

FALL and WINTER 2022 Issue #52

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

the puppet in contemporary theatre, film & media



THE ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ISSUE

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

issue no. 52

Editorial by Andrew Periale 2

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ON THE COVER

Environmentalists must at times feel as if they are tilting at windmills. The *Don Quixote* on our cover is by Austin's wonderful Glass Half Full Theatre. Climate Justice is one of their main themes and they have created many works on the subject:
www.glasshalffulltheatre.com

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THE ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ISSUE

If everything goes according to plan—and I have great confidence that it will—this will be my final editorial for *Puppetry International*. My partner Bonnie and I started producing UNIMA-USA's magazine back in 1985, when it was a smaller format piece called *À Propos*.

We'd joined UNIMA-USA just a few years earlier, and the previous year I began my first job as a full-time puppeteer with Connecticut's Pandemonium Puppet Company. Touring with Bart Roccoberon was a master class not only in puppet performance and construction, but in understanding the business of a small touring theater. Five months after I started with Pandemonium, Bart was tapped to head up the just-forming Institute of Professional Puppetry Arts (IPPA) at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. Bonnie and I moved to Waterford—just down the street from both IPPA and Margo Rose—while I led the company out on the road.

My background was in both theater and European languages and my early inspirations in puppetry—Bill Baird, The Yale Puppeteers, Walter Wilkinson—were all great travelers and wrote beautifully about the theaters and puppeteers they met in other lands. Meeting then General Secretary Allelu Kurten, Nancy Staub, Peter Zapletal, Mel Helstien and other board members was like getting a new family—one that extended all across the globe. When editor Nancy Laverick decided to pass the torch of *À Propos*, Bonnie and I offered to carry it for a few years. (That's what we said: We'd do it for two years.)

Although Bonnie had been trained as a graphic designer and I had at least some sort of academic background, we were not well known by the UNIMA-USA board. But Bart went to bat for us, and convinced the board that we were capable and that, furthermore, the magazine could be printed at the O'Neill's own press, which was down in the dark, dank labyrinth of a basement under the main building (known as “the

mansion”). Those next few years were happy ones for us—and very busy. Bonnie joined Pandemonium and a year later we formed our own company AND got married. We were always thinking about ways to improve the magazine.

In 1990, at the first Puppetry Futurism Conference at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, we began work on a proposal for a new, larger format magazine. The following year, at the second Puppetry Futurism Conference (held at the O'Neill), we gave a presentation of our vision for the new publication—one that would reach beyond the membership of UNIMA-USA—and a few years later issue #1 of *Puppetry International* was unleashed on the world.

In *Puppetry International* #40, which appeared in the year UNIMA-USA turned 50, I wrote about the history of UNIMA-USA's publications, and that has been expanded into an essay that will be housed on our website, but in this final editorial I just want to remember how we got started on this journey that has now lasted 37 ½ years—well more than half UNIMA-USA's life and, in fact, more than half of our lives. It has connected us to hundreds of puppeteers from all over the world. It has given us the chance to work with some remarkable people: General Secretaries Allelu Kurten and Vince Anthony, our historian and book review editor John Bell, peer review editor Dasia Posner, our first publication coordinator Leslie Asch, our webmaster Donald Devet and so many more.

We will continue to participate in the planning of upcoming issues as our new editor Alissa Mello and designer Michael Kelly get their feet on the ground but, knowing them, that should happen pretty quickly, which is to say, in short:

Goodbye.
It's been swell.



FROM THE PRODUCTION *AIR*, BY THE STATE PUPPET THEATER IN VIDIN, BULGARIA
PHOTO: IVAN ALADZHOV SEE REVIEW ON PAGE 42

My wife and I have recently begun watching a new TV series called *Good Omens**, in which the world, at the very brink of the “End of Days,” finds a pair of unlikely allies: the angel Aziraphale and the Demon who was the original tempting serpent in the garden of Eden. It seems that, over the past few millennia, each of them has become rather fond of the earth and are pretty sure that their future, post-apocalypse, would likely be far more dreary than their current lives on our little planet—global warming, great extinctions, and rampant authoritarianism notwithstanding.

Unlike the high orders of angels and demons, who tend to see everything in terms of stark opposites, these two have lived among the denizens of earth since the beginning of life here. They understand the nuances of human desires and our fallibility, and have

adopted a sort of Realpolitik whereby they carry out the wishes of their masters just enough to avoid divine (or malign) scrutiny, while still letting life go on pretty much as it always has. We're only a few episodes in, so I can't say if they manage to stave off the four horsemen of the apocalypse, but I am, for the moment, hopeful.

The theme of this issue is “Puppetry, the Environment and Sustainability.” Puppeteers, as much as anyone, are in the trenches in what might be fairly called the Environmental End of Days, making puppets (which is to say stories) out of trash, learning how to live and work in a sustainable, earth-friendly way, and then showing the rest of us how to do the same. It is not an easy task, and we are constantly facing moral choices in our own work: Do we use acetone and Celastic™ or recycled newspaper and cornstarch?

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

*an original series on Prime TV, co-produced and co-written by Neil Gaiman

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This is not a new concern. Marjorie Batchelder (McPharlin) and Virginia Lee Comer wrote a long essay on the subject more than fifty years ago.

PUPPETS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

An introduction to some of the current problems, how puppets can be used to illuminate them and two scenarios for plays.

By Marjorie Batchelder (McPharlin) and Virginia Lee Comer
Santa Fe, New Mexico, July, 1971

And they left no doubt as to their beliefs on the subject:

With all the attention now being paid to ecology and the environment, is it necessary for puppets to become involved? Yes indeed. Public apathy and ignorance, corporate greed, economic pressure, governmental ineptitude and conservatism still slow down the effort to "save the environment." Therefore, every available resource should be thrown into the battle, for victory is not at all certain.

And so we enlist our puppets in this great enterprise, and we make peace with the little angels and demons we meet along the way—local officials, students, area non-profits. And we make little gains at the local level. There are, of course, larger spheres—the great polluters, federal governments, international courts, banks and so on, and they will have to act in extremely bold ways—out of

self-interest, at the very least—if the biosphere as we know it is going to survive. "We the people," on the other hand, do not have much power to influence the large players. Sure, we can vote, protest, boycott and write letters, but the CEOs of Bayer, Exxon-Mobil, Pepsico and the like will need to be convinced absolutely that running a business that is sustainable with regard to the health of earth's systems will earn them money. Presidents and Prime Ministers must

truly believe that passing laws that promote sustainability will get them more votes and keep them in power. If not, I fear we will hunt the last wild elephants in order to turn their tusks into ivory crucifixes and the last of the Orangutan habitat will be cleared for palm oil plantations, in order that our snack foods may be both delicious and heart-healthy.

Puppeteers, though, are doing their best to get us—the everyday people who actually do most of the work in the world—to see how we can live better, use less, care for each other and the environment and perhaps even push off the apocalypse for a bit longer.

Some of the highlights in this issue? Heather Henson, who has championed the lot of Whooping Cranes and other endangered species since her teenage years (and is a daughter of our founding president, Jim Henson) shares some of her work with us. Greta Clough tells us about UNIMA-Iceland's proposal for an Arctic & Arctic Periphery Alliance as a special commission for UNIMA. Mikhail Baykov reviews

Air, a production in Bulgaria about the plastic bag—that necessary evil that allows us to carry things around in the lightest of containers (which then clog up our landfills and streams for the next few thousand years). Like *The Plastic Bag Store*, the Robin Frohardt piece we reviewed in our last issue, almost everything in *Air* is constructed from plastic bags. Other featured artists working for a better world are from Brazil, Japan, Vietnam, India, South Africa, Chile and our own U.S. of A. May you all be inspired!

— Andrew Periale

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— PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL —**
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Major donors are named on page 48.

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SPECIAL CITATIONS

These awards are given occasionally to members who have provided extraordinary service to UNIMA-USA.

This year two members have been recognized:



DONALD DEVET: Has been UNIMA-USA's webmaster for over 20 years. He is constantly updating and working with our editors, social media people and others to keep the site current and useful. He has served on the board and as its president.



MARIANNE TUCKER: For many years, Marianne was a board member, serving as president and head of the Citations Committee. She has continued in the latter position for many years after she went off the board.



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PUPPETS, RIVERS AND A VISION OF THE FINAL SPRING DECOLONIZING THE RIVER

by Aja Marneweck

We did know about the Redfin because as children we all went down to the river. The extinction of Redfin, in my mere opinion, could be linked to the extinction of who we once were. My people were forced to pack up and leave and settle in another place. We never settled, we never adapt, we're still struggling. So no, we are not just telling the story of one small fish and a small river, we are telling a story of disconnect, a story of loss, a political story, a history story (Kouter, 2018).

To invigorate, interrogate and activate awareness around climate change, species extinction and environmental protection in the 21st century through puppetry seems both a political and aesthetic proposition, especially from the position of artists and activists operating within the global South. The potential of the art form to raise public participation and to antagonize structures of power and hierarchy into action has been explored and variously documented in the fields of activism and the politically radical puppetry of such heavyweights as Bread and Puppet in the US or the Welfare State in the UK (Estrin and Simon, 2004 and Kershaw, 1983). Most recently the Handspring Puppet Company collaborated in a large-scale political public performance initiative in which Little Amal, a three-metre-high girl puppet walked across Europe to raise awareness of the plight of Syrian refugees through her appearances at various public events in multiple countries. The politico-aesthetics of large-scale puppetry and its visual propensity for spectacle have for centuries lent themselves to a galvanizing of publics, not only through the basic call of many hands to

materialize and generate such performance but the innate potential of puppetry to energize communal and public spaces. The appearance of puppetry in performance with and of publics is a widespread phenomenon across continents and, to bring this discussion closer to my own context in South Africa, a key characteristic of African puppetry that emerges through both traditional and contemporary public pageantry and masquerade.

In South Africa we have been asking how such large-scale public puppetry performance might generate questions from our particular positions in the Global South to creatively address the socio-ecological-political issues of climate change and ecological protection within our own context and environments. In a rural village in South Africa characterized by the ongoing racial, social and economic legacies of colonialism and petty apartheid in the 21st Century, a large-scale puppetry project, The Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade, has been using puppetry as its modus operandi to courageously challenge the divides between people and to shine a spotlight on the critical non-human ecosystems upon which we all depend and with whom we share this earth.



A GIANT REDFIN MINNOW, UKWANDA PUPPET COMPANY, BARRYDALE, 2018 PHOTO: JONATHON REESE

The Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade is a large-scale, puppetry driven performance project that for over a decade has sought to mobilize awareness, provocation and action within divided communities in South Africa. It is a multifaceted, collaborative puppet arts intervention designed to mobilize youths and children who live in this rural region, whose lives are marked by profound scarcity and the everyday legacies of racial injustice and economic disparity. The use of puppets to mobilize action and awareness specifically around our environmental impact was especially addressed through two parades and their spin-off projects and puppet events which took place from 2018-2021. *River and Redfin* in 2018 used puppetry, clowning and mask to bravely confront the very real issues of water scarcity faced in South Africa, and the 2019 parade *The Last Spring* saw the 150-strong cast of young people working on the parade to present a post-apocalyptic vision of an earth ravaged by human exploitation and greed.

The parade is developed the whole year round and culminates around the South African National Day of Reconciliation on the 16th of December every year, to instigate artistic bridges between the various communities of a farming town haunted by the political, economic and social divisions of its past and present. It was begun in 2010 as a collaborative project of the Handspring Puppet Trust in partnership with the Barrydale-based organization Net vir Pret (a local children's afterschool programme, providing crucial creative and developmental support for vulnerable rural children), the Maggie Arts Collective and the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape (CHR@UWC).

In 2018, *River and Redfin* played out against the backdrop of an imminent "Day Zero" in the Western Cape, with the city of Cape Town literally running out of water, as one of the worst droughts in South Africa's history, increasingly scarce water resources and the overuse



MR. AIR, UKWANDA PUPPET COMPANY FOR THE BARRYDALE GIANT PUPPET PARADE PHOTO: GRAHAM ABBOTT

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and exploitation of water brought us to the brink of catastrophe. Looking to the local river in Barrydale, the puppet parade wanted to raise a new consciousness and “perhaps a first ever conversation about the physical, political and economic issues that divide the river” (Shane Petzer, 2019). *River and Redfin* was a response to a public call to bring urgent awareness and action to issues of concern around the local river, the lifeblood that flows through the center of the village. Changes to the riverine environment over time have had devastating effects on a fynbos fish species, the Barrydale Redfin Minnow, endemic only to the Barrydale river system of the Cape Floral (or Floristic) Region, and now critically endangered. These unique freshwater fishes of the region, described as an ancient group, are found nowhere else in the world (Shelton et al, 2017).

Over 150 excited young people from Barrydale and surrounding farm areas enrolled in Net vir Pret’s puppet-making holiday program and came parading with their recycled material puppets down the hill, to the banks of the river where old and newly erected wire fencing clearly stated Keep Out. Private Property. No Trespassing. Suddenly, seen through the fencing in the distance, a giant River Spirit puppet walked down to the river-bank. The water had all but disappeared and the levels had dropped completely in the three weeks of rehearsal prior to this moment, the river emptied by worsening climate crises and drought, and the overuse of water pumps for private use, commercial agricultural extraction and human consumption. The onlookers gasped as the gigantic five-meter high river puppet raised its voluminous arms,

lifting precious water into the air in a gestural invocation, while a masked performer, human sized and dressed as a municipal water official, threatened the crowd to disperse, reminding them that they were trespassing on private property. From another part of the drying river, a three-meter long shimmering Red Fin Minnow puppet swam along the muddy course to a chorus of “Save the River, Save the Redfin!” spearheaded by the children and a large cast of student leaders and community-based performers. Each of them was holding up a Redfin puppet they’d made from recycled materials.

The process of creating the parade sought to enable new awarenesses and activities to emerge, different ways in which young people from Barrydale might begin to encounter and also re-imagine their history and relationships to water and resources in the town, their community and broader society. The use of puppets assisted the young people in raising critical social and cultural awareness, creatively confronting past and continuing water hegemonies around the Klein Huis River. It created a free, publicly accessible artistic platform in which they could raise questions around the continuing inaccessibility of the river as well as its overuse and abuse. The exclusions and controls around the river have impacted not only the people of Barrydale but also on the riverine ecosystem itself.

In response to these provocations, Net vir Pret began working closely with the governmental conservation body Cape Nature Conservation and an expanding informal group of “Eco Warriors,” young people from Barrydale who have been working continuously on river cleanup campaigns and

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mobilizations ever since the parade. Young people from Barrydale continue to be involved in weekly team clean-ups of the river and its environs:

The [Eco Warriors] group grew from an initial 8 to over 40 young people and they meet once a week to clean up the village. The Warriors are taught about environmental issues and they enjoy enormous support from local residents who have provided Wellington boots and equipment. Their work has made a noticeable difference to our streets and the condition of the river and they are currently working on a project to create a succulent garden, which will welcome visitors as they drive into Barrydale (Joubert 2020).

Following the environmentally focused provocations of 2018, and, in an almost prophetic moment of puppetry imagination, the parade collaborators lead by Net vir Pret decided to explore the story of *The Final Spring*, a parade that faced head on the possibility of the end of the world due to man-made environmental catastrophe. 2018 had seen the puppet parade tackling the abuse and destruction of water and the unthinkable prospect of running out of it. 2019 saw the young people of Barrydale stepping up to meet their anxieties around climate change and the frightening possibility of a future planet devastated by our actions. “The Final Spring” presented a vision of a post-apocalyptic world wrought by the effects of climate change and humanity. In the performance, nearly all organic life has been wiped out and the scorched planet is inhabited by a four-meter-high giant machine called Mr. AIR (Air as an acronym for Agricultural Intelligence Revolution), rolling heavily across the landscape shooting noxious insecticide gasses into the air, while a handful of insects survive to save the last seedlings on the planet.

Three months after the parade, our world was indeed forever changed as we faced the global epidemic of COVID-19 and the literal shut down of life as we knew it.

Why a story about a fish, many would ask? What about other topics other than nature and conservation? My answer to this is—our story is the kind of story where there’s a story within a story. Yes we’re telling the global story of climate, of conservation, but our story which is a story behind the story, is actually about people and places and a river runs through it (Sudonia Kouter, 2019).



A GIANT RIVER SPIRIT PUPPET PARADES UP THE HILL IN BARRYDALE, SOUTH AFRICA. PHOTO: JONATHON REESE

The use of imagery, storytelling through the forms and meaning of puppetry, is generating a new cultural imagination within the minds of the young people of Barrydale, crucial to exploring issues around the environment, climate change and conservation. Through a puppet parade the community has sought to reclaim not only physical, political and economic spaces, but also the cultural, creative and relational spaces of people and nature, of the connection to the earth itself, and in the form of the puppet, of the River and Redfin as living entities with their own rights to survive and flourish.

AJA MARNEWECK is a senior lecturer and the convener of the Laboratory of Kinetic Objects and Puppetry Arts (LoKO), in the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR), University of the Western Cape (UWC). She is a puppeteer and theatre maker specializing in Practice as Research in Puppetry Performance. Marnebeck was also the creative director of the Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade for LoKO, a landmark large-scale public puppet arts intervention founded by the Handspring Puppet Trust, the NPO Net Vir Pret Barrydale and the CHR@UWC.

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A VISION OF A FINAL SPRING AT THE BARRYDALE GIANT PUPPET PARADE 2019. PHOTO: GRAHAM ABBOTT



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THE ICELANDIC INITIATIVE

by Greta Clough

As I sit here looking out the studio window at the fjord on a cold yet sun-soaked day in Hvammstangi, Northwest Iceland, it is easy to let the mind wander. Earlier in the day I took the dog down to the nearby beach to collect driftwood and other less natural debris washed to the shore by the tides. There was a small pod of whales blowing not far from the shore. The dog barked at some seals as they peeked out of the waves, curiosity written in their eyes. I am drawn to the texture of tangled plastic bags that have been stretched and faded by their time in the sea. It feels like a strange new seaweed or mermaid hair. Discarded fishing net created the infrastructure for sand piles and modern housing units for an assortment of sea creatures. The rock crabs are new to these waters. They seem to be thriving. A couple of lads from a nearby village have started a crab fishing business to generate income and control the expanding crab population—adapting to and utilizing the natural resources available to them. In the same village a woman is exploring the different ways seaweed can be used as a sustainable food source in Iceland. She is making dehydrated soup stock. Every day the ocean brings something new to our shores. Sometimes it is lumber from Russia, other times gallon milk jugs from the USA. Often it is more local products—those are the ones that hurt when you see them.

It is easy to paint a picture of Iceland as an environmental utopia. It is recognized as one of the most sustainable countries, using renewable energy sources to provide heat, electricity, hot

water, and to power greenhouses. It wasn't until the 1970s that Iceland really began to develop as a modern country. Up until that point the United Nations classified Iceland as a developing nation—lacking infrastructure, knowledge about the potential of its resources and still emerging from centuries of poverty and foreign rule. It was not environmental concern that drove the shift to renewables in Iceland—but an economic one, as the country could not afford to import oil.

It also was not large-scale government initiatives that started Iceland's shift from fossil fuels to renewables. It was rural entrepreneurs. It was a small independent farm holder who first started exploring the use of geothermal energy to power his remote farmstead. This idea was then picked up by small municipalities, and eventually taken up by the national government at which time funding for research and implementation was allocated.

Things tend to start small here. People, especially rural people, are stubborn and independent. You have to be when you are this isolated. It is a difficult and unrelenting lifestyle out here.

The puppetry community in Iceland is small and spread out across the country. We are often isolated and operate on the fringe of society. Our community of professionals is overwhelmingly made up of residents of foreign origin; people who have immigrated here however many months, years, decades ago and decided to practice their art here despite the challenges.

Like the shift to renewable energy resources, Iceland's shift to sustainable approaches to theatre is being driven not by large institutions, but by individual artists. This is in turn picked up by institutions as artists are given a platform for their work.

As artists our ability to affect change through our practice is very limited. But our ability to create impact through sharing stories, through youth work, through conversation is vast.



OWL PUPPET FROM ENGI, HANDBENDI BRÚÐLEIKHÚS

Last year Helga Arnalds, Artistic Director of 10 Finger Theatre, created a beautiful show at Borgarleikhús (City Theatre in Reykjavik) which used only recycled materials to create the set and costumes. It was a striking visual and a thoughtful and touching story. There has been in general an increase in this kind of theatrical production, certainly throughout Europe, that uses found plastics and upcycled items to create characters, sets, and installations. Bernd Ogrodnik is an advocate for the holistic self-sustainable lifestyle of the artist and use of natural materials, particularly the art of wood carving, which produces the exceptionally designed and crafted puppets we all admire. I applaud these efforts. I think they are worthy and effective when the dramaturgical work supports it. My own company, Handbendi Brúðleikhús, uses primarily found and natural materials to create sets and puppets. I rarely buy any materials since moving to Northwest Iceland, as I tend to be inspired by the world immediately around me. It is a privilege I enjoy due to my choice to live remotely. It is also a sacrifice. It is not always easy to work in this place. Planning is often your enemy here. While living the mission is important for our personal motivations and integrity, it is even more important to concentrate on being good at our job—being good storytellers and artists—doing the work that delivers the message. This is where we have impact. In December 2020, the town of Seyðisfjörður in the East of Iceland experienced a series of devastating mudslides that swept large sections of the town into the fjord—the result of an unusual amount of rainfall and the thawing of arctic permafrost. The town is protected by barriers, but this



TRÖLL, HANDBENDI BRÚÐLEIKHÚS
PHOTO: HELEN MURRAY



HELGA ARNALDS: *THE GIRL WHO STOPPED THE WORLD* [HTTPS://WWW.TIUFINGUR.IS/](https://www.tiufingur.is/)

time it was different. The thawing of permafrost meant that sections of land previously immune to mudslides were now vulnerable. No one saw it coming. No one was prepared for a mudslide of this scale in that location.

Tess Rivarola, a puppetry artist from Paraguay, had recently moved to the village of 670 people earlier in the year to teach art at the local school. The conversation Tess encountered with her students and local community following the mudslides drove her to question how she could inspire her students and support community healing through arts engagement.

Despite experiencing the impact of climate change in a direct and immediate way, the view of many residents was that, although climate change was a recognized global problem, its effects did not impact their lives “here in Iceland.” The way Iceland has been marketed is at least partially responsible for this perception. If you constantly send out the message that something is flawless, that is what will be believed.

In the same way the USA thinks of itself as the greatest nation on earth despite the evidence to the contrary, Iceland believes in its own image of environmental perfection. And while we are privileged to live in a very clean natural environment, we are not immune to the climate crisis. The arctic is warming at four times the rate of the the rest of the world. The reduction of sea ice, glaciers, and permafrost is rapid and visible as are the changes in weather. And while we joke about how nice it is on the warm days, I struggle to envision myself or my community enduring many more winters like we have had in recent years up here in the north, or to withstand the increasingly powerful wind in what is already considered the third windiest place in the world (the other two being uninhabited). Even the old farmers—the folks who have lived here their entire lives, some of whom remember living in the old turf huts with no electricity to speak of—are saying how difficult it is.

So, climate change has been on our minds here. At the last UNIMA World Congress, UNIMA Iceland proposed an Arctic & Arctic Periphery Alliance special commission to unite our puppetry communities across this region. The aims of the commission would be to share stories about, for and from the Arctic regions, to research, document and promote indigenous arctic communities, art, and storytelling traditions, and to promote dialogue about climate change and what local people are doing to adapt to rapid environmental changes.

The proposal was met with mixed reactions. Why do we need a special commission for the Arctic region? Can this not be something that the European commission does? Is it necessary for UNIMA to be so active in the discussion about climate change?

The Arctic and Arctic Periphery region is extremely fragile. Just as sea ice is melting and weather is changing, languages and cultures are disappearing with little acknowledgement of what is happening.

What does that feel like, to witness the loss of your culture to circumstances outside of your control—to have your experiences, your world disregarded by larger nations? To be forgotten at the edge of the habitable world? As climate change has an ever-greater impact on the habitability of the world, what are we doing to support and record cultures that will undoubtedly be lost to the need to adapt to global changes (including climate-based migration)?

I have been thinking a lot about what stories I want to tell and how they want to be told—about the people I enjoy working with, the partnerships that bring joy and complicity, and the ones that do the opposite; about materials, how we approach international touring, and how to advocate for change; how to lead by example. I have been thinking about the world my daughter and her friends will be living in and how the gift of creativity and stories will help them adapt to and effect an ever-changing world.

I read an article the other day in the *New York Times*, which said that Arizona is likely to become the first uninhabitable state in the US with temperatures rising rapidly. According to all reports on climate change recently read, we need to prepare for mass migration. To me this means opening the conversation about cultural diversity and what that means for our small nation. How will Iceland adapt to hundreds of thousands of climate refugees in the coming decades? How will the conversation change? What cultural remnants will survive the changes to come?

Stories of the effects of climate change—personal authorial stories—are more frequently rural, as the impacts are possibly more evident to those who make their living from the land itself. This is why it is vital that we support rural-based artists. Share the story of the woman who has lived in the same house in the same village for ninety

years and watched her region thrive and struggle in equal measure. Tell the story of the child who listens to the breathing of the earth as she explores the world in isolation. Showcase the artist who works in the least accessible corners of the world so their experience can be heard. These voices matter to our understanding of the world as it is, has been, and will be.

These are the kinds of stories the UNIMA Arctic Alliance is interested in promoting. Stories of, or related to, the lives and experiences of people and animals who call the arctic home. Through stories we can increase awareness and empathy: We connect. And that is how we can affect dialogue and change.

Sharing every step of success, no matter how small, is influential. The public participates in a transition that they understand and want. In Iceland, the municipalities that had gained steady access to geothermal hot water became powerful role models for others to do the same. It is my sincere belief that as artists we can be a powerful voice for change when we work together and shout about our successes, share the work our compatriots are doing, get the word out, and let it be known that we are here. That we see. That we hear. And that we feel. That our stories matter.

I told you it is easy to let the mind wander here. I’m about to take the dog out again. The wind has picked up, but he is insistent that we get down to the sea one more time today. The fjord will look completely different in this weather than it did earlier. Everything is so changeable. In our lifetime, this

little village might grow, become huge even. The ocean currents could change—taking the seals and the whales with them as they did the herring and the shrimp before. The glaciers will melt. It is hard for us to envision and believe in such fundamental changes. But we must. In order to survive. And we, the artists of the world, need to be open to teaching others to imagine such big, earth-shattering concepts. Through stories. That is my vision of sustainability.



HEIMFERD MEMORY BOX 1: HANDBENDI BRÚÐULEIKHUS

GRETA CLOUGH is an international award winning Amercian puppeteer and theater director based in Hvammstangi, Northwest Iceland. She is the Artistic Director of Handbendi Brúðuleikhús and the Hvammstangi International Puppetry Festival, former Associate Artist at Little Angel Theatre, London, and the president of UNIMA Iceland.

SCAN THIS CODE TO READ GRETA CLOUGH'S ARTICLE ON THE ICELANDIC INITIATIVE.



CONNECTING TO NATURE THROUGH PUPPETS

by

Heather Henson with Brenna Ross

What are the innate qualities of natural materials? Movement implies life. When we observe a tree, how do we know it is alive? The wind moves through the leaves, stirring subtle movement. It breathes. Ripples dancing on the surface of water seem to carry emotion. What do we learn when we place ourselves into the consciousness of nature?

Over my years of producing environmental spectacles, I have seen how puppets can be these powerful connectors to nature. Growing up surrounded by the technicolor kaleidoscope of synthetic fur and foam innovations that made up the Muppets, I found myself drawn more towards the natural wonder in my backyards in the northeast. As puppeteers we manipulate objects, imbuing them with life, but I wanted to work with materials that already have lives of their own. Many of my early projects consisted of manipulating found and foraged materials—like driftwood and shells—as a way to explore the elements and life forces in the landscapes around us. Over time my work shifted from celebrating the abstract flow of nature to reanimating animals, to specifically focusing on cranes.

I found that by focusing on this one, broadly-dispersed animal, I could make connections with the many crane cultures around the world.



ENDANGERED SPECIES PARADE, DETROIT, MI, 2013



L TO R - ADELKA POLAK, HENU JOSEPHINE TARRANT, JOAN HENRY IN *AJIAAK ON TURTLE ISLAND* AT LAMAMA EXPERIMENTAL THEATER, 2018 PHOTO: RICHARD TERMINE

I saw my first crane at the Rhode Island Zoo when I was a student intern. My job was to use the zoo's crane puppet to encourage the orphaned baby African Gray-Crowned Crane to walk around its enclosure, strengthening its legs, while preventing it from imprinting on humans. I was fascinated by this bird and spent my breaks reading about the work of the International Crane Foundation. As I read, I learned about the fifteen species of cranes around the world—and learned how each of them was reflected in the cultures of the communities that lived in proximity to them.

When I moved to Orlando, FL, I continued my research on cranes and the wildlife of the Florida wetlands. I closely followed an initiative led by scientists to reintroduce the endangered Whooping Crane back to the east coast, culminating in Florida. My research resulted in a show that became the UNIMA-USA Citation-winning *Panther and Crane*. The visual spectacle of this production allowed a sharp contrast between the beauty of a healthy environment in balance and the man-made environmental disasters around these creatures.

One of our longest-running projects in Orlando, the Endangered Species Parade now run by the Big Potato Foundation) returns the animals of the Florida wetlands to the urban spaces in which they would have historically lived. We paired these parade puppets (by Davy Jordan) and kites (by Curtiss Mitchell) with craft activity puppets (by John Kennedy) to encourage the participants to become these animals and connect with nature through role playing, creating a tactile experience for all those involved.



ATTENDEES MAKE THEIR CRAFT PUPPETS AT ENDANGERED SPECIES PARADE, 2015

I continue to be fascinated by the different aspects of this annual migration and how it stitches together different landscapes, communities and cultures around the world. As migratory birds, these cranes have an innate relationship and dependence on the changing seasons, which has been a through line in my shows *Celebration of Flight*, *Flight: A Crane Story*, and *Crane: On Earth, In Sky*.

Through the evolution of these shows, I learned about and met members of the indigenous communities along the Whooping Crane's migration path. The knowledge carried by these birds continues to be carried by these vibrant communities. Relationships with these knowledge holders and native theater-makers allowed me to produce *Ajijaak on Turtle Island* written by Ty Defoe, with original music by Defoe, Kevin Tarrant, and Dawn Avery & Larry Mitchell. Telling the story of this resilient bird allows us to bring together stories and teachings from the many First Nations peoples along Ajijaak's path. Ajijaak—the Ojibwe word for Crane—was developed with members of the Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk, Lakota, Pawnee, Mohawk, and Cherokee Nations and offers experiences that demonstrate reciprocal connection between the

planet and its inhabitants. I am grateful beyond words to have been able to bring together my passion for visualizing environmental issues with our magnificent team of storytellers, composers and the exceptional team of native and native-allied artists who have developed this show with us over many years.

In recent years, I've returned to the Connecticut forests to find safety and peace through connecting to the land near where I grew up. Rebuilding my personal relationship with this ecosystem has been inspiring: learning the gifts of the forest, foraging for foods and finding where to harvest living spring water. I began gardening, nurturing dormant little seeds with my attention and coaxing the basic elements into the life-giving leaves, flowers, fruits, stems and roots that sustain me. At my woodland sit spot, I can observe the seasonal changes in my forest friends—the trees, plants, chipmunks, squirrels, song birds, raptors, amphibians and insects. Trying to live in balance with nature has finally become a daily practice and I am grateful to be moving in the kaleidoscope of a living tapestry.

As an artist and puppeteer, this shift of focus in my daily life has recentered

for me the ways in which the arts, performing arts and puppetry specifically provide unique insights into the inner lives of the beings around us. By becoming the animals, plants and elemental forces we perform, we're able to form—for ourselves and our audiences—personal relationships with the natural world. With the cranes as a guide, we can build networks between people, communities, cultures, environments and activists around the world. Over the years my work has been grounded in reconnecting people with land through immersive environmental spectacles and hands-on workshops. I'm continuing to seek ways to integrate sustainable artistic and life-ways practices that center and inspire better ways of living in harmony with the world around us.

HEATHER HENSON is an artist and educator who values lifeways in balance with nature, native value systems, the creative spirit of artistic expression in puppetry & other crafts, community and family.

BRENNA ROSS is a producer and general manager for Green Feather Foundation and IBEX Puppetry and is on the board of the Puppetry Guild of Greater New York.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH SILENCIO BLANCO'S DOMINGA GUTIÉRREZ

by Ana Díaz Barriga



Dominga Gutiérrez is co-founder, producer, and puppeteer of Chilean puppet company Silencio Blanco. We spoke on May 31, 2022 about the company's previous work, their upcoming project, and the importance of objects for memory and the environment. I translated fragments of our conversation that focused on their renowned performance *Pescador* [Fisherman] and the importance of giving a second life to objects. Silencio Blanco's new documentary on the research they conducted for *Pescador* is available at: <https://vimeo.com/640791139>.

Ana: First of all, I would like to ask you about a fundamental aspect of Silencio Blanco's use of materials in performances, namely your use of simple materials: paper, tape, wood. What led you to decide to use these materials?

Dominga: I think the aesthetic of Silencio Blanco is related to our philosophy of theater and life. The idea we have about giving a second life to things is related to questions we have about how everything is so disposable nowadays. Before, you would buy a fridge for the rest of your life, and nowadays, it lasts two years. So we are, so to speak, opposed to the idea that things are disposable. We don't look for new things or build from scratch; we'd rather give a second life to materials and things because they are already there. Our use of materials relates to that vision, which also connects to the themes of our productions: We want to rescue what already exists, like the lives of fishermen or miners. It is connected with the idea of rescuing the quotidian. We are not seeking to invent a new science fiction story, but rather we look at what is really close to us. It is about looking at our "everyday" from a closer perspective.

A: You focus a lot on artisanal professions that are disappearing, such as miners and fishermen. Could you tell me more about the relationship between the materials you use and your focus on these professions?

D: It is connected to wanting to rescue what is in front of our eyes but that we don't often stop to look at. We live in Chile, a country with a large coast that is full of fishermen, so we have seen them our entire lives, but it's as if they're just there, a part of everything; we never wonder about what happens in their everyday. They are workers who are all around us, and it is related to that—rescuing what is close to us. In general, people search too far. They want to build on things that are very far away, and we try to look for things that are closer. In that sense this focus is related to the environment; I don't need to import silicon from a different country. Actually, the first puppet that Santiago built was made from branches of a tree, not because he wanted to comment on the environment, but because that is what he had access to.¹

ALL PHOTOS FROM *PESCADOR*, COURTESY OF SILENCIO BLANCO

A: Speaking of *Pescador* more specifically, could you tell me about the relationship you observed, and that you wanted to portray, between the fisherman and the environment?

D: On the one hand, there is the constant presence of the industrial ship. You can hear it; yet it is the antagonist that you can't see. It is that low sound that you hear as if it were approaching to attack artisanal fishing. In Chile, artisanal fishing has been threatened and erased by all of these big, foreign ships. So, it is related to rescuing a profession that we could say is in a one-on-one fight—meaning the fisherman and his rowboat in front of the ocean, without this giant technology. And we realized that it was very hard to talk about that fisherman because that fisherman doesn't exist anymore. We were inspired by the people who live from the sea, but not necessarily artisanal fishermen who have already been consumed, so to speak. But now fishermen have a relationship with the environment that is in some ways polluted by what the system needs for them to be able to generate sales and we wanted to go back to the roots.

A: But you went to do some fieldwork visiting fishermen...?

D: Yes, we spent twelve days in the Caletas del Maule in Constitución and observed the fishermen. And we realized that the romantic idea of the artisanal fisherman with a boat and net that we had imagined did not exist anymore. We deromanticized the character of the fisherman a little bit, but we still wanted to talk about his relationship with the environment; what it is like when they are alone at sea; the relationship they have when they observe where the wind is going, where the birds are moving. Everything that nature gives them is information that, in general, we let pass, but for them it is actually necessary.

A: How did you decide what parts of that experience to portray in *Pescador*?

D: The story was built through the images that remained in our eyes, and how we wanted to let the audience feel these images that are so immeasurable because the life of the fishermen is very immeasurable. I mean, the ocean is huge. So, the narration was built through that and the constant presence of the ship that comes and brings bottom trawling with it and will consume it all. The ship is the constant threat that you hear in *Pescador*, and it is so big that you can't compete with it. At the end, when the fisherman sighs and lowers his head when he hears the ship, it's like saying: "Here it goes again." Every day he needs to fish one, two, ten fish, versus this ship that comes and devastates the bottom of the ocean and everything that exists. It is a fight that you can't even call a fight because it is so uneven.

A: What role do you think puppets play in inviting us to reevaluate our role in the world?

D: I think it makes us perceive life from this perspective where everything exists; all matter can have life. On the other hand, the puppet can personify the magic that exists in the everyday and we do not see. The fact that we believe in something that is, in reality, an object, but is also truly communicating something. The puppet shows up in many superhuman ways of understanding and perceiving the world; it can illustrate many forces that come together. For example, when a puppet is manipulated by three puppeteers, the energy of three people comes together. Imagine that on a huge scale in nature. It goes beyond whether one believes in magic or not. In the puppet you can see magic, and in nature too.

A: Why use puppets for *Pescador*?

D: I think the change in proportion helps us show simpler and more human stories. I believe it lets us linger on the details and deconstruct our mind. Seeing the fiction that the



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puppet shows lets you see everything from a different perspective. It is not the same as if you were to act it out. If it was a real actor, we see that every day, but what the puppet allows is a complete change of proportion. It is magic, but real magic. This change of proportions lets us focus on details that we don't see on a human scale; it distorts the order of the human brain.

A: Could you explain more?

D: It is not the same, for instance, to see an actor preparing a piece of bread with butter at a table, as it is to see a miniature table with all the same things, and a puppet—that is clearly not human because it is clearly made of paper—doing exactly the same, with the same gesture, the same movement, the same subtlety. This is a puppet that in reality is being moved by three people. It is completely different. If you want to focus on that gesture of how this being is getting a piece of bread, you see it completely differently if you see it done by a puppet. We are accustomed to seeing other humans, so seeing something different changes the proportions and shakes things up, making us focus more.

A: The impression that I have is this feeling that gestures and objects themselves connect us, right?

D: Yes.

A: The pieces you make also connect us with the environment. Is it then about connecting with the human through the environment?

D: It is not the environment and the human: We are part of the environment! The puppets are anthropomorphic. We have not yet made puppets of the wind or of fire; human bodies have done that, transforming and changing their materiality. So, an object becomes human, and a human body becomes the sea, the foam, the rocks in *Pescador*.



A: When you do your performances, what is the dream?

D: The dream is for people to get excited. We are not seeking to change the world. Maybe we want to, but I don't know if we are intending to do it with our work. If we did, we would live a more frustrating life. I don't think *Pescador* is going to end industrial fishing and recover artisanal fishing. It is not about that, but rather rendering homage to those professions. Taking them out of the museum and the books and placing them there so we can linger on things that the museum and the books don't linger on.

A: You've just created a documentary about the process you underwent when creating *Pescador*; why did you choose to document your fieldwork and research?

D: A lot of time and a lot of depth goes into creating a performance. And the performance is a thing, but to get to that there was a lot of research that is also interesting to show. Just as we show the profession of the fishermen,

it is interesting to show our profession as creators and for people to know more in depth what our lives and our profession are about. It is not just standing on a stage and acting. All the complexities of our profession are interesting to show.

A: Can you tell me more about this part of your work of doing your performances with the communities that inspired them?

D: For me these performances are giving back to the people what belongs to them. They were an inspiration for us, but it is their history. We were inspired by them, so we return that gift. Like, whoever gave you the flour to make the cake, you give them a piece of cake. And in a greater and more important sense, it is related to the fact that we focus on sectors that are socially more vulnerable and showing them as protagonists is something socially beautiful. The production we did on Friday was a gigantic production, we set up a wonderful stage, we rented lights, we really invested money and intention to show it to the fishermen and for them to see themselves as protagonists of the story.

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A: You only have one of each of your puppets, and—I think you also mention this in the documentary—what happens when the puppets break?

D: We fix them because every puppet gets filled with everything, it soaks in the performers that have manipulated it, it soaks up its history. The old puppets are full of history, so it would be too weird to say, "Hey, it is too old, we should change it." The materiality gets filled up with the history of performances in its body, just like an old actor would. So, we always fix them. If we need to cover them up with newspaper, we cover them up, but we don't make them again.

A: Thank you!

ANA DÍAZ BARRIGA is a puppetry practitioner and scholar, and a doctoral candidate in the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Theatre and Drama at Northwestern University.

ENDNOTE

¹ Santiago Tobar is Silencio Blanco's co-founder and artistic director.

When the rats start to worry about climate change, look out!



Climate change is not only a human issue, but an inter-species crisis affecting all living things. If humans continue to ignore the effects of climate change, we will lose what we hold dear, including many of the diverse species that share our planet. This is a video series in development by DONALD DEVET, Web Master of UNIMA-USA.ORG.

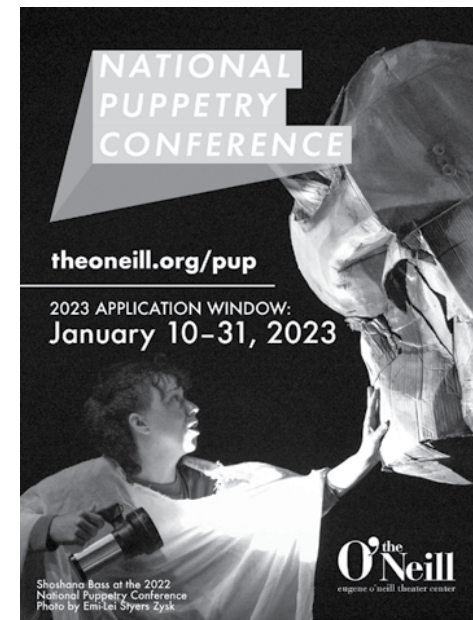
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SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE LEARNING IN BRAZILIAN PUPPETRY

by Mayumi Ilari

Among the several forms and groups of puppet theatre present in Brazil today, the mamulengo tradition is certainly the oldest and one of the most representative forms of popular puppetry in the country. Varying in form and sizes, and initially adapted from early European influences during the colonial times, this puppet form developed characters and themes of its own, mixing local culture and traditional elements. Along with Brazilian dramatic dances and folguedos, regional collective dances and festivities in which typical embellished ox puppets play a central role, these historical artistic forms have been both preserved and renewed by local artists throughout the times. The aim of this article is to briefly introduce contemporary variations in Brazilian puppetry that addresses issues related to environmental preservation and sustainability, whether using more modern stage puppetry and devices, or inspired by traditional Brazilian folk puppetry, now modified and set in the Amazonian region.

The vital topics of climate change and sustainability have become more and more urgent, as, locally, the Amazonian forest is progressively being burned down, in the highest rates of deforestation in decades. "A planet made of tears and piles of scrap" is the title of the introduction to the recent 25th issue of the *Móin-Móin – Revista de Estudos sobre Teatro de Formas*

Animadas, a key Brazilian journal of puppetry. In this edition, dedicated to the themes of puppetry, ecology and sustainability, its editors and authors manage to address the growing concern with human activity and the current transformations in our planet that have led to a predictable collapse in natural resources and the environment. Among its varied texts and reflections on worldwide theatrical, socioeconomic and environmental issues, involving the challenges of ecology and the various issues that involve sustainability, a main question seemed to return, over and over, as we read through the articles: In which ways do puppetry, art and its values contribute to our survival, working against nature's degradation and spoliation? With this central question in mind, we chose to recall two different types of Brazilian puppetry productions that deal more directly with the issue of preservation.

The first of them includes the plays and puppets that deal directly with themes related to the Amazonian forest and its native inhabitants, fauna and flora. Such plays, created and performed by mostly urban companies, shine a spotlight on themes such as those of the legendary *Animals of Brazil*, *Amazonian Baby Animals* and themes of forest preservation, such as *The Last Tree*, to name only a few iconic national productions. The memory and preservation of indigenous culture, myths and legends is also part of this category of puppet plays. Beautiful examples were *The Legend of the Guaraná Fruit*, *Cobra Norato*, and *Iara, the Spell of the Waters*, by, respectively, three renowned and award-winning companies: PiaFraus, Giramundo and Lumiató.

PHOTOS 1-3 AT MAMULENGO MUSEUM, OLINDA, PERNAMBUCO BY THE AUTHOR



MAMULENGOS IN A TYPICAL JUNE FESTIVITY

Whether calling attention to the forest and its inhabitants or to the myths and culture of its original native inhabitants, such shows help bring awareness to the importance of the environment, the forest and all of the cultural heritage that surrounds it. Only very recently, in 2015, has the popular puppet theatre of mamulengos become part of Brazil's intangible cultural heritage. In a country of deep colonial roots that has always praised foreign rules and modes, traditional popular culture (such as mamulengo puppetry, indigenous and African-Brazilian popular cultural manifestations of all sorts) must struggle to be acknowledged; in that sense, the puppetry of the aforementioned companies is a beautiful and necessary, vivid reminder and enhancer of the country's roots and original cultures.

A second type of puppet production related to environmental preservation and sustainability is one which not only thematically, but also formally, foments a local sustainable culture. Such theatre is more closely related to mamulengo and earlier folk



MAMULENGO PEASANTS MAKING MANIOC FLOUR



TYPICAL MATEUS AND CATRINA PUPPETS, MAMULENGO MUSEUM

These new and yet more traditional type of shows mentioned here are those performed by Jabuti-Bumbá, a fairly new company born in 2005 in the Amazonian Acre, one of the most remote states in the western extreme of the North region of Brazil. The creators of the company, a family of local artists, chose the popular Bumba-Meu-Boi tradition as its main inspiration, yet substituted its central character, an ox (or boi), by a jabuti, or tortoise: This new character is a colorful and larger-than-life tortoise puppet whose image strongly resembles the traditional large dancing and embellished popular ox puppet of Bumba-Meu-Boi. Strongly influenced by diverse regional and Amazonian cultural manifestations, the company mixes local and popular rhythms, legends, history, myths and dances, in order to address and denounce the growing destruction of the Amazon forest. In that sense, the jabuti represents the very claim for preservation of life in the forest: The tortoise, though bearing a thick and strong shell, is the first species to be victimized in the fires, since it is too slow to run and escape from the flames.

A symbol of nature and endurance, it dances with red Mapinguari, a local and legendary Amazonian monster, and honors religious and legendary characters, such as Our Lady of the Rubber Tree (Nossa Senhora da Seringueira) and fathers Joseph (José) and Pilgrim (Peregrino) or local environment leaders such as Chico Mendes, Hélio Mello and Matias, while executing rhythms and dances of Acrean popular religions. Nossa Senhora da Seringueira, the Holy Mother of rubber trees, a local Christian entity, is the patroness of the festivity, along with Santo Daime, a syncretic religious manifestation that was born in Acre in 1910, congregating alternately Catholicism, African rituals and Kardecism.

While the original ox puppet in the Bumba-Meu-Boi tradition may be considered a symbol of abundance from the cattle cycle in 19th century northeastern Brazil, in the Amazonian state of Acre, on the contrary, the ox is currently viewed as a living symbol of destruction of the Amazon forest: In the rush for profits at any cost, the state's lands are increasingly being burned down, turned into pasture and populated with the beef cattle which will in the end replace the tortoises (and several other local native species, along with the forest).

Closer in form to the Brazilian popular dramatic dances than to theatrical performances, the folk dances and puppetry created by Jabuti-Bumbá, dancing and parading in the streets and local and public festivities, compose a popular and collective form of art, a lively artistic experience accessible to all. Born against the devastation of the forest and the exploitation of animal life, it reinvents a traditional art form in our current historical reality, creating a new identity for its players and audience. A grassroots company defending its neighbor forest with papier-mâché

turtles wearing calico fabric and colorful ribbons, it performs directly against the anti-forest authorities and the locally powerful, much resembling the typically oppressed characters of mamulengo or Bumba-Meu-Boi, who happily addressed and inverted patterns of colonial violence, while dancing, playing and making fun of the oppressors.

In times of predatory exploitation of the forest and the environment, performing against the unavoidable degradation of a society based on conspicuous production and consumerism, this kind of popular theatre adds to its inspiring folk traditions important and new elements of indigenous, African and Amazonian roots, re-creating, through its art, for the group and audience participants, different possibilities of being in the world, as certainly do, in varying degrees and forms, all good puppetry.

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GIRL WITH TORTOISE PUPPET, COMPANY JABUTI-BUMBÁ



THE SPELL OF THE WATER, COMPANY LUMIATA PHOTO: DIEGO BRESANI

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FUKAZE DEKUMAWASHI

A 350-YEAR-OLD JAPANESE PUPPETRY TRADITION'S FATE, TIED TO THE LAND

by Claudia Orenstein

Three hundred and fifty years ago, a small town in the mountains of Japan's Ishikawa Prefecture became the birthplace of a unique form of puppetry whose performance tradition continues today¹. The story of its origin, as commonly told, attributes its beginnings to the area's famous heavy snowfalls and long winters. The harsh conditions have even led locals, when referring to *yuki*, the word for snow, to jokingly say it as *yūki*, with a long rather than a short vowel sound. This utterance not only reflects the length of the extended mountain season, but also turns the word "snow" into the word "courage," the characteristic most required to get through Fukaze winters. The story of the puppetry form's origin has it that a troupe of itinerant puppeteers were traveling through the area when the snowfalls hit, stranding them in the town, unable to move on or return home until the spring thaw. The people of Fukaze village, taking pity on the puppeteers, housed and fed them through the cold months. In return for this hospitality, the performers taught the villagers their art, leaving them a set of puppets to carry on what would become an annual entertainment in celebration of the lunar new year, continuing for centuries, long after the performers had departed.

¹ I AM GRATEFUL TO FULBRIGHT and my 2021-22 Fulbright Research Fellowship and to a grant from the PSC-CUNY, the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York, for funding this research. I am thankful to the Mayor and staff of Hakusan City Hall, especially Urano Ayako and my tireless interpreter Evan Rostetter, to the curators at the Hakusan City Museum and the Hakusan Folk Museum, and to all the members of the Fukaze Dekumawashi Preservation Society, especially those mentioned in this article, who have been immeasurably helpful and generous in their support of this research. I am also grateful to Professor Marty Holman, who invited me to be part of his Tokubei-za puppetry performance in Hakusan City, where I first became acquainted with Fukaze Dekumawashi and troupe members.

No concrete evidence corroborates this story, but a further explanation as to why this small village was able to not only take up the art of puppetry but also sustain it for so long, is related to other aspects of Fukaze's natural environment. During the non-winter months, families in adjacent villages would move higher up the mountainsides behind their homes to farm. After burning out the previous year's fields, they would plant them anew with a series of annually rotating crops and the local staple, rice. Fukaze, however, was at the bottom of a steeply inclined hillside that did not lend itself to farming, but it had the advantage of being rich with *hinoki*: Japanese cypress trees. Another village legend tells of a monk who came to the town and taught the locals how to make thinly slivered strips of wood from these trees and weave them into various products, including baskets and, importantly, *hinokigasa*, triangular hats essential for farmers and others as protection from sun, rain, and snow. No concrete evidence corroborates the monk story either, but history shows that during Japan's Edo period (1603-1867), Fukaze thrived as one of only four areas in the country making the all-important *hinokigasa*.



NEWER PUPPETS THE TROUPE USES IN PERFORMANCE, TODAY, HOUSED IN THE REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE SPACE

This small village produced around 20,000 hats each year and even established a distribution system throughout the region by which they would leave bulk stocks of items with other villages that then orchestrated their further sales throughout the country. Fukaze, which in the oldest records had only thirteen households, by 1877 had grown to 69 households, in spite of having no increase in land. The trade was so lucrative, in fact, that by 1950, they had devastated the local Japanese cypress population and needed to travel to a sawmill in Nara, a three-hour drive from Hakusan, to get the natural materials that once grew abundantly in their own backyards.

What does any of this have to do with puppetry? When something is called a “tradition,” it can seem to have existed from time immemorial, or at least to have somehow been preordained to take shape. It can be easy to forget the efforts required to develop and sustain a performing art, especially one with the complex mix of components found in Fukaze Dekumawashi. Fukaze puppetry is a form of *bunya ningyō*—a puppet tradition that predates *ningyō jōruri*, also now known as *bunraku*—in which a skilled chanter recites the dialogue and narration of a dramatic text while puppets act out the story. The *bunya* chanting style is different from what became, in the 17th century, the more popular *jōruri* style found in today’s *bunraku*, and each puppet in *bunya ningyō* is manipulated by a single puppeteer rather than by the three people required for the current *bunraku* technique that developed in the 18th century. A once flourishing art, there are currently only four prefectures in Japan where versions of *bunya ningyō* still exist: Ishikawa, Sado, Kagoshima, and Miyazaki, each with its own distinct take on the form. Even doing such puppet performances only once a year, as Fukaze has, requires time for a chanter to learn and practice the stories, for puppeteers to rehearse. It also requires funds to refurbish puppets and their ornate costumes and hairstyles.

Most of the other farming villages in the region, with their demanding agricultural calendars, were not in a position to devote time and money to supporting such a pastime.²

By contrast, Fukaze’s *hinoki* weaving production offered the village many benefits that helped them sustain their puppetry practice. Although this handicraft requires skilled labor, it is not very difficult to learn, so all residents could easily find a way to participate in the village’s economic mainstay. The wealth of the town was, therefore, evenly divided among the households, making for a more egalitarian society than existed in adjacent villages—some centered around Buddhist temples—where Edo’s strong hierarchies and economic divisions prevailed. Women were particularly good at the weaving technique, and so, economically valuable to their households, were encouraged to marry within the village and remain close to home.

² One nearby village, however, Higashi Futakuchi, also has sustained a 350-year-old puppetry tradition that has a different history, chanting style and uses different types of puppets from Fukaze’s. This village did not make *hinokigasa*, but, along with their farming, also produced *sumi*, charcoal made from local wood, which was also in high demand.

Since the men didn’t need to travel to find supplemental work, they also stayed put and had time to participate liberally in village activities. Furthermore, under Japan’s Edo period *bakufu* government, rice crops, as a subsistence staple, were heavily taxed. The *hinokigasa* that Fukaze produced, however, were not taxed at all, giving the villagers’ already lucrative business further economic advantage. All these factors led to a situation in which Fukaze villagers, who had been exposed to the art of puppetry by itinerant performers, were able to engage in it themselves and support the tradition for several hundred years.

A month before the lunar new year events, the locals would pull the puppets out of storage and check them over to see what refurbishments they might need before that year’s festivities: new hairs, taken from local fauna and inserted into balding spots? retouching of worn paint on faces? fresh kimono? At 92, Toki Kawagishi remembers joining a group of women from the village to make the long journey by foot across the mountain, down to a larger town to purchase new decorative hair ornaments (*kanzashi*) for the female characters, adapting ones made for young girls. Work units within the village—women who labored together in the making of *hinokigasa*—also pulled together for the upkeep of individual puppets.



INSIDE THE PUPPET’S KIMONO SHOWS THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO CONTRIBUTED FUNDS FOR OR WORKED ON THE OUTFIT.

The identification number of their unit and the names of all the women who contributed funds and craftsmanship for a puppet’s new clothes were written on the inside of the figure’s kimono. These writings can still be seen on the oldest surviving puppets that troupe members and I were able to inspect and try out during my April 2022 research trip to Hakusan. The puppets had been taken out of their storage in the Tsurugi Museum, which has been closed since 2013, and set out especially for our viewing at the Hakusan City Museum.

The puppets themselves are simply built, from two interconnected, crossed sticks, one incorporating the character’s carved head, and have no moving parts. Their movement comes from the motions of the puppeteers who hold the vertical poles and swivel them from side to side in rhythmic patterns and in time to their own stomping, as they dance their figures to the storyteller’s chanting. The “Dekumawashi” part of Fukaze Dekumawashi’s name is made up of “deku,” meaning puppet, and “mawashi,” meaning revolve, referring, locals say, to this swerving motion of the puppets and the puppeteering in performance. The heads of the oldest figures, some (they believe) carved by professionals and others by locals, are surprisingly diverse in style. Several are strikingly different from what can be seen in any other Japanese puppetry forms, and each seems to express a unique personality. The annual show was woven into village life as a joyful, communal event involving nearly everyone as either performers or spectators and ending with collective, celebratory *sake* drinking, singing, and dancing to welcome the new year.

While many rural villages in Japan have undergone drastic cultural transformations and in recent years suffered significant losses in population,

Fukaze’s fate has been more particular, and once again at the mercy of environmental factors. In the 1970s, the village was completely destroyed. It was intentionally flooded to create a dam that could bring water, so abundant in the area due to the large snowfalls, to the growing population of nearby Kanazawa city. Locals, who were relocated, mostly to more urban sites, like Tsurugi in Hakusan City, watched as the mountain houses that had been in their families for generations were torn down one by one, taking with them rural lifestyles developed over centuries in close conjunction with the land. Today, on the riverbank of the water flows that now cover the once industrious village, stands a solitary spicket gushing an unending flow of fresh, clean, drinking water descended from the mountain top. To people who grew up in the village, like Michigami Tetuo, the troupe’s chanter, in his seventies, this mountain water still tastes of home. He and other former villagers still take pleasure in identifying regional vegetation on the mountainside that once graced family tables at mealtimes. Katsuki Hisayo, also from the village, is a master craftswoman and one of four locals who continue to weave products made from *hinoki*, carrying on the age-old techniques. A visit with these wonderful people through the traditional homes at the Hakusan Folk



PUPPET FROM THE OLDER COLLECTION, SET UP FOR US TO INSPECT

Museum is more a journey following them down memory lane than a curated lesson in regional history and culture. Sakai Michio, the troupe administrator, who did not grow up in the village but worked in the area from a young age, was especially moved to reminiscences by the familiar atmosphere of the old houses and the daily practices they preserve. Life in the village developed in close connection with the region’s natural environment, something not to be taken for granted. The Hakusan Teodorigawa area, where the village was located, is today a designated Japanese Geopark, a “single, unified geographical area where sites and landscapes of geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development.” (<https://geopark.jp/en/>)

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 35]

ECO-PUPPETRY: PLAYFUL DISRUPTIONS FOR CLIMATE AGENCY

by Sarah Fahmy

Can climate change activism be playful? Can puppets expand access to and facilitate critical conversations that lessen animosity? These questions have percolated in my mind since 2018 when I started designing, creating, and performing large-scale butterfly and bird eco-puppets, with the intention of raising awareness and expanding access for public engagement with climate activism.

Climate change scholarship, often labelled as “doom and gloom narratives” and “apocalyptic imaginaries,” succeeds in elevating political agendas (Doyle 2749; Hinkel et al. 495), but its ability to “mobilize effective and sustainable climate responses at multiple scales of action” is questionable (Hinkel et al. 503), as most people cultivate links between science policy and their daily lives through media, inter-personal communications, and personal experience rather than through peer-reviewed literature (Boykoff and Osnes 1). Scholars thus advocate for investments in “win-win” strategies that target various engagement solutions (Hinkel et al. 503), and call for new, hopeful narratives (Doyle 2749). They urge the development of practical approaches to assess how creativity can assist climate discourse, as, like science, “the arts serve as another mode to acquire and interpret knowledge of the world” (Jacobson et al. 2).

Used for climate communication, “art provides personal experience through the senses,” immersing observers in a way that enables them to “visualize the localized impact of climate change” within the context of their personal and communal wellbeing (Mullooly 301), and encouraging participants to “holistically explore the problems and think more creatively about solutions” (Jacobson et al. 2). Eco-puppetry can foster spaces for these new, hopeful narratives.

In this article, I reflect upon how participation in eco-puppetry benefits climate literacy, examine its relationship between nature and women of color, and show how it is useful for supporting young women’s eco-activism. With the intention of providing accessible, joyful, memorable interactions, I demonstrate how puppets playfully disrupt public spaces to educate, protest, or celebrate nature, giving onlookers agency to engage with climate change conversations. Additionally, when women perform publicly with eco-puppets, I argue, they feel more comfortable taking up space and vocalizing perspectives on climate change.



SPEAK PARTICIPANTS PERFORMING IN SOLSTICE PARADE PHOTO: LIANNA NIXON

PUPPET CREATION PROCESS

As a puppeteer and applied performance scholar with *Inside the Greenhouse*, a creative climate outreach organization, and SPEAK, a young women’s vocal empowerment nonprofit, I collaborated with SPEAK co-founders Beth Osnes and Chelsea Hackett to advance hopeful climate change narratives. To extend recognizability and encourage onlookers to pay closer attention to their surroundings, our puppets featured native or migratory birds and butterflies in Colorado. These included: the Great Monarch, the Western Tiger Swallowtail, and the Red-Spotted Purple butterflies, and chickadees, turkey vultures, and herons.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we, like many, questioned the viability of in-person theatre. Inspired by our previous public-facing eco-puppetry projects involving butterflies sewn from bedsheets and painted by Colorado artist Juliana Forbes, we turned to joyful self-expression. Gathering weekly on Osnes’ front porch, we played with ideas and new techniques for building bird puppets. Even before the puppets were complete, our vivacious presence engaged many passers-by; often we’d present a drawing or puppet piece and seek their opinions.



AUTHOR AS CHICKADEE PHOTO: BETH OSNES

Central to the creation process was environmental impact. We planned and modified designs around second-hand and reused materials like foam mattresses, sheets, and cardboard boxes left for recycling. We aimed for realistic representations of the selected local birds and butterflies.

PUBLIC ECO-PUPPETRY PERFORMANCES

Embodying a butterfly or bird has become one of my favorite activities. As a woman of color, I feel hyper-visible yet invisible in the spaces I occupy, particularly in nature. Dressed as a puppet, though, my hyper-visibility is welcomed, and I feel able to expand my personal space without caring how I fit in or am viewed. I'm occasionally met with funny looks, both as a large puppet and while engaging in outdoor activities in Colorado. The more I puppeteer, the more comfortable I become, as if the puppet offers a protective shield. As I embrace the playfulness, the puppet expands my physical circumference, and I feel a joyous liberation taking up space. At the same time, I recognize this heightened visibility as an educational opportunity, both to teach onlookers about climate change and encourage reflection on their relationship with nature, and to acknowledge my presence.

Fluttering through the streets, I wait to be approached by an onlooker, leaving the agency of the conversation to them. Many ask about my intentions; some pause to take photos of or with me; and others walk past, ignoring me. When onlookers choose when, if, and how they engage, they appear more comfortable sharing perspectives about climate change. My interactions vary based on the situation. Sometimes I speak in first-person, as the puppet; other times I speak in third-person about climate change's impact on butterflies or birds. Sometimes I'm non-verbal. Though I've embodied these puppets on many varied occasions, I've discovered three ways in which puppets effectively support climate activism: 1) by creatively enhancing academic conversations; 2) through protest; and 3) by celebrating natural environments.

To enhance academic conversations, at the *Drawdown Act Up!* Conference at the Omega Institute, New York, (October 2019), four butterfly puppeteers (myself included) fluttered amongst conference attendees, smelling flowers, approaching and being approached by others. We performed a short, choreographed dance: moving in and out of a circle, we breathed in unison like butterflies. Through our presence, we celebrated and imagined the possibilities of a sustainable future.

We found close-up images and videos, paying attention to their shapes, sizes, colors, and movements while designing. Our human faces and legs remained visible, thus extending the metaphor of human-nature relationships. Next, we practiced on the street; filming ourselves, we compared our movements to videos of our subjects flying, perching, and landing, then modified our puppets and movements accordingly. When creating the chickadee wings, for instance, I drew individual cardboard wings in ascending sizes, hole-punched them on the top, and connected them to a fabric strip with small hoops. While rehearsing, the wings fluttered separately but kept collapsing inwards. So we added a hole-punch halfway down each wing, connecting them with a thin rope, and I held the last wing piece in my hand. The chickadee's body initially was represented with a faux fur shawl, but its bulkiness overshadowed the wings' simplicity, so it was switched for a lighter fabric and the wings painted white.

Researching, making, and performing with puppets in public provides a unique, hands-on learning experience that has empowered me to learn more about my local environment. Prior to this project, I knew nothing of turkey vultures. Today, on hikes with friends, I consciously look up, trying to spot large black birds with small red heads. I'm excited to share what I know about their wind-turbine style movement, nesting habits, and migration patterns. Creating and performing with eco-puppets can offer memorable experiences that outlast the project itself.



SPEAK PARTICIPANTS ATTENDING THE CLIMATE MARCH. PHOTO: LIANNA NIXON

To protest, at the "Campus Liberty Tour: Should America Eliminate Fossil Fuel Use to Prevent Climate Catastrophe?" (March 2022), hosted by The Steamboat Institute at the University of Colorado, Boulder, Osnes and I protested in our puppets outside the event. Gliding in front of the entrance, we realized that some thought we were promoting the event. Upon making eye contact, we therefore stated, "We are here to witness the clean energy transition to a thrive-able, sustainable future." Some nodded or smiled, others shook their heads. Others stopped to ask our intentions; a few took photos and shared that they, too, were interested in a sustainable future. Even when attendees' perspectives differed from ours, we noticed that our simple presence as butterflies welcomed conversation with those willing to engage. The organizer shared her delight to see us, expressing her interest in providing space for opposing dialogues. Taking our photo, she extended an invitation to attend their next event.



AUTHOR AS RED-SPOTTED PURPLE BUTTERFLY, ROYAL ARCHES, MOAB
PHOTO: ALLYSON M. YORK

To celebrate natural environments, I wore the Red-Spotted Purple butterfly puppet at Arches National Park, Utah, on a car-camping trip in July 2020. After exploring as my human-self, I slowly revealed the puppet in my bag, much to the surprise of those around. Curious to see how my spatial awareness would differ, I expanded my wings, growing attentive to small bushes, the direction of the wind, and how my center of gravity shifted on the uneven ground. My sudden transformation was met with enthusiasm. Onlookers here were not gathered for a climate change conversation—so their reception was different. Children rushed towards me with beaming smiles, touching my wings, while exhausted parents smiled with relief for the free entertainment, happily photographing. I shared my eco-activist intentions with those who asked. Though conversations didn't last long, I often wonder whose family holiday album I'm a part of and if conversations continued about this interaction.

SUPPORTING YOUNG WOMEN'S ECO-ACTIVISM

Since 2017, I have also designed and co-facilitated programs that center young women's vocal empowerment with SPEAK; some of these focus on eco-puppetry with participants aged 13-17. Studies have shown that "creating educational opportunities for motivation and engagement is crucial for teenagers, a pivotal age for establishing (or decreasing) pro-environmental behaviors" (Doyle 2753). Recently, teenagers—Vanessa Nakate, Isra Hirsi, Greta Thunburg, to name a few—have emerged as global leaders of climate activism. Through puppetry, we lent our support to such initiatives, providing space for young women's imaginative engagement, allowing them to "develop a multidimensional understanding of, and engagement with, climate change that goes beyond formal politics" (Doyle 2766). Eco-puppets became a conduit for young puppeteers' new understandings of their voices, bodies, and presence in public—benefits that extend beyond puppeteering.

SPEAK participants performed *Climate Change Theatre Action* plays, authored skits, and created exhibits, raising awareness about accessible environmental activism. Within the group, the butterfly puppets became synonymous with the change they want to see. Authoring slogans such as "if a dove is a symbol of peace, then a butterfly is a symbol of change," they infiltrated the CU Boulder climate strike (2019), voicing opinions as butterflies. During the pandemic, they helped design bird puppets and lead public performances. For the 2020 Summer Solstice, we paraded through downtown Boulder. Taking over the street, ten different butterfly and bird puppets were quite the attention-grabbers. As much as we invited climate awareness conversations, we also offered joy amidst pandemic gloom. These eco-puppetry performances have expanded the young women's interest in climate activism, with several hoping to study environmental science. Many have also continued their puppetry through Side-by-Side, a National Science Foundation project, pairing creativity with science to learn about local birds.

CONCLUSION

Creating and performing with large-scale puppets offers a transformative, joyful opportunity for creative climate activism. From conferences to protests and parades, the puppets' presence cultivates space for public conversations that offer onlookers agency to share their opinions. Their playful disruptions act as a double conduit for both women and nature. When women of different ages and ethnic backgrounds perform with eco-puppets, they promote the power that emerges when women lead initiatives. Eco-puppets challenge how women take up space, encourage on-lookers to evaluate their relationship with nature, and amplify climate action calls to invest in and listen to those most impacted by the climate crises: nature and women.

Pursuing this work, I echo that "arts-based climate communication supports our ongoing struggle to grow sustainable futures on the individual, institutional, and societal level by inspiring different ways of relating, knowing, and living deeply attuned to Earth justice" (Mullooly 309). While I cannot truly know the long-lasting impact on onlookers, I know that as a puppeteer, scholar, and woman of color, I have felt more liberated, comfortable, and knowledgeable through my climate activism and am committed to extending this creative access to facilitate inclusive eco-activism.

SARAH FAHMY is a scholar, applied performance facilitator, and educator. A PhD candidate at the University of Colorado Boulder, she researches ecofeminist decoloniality, and is a co-founder of the Middle Eastern Theatre focus group at the Association of Theatre in Higher Education.

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While Fukaze Dekumawashi has been wrenched from the mountain village that birthed and embraced it, it also has a new identity to uphold as one of Japan's National Intangible Cultural Folk Properties. Maintenance of Japan's important cultural heritage rests primarily in the hands of locals who care enough about it to devote themselves to its preservation and continuance. Members of the Fukaze Dekumawashi Preservation Society are predominantly in their late sixties, seventies, or older. Some are former Fukaze villagers, while others have been reeled in to take part by friends. Community spirit and comradery are thus still elements that draw people to the puppets. Half a century on from the building of the dam, they continue to search for ways to ground their tradition within its urban home and contemporary context. Two years of performance cancellations due to the Corona virus pandemic have not been



THE TROUPE BELIEVES THIS MAY BE THE OLDEST PUPPET IN THE COLLECTION.

CLAUDIA ORENSTEIN is a Professor of Theatre at Hunter College and the Graduate Center CUNY. She is also a board member of UNIMA-USA and will be the first editor of our new publication, the *Puppetry International Research Review*, an online academic journal that will premier in the summer of 2023.

helpful for their goals of reaching out to younger audiences and performers. Renewal, however, should not be fully in doubt. Michigami, after leaving all his attachments to Fukaze behind at the age of sixteen, just three years ago became reconnected with its puppetry tradition. Having participated in the performances so regularly in his childhood, the art, he says, is in his DNA. He has now taken up the role of chanter with gusto, brought in five new members, including his wife Yurika, (not from the village), and others who were childhood companions, all now newly invested in making Fukaze Dekumawashi thrive. The form has a unique, mesmerizing beauty in the circular motions of the puppets, the stomping rhythms of the puppeteers, the evocative faces and personalities of the figures, and the languorous chanting of ancient, epic tales. Together these evoke the village festivals of the past as they strive to capture the attention of today's restless spectators.



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PUPPETRY FOR EDUCATION IN VIETNAM: AN APPROACH BY PEACE ARTS EXCHANGE NETWORK

by Phan Tuan Quoc

Here is a long story in a short essay that aims to give you a glimpse of applied puppetry practice in Vietnam.

In 2015, the group Mekongaholics facilitated the first batch of storytellers and puppeteers to travel overseas and learn of the world through some festivals and conferences in Southeast Asia. It resulted in new connections with many puppet groups, storytellers and puppeteers who later traveled to conduct joint projects with Mekongaholics in Vietnam. This eventually became the Peace Arts Exchange Network.

In 2016, a troupe of international storytellers from Thailand flew in to help run the first International Storytelling Festival in Ho Chi Minh City and other follow-up storytelling activities in several provinces. The project was documented by THVL to encourage the preservation of folk tales and storytelling arts.

In 2018, many international puppeteers joined hands with Mekongaholics to introduce IN&OUT Peace Arts Exchange Festival to a diverse range of school projects in southern Vietnam interested in applied puppetry for education.

In 2019, the Mekong Peace Arts Exchange continued to boost the network with an international seminar on Southeast Asian shadow play, which resulted in the establishment of the

first colored shadow puppet group at one of the schools of the network, and inspired puppet-based curriculum in some other schools. The network also contributes ideas such as giant puppets or puppets made from recycled materials to community projects addressing climate change and environmental issues.

Those puppet-related projects were also documented by VTC10, *Puppetry International* and other local media channels.

In 2021, the Vietnam Puppet Opera training program was funded by Goethe Institute in Ho Chi Minh City to help found six new community puppet groups that promoted ideas of sustainability. The program included an online forum for practitioners of applied puppetry in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. During the forum, many school representatives expressed their strong interest and motivation to integrate applied puppetry in their extra-curricular activities despite the lack of specialists and grants to help set up long-term training projects.

In 2022, many applied puppetry practitioners joined hands with Mekongaholics to build the first version of Vietnam Children Storytelling Festival (started by VIRES), which empowers all kinds of storytelling languages, including puppetry. As part of the festival, educational puppeteer Carol Sterling was invited by Mekongaholics to conduct some demonstrations at the schools within Peace Arts Exchange Network, and it was a huge inspiration for a lot of teachers, who were introduced to the world of educational puppetry for the first time.



THIS COLLABORATION WITH MAY 1ST ENSEMBLE AND PASSIONATE TEACHERS AT VIỆT ANH SCHOOL WAS TO BRING CREATIVE IDEAS FOR HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT TO STUDENTS THROUGH PUPPETRY.

Currently, the Peace Arts Exchange Network also focuses on Vietnamese and bilingual storytelling projects where children of all ages are provided a multicultural context in which to learn and which will become the center of their growing up.

Such long-term projects as Let's Tell Stories have brought new ideas for community activities at Hồ Chí Minh City Book Street, in which we invite children to engage with our very common folktales around Southeast Asia, which is a way for us to learn from each other and help children develop their full potential by gaining a larger perspective.

The local educational puppetry community promises to thrive as it welcomes traveling educational puppeteers who will join hands with local schools and practitioners.

PHAN TUAN QUOC, also known as Nemo, is a puppeteer, community organizer and an environmental activist.

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PEACE ARTS EXCHANGE NETWORK is a social hub that uses puppets and stories to encourage the development of a child-centered, sustainable social platform. International storytellers and puppeteers will have the chance to collaborate with local artists to enrich the ecosystem for interactive storytelling arts with puppets for emotional and creative education as well as community development. Local children, youth and families will have an opportunity to experience and learn about art and culture, both traditional and contemporary, from ASEAN and international troupes as well as local puppeteers and storytellers. Please visit: <http://www.peacearts.vn>



TEACHERS AND GRADE 7 STUDENTS AT VIỆT ANH SCHOOL MAKE A GIANT OCTOPUS PUPPET FROM RECYCLED PLASTIC BOTTLES

MEKONGAHOLICS (Study Group for Vietnam-ASEAN Best Practices on Community Culture) is a social enterprise project focusing on community culture mobilization for sustainable development and social progress through interdisciplinary collaborations between professional and advisory members in various fields of interest. Through core programs based on theory of community culture threshold, Mekongaholics aims to initiate and facilitate open collaboration frameworks to inspire self-exploration for personal and social development. Go to: <http://www.facebook.com/mekongaholics>

STRIKING THE ECOLOGICAL CHORD WITH PUPPETRY

by Dr. Moushumi Bhattacharjee

Educating people about the minutiae and intricacies of nature is perhaps the best way to promote conservation. But, science and scientific temperament are not always given an attentive ear. There exists a section of people who are very rigid in their thinking, and this becomes a hurdle in the smooth dissemination of information. We have seen through the ages that parents always project math and science as dreaded subjects to their children, and this concept is nurtured and grows bigger with the passage of time. This generation, as they grow up, become disenchanted with scientific development and concepts and cultivate the notion that any information related to this subject is irrelevant and uninteresting (Goodrum et al). This type of situation is not just limited to a particular region or country but such tailback thinking does exist all around the globe, and thus the role of imparting edutainment becomes much more vital for the puppeteers who deal with these issues.

Realising the importance of developing a scientific temperament among the masses for the conservation and creation of an ecological balance in nature, puppeteer Manoranjan Roy from Assam took up the herculean task of spreading the message with the help of the traditional art form *Putala Naach*. *Putala Naach* is the traditional string puppet of Assam. If we search the history of puppetry in Assam, we find a huge gap from

the ancient time to the medieval Assam, where the presence of puppetry cannot be traced out. The history of puppetry practices may be ancient in other parts of India and it may be a glorified chapter of our cultural tradition too, but we have no proof that it had an impact on great Vaisnavite reformer Srimanta Shankardeva's theatre also. There's no historical data of puppetry practices from the 8th century to the 15th century of Assam (Dutta 1986). From all available accounts it is clear that at present, apart from string-puppet, no other form of puppetry like shadow-puppets, rod-puppets, hand or glove-puppets exist in Assam. However, the puppet section established at Srimanta Sankardeva Kalashetra, a cultural complex established under the Clause VI of the Assam Accord, 1985, are trying their hands-on rod-puppets and water-puppetry. The Assamese Bhagvata also has several references that highlight the presence of wooden puppets (kasthara, kasthamayaputula or daruputula) and shadow-puppets (chaya-putula) (Dutta 1986). Experts believe (Dutta 1986) that water-puppetry existed in Assam long before Sankardeva's birth but it got its due recognition only during his time. He, in a way, was the pioneer in developing the tradition that is now the national heritage of countries like Vietnam and Cambodia ("Water puppets" 2017).

Photos by the author



MANORANJAN ROY IN HIS WORKSHOP MAKING PUPPETS

Manoranjan Roy is by profession a school teacher, and puppetry is his passion. He therefore made a smart use of "narrative" or "the story telling" technique to reach out to the audience. As he comes from an educational background, he is aware of the concept of therapeutic alliance that originated in the psycho-analytic theories (e.g., Freud 1912/1958 1913; Greenson 1965). The use of therapeutic alliance along with the narrative style served a dual role—the first being visual illustration of the concepts and secondly to explain it with an emotional appeal. The main idea behind his puppetry projects was to provide therapeutic counselling to the students so that the phobia that circulates among students that mathematics as a subject is very tough could be erased out of their minds so as to create a positive mind set and make the learning process pleasing.

In the words of Manoranjan Roy: "before telling them how to preserve nature and why is it important to maintain an ecological balance, I opted to highlight what drawbacks the felling

of trees, excessive use of plastic, open defecation, vehicular pollution, water pollution, sewage treatment, etc. has made on our life." The stories developed by the puppeteers narrate common problems that the public in general face on a day-to-day basis, like man-animal conflicts, artificial floods, safe drinking water. Artificial flood stands out as a major problem these days for the residents of Guwahati city which occurs due to the unplanned expansion of the city to amass increasing population and severe encroachment in the wetlands, low lying areas, hills and shrinkage of forest cover. Over the years another vital issue that is gaining momentum is tackling the man-animal conflict, which is on the rise in Assam due to the dwindling of forest cover.



PUPPETEER ABANI SARMA IN HIS WORKSHOP

Encroachment of domain land, poaching of wild animals, etc., result in ecological imbalance, and eventually, the animals experience scarcity of required food in their home grounds and in search of the same they come out of their habitats to nearby human habitations. Thus the situation of conflict arises between humans and animals. This happens especially in between humans and wild elephants and the one-horned rhinoceros in Assam. Thus, the process of informing children about why is it critical to protect our environment, given the harmful consequences for both plants and animals from the growing interaction of humans with the environment, became much easier. Sagarika Puppet Theatre, under the aegis of Manoranjan Roy, has performed many such informative and motivational shows on environmental protection and sustainability at reputable schools in and around Guwahati city.

Sri Manoranjan Roy (50) has been associated with puppetry since 1988. His theatre was registered in the year 2005-2006 so as to get a license to perform commercially. Roy's entry into puppetry made its way from his interest in the traditional *Jatra*—the popular folk theatre form of West Bengal. The word *Jatra* literally means “journey.” In his youth, when he did a short stint in the *Jatra* theatre, he got a chance to experience a puppet show by the performers of West Bengal. Seeing how skillfully they manipulated the puppets with the help of strings, he started developing his interest in puppetry.

Coming back home with the intention of setting up a puppet theatre, he started searching for the existing puppet

theatre groups in Assam and came in contact with a veteran, Late Durlab Deka of Nagaon, who was a prominent puppeteer of his time. His puppet theatre was known as *Nilakantha Putula Naac'* but after his death it closed down. According to Hindu mythology the term *Nilakantha* refers to Lord *Shiva*, who gained this epithet when he consumed the *Kalakuta* (Poison) that emerged from *Samudra Manthan*. It was under the able guidance of Late Durlab Deka that Roy learned all the nuances of puppetry and also how to showcase a particular story within the framework of a theatre form. From then on, there was no looking back. Roy started to follow his passion alongside his main profession, thereby maintaining a smooth balance between academics and performing arts.

These puppet troupes from Assam might be living in oblivion for the rest of the world, but when it comes to rendering their services for the betterment of the society, they never hesitate to play their part. Even during the pandemic, almost all the troupe leaders tried their hands at making use of the social media platform for sharing information on the various standard operating procedures related to COVID-19.

Sustainable development has been defined in many ways, but the most frequently quoted definition is from *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report, which says: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Brundtland 1987)

Theater has always proved to be an operative tool in the widespread struggle to address social problems in India, from the time of freedom struggle till today. Puppets with their strong empathetic characteristics have a unique power to overcome social conventions like ethnic and cultural barriers. Puppets have always been a sophisticated means of artistic expression and so whenever we think of an alternate media to deal with serious, critical and neglected social problems, puppetry emerges as the first choice. Puppetry is a non-threatening medium of expression because the cultural tradition of India makes it a culturally acceptable medium for the masses (Kruger 9). So, based on these ideology organizations like Assam AIDS Control Society, National Rural Health Mission, and Rashtriya Sarba Shiksha Abhigyan, Assam are making use of *Putala Naach* extensively as a tool for social awareness for social campaigning on health and hygiene and child marriage.



A SCENE FROM THE PLAY DEPICTING FRONTLINE WARRIORS

In Assam, the audience of *Putala Naach* is divided into two spheres—rural and urban. While the urban audience appreciates concepts of scientific temperament like AIDS awareness, witch-hunting (witch-hunting is a form of superstition wherein women usually are blamed for deaths, illnesses, financial troubles, or even crop damage and targeted by relatives, neighbors, or fellow villagers. Such women are often ex-communicated, forced to leave villages, tortured by kangaroo courts, and in many cases killed. The real motives of such killings are often property disputes and ego clashes), environment day (which is celebrated annually on the 5th of June); the rural audience on the other hand still prefers the traditional stories of *Raja-Harishchandra* (truthful King) *Sati-Behula* (Legendary heroine), *Chandra-Sankha* (legendary King) and *Devi-Manasha* (Serpent Goddess). So for the puppet troupes it's a two-tier responsibility, wherein they must bring in changes by globalizing their thoughts but should also stick to the traditional roots by connecting it with the local concepts. The puppeteers of Assam are now experimenting on all possible factors to make this art form survive in this part of the region by innovating new forms, in which string puppetry is merged with rod puppetry to give it a new flavor and so on.

The communicative aspect of traditional media like puppetry is always highlighted by scholars of folkloric material. In *Asomay Lokonatyaya* (1991), Ram Goswami also highlights the importance of folk art forms for spreading messages and says how the new generations of puppeteers are incorporating different flavors of comedy, satire, etc., as the background of the plays to draw in more audiences. Organizations like Assam AIDS Control Society, National Rural Health Mission, and Rashtriya Sarba Shiksha Abhigyan, Assam, are making use of *Putala Naach* extensively as a tool for creating social awareness on the issues their organizations address.

Puppetry creates participatory dialogue, builds community and opens up possibilities for social change in rural areas, because it emerged as an effective communication platform for various audiences. Thus puppet theatre will be known for future researchers, not only as a pedagogical tool but also as an effective communication platform for bringing awareness among the masses regarding taboo subjects like witch hunting, child marriage, Sexually Transmitted Disease and maintaining an ecological balance.



FIGURES FROM SARVA SHIKSHA MISSION

Dr. Moushumi Bhattacharjee is a Senior Consultant for the Dr. Anamika Ray Memorial Trust (ARMT) and is a guest faculty member at Gauhati University.

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PLASTIC BALLOON



Air, STAGED BY THE STATE PUPPET THEATER IN VIDIN, BULGARIA PHOTO: IVAN ALADZHOV

The world is changing before our eyes every day. So many lessons and all of them unlearned. War and struggle for supremacy, world pandemics, natural disasters caused by human negligence in all corners of the Earth and a very sustainable hypocrisy in claiming that all this will soon be ended; that the protection of the planet—by the way the only one we have—is the number one priority for world powers, on which all this is dependent; that the fight against global warming will continue at all costs so that we can all have a future...so many lies we go to bed with every night to wake up deceived over and over again. Or maybe the change is not in someone else's hands but in ours, in those of the Man of today. Keeping the air, the water in the rivers and our future clean will be a task whose solution is possible only for us—the ordinary people, not those in suits, ministerial chairs and expensive cars. Is it within our power, though?

This big issue is addressed by the team of the State Puppet Theater in Vidin (Bulgaria), who staged the play *Air*, written and directed by Magdalena Miteva. The performance examines the topic of how the Earth was created and what path men have walked on it. The puppets, as well as the stage environment, have been placed entirely in the aesthetics of plastic, as both the puppets and the setting are made of plastic bags. It is the plastic bag that is the main actor transforming during the performance to give a different perspective of what to think about the character. This material is, after all, the main metaphor upon which the idea of the show was built. The plastic bag is the necessary evil, which men use to fill with various necessities. After that it's just thrown out, so the wind can take it and let it fly high. High in the sky it flies, and if we are quick enough, we

can grab its handles and then rise above the Earth as if in a balloon and look at it from above. Let's look at our Earth, our only home, to see how people use its resources and then how they pollute it. It is an educational flight worth taking.

Air begins with the appearance of a huge sphere, resembling the planet Earth, with all its continents and oceans, composed of a number of plastic pieces. The other planets of the solar system are lined up in the background, also made of colored plastic. The star—our sun—also shines in bright yellow. Above the Earth stand two angels played by actors Plamen Kanev and Teodora Rashed, who help each other put on their angelic wings of torn plastic feathers. Next comes an immersion in the core of the Earth, so as to pass through the different stages of its development and get acquainted with the life and customs of the people who have inhabited it over the millennia.

The show is non-verbal and does not follow any specific storyline that the viewer must follow closely. Rather, paintings are presented that the subconscious of each of us can decode based on the accumulation of clues they contain. Moving from the Ice Age to the present day, the actors manage to draw a few paintings with the main stage material—plastic. The improvised puppets participate invariably in this story from the very beginning, made from two ordinary latex medical gloves that the actors inflate to turn into the main characters of the show. Not long afterward, different animals appear—the cow from black and white garbage bags whose udder features the four fingers of the aforementioned glove; the camel

with its rider on top, wandering the vast desert, made of thousands of ocher-colored plastic bags, to get to the civilized world where cars and asphalt surround the entire planet with products of plastic once again.

The performance depicts our world in a very vivid way, from industrialization, to the production of new clothes. At the play's end, the talented actors parade in this clothing, which is made from various types, sizes and colors of plastic. This is the consumerist lifestyle led by modern men, who use dozens of single-use plastic products every day, which are then thrown away to slowly decompose in nature over the coming centuries.

The team of the State Puppet Theater in Vidin managed to create a show with a strong message that reaches both younger viewers and their parents. With quite minimalist means and employing a wide range of colors and shapes in which plastic is available, they recreate a very real world in which nature is highly endangered. It's hard to remain indifferent when, in the end, the two angels end up being crushed and thrown into the plastic ball that symbolizes Earth, along with all the other puppets, sets and props. Panting and overflowing with garbage, it continues to be our home, until the last spotlight above it is extinguished.

—review by Mihail Baykov
Mladzshki teatar

Coming in PI #53!

LIZZIE JAGO EXPLORES THE ELEPHANT-HUMAN CONNECTION THROUGH PUPPETRY IN KENYA

“On Trial” is a one-act piece of interactive theatre, in which a matriarch elephant is put on trial for killing a four-year-old human child in rural Kenya. As the play unfolds the multifaceted and complex relationships that have created human/elephant conflict are explored, with the audience as jury being asked to give the final verdict. Set against the backdrop of apparent human disconnect from nature as a cause for degradation of the planet, this article narrates the ways in which playwrighting explores that relationship and the role that puppetry can play within it, with the aim of creating affective conservation theatre.

PHOTO © YOUTH THEATRE KENYA

To Embody the Marvelous: The Making of Illusions in Early Modern Spain

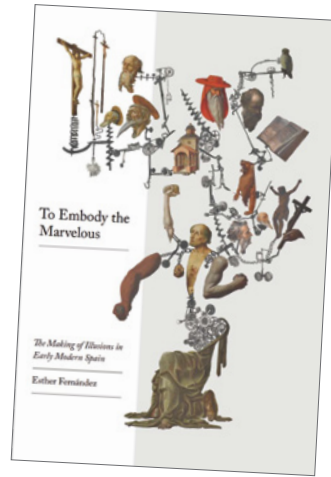
by Esther Fernández

Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press,
2021. 284 pages.

To Embody the Marvelous looks upon various ways that 16th and 17th century religious practitioners, authors, playwrights, and others undertook the task of creating supernatural events in both live performance and within novels and plays. Such fantastical “stagings” served a variety of purposes, and Dr. Fernández guides us through their various manifestations and the ways in which they reflected the concerns of their viewers.

The book begins by introducing the large, variously-articulated wooden figures of Christ (the *Cristo articulado*) and other religious figures. The precise use of the large “puppets” is of necessity somewhat speculative. Dr. Fernández does an excellent job of describing existing examples (in museums and religious settings in Spain and beyond) and the figures’ individual capabilities (such as the ability to shed tears). Using primary textual sources and images, she subsequently postulates their use in religious ceremony. In doing so, she effectively argues how such figures (even during times when the use of Christian iconography was highly controversial) reinforced faith and elicited the sense of wonder and awe that religious leaders desired for their followers. She draws a clear distinction between such obviously inhuman figures and the animated, realistic statues of mythology and literature.

Dr. Fernández continues by discussing how the smaller, lesser-known figures of the *máquina real* performances served to dramatize the lives of the saints (and in some ways could be seen as more acceptable forms of performance than the human theatre). In meeting the needs of the popular theatre, these plays frequently emphasized the dramatic aspects of their earlier lives. Dr. Fernández observes that the action-driven plots recounting saints’ early struggles proved far more popular with audiences than the contemplative themes of their later saintly lives. And since plays inevitably needed to conclude with the spiritual elevation of their protagonists, puppets—so effective in action—also proved highly effective as objects of veneration. As she observes, puppets are “unique props for engaging with new alternative languages and realms such as the cult of saints.”



The perspectives of Dr. Fernández reflect her appreciation of the religious and creative aspects of puppet performances, both in the historic record and in modern times. She cites the uneasiness she felt during one encounter with puppet figures, and she is willing to draw upon that experience to empathize with the sense of awe, wonder, and uneasiness that early viewers likely experienced. (While the book offers explanations of relevant Catholic religious practices, my own lack of personal experience did limit my appreciation of the mysteries being enacted and their significance to the faithful.) While deeply grounded in archival scholarship (the book is also well supported by illustrations), her discussions are refreshingly open to the insights that contemporary artists are able to offer. She discusses modern ceremonial practices and theatrical interpretations of their earlier manifestations. Jesús Caballero, working with La Máquina Real, an artist collective based in Cuenca, has researched and staged plays from the classic repertoire. She places special emphasis upon Ana Zamora’s contemporary staging of *Misterio del Cristo de los Gascones*, which featured a life-sized articulated Christ figure manipulated in the manner of Japanese *ningyo jōruri* puppets, noting that:

While most spectators nowadays do not look to strengthen their religious faith inside a commercial theater auditorium, they are open to engaging with questions loaded with theological and philosophical implications [...] when presented through an eclectic, innovative performance that highlights the mixed company of human and nonhuman actors. (53)

The book offers far more than descriptions of the history and practice of such figures (or parallel performance techniques, such as those of the shadow theatre and automata). Dr. Fernández shows how the use of such creations could serve as metaphors for contemporary political and cultural developments. Most importantly, she observes that the figures’ complex mechanisms themselves provided viewers with powerful experiences of the wonders of scientific thought. The design and engineering feats that enabled such miracles—regardless of whether or not the observer believed in the actual supernatural nature of the event—were in themselves subjects of amazement. She shows how religious awe and the sense of wonder that can be inspired by a greater understanding of the scientific mysteries of the universe are very closely related.

The book proceeds to examine the work of Cervantes as novelist and playwright, especially in the “Master Pedro’s Puppet Show” chapter of *Don Quixote*. Here Dr. Fernández is developing a kind of new theory of the marvelous object/event, and one in which the “destruction” of the object (as in Don Quixote’s disruption of the puppet play) has deep significance. In this way, she shows that the destruction of illusion—the revelation of the principles behind a human-made, miraculous vision—becomes as important as the illusion itself. I am not qualified to comment upon how closely they relate to theories related to performing objects, but I did find the discussion fascinating. She draws direct links between Cervantes’ likely exposure to the Sicilian *opera dei pupi* when living in Palermo and Messina to his depiction of the puppets (in multiple aspects) within *Don Quixote* and other writings.

She then shows how Cervantes’ themes found homes in early twentieth century works by Lorca and, of course, Manuel de Falla’s operetta, which itself receives in-depth analysis.

Dr. Fernández also looks at the work of playwright Calderón de la Barca and his own examinations of the marvelous. Much of the analysis here moves away from conventional puppetry and into the world of scenic properties in two of his plays, one featuring a cupboard that leads to a secret passageway and provides a metaphorical representation of the protagonist. (Some such scenic elements may still fall within the realm of the performing object.) The discussion continues to develop ideas established when discussing the earlier figures and deception inherent in those early, articulated religious figures.

The deep scholarship of Dr. Fernández’s study is firmly rooted in her extensively researched appreciation of the historical, cultural and literary aspects of her subjects. But she also demonstrates a firm appreciation for the practical aspects of performance and audience expectations (including those of contemporary revival efforts). As a result, *To Embody the Marvelous* is a dense, multi-faceted and utterly fascinating study that will certainly bear multiple readings.

—review by Bradford Clark
Bowling Green State University

Can't find time to READ this fine book?

In just under eight hours, you can listen to the entirety of *To Embody the Marvelous* as an audiobook. Steven Ritz-Barr narrates Fernández’s opus in a voice that is smooth and comforting. Many of our readers will know that Ritz-Barr is not only a voice artist, but has had a long career in puppetry including, most recently, the production of several classic films with marionettes; *The Legend of Joan of Arc*, *Quixote* and *Faust*.

To listen to this fascinating book, Google [To Embody the Marvelous audiobook](#). You’ll find it on Audible, an Amazon company.



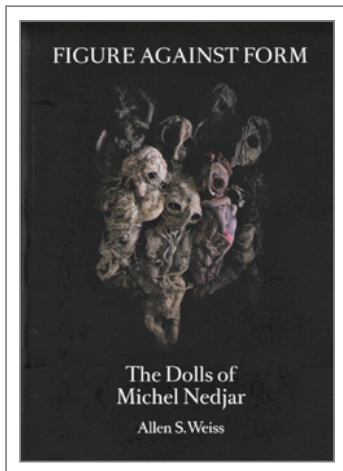
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Troubled Masks, Deathly Ragdolls Figure Against Form: *The Dolls of Michel Nedjar*

by Allen S. Weiss

Berlin: K. Verlag, 2021. 128 pages.

The field of puppetry studies has blossomed in the past few years as scholars around the world examine the history and current practices of what Dussia Posner calls “material performance”: the wide range of ways that objects, with (or without) their human collaborators feign or enact their own agency. Like puppetry itself, puppetry studies brings together multiple disciplines as it attempts to understand the material world in performance: traditional and familiar modes of puppet arts, but also related and culturally essential practices of material culture (another recent scholarly buzzword) connected to ritual, community performance, technology, and (as Jane Bennett points out in her influential book *Vibrant Matter*) the possibilities of “things” to “act as quasi agents or forces [...] of their own.”



Dolls are the domestic cousins of puppets, but are often considered not to be puppets since their “performances” usually take place in the privacy of the home; they are also often seen as a kind of female culture, and thus less significant than “real” puppets. Recent puppetry studies have pointed out the significance of doll culture, including Kamil Kopania’s 2016 anthology *Dolls and Puppets as Artistic and Cultural Phenomena (19th-21st Centuries)* and Kenneth Gross’s 2012 anthology *On Dolls*. Now comes scholar Allen Weiss’s erudite and insightful assessment of the work of Parisian Art Brut artist Michel Nedjar, whose home-made dolls approach the fetish status of non-modernist global material culture, and seem to be trying to connect with the power that similar ritual objects have for centuries held in folk and indigenous cultures.

Allen Weiss, who teaches at New York University’s famed Department of Performance Studies when he is not in Paris, has applied his considerable skills of cultural analysis to such subjects as radio, food, landscape, wine, automata, and the holocaust, and he has written and performed puppet shows as well. The fact that he turns his analytical erudition to something as dense and homely as Nedjar’s dolls is magnificently rewarding, since he is able to peel back and make sense of multiple layers of meaning to be found in these performing objects.

Nedjar, born in 1947, is the son of a tailor, and he loved playing with his sister’s dolls as a child; at the age of fourteen he was an apprentice in a clothing shop; and soon after traveled to Asia and Mexico, which introduced him to dolls and objects traditionally full of powers. He began to create his own powerful objects upon his return to Paris, which, thanks to artist Jean Dubuffet, soon began to be noticed as a kind of “outsider” art, celebrated in various exhibitions and collected in museums throughout Europe.

Weiss’s initial description of Nedjar’s dolls evokes their world (especially as they fill the environment of Nedjar’s Paris apartment) as a kind of creepy embodiment of Sigmund Freud’s concept of “the uncanny.” Weiss writes that their forms “range from small mummy-like papier-mâché objects to grotesque animals, from devils’ heads and eyeless, troubled masks to shrouded, deathly ragdolls.



These creations—made from refuse, garbage, leftover materials—are most often stained, filthy, spotted with paint, tinted from immersion in vats of dye: monsters from the earth, or the underworld.” Weiss keeps going further and further in his analysis, considering how the dolls transgress gender, “refuse” to perform, create an alternative world, and reflect the artist’s deep experience and memories as the child of a Jewish family, many of whose members died in the Holocaust.

Weiss looks at the range of Nedjar’s creations, their connections to the artist’s personal life, Nedjar’s understanding of global mask, puppet, and object traditions, and how this work exists in the 21st century in connection with the contexts of contemporary art, cultural theory, and the persistent power of the object today. Weiss considers Nedjar’s dolls (the ones he has collected around the world as well as his own creations) to have several dimensions: their ritualistic aspects, not only in terms of ethnography, but also in terms of “our everyday neuroses, if not psychoses”; their fetishistic aspects, as “magic objects,” “substitute[s] for repressed sex,” or “objects conceived as a nexus of social relations”; their performative aspects, not only in occasional theater events (some of which Weiss has created), but also through “the very presence of an object” as “a form of performance so slow that there is no apparent movement or change whatsoever, the performance being its very mode of presence in the world”; and finally their aesthetic aspects, as “art,” in “a much broader category than what is often recognized as such.”

Weiss is obviously deeply engaged with his subject here—one might say obsessed!—but it is an entirely fruitful obsession.

Here is an example of Weiss’s approach—perhaps a bit intimidating for those of us not steeped in Performance Studies analysis and French cultural theory, but, to my mind, fascinatingly insightful: “To enter into Nedjar’s world, while it is not necessary to believe, ipso facto, in magic, one must nevertheless be open to the heterodoxical existence of all sorts of prodigies; one need not espouse the cause, only recognize the effect. It is to set foot into a fantastic, hybrid, parallel world. His dolls are thaumaturgic [i.e., magical], fulfilling the antithetical conditions of magical objects: simultaneously practical and aesthetic, constructed and fantasized, temporally retrospective and psychically introspective.” Weiss concludes that Nedjar’s apartment-based doll installation “is a condensed focal point where numerous—and presumably incompatible—traditions and forms of magic meet, accumulate, and coalesce, finally to be transmitted to his own work.”

Weiss’s attention to the meaning and power of Nedjar’s dolls is revelatory because it consistently finds new insights into Nedjar’s work, and new ways to think about it. At a time when so much puppetry and object performance criticism—particularly in popular media—is shallow and ill informed, Weiss’s deep dive into the nature of Michel Nedjar’s material performance shows how rewarding such thoughtful insights can be. If such analysis can be accomplished for the work of Michel Nedjar, imagine what might be possible for other areas of puppetry studies!

—review by John Bell,
Director of the Ballard Institute and
Museum of Puppetry

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