portion of the vertep show generally concludes with an appeal for money.



Drawing of a Ukrainian vertep stage.

Note in the lower illustration a bird's eye diagram of the slits in the stage floor, as well as the proportions for the stage.

Courtesy of Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library.

Performances of vertep seriously declined by the late nineteenth century. Perets wrote in 1895 about the “disappearing” of vertep.¹² According to the scholar Vinogradov, writing in 1908, vertep had essentially “ceased to exist” and any occasional performance of it was a “rare exception.”¹³ Michael Kuzmin, a Russian playwright, poet and musician, made a couple of attempts to stage his version of vertep, but in 1919, critics found puppeteer Shaporina-Yakovleva’s staging of Kuzmin’s play “tactless” in the new social and ideological situation¹⁴ of post-Revolutionary Russia. Under Communism, state puppet theatres sprang up all over, but did not perform the traditional repertoire such as vertep because of its religious nature.

Until fairly recently, vertep had all but disappeared in Russia and was rarely performed in Poland and Ukraine. Over the past twenty years, however, Eastern Europe has regained an interest in its pre-Revolutionary folk traditions and religious beliefs, partly as a way to recover a sense of national identity; in addition, the Russian Orthodox religion is quickly gaining in popularity. As a result, pre-Revolutionary traditions such as vertep are being revived.

Victor Novatsky was one of the first scholars in recent years to actively seek out information on vertep and travel around searching for places where the tradition still existed. In 1980, when few if any performers in the large cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg were performing folk puppet traditions, he conducted a great deal of research, assembled a script from several pre-Revolutionary texts, and built a vertep cabinet theatre.¹⁵ Novatsky, thanks to his “restoration” efforts, is now seen by many Russian puppeteers as the modern father of vertep.¹⁶ He created his vertep in 1980, and has continued the tradition every Christmas season at least until his interview in the Russian puppetry journal *Kukart*, the 1997 issue of which was entirely dedicated to vertep. He built a “do-



The three magi. Note that all three are attached to a single rod. From a late nineteenth century Belorussian balleika.

mestic” stage for children to perform with and a more elaborate stage for performances outside his home.

Novatsky sees his vertep as a reconstruction of the folk tradition, and has tried to remain “faithful” to this tradition by not adding any new lines of his own to the composite text.¹⁷ Nevertheless there is a subtle, yet key difference between Novatsky’s vertep and the vertep in the composite text discussed earlier:

one of emphasis. Perets’s composite text summaries were weighted more heavily on the side of the comic/profane scenes. However, in Novatsky’s version, although the Herod story is given emphasis over the Jesus story, the comic scenes are considered secondary. In Novatsky’s case, this emphasis on the religious portions of the story is more out of a research interest than personal religious belief:

I think that always- regardless of whether you are a believer or not- it is important, that the relationship towards the vertep does not go through belief, because then immediately questions arise of accountability to the religious canon: what is permitted and what is not...The first vertep I made was seventeen years ago, in 1980 or so, there was no kind of government religion at all... I had a research interest- for reconstruction, for the restoration of vertep as a form of theatre. I wanted to make it a living thing...¹⁶

During their tours to Russia in 1987 and 1990, members of Bread and Puppet, including Peter and Elka Schumann and Michael Romanynshyn, met Victor Novatsky. Elka Schumann described seeing Victor’s vertep performed in his apartment. According to her, the lights were turned out and the small stage was lit from inside with candles. She describes the stage itself as a “glorified dollhouse” and the puppets as “little rag dolls on sticks.”¹⁹ There were two performers- a puppeteer

and a fiddler; both performers also sang all the songs. In Elka Schumann's recollection, the show was called *The Death of King Herod*. Michael Romanyshyn also describes the show in Novatsky's apartment. His description serves as an immensely useful link both to the kind of vertep that is performed today and to what current scholar-artists such as Novatsky consider important and traditional:

The story starts out with an angel coming with a candle in his hand... it's a nice puppetry trick, an angel carrying a candle, and doing an introduction and...the sheep come across and then the shepherds. And the angel's announcement to the shepherds. The angel is above—there's a hole in...the triangular top of the stage... It's different on different stages...but sometimes there's a hole in the peak and the angel looks through there, or a hole... like sun rays...

There's a scene with Herod and the advisors; Herod's on his throne, and advisors come in and they help him... and then there's a scene with the soldiers going around...to the houses and then...one of the big scenes is with Rachel and her baby...

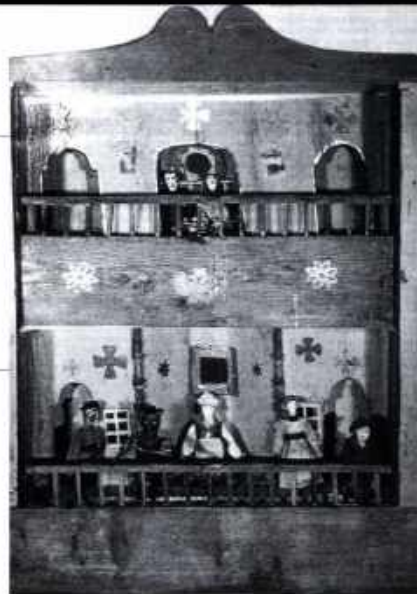
But of course the most important thing about the Russian vertep is the killing of King Herod... another name for that show was *The Death of King Herod*. When they chop off his head, that's the climax... and that's the big puppetry thing in the show... And also... the scene where the devil calls his mother... Death cuts off his head, and then the devil drags his body to hell.

Then came the comic scenes; the comic scenes are always at the end. He did one that's like a mummer's scene with an old woman on a horse, and the doctor coming in, he did about three... [And] dancing...

He wasn't so much interested in the comic scenes...²⁰

Though Novatsky is trying to remain historically accurate by including a few of the comic scenes, it is clear from this description that to him the religious segment is of primary importance.

Several other groups have become interested in



A late nineteenth century Belorussian batleika. Note Joseph and Mary in the background on the upper level, and the comic characters, in particular the devil, on the lower level.

vertep since Novatsky began his research, including the Wooden Horse Theatre of St. Petersburg, the Prokovsky Chorus, and numerous individual puppeteers and puppet theatres in Ukraine.

Michael Romanyshyn, a long time member of Bread and Puppet, became so fascinated with vertep that he spent a year traveling around Eastern Europe studying the form, and later performed a cardboard vertep in New York. Bread and Puppet was given a number of vertep puppets by Moscow friends, along with Novatsky's script, and they created a stage of their own in Vermont with which they performed several times. These puppets are now a permanent part of the Bread and Puppet Museum, but the theatre has integrated several ideas from the vertep into their annual nativities, including the two-tiered stage and the revolutionary aspects of the killing of King Herod.²¹

When talking about "traditional" forms of folk and popular theatre, one must keep in mind that there is no one definition of what traditional means. The vertep of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sought one way to balance the sacred and the profane, the divine and the comic: by having them co-exist on separate planes. Victor Novatsky is creating a new tradition: even in trying to remain faithful to how he thinks vertep was performed before the 1917 Revolution, he, perhaps unconsciously, places more emphasis on the religious part of the story. Bread and Puppet and others, although influenced by Novatsky, redefine the form even as they borrow from it. During each period, the balance of the sacred and the profane in vertep gives a window into the values of the people who perform and watch the shows. As vertep continues to be performed in Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere, and more information becomes available about the form, vertep will inevitably move in yet another direction.

- ¹ The Russian carnival preceding Lent.
- ² For more information on Petrushka, see Catriona Kelly. *Petrushka: The Russian Carnival Puppet Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- ³ Pronounced "shopka."
- ⁴ From the word "Bethlehem." Also spelled "betleika."
- ⁵ The emphasis in the Eastern European tradition is the location, while the emphasis in the Western European tradition is the manger itself; hence the Western European terms "crib" or "crèche".
- ⁶ Victor Novatsky, and Michael Romanyshyn. See also Elizabeth Warner. *Theatre in Focus: Folk Theatre and Dramatic Entertainments in Russia*. Chadwyck-Healey, Cambridge and Alexandria, VA, 1987. This book is one of the best sources on vertep in English, and is also accompanied by several wonderful vertep slides. See also *The Russian Folk Theatre*. The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1977.
- ⁷ Michael Romanyshyn calls the two levels heaven and earth/hell. Phone interview with the author. April 25, 2000.
- ⁸ Elizabeth Warner's term.
- ⁹ V. Perets, *Kukol'nyi Teatr na Rusi*. Moscow, 1895; facsimile version republished in 1991, p. 56. All translations from Russian are by the author. Special thanks to Maxim Lifshin for helping translate colloquial Russian and Ukrainian.
- ¹⁰ Galagan claims that his text is that of a traveling puppeteer who performed at his family's estate in 1770, though it was not published by him until over a century later.
- ¹¹ Perets, p. 58.
- ¹² Ibid, p. 78.
- ¹³ Nikolai Vinogradov. *Belorusskiy Vertep: Yego Ustroistvo. Opisanie Kukol. Vertepnaia Drama v Smolenske. Predstavlenie v Spas-Demenske*. St Petersburg: Tipografia Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk, 1908, p. 1.
- ¹⁴ Henryk Jurkowski. *A History of European Puppetry*. Volume II. Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998, p. 144. For information on how the Polish szopka was turned into a form of political satire, see Jurkowski's book, and also Harold B. Segel. *Pinocchio's Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automats, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde*



Vertep of the Wooden Horse Puppet Theater, St. Petersburg. The scene of Rachel's lament. Note also the numerous slits in the floor along which the puppets were guided. You can also just see puppeteer Igor Fokin's arms through the doorway arches.

Drama. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995 and *Turn of the Century Cabaret*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

- ¹⁵ Shabalina, "Interview with Victor Novatsky." *Kukart*. 6 (1997): p. 56.
- ¹⁶ Henryk Jurkowski, former president of UNIMA, is also an expert on the form, on szopka in particular. Jurkowski was also responsible for initiating the "International Festival of Nativity Shows" that took place in Lutsk in 1993.
- ¹⁷ Shabalina, p. 56.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Elka Schumann. Phone interview with the author. March 25, 2000.
- ²⁰ Romanyshyn.
- ²¹ Ibid.

Dassia Posner is a puppeteer with Luna Theatre and is currently working on her PhD in theatre history at Tufts University.

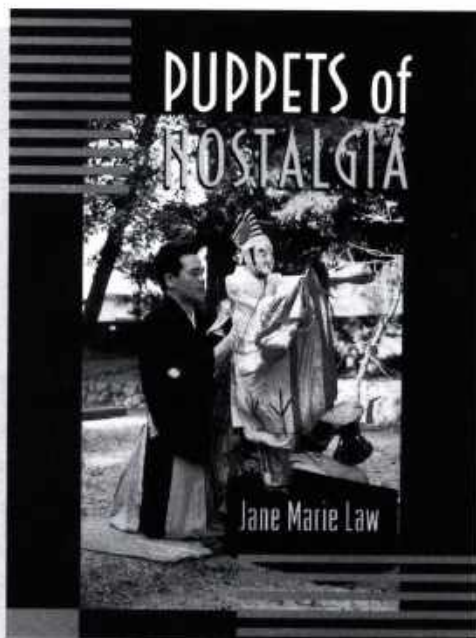


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Puppets of Nostalgia

by Jane Marie Law



book review by Andrew Periale

"Nostalgia" seems an odd descriptor for a working puppet theater, since it signifies a yearning for something in the past. In this case, though, it is that very poignant longing for an earlier more rural, rustic (and therefore "genuine") existence which helped revive a puppetry tradition. The Awaji puppet theater probably pre-dated Shakespeare and continued to flourish until just after World War II, when it abruptly died out. Before reading the book, I knew little about this theater—only that it involved a narrator/chanter (*chori*), three-man teams of puppeteers working fairly large figures, and that it probably had laid the groundwork for the more sophisticated urban bunraku theater. From the look of this book, with its 300 pages of scholarship in nine point type, there was clearly much more to it than that. I thought I might even "skim" through it, trying to catch the main points. After reading the first few pages, though, and despite a looming publication deadline, I was hooked. This is a wonderful story with many conflated narratives: it is a personal journey, it is the history of a puppet tradition, it is a story of reclaiming one's past, and of what it means to be Japanese (and, in a larger

sense, human). It is also an examination of a theater of religious ritual which existed uninterrupted for at least four centuries.

One of the challenges of researching ritual puppetry in Japan is the scarcity of historical accounts of puppet performances prior to the modern era. It is like looking at a complicated jigsaw puzzle in which all but a few dozen pieces have been lost. Professor Law avoids the temptation of reconstructing the original picture for us by means of interpolation and surmise, that is, creating a seamless account which would argue for a single tradition. Rather, she takes a multi-valent approach which is probably more accurate, and certainly more interesting. Puppetry on Awaji developed into two distinct forms: 1) a religious (non-ecclesiastical) ritual theater of itinerant performers (mostly soloists), and 2) a more secular *chori* tradition which prefigured the more sophisticated, urban bunraku, that is, three-man teams of manipulators, *shamisen* accompaniment, and *chori*. Professor Law focuses primarily on the ritual religious side of Awaji puppetry.

At the beginning of Chapter 1, Law describes her first encounter with Awaji puppet theater. After the performance, she wonders about the intentional inconvenience of using puppets instead of actors:

... What is it that a puppet can express that a human performer cannot?

This book is in part an exploration of that question. On the one hand, I have been interested in the general phenomenology of puppetry as a theatrical medium, and in the discussions by theater specialists, puppeteers and ritualists around the world who struggle with this same question; why puppets?

She bravely ignores the potential peril to her career by choosing to study puppetry at all, and goes on

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to explore the implications of the medium through the writings of E. Gordon Craig, Bil Baird, Dezso Szilagyi and Sergei Obraztsov.

Before revisiting the seminal question: "Why puppets?", Professor Law takes her readers on a long journey. She examines the importance of "otherness" in Japanese society, whereby those on the margins of society—outcasts—mediate between "order and chaos, the realms of the human and the divine." She looks at the roots of Awaji *ningyo* (puppet) tradition, which are found in the work of early itinerant ritual performers called *kugutsu*, as well as in the activities of ritual specialists several centuries later (also called *kugutsu*) who were associated with the deity Ebisu. Eventually, by the mid-sixteenth century, Awaji puppetry becomes a distinct tradition, as the puppeteers strike out on their own, weakening their ties to the Nishinomiya shrine dedicated to Ebisu, and forming their own identity. Law's close examination of two sacred performances—*Shiki Sanbaso* and *Ebisu-mai*—again show the importance of "otherness": "Puppets, puppeteers and deities are all 'outsiders' in the Japanese order of meaning, and these rites become powerful invocations of these forces from outside the everyday realm, capable of revitalizing and purifying communities." Finally, we are brought to the Awaji puppet theater of today, revived after a decade or two of neglect. The repertoire— one half of a single *ningyo joruri* text— found great success thanks in part to a wave of popular nostalgia. In this newly revived (if greatly attenuated) theater, Awaji's ritual tradition seemed to be lurking in the shadows like a repressed memory of childhood trauma. Finally, in the past few years, the Awaji puppeteers have begun to perform some of the ritual pieces once again, and although the context for these rituals has changed, it nonetheless feels like a healing process has started as Awaji natives begin to understand their present identity by claiming their past.

This is great scholarship, but it is also highly readable. Jane Marie Law as a character in her own narrative appears to be not only a dedicated and talented researcher, but a humble and very likable person. While she has made a great contribution to the history of puppetry with *Puppets of Nostalgia*, much of her research on Awaji was, as she writes, "... just plain fun." So is reading it.

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TDR *Puppetry Issue* is now

a BOOK

reviewed by Hanne Tierney

Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects, the Drama Review issue devoted to puppetry and guest edited

by John Bell, includes a collection of eight articles, two interviews and a photo essay. I am assuming that the articles were not selected with a puppeteer audience in mind. In reviewing this issue, my criteria has been whether or not the contributions add to the knowledge and understanding of the field by interested laymen and by other performing artists. It is rare for puppetry to be given the opportunity to present itself in a context other than its own, to address itself to a theater and performance audience, and, in a sense, to state its case on an equal footing with the rest of the performance world. *The Drama Review* issue offered such an occasion.

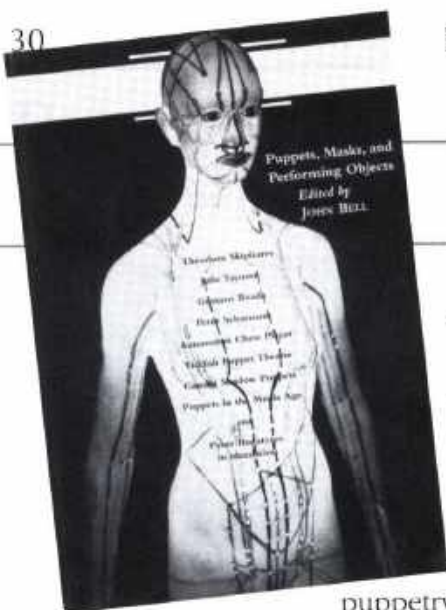
In his essay, "The Puppet Tree," Stephen Kaplin rightly points out that scholarly interest in the field has been scant, and the choice of some of the articles and essays included in this issue will probably not increase the interest. Kaplin's article, however, is a very good analysis of the physical realities of puppetry, on exactly that aspect of it that defines the art form. He constructs a new kind of classification system, one not based on the performing object, i.e. what it is made of, its means of manipulation, etc., as did Edward Gordon Craig in his *History of Puppetry*. Kaplin's system is based on the performer/object dynamic. He divides this dynamic into distance and ratio. Choosing the proper technique for the distance between the performer and the object, and the right ratio of the number of performing objects to the number of performers are totally essential to creating a successful performance. This new classification allows Kaplin to make room for the increasing use of technology in the field. As the distance between the object and the performer widens, he says, technology needs to bridge the gap. This thoughtful article offers the kind of information and thought that should be given to all students of puppetry to read and to think about.

On the other hand, a long interview with Julie Taymor by Richard Schechner does not necessarily give anyone a better understanding of puppetry, but it certainly gives a better understanding of Julie Taymor, who has enriched this field with her inventiveness and has helped open it up to a large public. The other interview in the issue by John Bell with Gustavo Boado, the mask maker with Yuyachkani, Peru's most important theater group, has much to say about masks, about a people looking for and working with their indigenous culture and about the political theater in Peru. Boado's beliefs and passions connect masks and puppetry in Peru to an earlier history— that of puppetry as an expression of political subversion.

"The End of Our Domestic Resurrection Circus," by John Bell, tells about the life and death of an extraordinary institution, the annual Bread and Puppet circus in Vermont. Anyone who either participated in or visited the circus will read this history with pleasure and nostalgia, but for anyone else interested in puppetry a really good article on the influence Peter Schumann has had on American puppetry and its practitioners would have been more important. Peter Schumann's contribution to this issue, several pages of drawings and of solid Peter Schumann dogma, should leave every reader with the desire to know more about him.

I also missed a comprehensive article with good photographs on the last ten years of the Henson Festival productions. It seemed odd to find the immense contributions made by the festival to the wide acceptance and authority of the field not mentioned in this issue. And in spite of the issue's title, performing objects, with their particular power to persuade through movement and placement rather than through facial expression and gesture, are not dealt with in any of the articles. Puppets still carry the day.

The essay, "Czech Puppet Theatre and Russian Folk Theatre," was published in Prague in 1923 as part of a collection *On Theory of the Poetic Language*. The essay appeared at a time when many artists in Russia and Eastern Europe looked at folk art as a source for inspiration. A praise of the advantages of folk theater over the natu-



TDR

realistic theater, the essay quotes examples from Czech and Russian folk puppetry performances to illustrate this superiority. It also deals at great length with the linguistic oddities used in both Russian and Czech puppet texts, and examines the use of Oxymorons, Metathesis, Synonyms and Homonyms. Reading the examples of dialogue given to justify these classifications leaves one thinking that in the end all this complicated analysis only belittles the intuition of the form. Ultimately, the essay says more about the excitement artists and intellectuals felt under the early Soviets, to celebrate and delve into the culture of the masses, than it says about puppetry.

The article on Modicut Puppet Theatre, subtitled Modernism, Satire and Yiddish Culture, by Edward Portnoy chronicles the history of a puppet company who overcame the prejudices of its own culture by performing with graven images, and then ending up being well beloved and very successful at it. Where human beings fail, puppets often succeed. In the last sentence, the writer makes the claim that the Modicut Puppet Theatre fulfilled the Yiddish speaking community's need for a popular expression of the clash between tradition and modernity. It struck me that the puppetry at the turn of the twentieth century fulfilled that same need for the educated middle class in Europe.

Theodora Skipitares photo essay shows the reader very clearly what puppetry can do and what it does. Although these photographs (and accompanying captions) are of her own work, they do show the scope and breadth of contemporary puppetry, and, not least, the virtue of good documentation.

I very much enjoyed the essay by Mark Sussman on the history of the famous Automaton Chess Player in the late eighteenth century. It is the history of a hoax perpetrated on a public ready for the superior intelligence of machines. No one ever saw the hidden manipulator inside the Turk figure, who played a wicked chess game with anyone who asked for it. Mark Sussman brings many metaphysical consideration, into this essay, relating them to the metaphysics involved in puppetry, and this, in turn, brings up absorbing questions as to the nature of deception.

The other absorbing questions being opened up in one of the articles "Puppets and Media Production" by

Steve Tillis, are incredibly interesting right now. Obviously, the field has been trying to figure out whether there are limits as to what constitutes puppetry, and whether puppetry should set these limits or even accept them. The virtual and the two-dimensional are a burden to this field which relies on the performance of its art, and on the knowledge of the audience that a human being is not only performing but at the same time transcending a technique. For the last few years these question have loomed large; are these computer graphics figures puppetry, should they be, why would they be, and, what, then, is a definition of puppetry. Reading the contemporary theories and criticism on the theater at the turn of the twentieth century, in particular those that relate to the threat posed to actors, acting and the theater by the moving images camera, it seems to me that puppetry finds itself in exactly the same place. Something is doing something better and more efficiently. Our instinct tells us it is not the same, and yet we can't pinpoint why it is not. I think the answer lies where it did then. A new field is emerging, the field of computer graphics, media production, and the use of computer technology to animate anything, just as the cinema became a new field unto itself, even though it utilized actors, acting and the conventional storytelling techniques of the theater. Eventually we will calm down and no longer be concerned about our identity and where we fit in. Steve Tillis, in his article, does what puppetry has anxiously been trying to do; he theorizes technology into being puppetry. Ultimately, this argument will lose its nervousness because the two fields will co-exist, as does the theater with the film industry. However, for Steve Tillis to intelligently look at a crossroad makes the crossroad exciting and introduces new ways of looking at old arrangements. It relates the present state of puppetry-in-relation-to-technology to many other fields, such as mathematics vs. the computer, or drawing vs. computer graphics. And, most likely, time will straighten it all out.

John Bell's erudite introduction to this *Drama Review* issue tells the reader of a theater that has strong roots, strong traditions and a strong appeal to that remarkable component in our imagination that can transport us into mysteries and otherworldliness in spite of the strings being clearly visible. •

"The Toymaker"

reviewed by Justin Kaase

Martin Stevens' "The Toymaker" is a simple, unadorned explication of the relationship of a human being to its creator, and of the relationship of one human to another. Though "The Toymaker" was performed live, and exists as a children's book, I am only familiar with it as a short film.¹ The premise is this—on the Toymaker's workbench, two newly-made puppets come to life. From there, things develop in a fairly predictable way: the pair, friendly at first, become distrustful when they realize that they are different from one another in a single superficial detail—one is decorated in stripes, and one with spots. To this point, it seems like a straightforward indictment of racism. Soon, though, each of the puppets becomes aware of its creator—the Toymaker.

Toymaker: . . . I'm the one who made you.

Stripes: Well, when did you get here?

T: Oh, I'm here all the time.

S: Well, I never saw you before.

T: You never looked, but I'm right with you every minute.

S: Is that so? Well then, I can beat the spots off of Spots! . . . You'll be right behind me?

T: Oh, I'll be closer than that.

S: Good! *[The Toymaker fades out]* . . .

I wonder what he meant by that?

Things have taken a turn. The tiny figure is now aware of its creator, and it believes that this all-powerful being will be an ally in its fight against those who are

"other." Now this is not merely an issue of racial disharmony, but of one culture pitted against another in holy war. It is the Crusades, it is *jihad*, it is every war where someone uttered " . . . because God is on our side."

A fearsome battle ensues, and both puppets take a beating. They complain to the Toymaker, accusing him of abandoning them. He tries to explain that he loves them both, and that they are both the same thing, but all they see are stripes and spots.

Toymaker: Do you know what you are?

Stripes: Sure! There's my little head, and my little hands, and my little shirt, and my . . . *[he hesitates]* . . . and your arm . . . and shoulder . . . and you! Then I'm part me and part you.

T: Yes, but there's more than that. Keep going.

S: Then there's your other shoulder, and your other arm, and then there's . . . Spots. Hey, Spots! We're all one thing— you, me and the Toymaker!

Now we have moved to a different level. At the level of spirit we are connected not only to one another, but to the universe and whatever creative energy pervades it.

R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, the great French chemist who also spent many years in Egypt trying to tease the secrets of the pharaonic cosmology out of the hieroglyphic record, posed this question: how many numbers exist in the universe? His answer was "One." All other

numbers are simply aspects of One (e. g. two: duality, three: trinity, four: the cardinal points, and so on). Achieving awareness of the One is the ultimate goal not only of spiritual seekers, but of science as well. Stripes and Spots learned this in just 10 minutes, and their little epiphany may be a useful metaphor for the young and a heartwarming reminder for the rest of us.



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"The Toymaker" Martin "Steve" Stevens portrait painted by Margi Stevens in 1971 "in honor of the subject, in memory of the artist."



The last time we saw Martin Stevens was at the 1983 Puppeteers of America national festival in Ames, Iowa, shortly before his death. We were recently astonished to learn that his marionette theatre has continued to tour since that time, using, for the most part, Steve's original puppets. To find out what they're up to go to: www.stevenpuppets.com.

J.K.

...The film is old-fashioned and the acting seems stiff, judged by today's conventions. Certainly not everyone responds to it in the same way. A few years ago it was shown at ciné16 as part of the ongoing screenings of films from the Academic Film Archive of North America,² where it garnered this review:

Last week, a ciné16 regular suggested, no demanded, actually, that we re-run probably the sickest kids' film we've shown. . . . So what could be so diabolical about a puppeteer doing a kids' film about how stupid racism is? The disturbing Martin Stevens has crafted a puppet on each of his hands and spends a lot of time lecturing them not to beat each other up. We wish

he'd have done some soul-searching on the god complex issue... [<http://www.cine16.com/98chrono.htm>]

Awwww. I think somebody needs a hug.

###

¹ (19xx) Directed and photographed by Wango Weng. Produced by Wango Weng and Alfred Wallace. I believe Jim Rose did some of the (uncredited) puppeteering. Available through Puppeteers of America Audio-Visual Library—Gary Busk, 3827 Westminister, Carrollton, TX 75007.

²The Academic Film Archive of North America (AFA) is a 501(c)(3) public benefit organization, incorporated in the State of California on March 5, 2001 for the purpose of acquiring, preserving, documenting and promoting academic film by providing an archive, resource, and forum for continuing scholarly advancement and public exhibition.

Dear Readers:

If you have enjoyed *Puppetry International* magazine, you might be interested in the web site for UNIMA-USA.

You can access the site at:

www.unima-usa.org

STAR WARS, EXULTANT LIGHT AND THE TRUTH OF THE IMAGINATION

by Stephanie Green



photo: A. Golyanov

Star Wars, Bread and Puppet, Bunraku, the Italian Renaissance and Russian Orthodox iconography ... and all in the same show. It was a little unexpected, not to mention disorientating.

Having travelled 36 hours on the Southern Urals Train from Moscow, through miles of birch trees and featureless landscape, apart from the stunningly white expanse of the Volga (as wide as a small sea), here we were: where Stalin's tanks were built and where Russia's physicist, Kurchatov split the atom for Russia and developed their H-bomb, making this a closed city to Westerners until 1993. Here we were watching in a Stalin-period neo-classical theatre, of all things a Nativity play: *Exultant Light*, directed by Vladimir Garanin.

Nativity plays are two a penny in the west (or at least, they are if your children attend primary school away

from multi-cultural cities), but this was Russia; you have to remember that thousands of churches were shut down in Stalin's time, razed to the ground or just left to rot and, in the most notorious case of one in Moscow, turned into a swimming pool. Religion was not illegal, but promotion never happened if it was known you went to church. After perestroika, the first church service attended by a Russian leader was when Yeltsin attended a Kremlin church service in the late 80's.

The extraordinary resurgence of religious feeling and search for a spiritual meaning that has swept Russia recently was therefore reflected in this collaboration between second year students of drama from Yekaterinburg and their local Russian Orthodox church.

This Nativity play was like no other I have seen: Byzantine iconography (angels floating upside-down painted on the proscenium arch), the opulent costume of the Three Kings, a Madonna in gold-edged red (not blue) veil, mixed with Italian Renaissance images (angels with long curly locks, wearing multi-coloured wings and robes with flowing folds, as if they'd just stepped down from a Piero della Francesco fresco), a curiously anachronistic Herod in a spiked headress reminiscent of Star Wars; masks, 21-foot-high puppets inspired by Bread and Puppet (an angel, Mary and Joseph, and a swan), Bunraku manipulators with a gloriously uplifting sound backing of modern Andrew Lloyd-Webber-like solos, rock music and Russian Orthodox chanting. It was a veritable potpourri of western, orthodox and modern images plus every kind of puppetry style available, as if the director were trying to combine the two religious traditions plus bring it up to date with modern references using every technique available. Heady stuff, indeed, but somehow hollow.

I overheard people talking, wondering if this was because the director himself is not a believer, and he was merely being opportunistic. Religious fervour, though, does not necessarily lead to aesthetic taste, and I don't think the spiritual credentials of the director are relevant.

I think a more pertinent question would be to ask why this gargantuan stew was in the end unsatisfactory theatrically and why I couldn't help having a sneaking feeling that the Director was showing off all that he knew as if to say: we can drag Russia into the post-perestroika 21st century, combining the best of the west with the best of our orthodox tradition plus using the best world traditions of theatre, rather than having an emotional validity for what he did.

The performance on stage (I will get to an introductory foyer performance later) began with a host of angels (so short I wondered if they were played by children?) spaced out on the open stage, so that we walked into the auditorium to find them there. All were wearing identical full-face waxen masks, with holes for eyes and mouth, they remained immobile and their expressionless faces gave rather an eerie effect. I am sure that the effect was supposed to be spiritual, but on the contrary, I'm afraid it was just rather static.

There was a curious dichotomy between these static heavenly beings, the various Renaissance angels and the 21-foot-high puppet angel, and the dynamic baddies—Herod and his henchmen— one more example of how

the Devil always has the best parts! Even Mary and Joseph, puppets of various sizes, with their lumpy, unattractive faces (-why, unless you're aping Bread and Puppet?-) were brought in, held high, like statues in a religious procession, with the same lifeless quality.

But then the drama really got going when Herod entered. The acting was a mixture of Dracula, Richard III and the villain in *Maria and the Red Barn*, with a costume like something out of Star Wars. Oh dear; but what fun! Not really what you're supposed to feel about Herod. Three henchmen, a drum-beater, a mummy-like creature and swordsmen followed Herod about, performing what amounted to every stylized mime technique that can be learnt in the current fashion for physical theatre techniques— again the relevance was questionable, other than proving you're aware of these techniques. The massacre of the Innocents was suggested by a giant wheel (of Fate? A bit of a cliché but never mind.) being carried high by Herod's soliders whilst a long red cloth enveloped the wheel and trailed behind them across the stage. Although I had seen red cloths symbolising a bloodbath many times in Agit-prop theatre, I was beginning to be won 'round. It was effective, and must have been more so for members of the audience who had not seen this technique before. The sheer horror of the massacre is strongest in the imagination and nothing would have been added by staging mock-killings, after all.



Folkloric games and festive animal characters before the performance

The drama then took on a more resonant, plangent note

... as a grieving woman, symbolising all the hundreds of other bereaved women, walked slowly in a spotlight across the darkened stage. Surrounding her at a distance were actors who pulled her along by many strings, as if she were a puppet and they the manipulators. Unlike bunraku techniques, however, the manipulators were not made 'invisible' but spotlit, wearing white gloves, which emphasised the symbolism of this image. I have to admit to being totally overcome at this moment- perhaps it is my own identification as a mother and the thought of losing my own 'first-born' son which made me weep but I think this is because the massacre of Innocents and Herod's despotic rule in fact were true subjects for this Director- a metaphor for Stalin's purges and Russia's tragic history, perhaps? It was here that a theatrical technique expressed an emotional truth most truly, that it also worked aesthetically.

At this point, although this happened prior to the stage performance, I must mention the most moving moment of the whole evening and tellingly, the most simple technically.

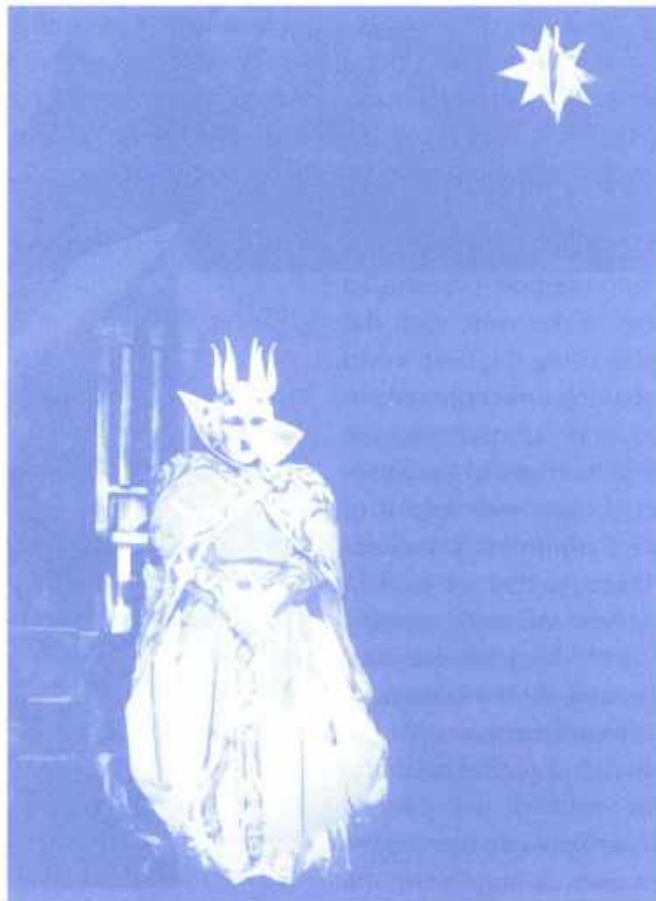
The audience had been asked to wait in the foyer. The lights were dim and the excitement was palpable. Suddenly a spotlight roamed the grandiose Art Deco stucco on the ceiling and then fell to the black and white checked floor. Two actors dressed in sheepskins, one with Cossack hat and long, tangled beard appeared. 'Look, a star!' they cried and watched in wonder as the star began to move

but this time in our imagination, it was not moving across the foyer but across the night sky and the hills outside Bethlehem.

Finally, the star came to rest on the ground. The shepherds slowly circled it and we all craned forward as the old man carefully picked up the light and placed it inside his basket. It was a magical moment, rather like the mystery and wonder that is Christmas when you are a child.

Before the Nativity play started, we followed the actors into an inner foyer where actors in traditional Russian costume sang folk songs and then invited the children in the audience to participate in Christmas games, such as dancing a complicated step-dance over two sticks lying crossed on the ground without touching the sticks. (A game I've seen danced in Ireland and Cornwall with broomsticks.) Actors wearing animal costumes, a goose, a bear and a cow also joined in the fun. Apparently these were authentic Russian games, though the idea of performing them as a Christmas rite was an imported

American idea and this time a very happy and enjoyable borrowing.



Stephanie Green, co-editor of the Br(itish) UNIMA Bulletin, travelled to the Urals Festival 2000 in Russia as recipient of an UNIMA Scholarship.

*Herod in "Star Wars" costume
photo: A. Golyanov*

■ Aspects of Ritual in Puppetry ■



Puppets, because they are not human, can be good conduits for images of ancestors or deities in many areas of the world. Here, Dalang Abah Sunarya performs a wayang golek exorcism in Sunda (West Java, Indonesia). The figure wrapped in white on his left hand is the demon, Kala. The figures on the banana log represent the first puppetmaster and his troupe, who are incarnations of gods.

Puppetry is the art of the animated object. Ritual is patterned ceremony which imparts spiritual knowledge. The interrelationship of puppetry and ritual is long-standing, yet ritual uses of puppets are only partially understood.

Puppet information often passes in oral modes, and thus has limited access of people outside an artistic lineage to teachings about ritual meanings, since secrecy prompts practitioners to guard information. Therefore, where initiation rites or age grade ceremonies are concerned—as in Africa or Melanesia, or where tantrism has left its mark—as in many Asian puppet genres—we have only partial information as to the meanings. Moreover, as cultures transform, ritual puppet genres, as with the *bula ki'i* (puppet hula) of

Hawaii (Luomala, 1984) or the dancing of ancestral heads as in male societies of Vanuatu, may be remembered only in citations in missionaries' diaries or as objects on display in modern museums. Even where rituals persist, the esoteric meaning of the performances may remain hidden, even when played in plain sight.

After an introduction on general principles on puppetry and ritual in a wider part of the world, this article will argue that even where puppet performances primarily serve entertainment functions, ritual patterns persist as an ongoing aspect of the genre. While we think we create modern puppet shows to display our personal vision, anyone who has played with puppetry knows the figures often have a life of their own and take us to a place that we never intended to go.

by Kathy Foley

General Principles

Crucial metaphors are intertwined with puppetry and enjoy a geographical spread that cannot always be explained by simple cultural flow. Some examples are: 1) the conception of puppets as representations of spirits or ancestors, 2) the use of an interpreter to translate the altered or distorted voice the puppet, 3) the widespread analogy that "as god is to man, so is the manipulator to the puppet," and, finally, 4) the mythos which surround the traditional clown in puppet theatre.

Spirits or Ancestors

Where ancestral cults, animism and shamanism form the religious substructure, puppets often appear with ritual overtones. Philosophically, these three religious tendencies have in common the idea that the active energy in the universe is not confined to living humans or animals. Other entities have power that can suffuse the world. Objects, in this perspective, have life. The wood has the life of the tree; leather of the animal; etc. Additionally, objects correctly prepared can become appropriate vehicles for disembodied entities of ancestors, spirits, or gods. The manifestation may be metaphorical but awe-inducing: for example, the towering *ijele* mask of the Igbo of Africa is paraded every 25 years. A large body mask-structure over six meters tall and three meters in diameter is encased with figures of animals, humans, spirits, and ancestors. It dances majestically through the village an "ideal of achievement, authority and the status associated with founding fathers or ancestors." (Aniakar, 47) In the *gelede* performance used to placate female ancestral power, Yoruba men of Benin and Nigeria use body puppets to transform dancers into representations of powerful ancestors. More recently, motorcycles or airplanes may appear on these stately headdresses, as these images of potency expand to include modern technology (Drewal and Drewal, 8-9, 201).

The actual presence of the ancestor in a puppet is posited in the *Nini Towong* play of Javanese girls where a water dipper is made into a manipulated doll. This figure is identified with the ancestress/rice goddess, Sri. The puppet is activated by entranced girls who use the figure in games predicting marriages or creating rain.

In some sense, we can see these spirit-bearing puppets related to statues of gods all over India which are activated by devotees who pull the god's vehicle at annual cart festivals or funeral pyres of Balinese where the bull or other figurines represent the deceased. These

elaborate pyres with figures atop them are whirled with the wild collective energy of the group. While such images are not puppets per se, they participate in a pattern: they are objects that take on an otherworldly energy when activated by believers. The collective energy of the group pours into the object, and it "dances" with that power which is the spirit/ancestor/god manifesting itself in the world.

Though these forms are quite different, there are some common denominators. Firstly, puppets and masks, because of their visible difference from human form, seem to be appropriate vehicles for representing the "other" worldly. Secondly, the seemingly unmoving nature of the object, which is latent until the puppeteer applies himself, makes puppets good models of how the spiritual dimension may interface with our world. The spiritual power is hidden behind the everyday. Puppetry as a genre may have a conceptual fit with the manifestation of spirit in the material world.

The Interpreter

The vocal stylization of many puppet theatres is another peculiarity which may relate to ritual sources. Shamanism which posits that a specialist can have ability to communicate directly with spirits, often via dream, trance or seance, is receptive to the use of puppets since they conveniently show the spirit with whom the performer interacts. The puppet or mask is a visually clear representation of the altered reality that the shaman clarifies for his clients.

The altered voice of the *boli* reed in Rajasthan's string puppetry is analogous to the swazzle used by Mr. Punch. The often incomprehensible voice of the puppet reminds us of the widespread use of a musical instrument to represent a "spirit" reality in shamanic traditions. The "interpreter," who translates the puppets' voices into comprehensible language, is widely found in genres which use the reed for the voice of characters. While this pattern of using an intermediary is not ritual in modern puppet genres, it is extremely widespread: Punch has his bottler, Sundanese rod puppetry of Indonesia has its *lurah sekar* ("leader of song"), Rajasthani string puppetry has its singer. The pattern may stem from ritual practices in which puppetry is rooted. The magic of putting the puppet into juxtaposition with a person remains, even in TV performances like *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* or *Howdy Doody*. The film performances of the Muppets' pattern of puppet interacting with the human, is the norm. These

popular shows and movies are a long way from shamanism, but the power implicit in this pairing still glows even in the electronic mediation.

God as Puppetmaster

The recurring metaphor of the manipulator as a "god" who orders the world while the creature who is manipulated only dimly understands is far flung. The opening song of Sundanese rod puppet theatre, *wayang golek purwa*, in West Java states:

The screen obscures the vision of the God [puppeteer] behind.

The puppeteer [God] moves the puppets.

The puppets are moved by the puppeteer [God].

The screen hides God....

In Turkey, the prologue of the Karagöz shadow puppet theatre includes a mystical poem repeating some of the same sentiments:

It is He [God] who casting all the figures in their proper roles,

Causes each to speak in the words and manner appropriate thereto.

See all those figures are but passing shadows,

And it is God's wrath or beauty which manifests itself through them. (Basgoz, 4)

The *P'i Ying* of China captures some of the same thought:

Thousands of years told by one mouth, a myriad of soldiers fought by two hands.

While metaphors of omnipotence can be dismissed as poetic license, the distribution of statements about god as puppetmaster is wide and gives an aura to the manipulator. Plato, in his metaphor of the cave, used shadow puppetry to represent the illusion that men live with until they exit the cave and first see the sun-lit reality. Theatre as an imitation or mirror of life is a consistent metaphor in European thought, but in non-Western locales things are often reversed. Life is the illusion and art shows us the reality. In Indonesian puppetry, ritually important passages remind us that sun *is* the lamp of the puppeteer, and the stage *is* the earth and all the men and women merely puppets suffused by a power that animates them, but which they do not own. By understanding the nature of life as play, and becoming puppeteers, humans participate in the creative power of the godhead.



Hanuman holding up the hero, Laksmana. Indian figure from Andhra Pradesh from the collection of the American Museum of Natural History.

photo: K Foley

Puppetry seems to have a particular attraction for spiritual persuasions that draw this analogy between the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (the individual). Because puppetry can allow an individual to express a "universe" in the artistic confines of a puppet performance, it becomes an art tinged with mystical overtones in variants of Tantrism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, Taoism and other assorted mystical sects. The Balinese *dalang* (puppetmaster), at the beginning of his performance, absorbs the gods of the four directions and quadrants into his body and centers it in the *kayon*, the tree-of-life puppet, which he uses when he narrates the play. The mantra [*Om Sambu*, takes the place of Visnu; Visnu takes the place of Sangkara; Sangkara takes the place of Mahadewa... (see Hooykaas, 32-33)] helps his physical body to coincide with the divine body for the duration of the performance:

While this idea of godlike power of the puppet master is very prominent in Asia and the Middle East where the religious strains noted have had influence, the idea of the puppet/mask as a locus of power is even more widespread. The *gelede* procession of the Yoruba of Africa may begin with this lyric:

*He must put on an image [mask], bead ties,
and leg rattles.*

He obeyed and put them on . . .

He rejoiced in dancing and singing—

"I have covenanted with Death, I will never die.

Death, worrisome Death. (Drewal and Drewal, 17)

In puppet/mask performance of Asia we often discover lyrics or mantra or dramatic actions learned from a teacher which encourage performers to expand their potential spiritual power. The teacher, who has preceded the apprentice in learning the system, may be given ritual homage as part of training, initiation, or pre-performance rites. This homology between the little world and the great—learned experientially under the guidance of teacher whose authority is absolute or divinely mandated—is frequent in Asian esoteric traditions and is found in dance, visual arts, and musical traditions as well as puppetry in Asia. It gives rise to conservative attitudes toward change in the structure of performance and promotes quasi-mystical auras. Indian and Southeast Asian puppet genres are strongly marked by such thinking. But the idea that these small beings open us to the plenitude of our possibilities and allow us to experiment on the small scale with who and what we really are, is implicit in the genre. There is a wonder in figures which persist as our physical bodies age and which allow us to move out of the givens of our gender, class, species, and historical period, to wander in a world of expanded and expanding possibilities.

The Mythos of the Clown

The recurring motif of a god-clown and the self-identification of the puppeteer with this unruly divinity is another face of a topsy-turvy ritual at the base of many

puppet genres. One could argue that for at least a millennium, there has been an iconoclastic religion of the puppet. In a wide swathe from Southeast Asia to Europe we find a puppet clown with divine or superhuman characteristics who defies death and gets away with murder. This figure has a relatively consistent iconography: a distorted or humpback body, a long nose, and a large club which sometimes turns into a phallus or a pointing finger. The clown figure has sometimes

been associated with the absorption of the evil eye. He is frequently said to be a god of low castes in India. Some hypothesize that the introduction of this figure to the Middle East as Karagöz, and to Europe as Kaspar, Pulchinelle, Punch, etc. came as the result of migration of low class performers from the North Indian area in medieval times. While it would be foolish to look for a singular origin of so widely known a figure, it is worth noting that the medieval period was a time when tantrism was an important religious strain in north India. Earlier medieval Indian sects like the Pasupatas and the Kalapilas developed ideological frameworks which articulate well with the cultural practices of these showmen/women. These sects were said to be founded by an avatar

of the god Shiva, Lakulisa, who, waking from death just before his body was to be cremated, took up ashes of the dead from the burning ground, smearing them over his body. He took up a club, some say a thigh bone. The image followers worshipped was Lakulisa/Shiva, a short figure with a club. He taught his followers a religion which burst normal social expectations—dance, sexuality, singing, outrageous behavior, and laughter were tools for bringing the performer-initiates of the sect and viewers who observed them toward enlightenment. The club might metamorphose into an erect phallus. The function of the sect's practice was to smash the fetters that bound



Sun Wu Kung, the Monkey King of Buddhist legend (with open mouth) is surrounded by figures of the Thai Hun Krabok theatre, built by the master artist, Chakraphand.

photo: K. Foley

humans to the world and to allow devotees to experience their inherent divinity. (Bhattacharyya, 195-204; Lorenzen)

In West Java, the black-bodied clown Semar is said to be the high god of the universe, his extended finger is said to point out the ultimate truth, his androgyny allows him to conceive children without a spouse.

The clown god who returns from death is part of the founding myth or basic narrative pattern of a number of puppet theatres. The Karagöz of the Middle East was, supposedly, created in Bursa to bring back the comic energy of an irreverent workman who, during construction of the great mosque, was executed by the ruler. Indonesian puppet narratives tell how the clown is killed by his master in order to make the earth fertile, but who reincarnates as an avenging knight. No one can kill him until he manifests himself in his clown body again. Mr. Punch beats hangman, crocodile and devil. Death has no sting for the eternal clown. The religions change but the puppet god remains the same.

In many areas, the links between puppet/mask performance has changed considerably in recent years with urbanization and economic development. In Africa, for example, the tendency toward Islamization and Western modernization has ended many initiation ceremonies practiced in the earlier part of the century. The diminution of ritual may take genres in new directions. For example, the impressive Bambara puppet masquerades of Mali have expanded, and complex figures which represent various animals, birds, genies, or human figures have proliferated. More ritual influences remain, however; the amorphous raffia figures of bush animals like the hyena and other such sequences may still be mainstays of the performance. (Arnoldi)

While Indonesian *wayang* is performed primarily as an entertainment, it still maintains ritual aspects. These are generally life cycle ceremonies (wedding or circumcisions). Offerings for spirits sit underneath the puppet stage. A performance is considered to bring good luck or spiritual benefit to the family which commissions it. While entertainment is emphasized in performance, *dalang*, often know more esoteric meanings for a story, or continue to feel that a certain piece of music has the power to soothe spirits.

Despite changes, the content of stories may also rework older religions and ideologies in ways that revitalize them for another period. Consider the historical

example of the semi-divine monkey character who appears in puppet stories in South, Southeast, and East Asia. In South and Southeast Asia the monkey character is Hanuman, a general who assists the god Rama through great difficulties as he journeys to retrieve his beloved wife, Sita. In China, a monkey character is significant in both puppet and human theatre. He has many of the semi-divine aspects of Hanuman, but has become the right-hand monkey for a monk who journeys to India to retrieve the Buddhist scriptures and bring them back to China. The metaphor of the puppeteer as god persists, though performers in a specific theatre may be Islamic (Kargöz, *wayang*), Hindu (*gombeyata*), or Buddhist (*yokthe pue* of Burma and *nang yai* of Thailand), respectively. The religion changes, but ideas at the base of the puppet genres may persist. As the clown may have a hundred names, but a common mythos, so puppetry has developed patterns of rich diversity which point back to a common ground. This commonality comes from the nature of puppetry—the finding of life in objects, and the creation of a cosmos of voices, figures, and ideas through one mouth and two hands.

Cheke Aniakar, "Ijele Mask of the Igbo" *African Arts* 9, 4, 42-47; Mary Jo Arnoldi, *Playing with Time*, Bloomington, 1995; James Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold*, Cambridge, Mass., 1970; Ilhan Basgoz, *Karagöz: The Turkish Shadow Play Theatre*, Bloomington, n.d.; N. N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Tantric Religion*, New Delhi, 1982; Henry Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*, Bloomington, 1983; Kathy Foley, "The Clown figure in the Puppet Theatre of West Java," in *Humor and Comedy in Puppetry* ed. by Diana and Joel Sherzer, Bowling Green, 1987; "Of Dalang and Dukun, Spirits and Men," *Asian Theatre Journal* 1, 1 (1984), 52-75, and "The Sundanese *Wayang Golek*: The Rod Puppet Theatre of West Java," Ph.D. Univ. of Hawaii, 1979; Mel Helstein, et. al, *Asian Puppets: Wall of the World*, Los Angeles, UCLA Museum of Cultural History, 1976; C. Hooykaas, Kama and Kala, Amsterdam, 1973; Pascal Imperato, "The Dance of the Tyi Wara," *African Arts* 4, 1; Katherine Luomala, *Hula Ki'i: Hawaiian Puppetry*, Honolulu, 1984; D. Lorenzen, *The Kapalikas and Kalamukbas*, New Delhi, 1972; Mangkunegoro VII, *On the Wayang Kulit (Purwa) and its Symbolic and Mystical Elements*, Ithaca, 1957; Michael Schuster, "The Visual Aspects of *Gombeyata*: Dancing Doll Puppets of South India," Ph.D. Univ. Hawaii, 1996; Roberta Stahl, *China's Puppets*, San Francisco, 1984; F. E. Williams, *The Drama of Oroko*, Oxford, 1940.

Kathy Foley is the Chandra Bhandari Endowed Chair of South Asian Studies and the chairperson of the Theatre Arts Department at the University of California Santa Cruz. She performs wayang golek and has curated exhibits on Asian puppetry for Center for Puppetry Arts and other venues. Her most recent publication is an Asian Theater Journal (Spring 2001) issue on South and Southeast Asian puppet theatre which includes a translation of a Sundanese wayang golek exorcism.

The Winner's Circle

Atlanta's Center for Puppetry Arts is currently presenting an unprecedented exhibit of American Puppetry. The Winner's Circle: Ten Years of the UNIMA-USA Citations of Excellence in the Art of Puppetry features puppets, props, sets and video clips from David Simpich, Phillip Huber, Perry Alley Theatre, Bil Baird, Larry Reed, Eric Bass, Paul Mesner, The Carter Family Marionettes, and Hystopolis Puppet Theatre to name a few. It runs from January 25, 2002 through January 3, 2003, so you have plenty of time to plan a weekend getaway

to Atlanta and see this collection for yourself.

The exhibit boasts a beautifully designed catalog with a thoughtful text by Mark Levenson (former UNIMA-USA president and Citation winner). Levenson's narrative elucidates the history of the Citation (or "UNI", as it has come to be called), which was established in 1975 by Jim Henson, as well as the selection criteria and the wide range of puppetry and performance styles found among the UNI recipients over the years.

A.C.Periale

“

What Makes a Great Puppet Show?

What cited shows have in common is the ability to “engage, enchant and enthrall.” But what constitutes such ability and how do cited shows demonstrate it? The citations criteria may be subjective, but a look at the winners should be revealing. Cited shows seem to have far more that distinguishes them than they have in common. . . . These shows burst the public's stereotype that puppetry is simply an art for children – and the younger the better.

While many UNIMA-USA cited puppet productions arise from a folk arts tradition, many others arise from a fine arts tradition, with puppet artists using original or adapted scripts to offer new comments on the human condition. Artists as different as Eric Bass, Roman Paska and Ronnie Burkett – each of whom has earned several citations – combine superb technique, sophisticated stagecraft and keen insight to fashion highly distinctive psychological portraits and critiques of human interaction and society.

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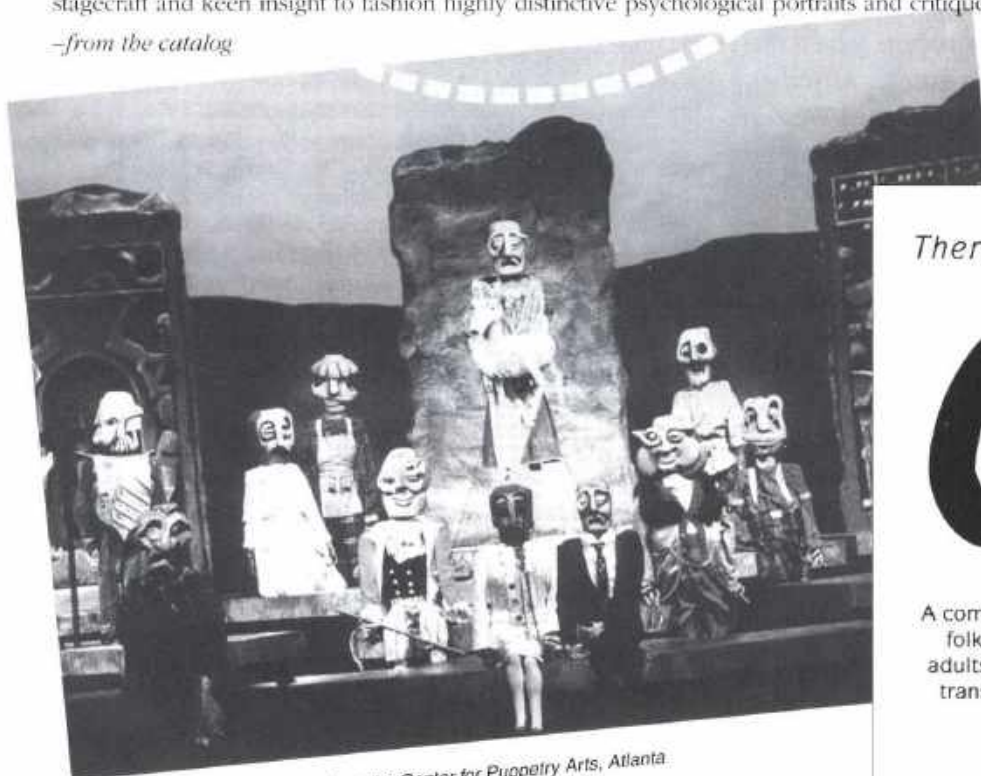


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Puppet History: a column by John Bell

Ribald Spirituality in a Ramadan Puppet Show

This is the beginning of a Puppetry International column on the history of puppet theater, in which I would like to bring up and point out various (and usually short and singular) aspects of puppet performance which have preceded us. The focus of this issue of PI on spirituality and puppet theater brings to mind an interesting story which has recently come to my attention, about an English romantic poet and his encounter with a shadow theater performance during the Muslim holy days of Ramadan.

The excerpt which follows is from Benita Eisler's biography of George Gordon, Lord Byron (*Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame*, Knopf, 1999). Byron was enamored of Greece and the Mediterranean, and in 1809 made an extended visit to the area with his friend John Cam Hobhouse. The following passage concerns a trip Byron and Hobhouse made to the Albanian city of Jannina. Eisler includes quotations from Hobhouse's diary:

During their last week in the city they sailed on the lake, visited the bazaar and watched a Greek wedding wind through the streets. [...] They also attended a puppet show, one of the most popular entertainments of Ramadan. Performed in a corner of a dirty coffeehouse by an itinerant Jewish puppeteer, the story played by shadow puppets, cutouts made of greased paper, featuring a hero possessing an enormous penis supported by a piece of string hung from his neck. The action that most delighted the young male audience was the finale, when the protagonist "held a soliloquy addressed to the appendage alluded to, which he snubbed most soundly with his fist, a prelude to the devil descending & removing this engine from before & affixing it to his posterior." Hobhouse was duly horrified. "Nothing could



be more beastly," he confided to his diary, along with a detailed description of each obscene gesture. Byron, however, assured his friend that he had seen puppet shows in England just as bad and worse performances by the morris dancers of Nottinghamshire.

There are a number of amazing aspects to this story. First of all is the religious context. Byron and Hobhouse are travelling in the Ottoman Empire, in Islam's westernmost Euro-

pean communities. The mix of cultures is amazing: Greeks, Jews, Muslim Albanians, and the English tourists (who are not actually that far from home). The context of the performance is quite importantly religious, because the day-long fasts during the month of Ramadan are one of the essential Pillars of Islam, marking the time when the Koran was first revealed to Mohammed. The evening break from the fast is traditionally a time of feasting and celebrating, and especially in Turkey (and apparently Albania as well), a time for Karagöz-style shadow theater, of which Hobhouse's account is most certainly an example. In fact, Metin And's fascinating book *Karagöz: Turkish Shadow Theater* (Ankara: Dost, 1979) contains photographs of exactly the kinds of prodigiously endowed Karagöz figures Hobhouse mentions.

What seems most remarkable here is that in the multi-ethnic city of Jannina, Byron and his friend Hobhouse saw a shadow show which, in the best tradition of puppet comedy, was outrageously obscene (although Hobhouse does not speak of the rest of the show, which probably included a variety of character types from the Ottoman Empire). This was at a holy time of the Muslim year; and the show was performed "by an itinerant Jewish puppeteer." The contrast of comedic excess

in the evening with the highly spiritual and physical ritual of the daytime Ramadan fast reminds us that spirituality is not limited to serious and solitary meditation, but instead can also include exuberant depictions of sex and the devil. Moreover, this particular performance shows us how Muslims and Jews (together with the travelling Englishmen who, we can assume, were at least nominally Christian) functioned together in a particular community in 1809 while still peacefully recognizing each other's existence and religion. This is definitely something worth contemplating in 2002. The fact that watching and enjoying puppet theater seems central to the situation Hobhouse describes may or may not be important. But it does seem that the abstract visual language of puppet theater— in this instance the shadow of a Brobdingnagian phallus— joined all those watching in what we could call a spiritual event. (Of course they were probably all men, but that's another complication...)

Byron's response to Hobhouse's horror (although Hobhouse was apparently not sufficiently horrified to actually turn away from the shadow screen) is typical of the expansive Romantic temperament. Byron loves the performance of sensuality, and finds commonality between the Jannina shadow show and the earthy (and also spiritual) Mummers' plays back home in England. Decades later, such ritual performances would be celebrated under a brand-new rubric: "folklore." But Byron's ability to find connection with the earthy Ramadan shadow show he saw in Albania is a good example of how people from quite different places around the world can understand each other by means of performance. (Thanks to Milly Cohen for showing me this story.)

--REMO BUFANO AND PUPPET THEATER AT THE PROVINCETOWN PLAYHOUSE--

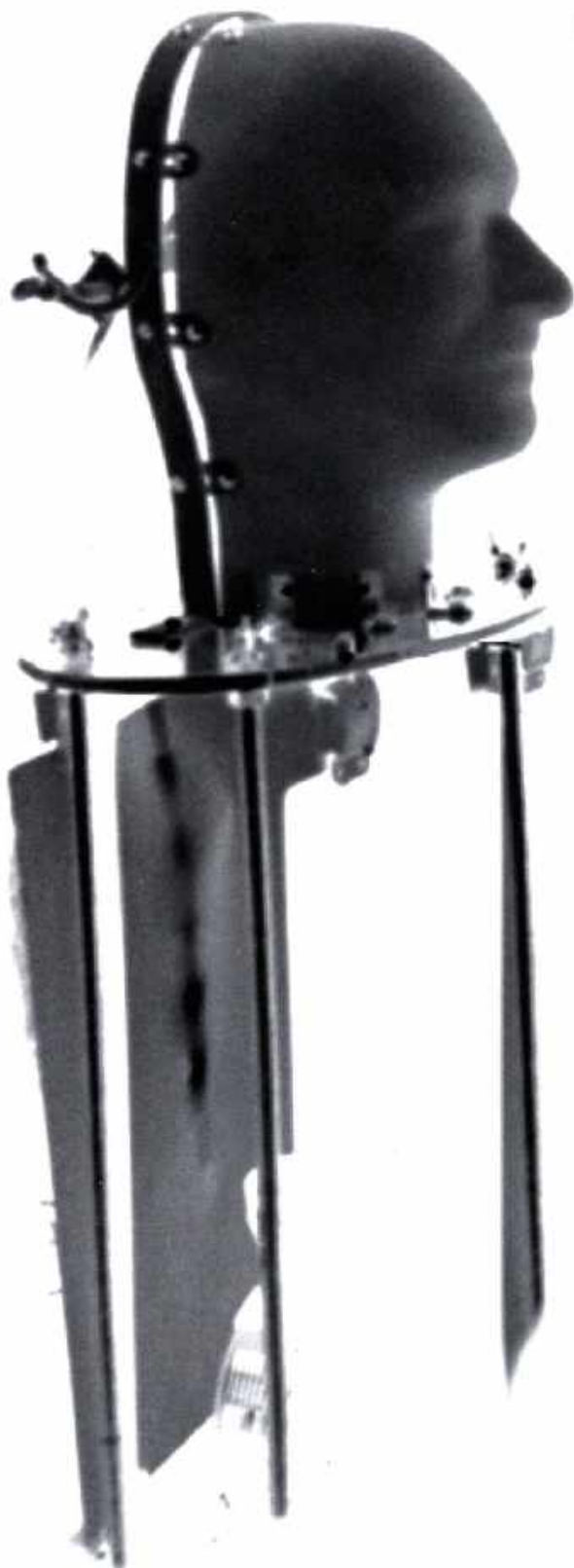
Remo Bufano's groundbreaking work in American puppet theater in the early twentieth century covered an amazing variety of forms and influences. One of the most intriguing aspects of his work is his involvement with the Provincetown Playhouse, the avant-garde experimental theater which from 1915 to 1922 gave birth to serious American drama, most famously by spawning the playwrights Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell, but which also explored a variety of new ways of making modern theater, including the use of puppets.

Bufano joined the Provincetown Players in 1919, and participated in the company as a performer and builder. Certainly his background as a puppeteer helped

influence some of the methods the group used. In *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1982) Robert Sarlos describes a 1920 production of playwright Alfred Kreymborg's "satirical election fantasy" *Vote the New Moon*. In a set featuring four small houses and a town hall, a Burgher and Burgess prepare to choose a new Burgomaster. According to Sarlos, the two citizens vote in Punch and Judy fashion, beating each other over the head with paper-maché hammers "until one falls unconscious," at which point the survivor's candidate wins, and a moon the color of the winning party appears over the town hall belfry. However, Kreymborg has the two citizens grow tired of this election process, especially since "color is the only difference between the candidates," and the candidates are all in thrall to a political boss named Catfish. Consequently, the two citizens call for a new, purple moon (i.e., a third-party alternative), but Catfish appears, "bathed in purple light," swallows everyone, and enters the town hall as he always has.

Remo Bufano performed as one of the citizens in this play, and probably helped build props and the surreal set in which the play took place. The actors, according to Sarlos, used "puppetlike" movements, but most interesting to us, the character of Catfish was "a canvas-covered lumber-frame carried by an actor in resemblance of giant carnival masks." Like many theater historians and critics who are unfamiliar with puppet and mask theater, Sarlos is maddeningly vague in describing this particular performing object, but it sounds like it was some sort of giant puppet with a paper-maché head. If so, this would mark one of the earliest uses of giant puppets in a serious piece of American drama. Perhaps Kreymborg's 1920 book *Plays for Merry Andrews* (to which Sarlos refers) gives a clearer description of this fascinating example of political puppet theater.

The Provincetown Playhouse was part of the "Little Theater Movement" which reinvented American theater in the first decades of the twentieth century, and it's worth noting that puppets were an important part of the movement from its beginnings in Chicago, where Ellen Van Volkenburg teamed up with Maurice Browne to create the Chicago Little Theater. (Volkenburg, among other things, invented the term "puppeteer.") Volkenburg and Browne briefly worked with the Provincetown Players in New York, and it's intriguing to wonder if Bufano and Volkenburg met each other and talked about puppets. If puppeteers back then were as garrulous and convivial as puppeteers now, they probably did. •



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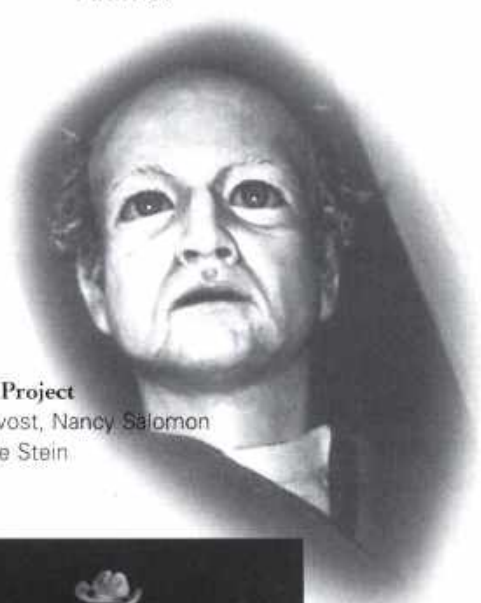
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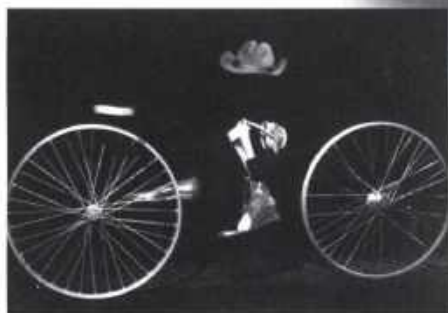
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OOPS! Sincere apologies for any inconvenience caused by Editorial blunders

From: Ddevet
Date: Tue, 23 Oct 2001
Subject: beautiful issue

Hi Bonnie & Andrew,
Good to see Andrew yesterday.
The Fall 2001 issue is delicious. But, we've got to straighten out the web address you have published. The correct address: www.unima-usa.org
I've got the Japanese TV article on the site along with the pics you sent me. I'm scanning the cover today to get that on-line.

Love, Donald

[Donald Devet is our Media Editor. Sorry Donald!]



Date: Tue, 23 Oct 2001
From: "Michiko Ueno-Herr"
To: "Andrew & Bonnie Periale"

This issue is quite special. It has so much written contents and it is truly resourceful. Congratulations.

I have not read the whole thing yet, but I noticed something and I must tell you. This is important.

First of all, the source of the photo on page 39 is NHK International. This one had absolutely nothing to do with Hitomi-za. It was not even their show. The copyright belongs only to NHK.

The other mistake is the acknowledgement on page 40. I appreciate that you tried to say something about me. But I have NEVER been an assistant professor at the University of Hawaii. I have done a lot for the school as well as being a student there. But I am not associated with the school anymore.

Otherwise, thank you, thank you,
Sincerely, and aloha,
Michiko Ueno-Herr



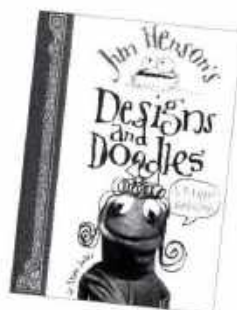
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In our last issue, we neglected to include publication information with the review of:

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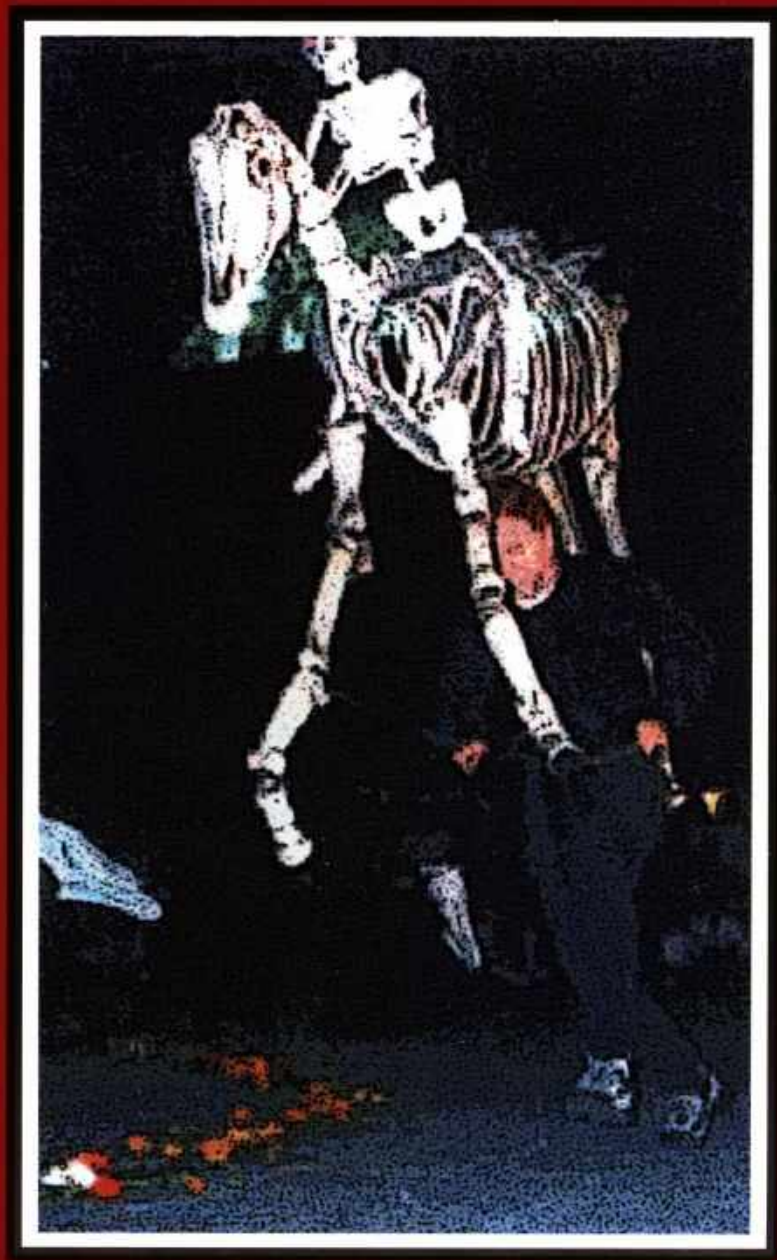


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