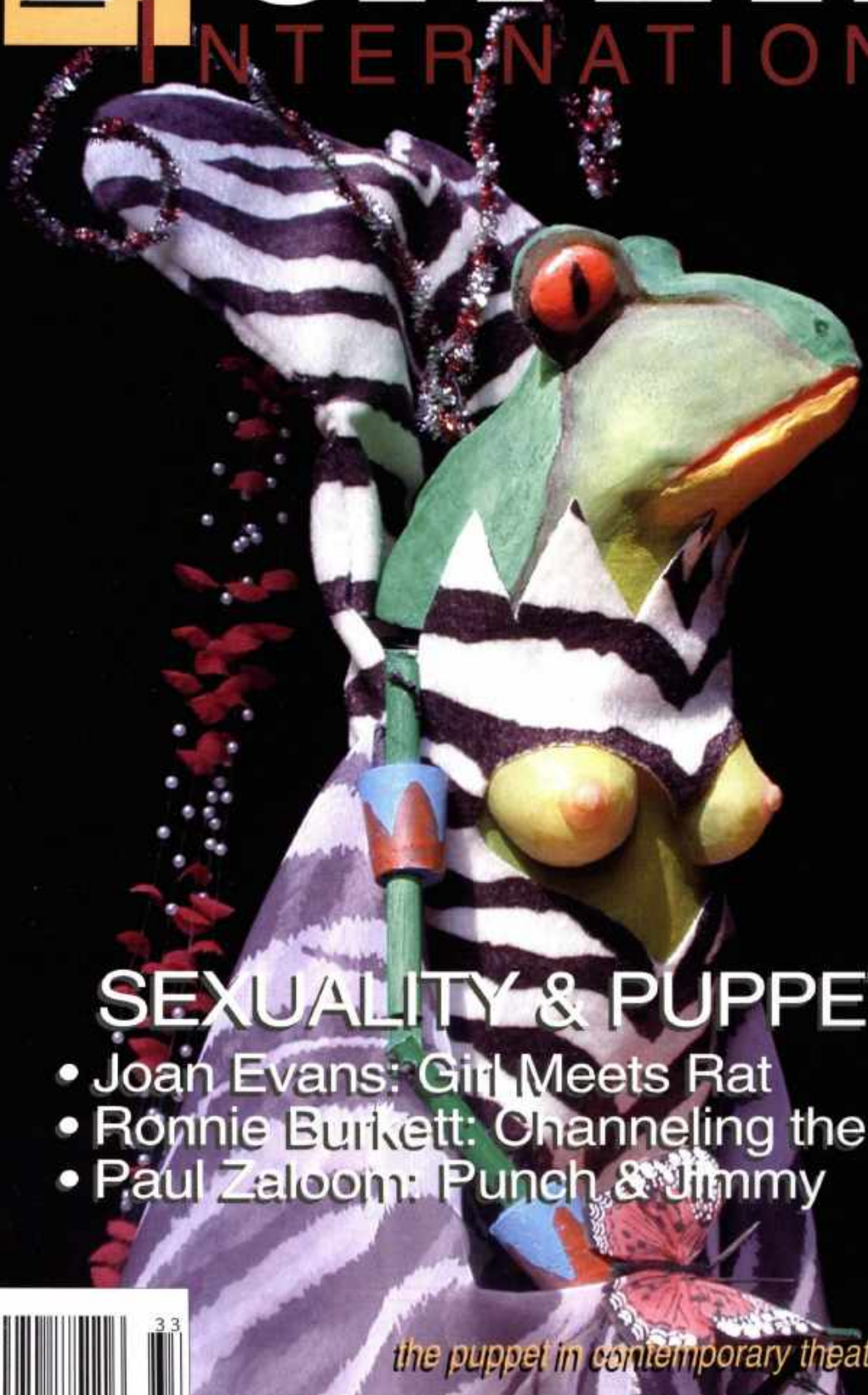


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PUPPETRY

INTERNATIONAL



SEXUALITY & PUPPETS

- Joan Evans: Girl Meets Rat
- Ronnie Burkett: Channeling the Rage
- Paul Zaloom: Punch & Jimmy

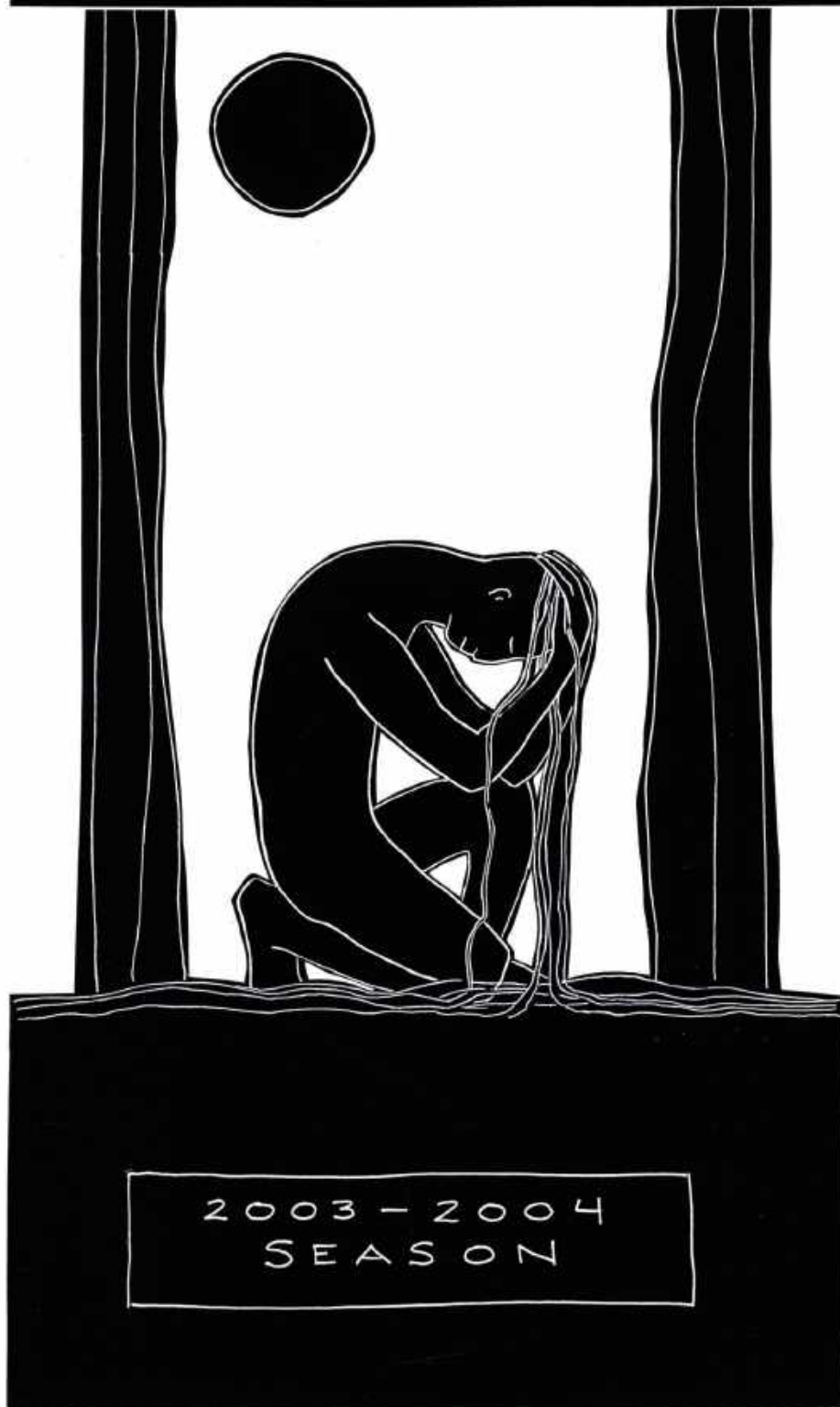
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the puppet in contemporary theatre, film & media

issue no. 14

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c/o Center for Puppetry Arts
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ON THE COVER:

Fashionable frog puppet, from Perry Alley Theatre's *Chinese Take-Out Theatre*, by Andrew Periale; costumed by Caleb Fullam. ©1999

photo: B Periale

Production

Terrie Ilaria, Lillian Meier
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Kittery, ME



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Editor

Andrew Periale
56 Woodland Drive
Strafford, NH 03884
perryalley@rscs.net

Designer/Assistant Editor

Bonnie Periale

Editorial Advisor

Leslee Asch

Historian

John Bell

Media Review Editor

Donald Devet

Advertising

Reay Kaplin
reaypuppet@yahoo.com

Distribution

Tricia Berrett

Advisors

Vince Anthony
Meg Daniel
Norman Frisch
Stephen Kaplin
Mark Levenson
Amanda Maddock
Michael Malkin
Dassia Posner
Hanne Tierney
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Editor's Page—



As a freshman theater student, I remember going down to Greenwich Village to see *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well* at the Village Gate. On the way into the theater, I saw a poster for *Kumquats*,* which was advertised as the "world's first erotic puppet show." *Oh, Calcutta* and *Hair* were playing on Broadway and, as teenagers, we were all tuned in and turned on to the new sexual openness which was everywhere apparent: in our music and manner of dress, in our cinema and theater— in short, in our hippie/free-speech counterculture and all the mainstream outlets which were ripping off its outer trappings in order to make a buck. The politics of culture aside, though, I was intrigued by the *Kumquats* poster, if only because it flew in the face of my as yet rudimentary notions of puppetry: Punch and Judy, Howdy Doody, Bil Baird, *Fireball XL5*. The fact that sex and puppets did not strike me as a natural and profoundly significant pairing is proof enough of how little I knew about puppetry, or, indeed, about humanity itself, which is— deny it as we might— all about sex. Longtime readers will know that we have waited a long time for this, having previously explored the puppet's relationship to television, propaganda, spirituality, technology, traditional cultures and so on. But the implacable force of the phallus implicit in Punch's big stick will not be stilled a moment longer— its time has come!

On the topic of human sexuality, we observed that there were three principal areas in which puppets seem to have been used consistently throughout history: as a means of transcending narrowly defined gender roles, as an expression of the artist's sexuality or sexual politics, and as an acceptable (more or less) way of having sex in public. This is fertile ground, and, as always, we are only able to scratch the surface here, but scratch we do; beneath the gaudy plush of muppet fleece we catch the heady whiff of germination— of rat lust and dragon lotion.

That a puppeteer may play characters of any gender is such a common notion that it is often taken for granted. Every now and then it piques our interest: "All those female roles in the bunraku theatre are played by men— are they gay?" (No, they're not, but it does beg the question: why *are* there no women in the company?) John Bell considers the significance of gender identity in his survey of sex and puppetry throughout history [page 26]. Of all the well known examples of this in recent times, perhaps nowhere has the illusion been more complete than with Wayland Flowers and Madame [page 13].

Strange Love, by Perry Alley Theatre with Larry Siegel is made up of three short plays— each dealing with a particular aspect of human relationships. Here, Charles introduces Tempesta to his parasitic conjoined twin, "Junior." Eventually, she ends up in bed with both of them!

photos: **Richard Termine**

No doubt artists who've flouted sexual mores

(either openly or not) have used puppetry as a way of expressing their ideas, sensibilities and so on for many years. Though not a new phenomenon, a great deal of important work has been produced by contemporary gay playwright/puppeteers. Norman Frisch has interviewed two of puppetry's most celebrated artists—Ronnie Burkett, who speaks of his process of maturation from Canada's "bad boy of puppetry" to one of his country's most respected contemporary playwrights [page 20]; Paul Zalloom makes a strong case for his gay Punch, and speaks passionately about why "gay" is not synonymous with "queer" [page 22].

Puppets seem to be having sex everywhere

these days, nowhere more openly (or hilariously) than in Broadway's *Avenue Q*. John Bell considers this production, as does the show's puppet designer, Rick Lyon [page 14]. We've included a number of other examples of recent or current shows in which sex plays a prominent role: the campy *Nosferatu* [page 11], the haunting *Dark at the Top of the Stairs* [page 8], the enchanting *Natalie* [page 10] and others. Joan Evans also recalls her *Rico and Dolores*, a scathing social commentary which she calls "your basic girl meets rat story" [page 18]. Puppets, though, have been having sex in public view for a long time—in fertility rituals, tales of the gods, and as a way of skirting taboos. Eileen Blumenthal gives us a sneak peek at her upcoming book in her consideration of the ritual uses of puppetry, for which there is evidence right back to prehistoric times [page 4].

There are other ways in which sex and puppetry have come together

over the years—as a teaching tool, for instance. Gary Friedman has done very valuable work in AIDS education in South Africa, and Grey Seal Puppets had a program for middle school sex education [page 19]. We also have a number of reviews of films, productions and books—something for everyone!



We seem, as a nation, to be incapable of having a frank and open discussion of human sexuality.

That the desire of many gays and lesbians to marry or serve in the military is so contentious should be proof enough of this. The absolutely shameful prevalence of hate crimes against sexual non-conformists, the sexual abuse of children, the Catholic ban against women entering the priesthood, legislation against public support of birth control, are just a few of the many examples of how repressed, fearful and psychically injured we are as a people. Puppetry is a force for good in this arena. By "holding the mirror up to nature," our puppet artists allow us to look at our excesses, our phobias, our suppressed desires, insecurities, foibles and occasional triumphs, and to give us a good laugh, or a good cry, in the process. And that is how healing begins.

*Directed by Nick Coppola and featuring the well-reviewed Wayland Flowers and Madame, 1971.

—Andrew Periale

Naked in a Public Place: Ritual Puppetry and the Celebration of Fertility

by Eileen Blumenthal

Along with spearheads and scraping stones, our Paleolithic ancestors crafted miniature women with bulging bellies and breasts. Plump little statuettes, from ca. 25,000 B.C.E., have turned up all over Europe. While the precise purpose of these carvings is less obvious than the tasks of Cro-magnon's other paraphernalia, their bulging anatomy suggests that they had something to do with fertility. One scholar* has even shown that their odd proportions resemble a very pregnant woman's own top-down foreshortened view of her own body. Perhaps these zaftig miniatures modeled the condition of pregnancy in order to bring

it about, particularly if the society had not yet sorted out birds and bees. Or maybe their job was protecting a pregnancy to term. In any case, it seems likely that these human-made beings played some role in reproduction. If so, the extended family of puppets and amulets has been mixed up in the business of fertility for about thirty thousand years.

By the first millennium B.C.E., fecundity rituals had homed in on sex as the key agent for making babies,

and people in many parts of the world had taken to worshipping the penis. Sculpted replicas honored the blessed organ, often depicting it in its most elevated condition. Whereas the activities of the little Paleolithic "Venuses" occurred on a spiritual plane, with no movement visible to humans, the ritual phalluses often appeared in action. According to the 5th century B.C.E. Greek historian Herodotus, ancient Egyptians venerated Osiris, a dying-and-rising god associated with fertility, by parading with male puppets that sported prodigious dying-and-rising penises.

Herodotus also described phallic effigies in Greek fertility rites. There, rather than distracting from the main focus with irrelevant body parts, the celebrants paraded carrying colossal replicas of erect penises. In fact, through much of history and geography, ritual penises of wood or stone, some of them tree-trunk size, have been venerated and even animated. Usually, these *linga* are not attached to a body (it being widely accepted, apparently, that the penis has a life of its own). Free-standing and moving penises of this sort have figured in ceremonies in cultures as widespread as East, Central, and Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Finally, constructed figures of males and females dedicated to fertility do what all types of males and females do to reproduce: They copulate. Typically, their ritual foreplay and/or coitus highlight ceremonies meant to insure a bountiful yield— be it of children, livestock, or crops. At weddings in India, for example, giant "King" and "Queen" puppets associated with sex perform (though not the act itself) to bless the couple with fecundity. Among the Yoruba and Fang peoples of West Africa, anatomically explicit wooden couples are joined in coitus to engender a plentiful harvest.

At first glance, puppets seem an odd choice to perform sex since, as inorganic creatures, they have no hormones, or nerve endings, or libido. And they seem a *very* odd choice to model creating new life since, technically speaking, they are not alive.

But puppets have unique advantages for performing sex acts. First of all, in many societies they can engage in graphic sex without the gross violation of mores that live actors doing the same thing would commit. Moreover, they will not shrink from playing their roles, no matter how intimate or even unseemly. They will not have trysts with audience members (a concern of moral authorities in Europe, Japan, and America at various times).

Puppets also, unlike live actors, can be made-to-order for their roles. They can have perfect, or extraordinary, penises, nipples, buttocks, whatever— and need not have dis-



tracting extraneous features, such as elbows, ears, whatever. Also, sex acts and puppet acts both work in tandem with imagination, so a puppet-sex act gets a whopping double dose.

Puppets are especially apt players for fertility rituals in one important respect. They are involved in the business of creating life. Until the advent of cloning and DNA sequencing, puppetry and sex were the *only* phenomena humans knew that would engender living beings. True, puppetry creates new life only in the realms of imagination and religious faith, whereas sex literally conceives new organisms. But that distinction is not always critical. In many belief systems, corporeal and spiritual life, the physical and supernatural planes of being, interweave into a single, complex reality.

Many societies spanning centuries and continents have used puppet sex to model fertility. In one village in northern Bali, when the rice is planted, a ten-foot-tall pair of sacred body-puppets (*barong landung*), made from fertility-promoting dap-dap wood and sugar-palm stems, perform temple ceremonies, then copulate in front of the villagers, and finally are thrown into a river. Some Balinese harvesting tools made to bundle rice sheaves are carved with the shape of sexually explicit couples. In one old ritual in Congo, male and female puppets with exaggerated genitals were strung, like European "jigging puppets," on a single taut cord stretched between the seated handler's big toes. He slapped a rhythm on his legs, vibrating the cord, and the puppets approached one another until they consummated their act. Puppets with erectable penises, like those Herodotus described in Egypt, continued to play in parts of Europe— including Spain, Portugal and Hungary— into the twentieth century. And in one particularly colorful New Guinean fertility ritual that Joseph Campbell described, men would hold giant prosthetic genitals made from bark and pine cones at their crotch and put them through their paces, miming masturbation and spraying (imaginary) semen all over the village and nearby fields.

Many of the most popular Indian, Southeast Asian, and even North African shadow-puppet clowns may actually be retired fertility agents. Until the last century, many of them displayed private parts that were anatomical marvels. Some Javanese *wayang* wielded enormous penises comprised of nearly a dozen sections, with the end piece shaped and carved like the head of a bull. The genitals of one Syrian jester reached nearly to his feet, and one southeast Indian clown still sports testicles that almost sweep the ground. These entertaining oafs frequently are powerful gods of an older generation, slumming incognito as buffoons to keep an eye on human affairs. Since fertility is irrelevant to the clowns' present occupation,

and sex is not even the main feature of their humor, these prominent genitalia could be vestiges of a previous portfolio that included fertility. As the evolving religion or sense of social decorum made their previous function obsolete, they reoriented their vocation, while remaining within the shadow-theater world, which straddles ritual and entertainment.

While the shadow clowns may have shifted their performances of ritual sex away from sex, many ritual-sex puppets have kept the sex part and moved away from the ritual. This distinction between ritual and entertainment, between performing for humans versus for divine audiences, sometimes is absolute, sometimes not. Most Punch and Judy professors do not pitch their shows for an audience that includes Jesus. But in many situations, that border is porous— if not totally beside the point. Where all elements of life are understood to have both a physical and a spiritual presence, puppets' (and other actors') performances can encompass ritual and entertainment. Most Southeast Asian shadow puppets perform for a combined audience of humans and spirits. Addressing mainly human spectators versus mainly gods just amounts to shifting the demographics of the target audience.

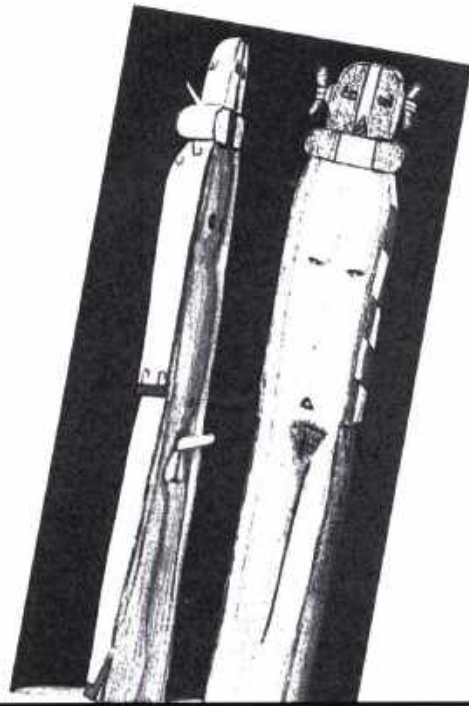
In any case, when societies abandon the ceremonies that provided the occasion for puppet sex, the actors often retool for secular performances so that audiences can continue to enjoy them, or to enjoy the release from social restraint that the old rituals allowed. The oversized prosthetic penises that comic actors sported in classical Greece no doubt descended from the giant ones actors used in the *komoï* or phallic rites, from which comedy developed.



In Eastern Turkey, some folk plays contain sections virtually identical in form to phallic rituals, but are purely secular. The technique for Congo's jiggling fertility dolls became adapted for totally non-ritual puppets and toys, both sexual and non-sexual.

Although the ritual veneration of female genitals via puppets is much rarer than male, it does occur. (Puppets with pregnant bellies and large breasts exist in many cultures, but not female puppets with prominent genitals. In the puppet world, as in the human world, women often are celebrated as mothers but no one wants to deal with how they got that way.) Some Japanese Dogu figures have oversized genitalia. In Niger, the female partners of humongously hung little male puppets have vulvas as large as buttocks. Whatever ritual links these ladies may once have had, they now perform the act just for pleasure.

Which, of course, is why most puppets, like most people, have sex. Still, puppets' role in fertility rituals does highlight their most remarkable trait: their ability to be endowed with life.



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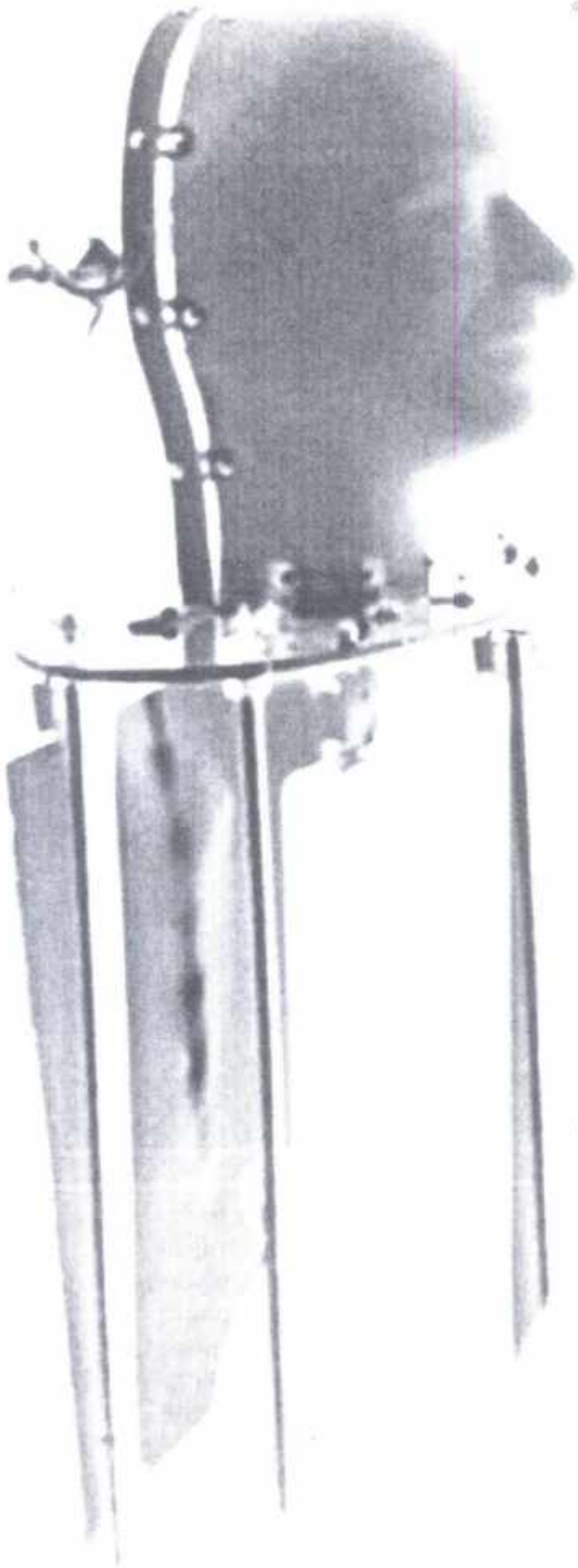
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Eileen Blumenthal is Professor of Theater Arts at Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University. She writes frequently about theater, including both live-actor and puppet work. Her forthcoming book, THE STORY OF PUPPETS, will be published by Harry Abrams, Inc. in the fall of 2004.

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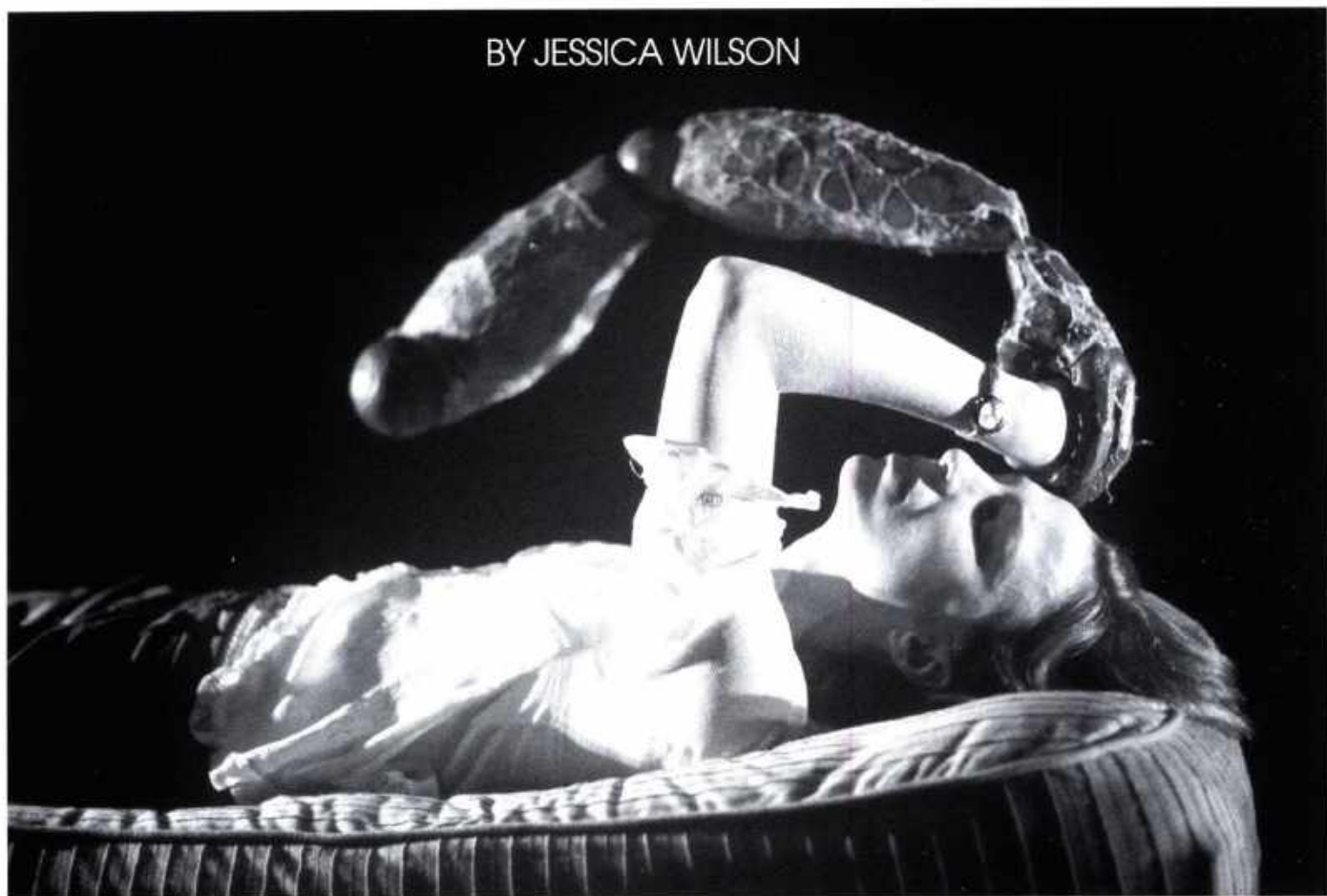
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TERRAPIN PUPPET THEATRE

BY JESSICA WILSON



MARIONETTE SEDUCES WOMAN IN "THE DARK"

*photo: Eddie Safarik*PUPPET SEDUCTION INTENSIFIES
THRILL/FEAR PARADOX

This year, Terrapin Puppet Theatre redeveloped its production for adult audiences, "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs," in Hobart, Australia. "The Dark" is a densely visual piece using marionettes, physical performers, projection, music and text to communicate a multi-layered narrative. In exploring the mind of a woman affected by fear, the piece contains a number of sexual references including a scene where the woman, played by an actress, is seduced by a large, fleshy marionette torso. Because of the sensitive and intense nature of the material, the scene was the product of a



DAD AND AUNTY
photo: Eddie Safarik



CARLA WITH MUM AND SISTER, BRIDIE, IN A FAMILY MEMORY SCENE

challenging and interesting development process. The audience's response to the sequence led me to believe that it is one of the most effective I have created in recent years, and so, to accompany the following images, I would like to share a little of how it all emerged from the dramaturgical process.

The primary theme of "The Dark" is fear and the tension that exists when we try to create logical answers for things we can't understand. The piece opens with the sounds of a woman stranded on a lonely roadside surrounded by

bushland. We hear her nervously trying to make a call on her cell phone before she treads into the bush and onto our stage. The dramatic structure is informed firstly by the woman's physical journey through the bushland. Memories of her past are triggered by fears as she navigates this wilderness.

These memories make up the more significant layer of the work. The memories are distorted and she must try to piece the events together: a sister who disappeared long ago, a father having an affair with aunty, a journey to India in her early 20's. In order to continue, she must eventually cross a threshold to a place from which she may not be able to return. The sex scene emerged from our interest at this point in a thrill/fear paradox: her desire to indulge in her fears and the simultaneous terror at where this might take her.

Given that the piece occupied the world of her mind, in communicating the character's vulnerability we needed to find a way to express the world visually and through action or transformation of imagery, rather than through her acting alone. We also wanted her to be confronted culturally, physically and emotionally. The woman is in a delirium towards the climax of the piece when she is enticed into a seduction by a lone limb that caresses her gently; a welcome sensitivity after her difficult journey. As it leaves, she begs it back. It returns but is now a torso; a human sized figure with his legs cut at the knees, a large phallus and flaking skin.

Visually, this character needed to be both beautiful and repulsive. We wanted this scene to generate a conflicting emotional response in the audience. Audience and critics commented that they felt both aroused and horrified at the same time. It was particularly haunting for the audience that the human was being seduced by the puppet, and by a puppet that was so beautiful and so menacing at the same time; physically dominating, yet oddly articulated by its marionette movements.

The need to create this image came from the dramaturgy of the piece and formed the theatrical climax of the "The Dark." In exploring an internal journey and an emotional life, sexuality could not be ignored. It was really rewarding for us to exploit the strengths of puppetry and develop a scene of this nature as a part of a dramatic continuum. •

"Natalie" Undressed

by Michael & Valerie Nelson

The play *Natalie*, presented by Michael & Valerie Nelson's Little Blue Moon Theatre is an original play written for the toy theatre. In the play, a Paris street performer decides to take off her clothes inside her puppet booth during a heat wave. A sudden and unexpected gust of wind blows away her stage, puppets and clothes. This event brings about a change in her art and her love life while catapulting her shows into the public eye. In the photo, Natalie relaxes with her new friend who took her home to get better acquainted after her puppets and clothes blew away. He then helps her to find her puppets and stage (she never does find her clothes) so she can continue the pursuit of her art.

The play is one of a series of new works for the toy theatre that celebrate the joys (and quirks) of human sexuality. The plays focus on sexual adventure, romance, seduction, foreplay and (as in the photo) post-coital activities (the actual physical intimacy takes place tantalizingly out of sight behind the folding screen which is then pulled back to reveal the satisfied couple). As toy theatre is an intimate form of theatre, the Nelsons decided to use the medium to explore human intimacy as a theme. Audiences for the shows usually range in number between 15 and 30 (with a maximum of 40) persons. The theme (sex) is timeless, and the tiny, light-hearted performances have proved popular with adult audiences. Theatre-goers are provided with opera glasses, enhancing the natural voyeurism of the theater. •



Nosferatu

The vampire tale of *Nosferatu* exploited the already well-established link between sex and death. In Deb Hertzberg's new production of *Nosferatu*, we are invited to see an "expressionistic tale of horror, humor and hysteria." Though less alliterative, sex and death are here as well.

"First we see Ellen with The Count closing in on her in the shadows. When he finally appears, she gives herself to him, letting The Count draw the last bit of her life's blood from her neck until dawn's first light burns him to ash. She struggles and then is overcome with passion as she slips closer to death."

This is one possible explanation for the discord in so many marriages— one partner wishes to be consumed with passion, the other aiming for something with more of a future. The romantics in the crowd can live out their desire for all consuming passion vicariously through such flame-seeking moths as Ellen. Well, let those who take delight in the thought of their bodily fluids being drained by a toothy, bad-boy Romeo sign up for therapy, and quickly too! I'll go to the theatre and laugh at a puppet's take on those misbegotten bloodsuckers, then go home and dream of my silver wedding anniversary with my sweet girl (who, come to think of it, keeps her DVD of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* close to the television at all times . . . hmmm).

ACP



photo: Gathy McCullough



Warner Blake's VOICE OF THE TURTLEDOVE



Separating the Turtles, *or*, Was Napoleon's Conquest of Europe a result of Post-Coital Anxiety?

The SOUPTALKS began with the idea of staging a war on a tabletop and I chose Napoleon's invasion of Russia for lots of reasons, probably none more important than it would end with a miniature snowfall.

As I worked on it, there seemed to be a need for a creation story—to explain how everyone ended up here fighting in the snow. And so the story of the mating turtles playing the part of Adam and Eve giving birth to all of civilization was developed. Further, I tried to describe the Enlightenment as the time when the humans pushed apart their mating parents, which seemed to fit with Napoleon's rep as marking the beginning of nation states.

So all of this was in place when I came across the story told in Durant's *Age of Napoleon* of the 16 year-old Napoleon wanting to commit suicide after losing his virginity to a Parisian prostitute—something he evidently shared with his diary. This gave me an interesting echo of the mating turtles and a dramatic finish to the creation story theme of Part I.

This final scene then, in which this all takes place, is called "The Evening News"; and while he and the whore are doing it, the audience also sees a Dan Rather cut-out puppet on a small TV telling/showing us about the mysterious remains of a sea turtle found on a Seattle beach...

After this, the three inch figure of Napoleon leaps out of bed to sing an operatic duet with Dan Rather, backed by the Chorus of Civilization, about being the greatest nation on earth.



The first version of this show was presented in my Seattle studio in 1990, in 1993 an updated version was presented in Atlanta, and in 1996 the show was presented at La Mama as part of the Henson Festival. The final live version was presented in 2001 in Seattle and that's the version that is used in the movie finally finished this year, *Voice Of The Turtledove*, the first part of *Memory Of The Whispered Word*.

The stage action of puppets copulating never failed to get a joyous reaction from the audience. To further their enjoyment of the event, I provided small binoculars, [either opera or field glasses—depending on your point of view], that would drop down from a grid over the table and attached with elastic cord that would give the binoculars a happy bounce when released—almost like a dance. The question I wanted to present to viewers with all this was simply—why do we seem to enjoy a lot of war with our sex? Could it be, as I suggest in Part III, that we are all puppets of history, as Tolstoy described the characters of *War and Peace*?

Wayland Flowers and the Madame Phenomenon

by Andrew Periale

Madame was a tough old broad—sarcastic, bawdy, witty. Wayland was always with her, of course, and we all knew that he was there, but long before his early 80's TV sitcom, *Madame's Place*, in which he was actually kept out of the shot, his presence had ceased to matter. Madame was too big, too vivid; she was the star.

The irony is obvious when seen from a distance. Wayland was the incredibly hard-working genius who made that tough old broad tough. We saw him do it. *We saw his lips move!* It didn't matter. Wayland described himself as "an illusionist," and, like any master of close-up magic, he was able to make us see only what he wanted us to see.

Now, there have been tough old broads before (in fact, the idea for Madame's character was born in a bar; one night Wayland saw someone who "looked like a sweet little old lady until the bartender got a rise out of her and she let loose with a stream of expletives ...")—Mae West, Sophie Tucker, Phyllis Diller. Of course, they were illusions, too—stage personae created by some talented women. When a man creates a

tough old broad, though, there is always an element of clownishness to it, perhaps because the Transvestite and the Drag Queen both violate our widely held notion of the human image. With puppets this is not the case; the mask is too effective. This is certainly true in Japan's *ningyo joruri* tradition, where all female characters are enacted by male puppeteers and narrator, and it was true of Wayland Flowers, who looked perfectly elegant in his tuxedo while the brassy Madame had her audiences in stitches.

This is one of the basic truths of puppetry, so plainly stated by Heinrich Kleist in his essay *Über das Marionettentheater*, namely, that an actor (or, in Kleist's example, a dancer) plays a character while a puppet is a character. As brilliantly as Robin Williams or Dustin Hoffman as Tootsie (and there we saw the joke, as they were both actors playing actors playing tough old broads), we all knew that, after the shoot, the mask was coming off and they were going out to a life quite different from the one we'd just seen.



Madame, on the other hand, was always Madame: big as life on stage, *bigger* even, then afterwards nothing—wood and cloth packed up in a box until the next show.

The puppet *is* the character. As a puppeteer, Wayland was something different from, say, a gay comic or a drag queen. Over the course of his career he created a number of different puppet characters, but none resonated with his audiences like Madame. With her help, he could actually, for a time, *be* a tough old broad.

**from "Wayland Flowers and Madame," an essay by Judy Anderson for the catalog to an exhibit of the puppeteer's career; presented by The Center for Puppetry Arts, Atlanta, 1989.*

We asked Rick Lyon about the reports we'd heard of puppet sex in the new Broadway hit, Avenue Q, and we received this e-mail:

Subject: Avenue Q
Date: Fri, 15 Aug 2003
From: Rick Lyon

WARNING: FULL PUPPET NUDITY



photo: C Rosegg

In AVENUE Q, the puppets have sex because people have sex. In this show, the puppets engage in all sorts of normal adult behavior, like getting fired and trying to put relationships together and swearing, and getting drunk and having sex and surfing the internet for porn, and generally behaving like flawed human beings. The one scene that features naked puppets engaged in sexual activity can hardly be very explicit—after all, these are mouth puppets in the caricatured style you're used to seeing on TV, and they end above what would be the puppet's waist. No genitalia, nothing anatomically accurate. Kate Monster, the female character of the couple, does have breasts, but these, too, are very abstracted and cartoony—besides which, it's very difficult to see her nipples through her thick tan fur (she is a monster, after all). Princeton, the male character, also has only very abstracted upper body detail (including nipples and some pretty nice pecs).

Avenue Q

So what is the audience really seeing if there is no overt sexual equipment on display? What they're seeing is two fuzzy little cartoony mouth puppets bumping into each other in various positions onstage while the puppeteers are supplying appropriate groans and screams and heavy breathing. It is one of the most obvious examples of the theatrical conceit of "willing suspension of disbelief" I've ever witnessed. The audience thinks they're seeing two puppets having sex because they IMAGINE it- because the rudimentary motions of the puppets and the aural accompaniment suggest the abstract concept that the puppets are having sex. The audience fills in all the details. It's their own brainsful of information and opinions about sex that make them laugh and shriek or feel embarrassed or delightfully shocked. And every night in performance it does exactly that.

By the way, the fact that Princeton, a humanoid, and Kate, a monster, are a mixed couple, interspecies even, is not overtly exploited in the show. There is no discussion of how different sex for a monster puppet might be from a humanoid puppet. There is one disparaging remark about monster sex made by a humanoid puppet- Lucy The

Slut, who complains about getting fur in her teeth- but that's it. Sex in the world of AVENUE Q is pretty much just that- sex. No more, no less. It's part of the joy and the trauma of being alive, so the puppets have to deal with it, too.

After some time to reflect, we received another note:

I haven't touched on one of the show's signature numbers, THE INTERNET IS FOR PORN, sung by a bluster-furry beast named Trekkie Monster- but I guess the same basic ideas apply. People surf the web for porn, so why shouldn't a puppet?

Again, there's nothing explicit ever shown- we don't see what websites are being surfed- and there's not much explicit language, either (one slangy reference to male genitalia). The audience fills in all the details based on their own knowledge and opinions about internet pornography.

I guess most of the shock value, and hence humor (as most humor is based on surprise- behavior that is "inappropriate") comes from the fact that the style of puppet used in AVENUE Q, fabric and foam mouth puppets, is so irrevocably linked to children's entertainment.

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The Spooky Puppet Horror Show



Center for Puppetry Arts producers Jon Ludwig and Bobby Box have been producing interesting work for years, including some with compelling sexual imagery. Some of this has been covered here before, such as the phenomenally entertaining *Wrestling Macbeth*, in which a dominatrix Lady Macbeth shoots "milk" out of her pointy breasts, soaking the front row. And speaking of milk, in *Safe as Milk*, Jon actually changes gender, becoming a woman and giving birth on stage. For his part, Bobby Box has covered the subject in both its comic and tragic aspects, as in his *Towing the Line* consideration of the murder of Harvey Milk. What is it with these guys and milk? Not only are they lactose tolerant, they endorse tolerance and sexual liberation both on and off stage. Here's some of the promo for their annual *Spooky Puppet Horror Show*:

Ghoulishly goofy puppets resurrect beefcake and cheesecake as Jon Ludwig, Matt "Lucky" Yates, Bobby Box, Lorna Howley, and other escapees of the local puppet ward serve up campy comic improv, freaky dance moves and touch-a touch-a, stop-touching-that-you'll-go-blind tunes. Why, It's enough to make Dr. Frank N. Furter blush! We suggest you leave Mummy at home.

.....

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RICO & Dolores

It's your basic girl meets rat story...



Plot: A woman [Dolores] picks up a rat [Rico]. They go to her place, they have snacks, they dance, they watch TV, they have sex, and they fight. She wounds him, but he kills her. After all, he *is* a rat.

The sex in *Rico and Dolores* is not about sex at all. It involves numbness, not feeling; Dolores, a scantily-clad woman in a miniskirt and pumps, struts down the street in search of a date. She waves at men, but they don't wave back. She seduces Rico because she can't be alone. She hates herself for wanting a rat.

Dolores returns to her apartment with Rico. They dance together and share a peanut. Dolores feels numb and would rather watch TV. Rico nibbles at her breast and is drawn to her musky scent. But he is not aroused. He only wants something to eat, and Dolores is garbage to feast upon. Later, he bites off her finger and is temporarily satisfied. Dolores strikes Rico with her red pump and knocks him unconscious. Her fetishistic sex object has become an instrument of revenge.

Alone again and desperate, Dolores changes the channel. She accidentally hits the button for public TV. She watches an operatic murder but misses the point about love.

Dolores wants her shoe back. She retrieves it from Rico's belly. Just then, Rico awakens, hungry, and lunges for her neck. Dolores dies, and Rico continues to eat.

Rico and Dolores is not about sex. It is about politics. The politics of indifference. Indifference to value.

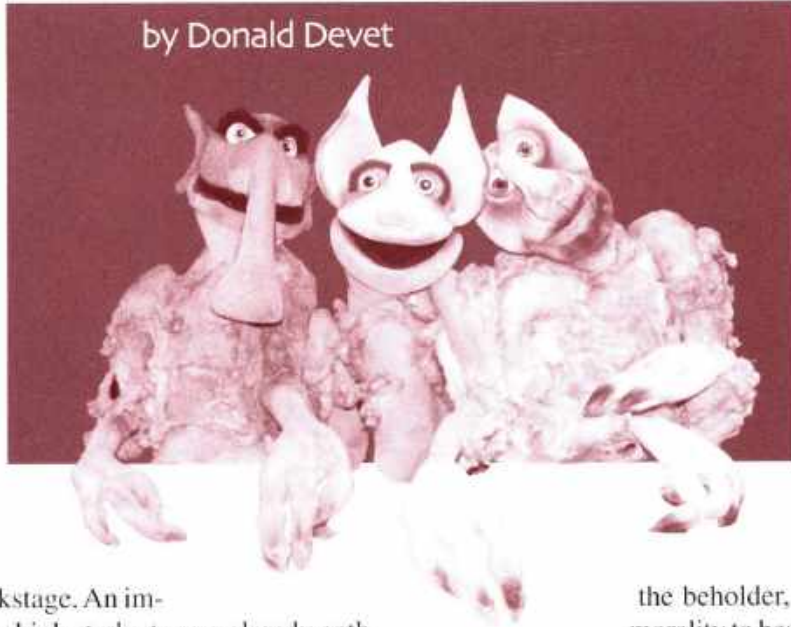
We are a people attracted to junk: We eat junk, we watch junk, we f**k junk, we *are* junk.

The rat reigns.

Joan Evans in *Rico and Dolores*
photo: Frank Ward

Naughty & Nice

by Donald Devet



Three penises and three sets of breasts were in place and ready to go. All that was left to do was to grab "Gonorrhea," "Herpes" and "Syphilis" from the trunk and hang them backstage. An impatient audience of 40 junior high students was already gathered— their raging hormones steaming up the tiny school library where I had been invited to perform a sexuality puppet show. Back in the days when sex education was rarely taught, one magnet school in Charlotte, N.C. dared to be different. My show came at the end of a two-day intensive course designed to introduce 8th and 9th graders to the pitfalls of having sex too early and to the smorgasbord of contraception available. The puppet show wasn't meant to teach, but to reinforce topics and relieve tensions by poking fun at the "serious" topic of sex.

The three skits I developed for this show required an unusual cast of characters: puppets representing Sexually Transmitted Diseases, a TV salesman hawking a bottle of "Abstinence" and a stuffy professor lecturing on the relative size of sex organs. The week before the show, as I was making the puppets, I began to wonder if some people might find polyfoam puppet penises and styrofoam breasts offensive.

I suppose puppets representing human anatomy are like any other works of art— painting, sculpture, Greek pottery— in that they are judged by



the beholder, who brings his or her own morality to bear. But puppets, because they are often branded as children's playthings, are especially susceptible to criticism if they represent anything other than the traditional cute and fuzzy. In fact, the term "adult puppetry" which for most professional puppeteers means a performance that deals with mature themes, with or without sexual content, usually conjures up seamy images in the mind of the general public.

This just goes to show that terminology is tricky and must be carefully handled when advertising art.

What better example of titillation for adult puppetry can you find these days than in the none-too-subtle ad campaign for Broadway's *Avenue Q*? "Get off at Avenue Q" screams one billboard, displaying the ample cleavage of a busty puppet. Now *there's* a show that gives adults a chance to feel naughty just by watching puppets acting, well, like adults. Maybe that's

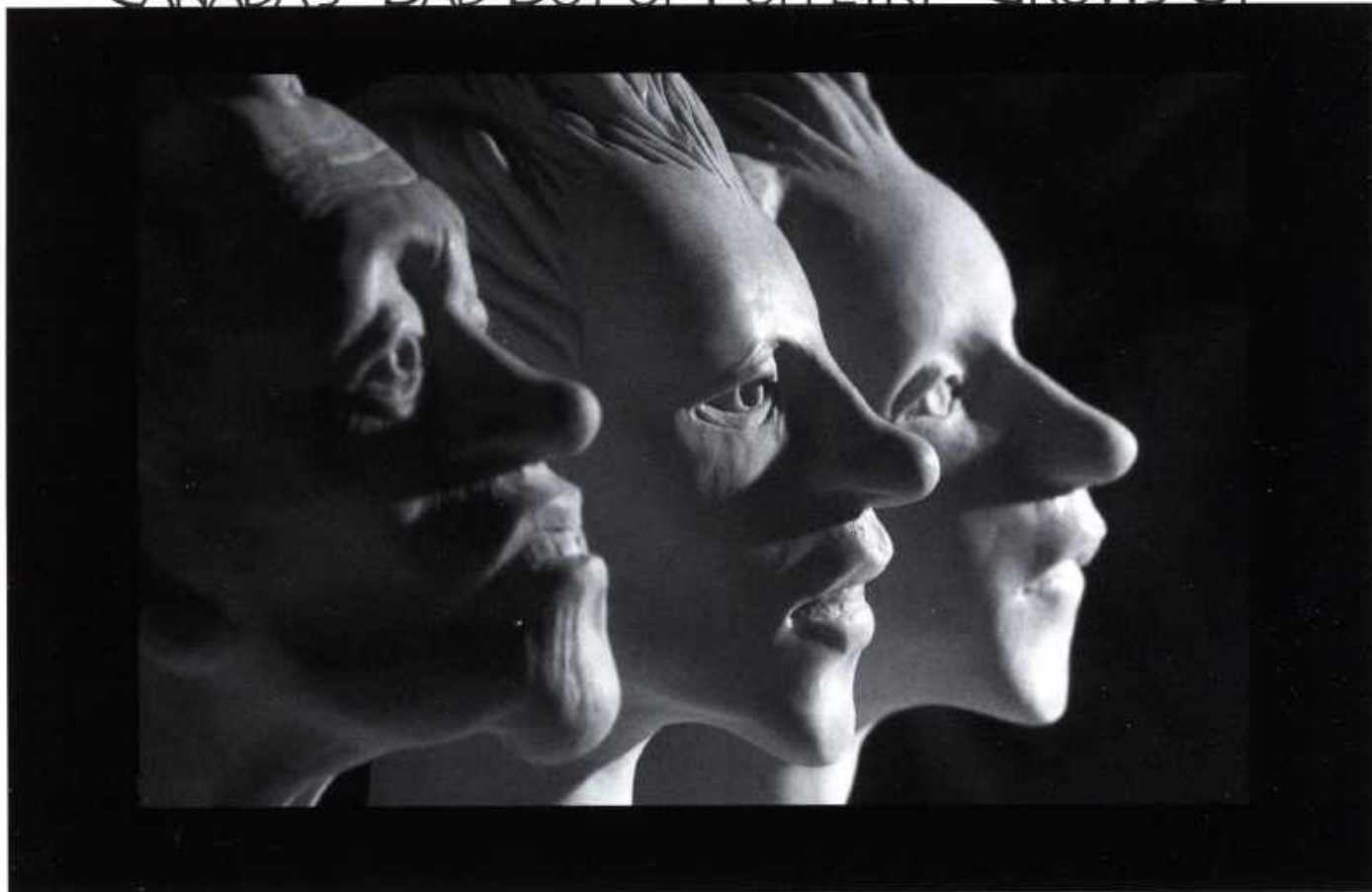
why the junior high students were laughing so hard at the wiggling penises and bouncing breasts. For a few minutes, these gangly teenagers were able to take their minds off the burdens of dealing with their own developing bodies and, for a little while longer, just be kids. •

top: Characters Gonorrhea, Herpes and Syphilis

bottom: Sam Sperm

photos: Grey Seal Puppets

CANADA'S "BAD BOY OF PUPPETRY" GROWS UP



EXCERPTS OF NORMAN FRISCH'S INTERVIEW WITH RONNIE BURKETT

I think perhaps one of the reasons that my puppets are as sexually defined as they are is that when I began Theatre of Marionettes, in my early or mid-twenties, I was doing very broad, comic, musical works for adults. And I guess I thought at that time, and at that age, that bawdy humor was a way to define myself as an adult performer.

Given that I was raised in Canada, I had not only the American influence (from television in the United States), but I also had a lot of British influence—we in Canada are really trapped between those two cultures. With the British cultural influence came, well, the *Carry On* movies and all that very sort of Benny Hill comedy—this is what I grew up on. And so bawdy, cheeky, boob-and-bum jokes were probably what I found funny from a very early age. When I began doing puppet work, it was almost too

easy to go there. I met some collaborators, in particular a composer—Ed Connell. He wrote music and lyrics for me, was very salacious and funny and had a very similar sensibility. Ed could rhyme any body part with anything, and we came up with all these very “bad boy” marionette musicals. And so I became “The Bad Boy of Puppetry” in the press for a very long time.

But beginning with *Tinka's New Dress* in 1994— or really even before then—I began wanting to create a more text-based puppet theater, without relying on all this double-entendre and triple-entendre cheeky humor which, as I said, had become almost too easy for me. And I needed to know that I could write a play without always winking and nudging the audience, in that very British, music hall mode. That was a big part of the experiment for me.

A great many things came from that experience, the most apparent being that my writing is now the primary focus of all the work I do. But I was a little perplexed: was I writing work that was very serious, even tragic, or was it very funny and satirical? And then I realized that in my circle of close acquaintances, we can be discussing something quite sad, very life-and-death, and there can be tears, and then a very funny or caustic remark will spring forth and everyone will break into outrageous laughter. I thought: this is the world I know, which is a gay world, with all emotions available all the time. I've lived an urban lifestyle for all of my adult life, so I know people who embrace every form of sexuality, and nothing is really that scandalous to me. I just allowed all these elements of my own life into the writing.

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CANSTAGE PHOTOGRAPHY
 BY LUCAS OLENIUK

In *Tinka's New Dress*, for instance, one of the major characters, the tragic hero, is Morag—a very high-camp drag queen. But I wanted to create Morag as a love interest for Tinka, which reflects the truth that not all cross-dressers are gay. I need to remind my audience—the audience that tends to follow my work: Don't judge the book by its cover always. For me, this made Morag an infinitely richer character to play, because his very complex sexuality is at the core of who he is.

Actually, for the most part, I'm not a very big sell in the gay community. Most of my audience is composed of theater students and middle-aged heterosexual theatergoers, but because I am so accessible to the audience, because I am constantly visible, I think everyone can figure out pretty quickly that it's a big ol' homo up on stage. My job, I think, is to acknowledge that they know that, and then be able to present a whole spectrum of characters of every sexuality. This makes for a much richer discussion all around. And the characters that spring from "my world"—that is, the gay world—are not any more noble than the other characters. In *Street of Blood*, for instance, Eden's anger was a very dark thing, and very unsettling to many people who saw it, certainly in the gay community. When I

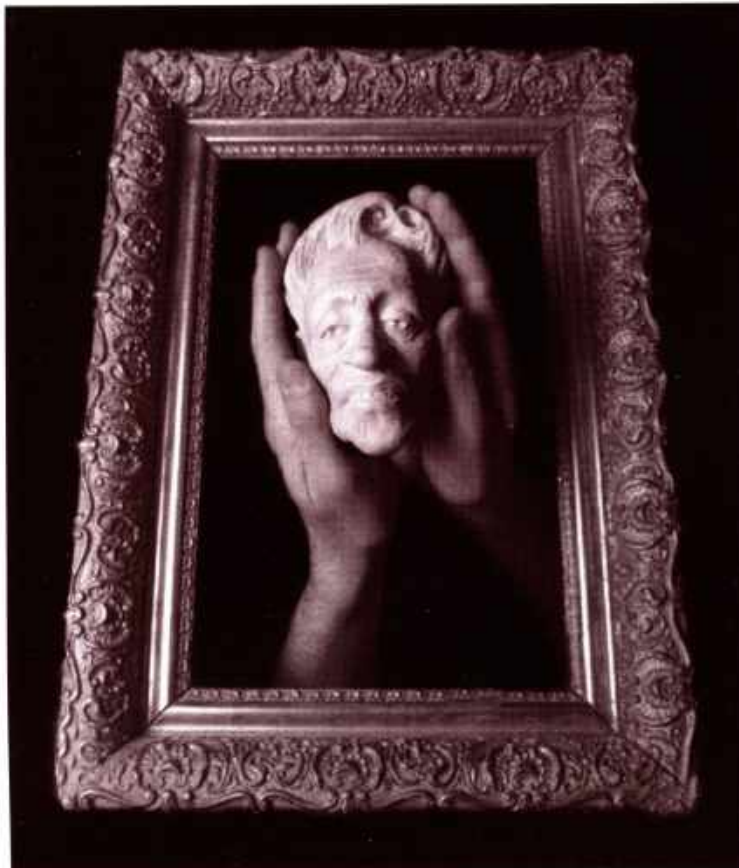
first began performing the piece, I thought: Oh, dear. Maybe I've taken him a bit too far. Maybe that kind of anger has no place here, is of no use. Just as I was about to edit him, to soften him, the building that my home and studio were in was "soaked" on Halloween, covered in really homophobic hate graffiti. And for the first time in my life, I became so enraged that I didn't know what to do. The vigilante in me exploded, with all the suppressed rage of having been "the good boy" all my life: Don't be too visible, Ronnie. Know your place, because you're not in the norm here. And I decided I needed to hang on to this rage, but to use it—to channel it into Eden's journey.

I've never assumed that I could speak for a gay community, or any gay man other than myself, or any group of artists other than myself. But I have cre-

ated these unique characters who can speak for themselves within the context of a play, and speak for me—but only for me.

My current work, *Provenance*, is set in a brothel in Vienna, and centers on an old madam and her four whores. The whole piece is about Beauty, and the search for Beauty, and the objectification of things that we find beautiful. And the central character is a painting of a naked young man... Honestly, I think I can only delve into these things because I come from a community—the gay community—which exists in high objectification mode at all times. Thinking of the "glossy" version of gay life, "the gay lifestyle," as reflected in the magazines and *Will and Grace* and all that, which is all about fitness and beauty and the "A-list" lifestyle. I think I can only have this discussion with an audi-

ence because I've lived in a minority culture and observed this kind of objectification first hand. Although, finally, that is not what the play is really about... At this point, because I'm now too old to continue playing that "bad boy," when I touch on issues of sexuality within these pieces, I no longer treat sex flippantly. I no longer use sex as comedy. I now use sexuality as a fuller dimension of character. Which it is. It is. •



CANSTAGE PHOTOGRAPHY

BY LUCAS OLENIUK

Excerpts of Norman Frisch's interview with Paul Zaloom

Mr. Punch Moves to West Hollywood, Gets a Boyfriend, but Success Doesn't Change Him!

**WARNING: This article contains frank language
which some readers might find offensive**



I've done a series of Punch (or Punch-inspired) shows over the years, on a variety of themes. I was really influenced by George Konnoff, who died two years ago. He was the big Punch theoretician around the Bread and Puppet scene, and was the most Punch-obsessed person I've ever met. He actually really adopted the whole Punch attitude as his own guiding philosophy in life, and he was hugely influential on me in that respect... Amy Trompeter— and Andy Trompeter— were also big influences.

The story is really simple— and great. But what does it really mean? And why is it important to do it? Because it's anarchistic, and Punch gets to do everything that everyone wouldn't dare do, or even dare to portray. So Punch is completely "politically incorrect": he chucks the baby out the window; he kills his wife; the cop comes over, he kills the cop; the hangman comes, he kills the hangman; Death comes, he kills Death; the Devil comes, he kills the Devil. Then, in the American version, he gets his comeuppance, because of our Puritan tradition. In England, he doesn't get his comeuppance. He essentially goes "Screw you!" and that's the end of the show.

What interested me were the elements that are already in the story. Like the policeman. Well, that's obviously the L.A.P.D. Ramparts Division, the jerks planting drugs, beating people to death, shooting and killing them— absolutely criminal cops. Death, that's the whole idea of being afraid of death, confronting death. The hangman: capital punishment, that chest-beating political morality. The Devil: I took the great opportunity to make the Devil a priest, and to rag on religion. So it's all a great framework for contemporary political satire.

Now how does the gay thing work in all that? I figured it would be interesting (for me) if Punch was gay, but his affect is exactly the same as if he was straight. And if he was an older guy with a big nose, and his boyfriend Jimmy is this younger Chelsea/West Hollywood clone— now it's become, like, massively autobiographical. Punch, because he's Punch, is obsessed with sex. In my show, he just likes humping guys.

In one scene, Jimmy comes home and Punch jumps on him and says "Let's get busy," and starts putting the stones to him. And Jimmy pushes him off, and says "All you ever think about is sex, sex, sex." And Punch says,

"Aaaaah...your point being?????" And although nobody ever laughs at the joke or thinks it's funny, it's my big "screw you" to everyone who's given me that old, tired goddam line: All you ever think about is sex, sex, sex. I don't get that. They're complaining?!?!"

And I wanted to use the show as a venue to attack all this assimilationist "gay" bull. "Gay" is now like this code-word for this right-wing, desperate need to be "the boy next door," and to be just like the straight people.

And I agree with [early Los Angeles gay rights activists] Morris Kite and Harry Hay, who said "Hey, let's just be queer. Screw trying to be just like straight people. Who needs it? Why should we model our lives to be just like them?" Fran Leibowitz says, "You know, gay men are the straightest people in the world. They all want to get married and go in the Army."

And I live in the middle of the biggest gay city in the world, West Hollywood, and it's just relentlessly assimilationist. So I wanted the show to address all this, and that's really where *Punch and Jimmy* is coming from.

Now for me, the real conundrum was the violence. I

have no problem with Punch killing essentially in self-defense, against the deadly forces of authority—the cop, the hangman, the Devil, and so on. But it was unacceptable to me that Punch should kill his wife, or in this case Jimmy. In my life, in my lifetime, this is not acceptable. So in my play, Punch doesn't beat his wife to death. Jimmy just gets in a huff and goes home to Mother.

Now, the baby; I have no problem killing the baby. That's an accident. Punch is a lunatic, he doesn't know how to handle a baby: "Oops, butterfingers," it goes flying out the window—that's been going on for 500 years. It's no big trauma. Jimmy comes home and says, "Where's the baby?" And Punch says, "I'm right here." And Jimmy says, "No, the other one". And he looks out the window and goes, "Oh, Punch, not again!?" Now usually at this point Punch says to Judy, "Well, we can make another one" and he climbs on

top of her. But, uh, you can't really do that with Jimmy.

But, you know, at the same time, I don't think this show is "about" being gay. That's really not the central theme. Actually, Punch's gay identity here is really just incidental. And philosophically, I feel that's correct—that as gay men, it's a mistake for us to define ourselves in a central, primary way as "gay." Our queerness is so ordinary, really, that's it's not all that vitally important—or shouldn't be. Being gay, and identified as gay, and your friends are all gay, that's bull. The "queer" thing, which is more correct, is that you're just another freaking weirdo. "Queer" doesn't equal "gay"; it doesn't mean that you like same gender people. It just means that you reject the norm, that you're willing to be seen as weird. So in that sense, Punch has always been queer. He's always been totally in-your-face "out" with his sexuality. I just made him gay, too.

Bottom line, Punch is about the battle between the brain and the dick. It's interesting, how

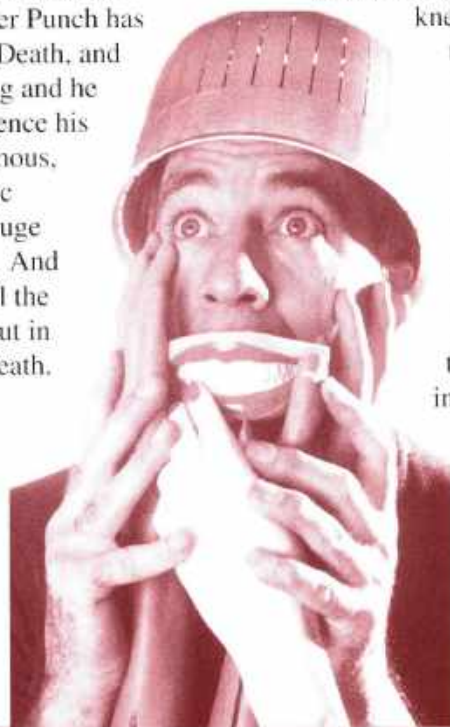
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much men really are ruled by their dicks— and I'm not talking only about gay men. *All men!* This constant battle between their heads and their penises. In my show, after Punch has killed the hangman, and Death, and the Devil, he's celebrating and he decides to show the audience his dick— which is this enormous, fleshy thing, very realistic looking, but huge— this huge dildo. Bigger than he is. And he shows the audience all the tricks his dick can do. But in the end, it beats him to death. The only thing that can defeat Punch is his own dick.

I wrote a letter to the College of [Punch]

Paul Zaloom



Professors, which is a collection of eight or ten guys in England, who are all directly descended from Queen Victoria or something. I

knew from the start that they wouldn't accept me as a member, because I'm an American. And I don't use a swizzle, which I hate. And in this letter, I included a whole scenario of my show, of Punch and Jimmy, and I said I would like to be

accepted into the College of Professors. I thought, in the spirit of the show, I should just crawl up their butts and bug them.

And they did write an official letter back, rejecting me. "We're sorry to disappoint you. We are unable to accept your application at this time." Dada dada dada. And then smack in the middle of the letter there's this one-sentence paragraph: "Punch is not gay." Dada dada dada.

And my message to those guys, and to that whole world, is: Screw you, you English assholes. How the hell do you know Punch is not gay? You can kiss my big queer ass. He is *now!* And *that*, you can print in the magazine! [Paul laughs.] •

Mr. Frisch has directed numerous theatre festivals and currently lives in NYC.

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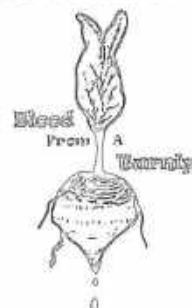
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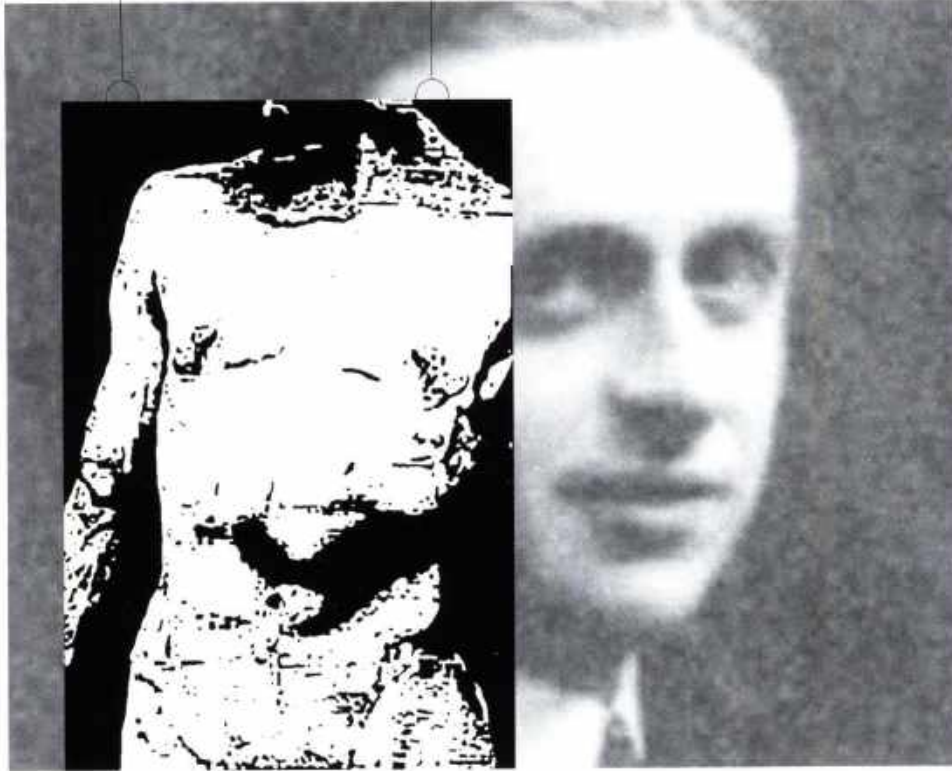


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Puppet History Column by John Bell
Sex and Puppets



Puppet Sex on Broadway!

At one moment in the new Broadway puppet musical *Avenue Q*, the principal romantic couple, Princeton and Kate Monster, finally realize their mutual attraction, and go to bed. Literally. Because far from allowing the couple to slip off behind closed doors, *Avenue Q* breaks into a musical number (“You Can Be As Loud As You Want When You’re Making Love”), and the couple go after each other with gusto, on a suddenly materialized mattress. Not only do puppeteers John Tartaglia and Stephanie D’Abruzzo show us Princeton and Kate stripped almost naked (if a puppet can truly be said to be naked) and humping face to face, but they also perform an array of simulated sexual gymnastics including fellatio and cunnilingus, separately and then simultaneously. There

are two things going on which prevent this from being pure pornography. First of all, the sex partners are not people, but puppets; and more exactly, puppets built in the Muppet image, with colorful fake fur, benign expressions, and large moveable mouths. Secondly, like all the other puppet characters in *Avenue Q*, the bodies of the Princeton and Kate Monster puppets exist only from the waist up, so there’s literally nothing there with which to fornicate. “You Can Be As Loud As You Want When You’re Making Love” was a real crowd-pleaser the night I saw it because it takes advantage of puppets’ ambiguous ability to suggest or even mime sexual acts while actually engaging in nothing of the kind, since there’s no way cloth, plastic, wood, leather, or any other material could experience sexuality. I mention this *Avenue Q* episode because, like some kind of long-repressed release of

libido, the sex in the show fulfills our rather natural desire to see puppets do everything that humans can. In what follows I would like to look at some different aspects of sexuality and puppets, and try to understand why it’s such a persistent puppet theater tradition.

Puppets and the Performance of Fertility

It should first of all be made clear that sex with puppets

does not at all necessarily mean pornographic entertainment. In some of its most basic modes, sex has been and still is suggested or performed by puppets and objects in fertility rites rather than for titillation. The yoni and lingam sculptures of India, representing divine female and male genitalia, are not so much salacious as they are sacred objects representing the powers of sex and procreation as essential life forces. In Central America, anthropomorphic puppets played an important role in Mayan and Aztec fertility rites, although it doesn’t seem that they were particularly

sexualized with genital details. However, rural Korean ritual puppets used in fertility rituals often included a rod puppet equipped with a comically oversized penis, and in ancient Greece, the origins of the Festival of Dionysus (which gave birth to Greek tragedy and comedy) included parades through Athens featuring life-size sculptures of the fertility god Dionysus sporting a fully erect penis. This kind of very public performance of sexuality in the context of fertility ritual could later be seen in a ribald seventeenth-century street procession noted by Turkish theater historian Metin And, in his book *Karagöz: Turkish Shadow Theater*. During a fifteen-day festival marking the circumcision ceremony for Sultan Mehmet IV's son Mustafa, And writes, "a foreign observer mentions that a jester, attired in a costume made of straw and paper, rode on a donkey, carrying a giant size phallus. With this, he saluted the onlookers, while lady spectators, modestly shrouded behind their veils, or hiding their faces in their hands, stared at the sight between their fingers."



Puppet Sex as Ritual Entertainment

In the development of Greek drama, one can see an interesting shift from ritual performance to theater, specifically in terms of sex and performing objects. Outrageously long phalluses shifted from adorning processional statues of Dionysus to being essential elements of bawdy Greek comedies, as masked actors attached such excessive extensions to themselves for such plays as Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*. (Michael Romanyshyn's recent table-top puppet version of Aristophanes's political comedy *Peace* reprised this tradition by giving the character Hermes a hilarious moveable penis whose gestures punctuated his speeches.) It may have been inevitable that puppet performance based in fertility rituals would again and again shift itself into the creation of broader puppet entertainments which, while maintaining connections to ritual, would focus on the different job of making sex stories funny and provocative. Puppet fertility rites want to bring into the com-

munity a fecund power, which can then attach itself to the crops, whose growth must sustain us or inspire the fertility of the next human generation. The Turkish Karagöz has traditionally performed such a role in fertility rites, since its performances were a regular feature of circumcision ceremonies. According to Metin And, "the phallus was an accepted part of the Karagöz show," and in fact "it is even believed that the large, moveable arm of Karagöz had originally been a phallus." As in the case of classic Greek traditions, Karagöz connected fertility, sexual titillation, and comedy. In the early nineteenth century, the English Romantic poet George Gordon, Lord Byron saw such a ribald Turkish Karagöz (or perhaps Greek Karaghiozis) shadow show in Ottoman Greece, during the Islamic holy days of Ramadan. "Performed in a corner of a dirty coffeehouse by an itinerant Jewish puppeteer," according to Benita Eisler's biography of the poet, the show Byron and his travelling companion watched was "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 and removing this engine from before and affixing it to his posterior." Although the performance was no doubt

greeted by howls of laughter from the local audience, it's worth noting that Byron's friend was outraged; by the nineteenth century, modern Europeans considered the performance of sex to be obscene. The way ribald Karagöz persists in maintaining connections to the ritual world is paralleled by the nature of the Javanese puppet characters Semar, Petruk, Gareng and Bagong, for, in addition to being acerbic commentators about the serious goings on of wayang, as well as actual gods, they embody and joke about their sexual drives with as much gusto as Karagöz (although they aren't normally fitted with actual phalluses).

Pornography: the Modernization of Puppet Sex

If the part of the progress of western culture was to remove sexuality from the performance of public ritual, the other side of this repressive effort was the re-appearance of sexuality as naughty entertainment, through the secret satisfactions of pornography. Puppets played a role in this, as Daniel Gerould pointed out in a 1981 TDR article about a mid-nineteenth-century private puppet theater in Paris called the Erotikon Theatron. The great French puppeteer and puppet historian Louis Lemercier de Neuville made the marionettes, costumes, and sets for this theater, and performed its shows together with puppeteer Jean Duboys. Satirist Henri Monnier wrote short ribald plays for the Erotikon Theatron, typically featuring an amorous student and a prostitute, with comic relief provided by Monnier's caricature of bourgeois pomposity, the corpulent Monsieur Joseph Prudhomme (a forerunner, Gerould points out, of Alfred Jarry's puppet anti-hero Père Ubu). In Monnier's play *La Grisette et l'étudiant* (The Tart and the Student), attention is expressly focused on the step-by-step development of the couple's sexual congress, which is comically interrupted at inopportune moments by Prudhomme's

offstage voice. Here, for example, is the Tart urging on her lover: "On the bed, doggie... on the bed... It's more comfortable doing it on the bed... (He carries her over to the bed, and begins the attack with a certain frenzy.) Wait... wait till I pull my dress up underneath... do you want to tear all my things?... There... now I'm ready... Go ahead... Not that way, though! You're heading in the wrong direction... Let me guide it in... There now! Wait, my big baby... Oh!... wait!... Let's do it a long time, a long, long time: right, little puppy dog?... Now you're in... can you feel me?..." Wow! It's hard to know exactly what de Neuville and Duboys did with their marionettes during this scene, although it doesn't seem like they would shy away from showing us (in much greater realistic detail than *Avenue Q*) exactly what the Tart and the Student are doing. In a way, the Erotikon Theatron, like many nineteenth-century performance forms, seems like a preliminary gesture towards the realistic pornography which quickly arose with the invention of new technologies of cinema and photography, and which now so characterizes the invention of the internet. But puppets performing sex acts are quite different from photographic images. Although a major goal of a play like *La Grisette et l'étudiant* is clearly audience titillation, there's something primitive and innocent about puppets that surely must have emerged in Lemercier de Neuville's marionettes. I would say that precisely because those puppets were neither human nor exact images of humans, they maintained a kind of license, an innocence which marks the mutual recognition by audience and performers alike that, in fact, we are not watching human beings engage in sex acts. Because of this basic non-reality, the sexual activity of puppets is freed from the various elements of modesty, shame, and guilt, which are inevitably attached to strictly human enactments of the same actions.

Puppets, Sexuality and the Performance of Gender

It's not surprising that there is a strong multi-cultural tradition of puppets representing sexuality in both fertility rituals and the entertainment of pornography, since puppets do so many things with such efficient and effective theatricality. But there is another interesting aspect of puppets and sexuality, and that is the way that puppets, masks, and other performing objects allow the performers to cross gender boundaries. The example of Lemercier de Neuville's puppets suggests how puppets offer a kind of safety, or insulation from the actual performance of sex acts; but they also offer their performers the safety of performing the other gender. By this I mean that puppeteers routinely, and with hardly a second thought, regularly create and perform their gender opposites. Male puppeteers perform female puppet characters, and female puppeteers perform male characters. Punch professors traditionally performed all the roles in their show: Judy and Polly as well as Punch and the other male characters. And the traditional role of puppet narrator in Sicilian traditions meant that one speaker did all the puppets' voices: the lovely Angelica as well as brave Orlando, just as Javanese dalangs provide both male and female voices for their epic tales. More recently, Frank Oz became renowned for inventing the persona of Miss Piggy, and Wayland Flowers built his whole puppet career around his outrageous character Madame. I think of this in terms of one of Peter Schumann's most powerful performances of the seventies and eighties, the White Lady. Schumann's White Lady (who danced on five-foot stilts) played a prominent role in Bread and Puppet Theater's *White Horse Butcher*, a text-free, black-and-white spectacle on an open stage, which featured masked Butcher characters who hunted, captured, and then executed a wild White Horse (a life-size two-person puppet).

in a plot inspired by the medieval Unicorn Tapestries. Schumann's White Lady emerged at the show's climax to motivate the White Horse's resurrection, at which point she danced off astride the horse's back. Schumann played this character across the United States, in Europe and in Latin America for a good number of years, and it often struck me how the dynamics of puppet theater entirely characterized the meaning of this performance. By this I mean that if Schumann were an actor, and White Horse Butcher a written drama, one of his most powerful theatrical roles would be a drag performance. Performing in drag is a long and honored tradition, but it brings with it a whole passel of complicated issues connected to the performance of the body: what exactly does it mean when an actor plays the other sex? For example, around the same time that Schumann was performing the White Lady, Charles Ludlam made equally strong impressions in the modern theater world by performing in drag in the title role of the melodrama *Camille*. But Ludlam's drag performance was part of the development of something Stefan Brecht called "queer theater," in which theatrical drag not only exists as dramatic entertainment, but as a conscious social statement about the need for free expression of sexuality. A rather amazing aspect of Schumann's performance of a woman, in contrast to Ludlam's, is that such larger issues of sexuality never arose. The White Lady was simply accepted as one of Schumann's puppet and mask characters, just as Miss Piggy was simply one of Frank Oz's many puppet characters. As in the case of *Erotikon Theatron*, or with the licensed foolery of fertility rituals, puppets offer a kind of buffer, a distancing between the performer and the character performed. Puppets and masks give us a license to do whatever we want, with far fewer consequences than if we were physically acting things out with our bodies. In *Avenue Q*, therefore, Kate Monster can quite clearly give Princeton a blowjob,

but because it's puppets (whether or not the puppets are equipped with genitals), we haven't really seen what we all saw, and Stephanie D'Abruzzo and John Tartaglia didn't really perform those acts (which in fact couldn't even be lawfully performed on a Broadway stage). The laughter greeting Princeton and Kate Monster's sex scene is our mutual understanding—performers and audience both—that we are all experiencing the thrill of voyeurism without an actual union of two sexual beings. Paul Zaloom plays with this puppet sexuality in his

a bit more uncomfortable by happily being gay. What Zaloom achieves with this is rather interesting. On the one hand, *Punch and Jimmy* might be shocking to many audiences, because it thrusts gay sexuality in our faces. Once, then again, the shock of puppet sex is mitigated by the fact that "we're only watching puppets after all," and that Zaloom's performance is constantly punctuated by humor (as, in fact, are almost all the instances of puppet sex we've mentioned here). The almost inexplicable power of puppets has often been remarked upon,



Punch and Jimmy, a handpuppet show which takes the naturally oversexed Punch into a new direction by making him gay. Zaloom's one-man performance takes advantage of the traditional sexuality of Punch, which traces back to that character's commedia dell'arte forebear Pulcinella, and then even prior to that, the humpbacked, sexually charged shaman-like characters of southern Italian farce (the territory of Dionysus). But, while puppeteers have traditionally enjoyed playing with Punch's sexuality, Zaloom's Punch makes things

especially in the West by such writers as Kleist and Gordon Craig, who saw that puppets' apparent simplicity masks a very deep and rich array of multiple meanings. Many people are happy enough thinking of puppets as children's entertainment, perhaps because taming the possibilities of puppet theater in this manner seems to keep the puppets under control. But puppets resist such controls, and continually act out, thumbing their noses at society and morality, and guiltlessly enjoying their sexuality in front of our very eyes. And we love it. •

Czechoslovak-American Marionette Theatre in Don Juan, or Wages of Debauchery

directed by Vit Horejs

review by Hanne Tierny

It's amazing how all the Kaspars, Punches and Kaspareks, after many centuries and hardly any adjustments, still have the vitality and the dynamism to take over a show. True, the dynamism is transferred from the manipulator, but these old boys, when properly applied, make you realize the brilliance of the invention.

Vit Horejs's Kasparek, Don Juan's servant in this production, more than justifies the longevity of his species. Performed by Theresa Linnihan, he took over the stage. Or maybe *she* took over the stage. She became that little puppet who knew how he would whistle if he could, how he would run away if he dared, or stay if he thought it was advantageous. Actually, they both took over the stage.

That much said about Kasparek, this entire *Don Juan* was a smart work of puppetry that combined folk and sophistication to the advantage of both. (Vit Horejs uses old as well as newly carved marionettes from Czechoslovakia; they give his productions a comfortable, folky look.) Apparently the play, a favorite in 18th century Europe, and written by itinerant puppeteers, includes directions for the puppeteer to act the same part as that of the puppet he or she manipulated. I would not have thought this could be done seamlessly enough, so that between the two of them they became one character for the audience. Personal interaction between a manipulator and a puppet rarely works for me, I don't lose track of who is whom and I

don't like puppets to be put through this kind of existential exercise. In Vit Horejs's *Don Juan*, both puppets and manipulators presented straightforward identities to the audience; it was done very well and with a light touch.

The Czechoslovak-American Marionette Theatre is keeping a folk art alive in a spirited manner. Puppets are predictable in their movements; they function on repetition. To watch them stomping around, chasing each other or banging into a wall can make one a little wary. The liveliness of this *Don Juan* production was a tremendous credit to the company. The old text, interspersed with references to everyday life (like credit cards being maxed out) had lots of humor in it that might have been stilted or self-conscious with less easy-going performers.

In the somewhat weak ending, Don Juan and Kasparek were shrunk into tiny little puppets— an obvious gimmick used by too many puppeteers. Two large bony hands descended Don Juan into hell, persuading no one of the terrible fate that awaited him down there. But by that time it was the end and everyone had spent a delightful evening. •



Doña Anna hovers over the body of her Father



Doña Anna and Don Juan in the graveyard

photos: Vit Horejs

Don Juan, Kasperek and Hermit Unus
in the Forlorn Forest





Barber of Seville

by Amy Trompetter
with the Absolute Ensemble

directed by Kristjan Jarvi
St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn

review by Hanne Tierney

The loss of the Henson Festival can't be mourned enough for all the obvious reasons, not least of all because the festival educated the general public by presenting quality puppetry and setting standards for the field. The public began to discriminate and to understand that, although puppetry casts a wide net, not everything caught in it is good puppetry.

Amy Trompetter's collaboration with the Absolute Ensemble in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* makes a case for the above. Most of the puppetry in this piece consisted of stiff papier maché figures, large cut-outs of old illustrations, being moved, twirled, twisted and turned upside down by six hooded puppeteers. Hands and legs and other body pieces were also part of this constant activity on the stage, as were the six puppeteers. This was not a piece one could get lost in.

My opinion of these figures and their popping up and down is irrelevant (I'm generally not too fond of imitation folk art), but the fact that the audience loved the performance requires some thought. Perhaps having seen a lot of good puppetry made me unresponsive to the tricks of the trade, such as varying the scale from huge to small, dislocating legs from the body, etc. I would have enjoyed it more had I not been upset by the fact that this widely advertised and well-attended production claimed to be puppetry and that the audience took it to be puppetry, not

knowing any better. Perhaps all of this has to do with my grieving over the loss of the festival: How will New Yorkers ever know the art of puppetry again without the festival to bring it to us? The puppets in this *Barber of Seville* were merely clever staging devices, with a few wonderful minutes of hand puppet work thrown in.

The structure of the opera worked well as a concert. The singers sang beautifully, with charm and conviction, using few gestures and very little movement, and yet giving a feeling of the characters they portrayed. They were dressed in plain black, which made one very aware of their facial expressions. The stage swarmed continuously with the six hooded puppeteers who carried these stiff figures around, often several of the same character: four Figaros,

three or even six Rosinas, etc., some were large, some small, but always one knew that these were theatrical conventions that make a boring stage more interesting. (These sudden changes in size seemed to have no other purpose than to keep the audience from getting bored.) "Play with the proportions." The figures were swung around, turned upside down, stood on their heads and turned sideways, to give them a sense of animation. During all of this commotion, the singers stood mostly to the side, singing.

Even had I not worried about the state of puppetry, though, a lot of the production would have seemed repetitious, predictable and somewhat boring to me. To be fair, however, I need to say again that the audience laughed loudly and applauded enthusiastically, and that I may not be the right person to review this piece, since my prejudices are very strongly in favor of puppetry as the fine art of manipulated gesture in inanimate objects. •





HUNGARY'S ANDRÁS LÉNÁRT is the creator of Mikropodium Theatre. His intricate miniature figures are sublime. His show *Stop* is performed on a stage the size of a trade paperback. It is composed of a handful of wordless sketches performed to music— a ballerina, an accordion playing clown, a mermaid, a pair of playful dolphins.

A second work, *Con Anima* (With Soul) is played on a much larger stage-- about the size of a chess board. In a desolate, futuristic setting, a troll-like figure digs up some puppet figures out of the sand, and acts out a story reminiscent of the creation myth of Adam and Eve.

Always, Lénárt's presence is magical, his manipulation, masterful. He performed this year in festivals around Italy, and in the USA at Puppets in Portland (organized by Figures of Speech Puppet Theatre) and Puppets in the Green Mountains (organized by Sandglass Theatre).•



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Wayang's World

Puppet Theatre in Contemporary Indonesia, edited by Jan Mrázek, Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia #50, University of Michigan Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 2002. 376 pp. ISBN 0-89148-083-8 (cloth), 0-89148-084-6 (paper).

This extraordinary collection of essays, subtitled *New Approaches to Performance Events* and sporting a cover shot of comic book heroine Batwoman as a wayang shadow figure, includes 24 chapters by various authors and a lengthy introduction. Jan Mrázek is not only the editor of this collection, he is also a contributor and he shows himself to be a formidable researcher and writer, as well as having a boyish enthusiasm for his subject and a keen sense of humor. *Puppet Theater in Contemporary Indonesia*, despite the small 8-point type, is an enjoyable and illuminating read.

I was particularly grateful to Mrázek for starting off with a "Geography of Wayang." This art form has so many variants from so many locations, that some sort of "pocket guide to wayang" seems a prerequisite to the more serious considerations of the art which are to follow.

Mrázek's Introduction begins unexpectedly with a heated (if imaginary) discussion of wayang by the characters from Goethe's *Faust*. This is an immediate cue to the readers that, not only is the editor an inventive soul, but that we may expect new points of view in the pages ahead. Thereafter, his introductory remarks put the book's essays into perspective though, in fact, I found them so detailed that I decided to read the essays first, returning to the introductory remarks only later, so as to preserve some of the surprise.



Hendrik Kleinsmiede's essay, "Watching Wayang with Spinoza," proposes a new model of scholarship from what was traditionally a (mostly) Dutch preoccupation, and which derived, he writes, from Europe's nostalgia for the Greeks. It was presumed by some of these writers that the Indonesians would harbor similar nostalgic feelings for India as an idealized spring from which flowed the origins of their mythology, arts and ethics. This was not a very apt model, as it turns out.

According to Kleinsmiede, it was Plato's triumph of mentalism which led to the mind/body dualism of Descartes. A better paradigm, he writes, is the view of the less well remembered Spinoza, which is a monistic, or "wholistic," view of the world, in which an individual was defined by a number of interconnected "bodies" or "modes of being." (This is a view which is given credence by a number of the other essays in the collection.)

Kleinsmiede's preferred method of criticism for wayang would not be the essay, but rather a sort of hyper-text, multi-media, multi-sensory event, in order to convey the full range of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and social interactions which characterize a night of wayang.

A. L. Becker, in "On Arnheim on Language: The Case for Wayang," makes an interesting observation early on: "Not unexpectedly, in Javanese, to imagine or consider something is to 'shadow'— a metaphor congenial to our image of thinking as 'reflecting.'" This is something American puppeteers might want to try out—"Well, I don't know, let me shadow that for awhile, and I'll get back to you." Another thing which may be a revelation for American puppeteers, for whom puppetry is essentially a visual medium, is the composition of the traditional wayang performances.

... for much of the time of the wayang performance, there is little movement on the screen. A good puppeteer will put in little movements of the puppets' arms now and then to keep the screen alive, but for much of the time what is happening is talk. Performances outside of Java and Bali are often much shorter and relatively talkless, as are special tourist performances in Indonesia, but in a regular shadow play there is so much talk that people who like wayang often listen to it on the radio. For them, as for many who watch shadow plays— and there are

many performances all over in city and village— it is primarily a verbal medium. A dalang can get away with sloppy movements and minimal shadow painting if he or she is good with words . . .

Kathy Foley writes not only as a scholar, but as a dalang— a puppeteer. In her chapter, "First Things," she examines the meaning of the *murwa*— the "opening passage of each all-night presentation." Though there are variations, depending on the region, the *murwa* consists of three basic parts: "(1) the dance of the *kayon* (tree puppet), (2) the introduction of the puppets, and, (3) the opening incantation. In one sense, these activities are as pragmatic as raising the curtain, getting the cast onstage, and delivering a prologue in a European play. Yet the hour-long duration and structural elaboration give these actions a weight and fascination of their own." Indeed, it is here that the dalang creates a sort of an analog of the entire universe and man's place in it. The placement of figures to the right or left of the dalang, whose head is always visible during the performance, has profound significance: "All forces in the universe, good and evil, male and female, god and demon, right and left, are located for the night within the performer's body." This harkens back to Kleinsmiede's defense of Spinoza's monism over Descartes's dualistic universe. The dalang's incantation always begins and ends with the number one. In ancient Egypt, according to the great French observer R. A. Schwaller de Lubiez, the only number in the universe was the number one; all other numbers were merely aspects of the one. Foley shows us how, in the



Nyi Suharni Sabdowati with her version of Limbuk (c. late 1960's early 1970's)

elaborate numerology of the dalangs— the duality of forces, the quaternary of the cardinal points, the nine openings of the body, etc.— everything reduces to a singularity: a perfect whole. There is much more to it than this, and Foley whets our appetite without belaboring anything. As a dalang herself, though, she offers a unique perspective. She recites the incantations of old as she learned them from her teachers. The words are clear, but their meaning ambiguous. They beg to be meditated upon, in order to reveal their meaning slowly over time.

One thing which sets all the authors here apart from the academics of old is that these writers— Foley, Kleinsmiede and the others— have seen a lot of wayang firsthand. They understand it not only with their minds, but with their bodies, and the essays, taken as a whole, convey well, I think, the totality of the wayang experience, inasmuch as this is possible.

If all dalangs' incantations begin and end with the number one, then this book begins and ends fittingly with words from Mrázek. For an academic, he is surprisingly passionate and candid in his prose style. Kleinsmiede, in fact, remarks on the almost complete lack of "novelistic" writing in the whole "corpus" of Dutch colonial and international postcolonial writing on wayang, that is, writing which affects the body— which is visceral in its impact.

It strikes me as remarkable that the only thesis I ever read on wayang that broke the mold on academic writing conventions and read like a novel is Jan Mrázek's.

I can well believe it after reading *Puppet Theatre in Contemporary Indonesia*, a fascinating and valuable contribution to the scholarship of wayang.

review by Andrew Periale

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Fig. 2. An impression of a "bare wayang" performance in a radio studio. The "puppeteer" naps and crashes against a chair, and the "musician" takes care of the accompaniment. (Jaya Baya 40 [1980]: 52)

Bruce and Darlene FRASCONE

THE ART AND TECHNIQUE OF MARIONETTE MAKING

Volume 1

*L'ART ET LA TECHNIQUE DE LA
MARIONNETTE A FILS*



Bruce and Darlene Frascone have produced a book that should be valuable to those who need to know how to build a human-type marionette that looks good and works well. Their theories owe much to the works of W. A. Dwiggins and Fettig (which they acknowledge) and, though it lacks the beauty of Dwiggins' *Marionette in Motion* or the comprehensiveness of Fettig's *Glove and Rod Puppets*, it clearly benefits from their years of professional work with

ing out this sort of book would intend to make. There might be a benefit, though, to including a few photos of other artists' work to demonstrate some of the great diversity in the field of marionettes, from the abstract sculptures of Hanne Tierney to Chinese figures with 50 strings. The reader should know that this is only the Frascone System of marionette making. That said, there is much of value in this book, from how to use facial features in order to support the

marionettes. It contains useful time-tested information relating to balance, proportion and manipulation.

The Frascones' concept of what a marionette is seems fairly clear from the outset: "Once the marionette is finished and assembled, it gives the impression of a small inanimate being. However, the inertia of its movements and the natural actions of its joints give it human-like behavior." In other words, it is something imitative, more or less, of a human being in both appearance and action. It is likely that that is exactly the sort of figure which most people seek-

puppet's character, to the details of the Dwiggins control paddle, to achieving balance through the use of a variety of woods.

When I see simple, straightforward illustrations which are larger than they need to be in order to convey information, and entire pages devoted to chapter heads, I get suspicious that the book designer may be padding the page count in order to increase the book's "perceived value." Only half a page of text at the end of the book is given to "optional strings," and then only to the heel string. What of the elbow string so characteristic of the National Marionette Theater? How about a hand-to-mouth string or a hand-to-heart string for a special gesture, never mind stringing for some standard trick such as juggling or doing a handstand: There is a concluding note which intimates that such techniques, as well as animal marionettes, the use of modern technology, and woodcarving may be covered in a yet-to-be-published Volume II; given the relatively slim size of this volume (under 100 pages) and the amount of white space, it seems that some of this information could have been included here.

review by Andrew Periale

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Figuretheater Wilde & Vogel

meet the feebles

An early effort of Peter Jackson, director of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *Meet the Feebles* is (among other things) a send up of *The Muppet Show*. In *Feebles*, however, the usually lovable characters may look terrific on stage, but backstage the seams show, the fur is patchy, and five minutes don't pass without someone throwing up or peeing on someone else. And there is sex: puppet sex. More on this and its significance later.

The film was shot (as with the *Lord of the Rings* films) in New Zealand, and was released in 1989. The budget must have been rather low, as Peter Jackson was not only the director and co-writer, he was also the camera operator. Still, there was a good size crew, the Vaudeville era theatre which was the film's primary set looked great, and the puppetry was actually pretty good. I'd only heard about this film in passing, but having run across some reviews of it lately on the internet, I realized that I had to see it:

"Two days ago, my roommate subjected me to The Worst Film Ever Made, without any warning whatsoever. I'll never trust his film recommendations again." <http://letaboo.diaryland.com/evilpupets.html>

"Meet the Feebles is for those with a strong stomach and a seriously warped sense of humor. The film is so off the beaten track that it makes Monty Python seem mainstream." © 1995 James Berardinelli-http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/m/meet_feebles.html

At least Berardinelli found parts of the movie "diabolically clever and funny." Parts of it are funny, and the film makes some good points. At its core, though, *Meet the Feebles* is a gross-out movie, and a very entertaining one if you should happen to find yourself with a bunch of drunken college friends one night with nothing else to do.

What really interested me, though, was the portrayal of human (sort of) sexual behavior by puppets. Beyond the titillation (or, in the case of the film's bovine porn actress, Teat-illation), lurked some very serious comments on the human condition. One of the first scenes of the film, after the opening glitzy onstage number, is of Bletch the Sea Lion (the theater's producer) making love to a cat (a young actress to whom he has presumably promised a leading role). He is interrupted by the appearance of Heidi the Hippo, the show's leading lady with whom he has an existing relationship, and an obvious parody of Miss Piggy. It is, however, inconceivable that Miss Piggy should ever discover Kermit in a back room banging Big Bird. We have too much invested in the unshakable hopefulness and moral purity of Kermit. Jackson steps on our Polyanna beliefs by showing us the dark side of Show Biz—lost innocence on bedsheets smelling of cigar smoke.

One of the nice things about Jackson's use of puppets is that he takes advantage of their naturally Brechtian distancing effect. We know in our minds that the bunny rabbit orgy is just a rhythmic blur of polyfoam and fake fur. The creature which masturbates while spying on the bunnies seems unduly coarse until we realize that it is his elephantine nose which is the erectile part of his anatomy. It's just enough distance from our own lives to keep us laughing instead of squirming. Thus the point is made that we are a people given to every sort of excess and the audience is (in theory) able to accept Jackson's contention because, perhaps, we see his vision as that of an unfettered child playing with his toys rather than as a sage holding up the mirror to ourselves.



In the end, the bad are punished and the good are rewarded . . . more or less. Heidi gets revenge on Bletch. In the muppet movies, Miss Piggy is often able to help the resolution along with a few well placed karate kicks. But if Piggy is Jackie Chan, Heidi is Quentin Tarantino. She goes on a rampage with a very large machine gun, and the fur and feathers fly as she wipes out most of the theater's cast and staff in front of a full house of horrified onlookers.

I've given *Meet the Feebles* serious consideration. I'm sure that there are those, like the first reviewer above, who will wonder why I bothered. Beyond the points already mentioned, this *is*, after all, Peter Jackson. While it is a long way (a *very* long way) from *Feebles* to *Hobbits*, he still fulfills our perceived need for crunch and splatter. He shows that we are not so very far removed, in evolutionary terms, from a time when there was only the hunter and the hunted. In both films, the main theme is the battle of good to overcome evil, with subplots featuring the possibility of true love, and overcoming personal demons in order to become a whole, mature being. While the vision in *Feebles* is juvenile and cynical, it is at least interesting to see where this now respected director came from, and there are a few good laughs along the way.

<http://www.foreignfilms.com/films/5279.asp>

Meet the Feebles (1989)

Keywords: bizarre, offbeat, spoof

review by Justin Kaase

BROTHER BREAD, SISTER PUPPET

New Video Release by Cinema Guild



Recent releases of possible interest to our readers include "Puppetry: Worlds of Imagination" (the wonderful documentary by Michael and Joshua Malkin previously reviewed here) and "Brother Bread, Sister Puppet," a documentary about Bread and Puppet Theater. The latter covers one summer's Domestic Resurrection Circus at the theater's home in Glover Vermont (1985 or 1986, I believe). Intercut with scenes of the Circus and Pageant are interviews with company founder Peter Schuman, performers Paul Zaloom, John Bell, Trudi Cohen, Amy Trompetter and others. There are also shots of a parade in NYC, a good look at the breadbaking so integral to the feeling of communion, or communalism, of the Circus in it's heyday. "Brother Bread, Sister Puppet," (60 minutes, directed by Jeff Farber) is a warm look at one of America's great events. It is also inescapably poignant, as we become even more acutely aware of how much we have lost since Schumann declared the annual pageant over, a victim of its own success.

For more information: Garry Crowds, The Cinema Guild 1-800-723-5522 or contact them through their website: www.cinemaguild.com

Future P.I. topics

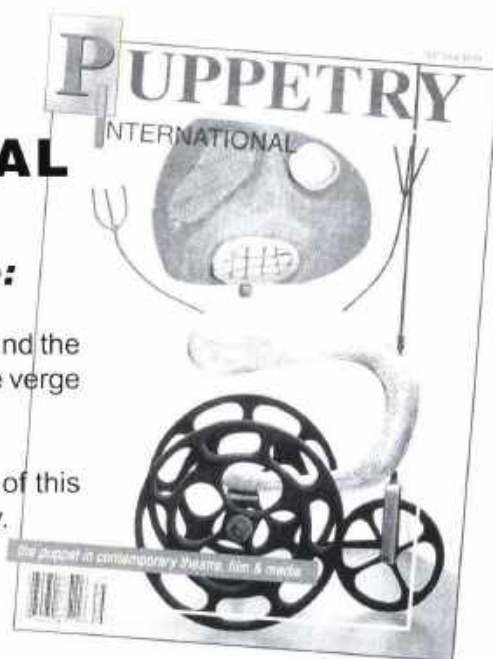
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by Various Artists

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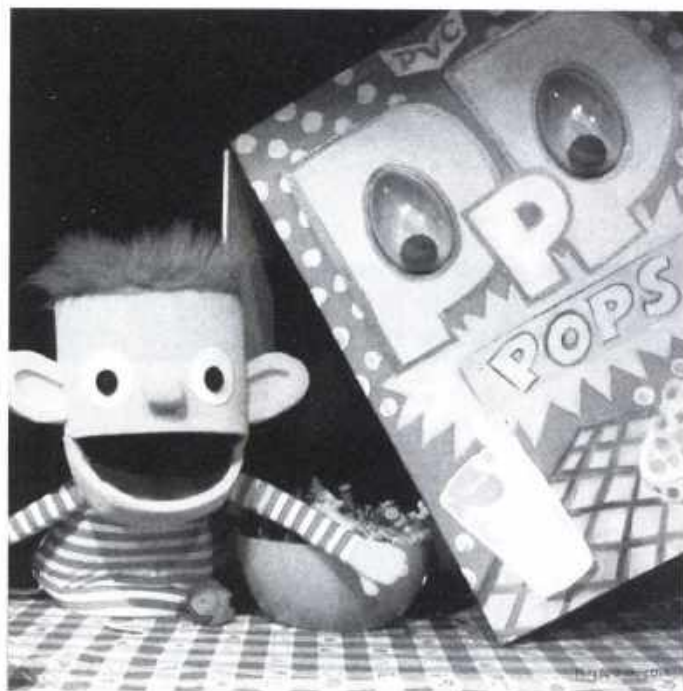


photo: Bradford Clark

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Photo by D.D. Simpich



Photo by Joe Boris

Shows for families feature classic literature and new takes on old tales. American heroes spin tales taller than a ten-gallon hat in *American Tall Tales*. Dr. Deadly Nightshade is threatening to take over the General Botanical Hospital in *The Plant Doctors* (pictured at left). Dragons, shoemakers, billy goats and more round out the season.

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Photo by Brad Clark



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Punch and Devil in PAUL ZALOOM's Punch & Jimmy

See article on page 22

