

Pavel Drábek

Review of *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*

Dassia N. POSNER, Claudia ORENSTEIN and John BELL (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014. xxiv + 351pp. ISBN 978-0-415-70540-0 (hbk), 978-1-315-85011-5 (ebk).

The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance is a varied testimonial of the complexity of contemporary puppet theatre and some of its related art forms – theatre of objects, animation, robotics. The collection deals with historical heritage of puppetry and many of its essays discuss contemporary performance that negotiates history and the present. The book's 28 contributions are divided into three parts of two sections each – each part curated by one of the volume's editors, i.e. John Bell's 'Theory and Practice', Claudia Orenstein's 'New Dialogues with History and Tradition', and Dassia N. Posner's 'Contemporary Investigations and Hybridizations'. The volume

unites common threads of observation about the puppet that have emerged in disparate nations, time periods, minds, and forms – ideas that have not yet been fully understood in terms of their interconnectedness and with which we seek to hone a vocabulary. [...] In selecting the book's chapters from over 70 submissions, we have pursued temporal, geographical, critical, and thematic breadth (1)

– as the introduction states its mission. The disparateness is certainly there and it

would be beyond the scope of such a collection to attempt an overall conceptual framework or common theoretical basis.

What is most striking about the volume is the selection of its contributions. As the editors announce, the idea for the volume came from the 2011 'Puppetry and Postdramatic Performance' conference at the University of Connecticut when they realised 'that numerous individuals were thinking about puppetry in the same kinds of ways, that there was a hunger for a more comprehensive investigation and articulation of the poetics of the puppet' (1). Combined with the stated mission, the volume's main internal contradiction arises – part of it pulls in the direction of 'individuals... thinking... in the same kinds of ways', while the other aims at 'a more comprehensive investigation'. The editors acknowledge that they 'were not able to include' (2) a number of significant phenomena, and yet they state the ambition 'to significantly shape puppetry scholarship as a discipline[;] we aim not to exhaust its study but to nurture its growth' (1). This aim is significantly hampered by the fact that the volume does not triangulate the discussion – not even in its introductory and editorial comments – with (i) puppetry research in the cultures that could not be included, such as

German, Polish, Czech, Italian or the Baltic regions (which is striking, given that the *Companion* contains half a dozen essays on very particular US companies and their work); (ii) the rich body of puppetry and object performance theory such as Pyotr Bogatyrev (the most significant omission!), Jiří Veltruský, Otakar Zich, Bert O. States, Marvin Carlson, Scott Cutler Shershow, Wendy Beth Hyman, Brooke Conti, Steve Tillis, Meike Wagner – some of whom are listed or mentioned at passing but never properly part of the discourse; (iii) scholarship on scenography and theatre technology; there is no reference to scenography at all, leaving out masks, onstage automata, digital projection, not to mention the entire school of *action scenography*, which is a near match to the volume's neologism of *material performance*. Given that John Bell has edited the important *Puppets, Masks and Performing Objects* (2001), the omission of masks in the *Companion* is surprising. (Bell's 2001 volume also publishes one of Bogatyrev's key texts on puppetry.)

It may be that my assessment is skewed by a European vision; the *Companion* covers more continents and is perhaps intended to appeal to an Anglo-American readership. Also, the fact that I am writing for a special issue on Czech puppet theatre in global contexts and not finding any reference to Czech puppetry or animation – only a highly specific ethnographic case on the revival of Ukrainian Christmas *vertep* play to stand for Eastern Europe 'since the fall of Communism, [and] Eastern European directors [...] exercising their new [...] artistic freedoms' (113) – makes me somewhat restless and biased in my judgment.

The groundplan of the *Companion* is problematic from the point of historical and theoretical awareness: for instance, there is no mention of the movement known as 'Puppetry Renaissance' (referenced repeatedly in this special issue of *Theatralia*), although occasionally contributors hint at the Modernists' avant-garde interest in the puppet. In the introduction, Claudia Orenstein speaks of 'a puppet moment' as today's cultural juncture and argues that in modern, daily life 'things [are] an essential extension of ourselves' (2), which is both dubious and overstated, and has little to do with puppet theatre. It does relate to Bread and Puppets' Peter Schumann and his meditation on the *shoe* as an object (105–9); however, Schumann is not talking about puppets exclusively but is paraphrasing Victor Shklovsky's seminal essay 'Art as Technique' and the Russian Formalist concept of art as *estrangement* (остраннение). In a similarly dubious way the editors posit that 'Today the demarcations between life and death may not be as simply construed as in the past' (3). I would argue the very opposite: never before was the separation of life and death more extreme than nowadays. Medical advancement – while Orenstein takes it for a reason of blurring the lines between life and death – is, on the contrary, making life generally much more secure and death secluded as much as can be, in the sterility of hospital wards. Similarly dubious is the suggestion made by Dassia N. Posner – backed by a quote from Handspring Puppet Company's Basil Jones – that modern material performance revives animism, 'ancient belief [...] that there is life in stones, in rivers, in objects,

in wood' (Jones quoted on p. 5). I would argue that objects onstage are part of a *purposed* space, not to do with daily reality – perhaps with the exception of a deist vision that finds God's purpose in all Creation. Audience are charged by this super-individual presence of purposeful design of onstage action. This is escalated by the vicarious agency of the puppet and our individual inability to counter the overall design: the puppet is uncanny and super-human in that it is its unconscious tool – it is in this sense, to my view, that Jane Bennett talks of *vitality* in her *Vibrant Matter* (2010) as cited by Posner (p. 6).

John Bell's brief overview of critical thinking and key stages of puppetry history mentions Plato, Kant, Heidegger; Kleist, Goethe, Schiller; lists Maeterlinck, Jarry, Craig, Léger, and Schlemmer '(to name a few)' (8), and avant-garde movements of 1960s New York and Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Company. Anachronistic reference is also made to the Prague School in the context of the 1980s semiotic wave centred around Frank Proschan's 1983 issue of *Semiotica*. Again, no mention of the Puppetry Renaissance or the towering work of Pyotr Bogatyrev – or the UNIMA and its contexts (see our Introduction and Bernátek's and Malíková's essays in this volume).

Margaret Williams's essay 'The Death of 'The Puppet'?' (18–29) opens the theoretical section, discussing the key question pervading much modern puppet theatre, whether the puppet will be replaced by an object for good (see also Malíková's opening reflection in her essay in this volume). Williams concludes, hopefully: 'We're not

in the age of post-puppet puppetry, and the figurative puppet will always remain [...] the point of reference because it holds acting, acting-on, and acted-upon in near equilibrium' (26). Other essays in the section – Paul Piris's 'The Co-Presence and Ontological Ambiguity of the Puppet' (30–42) and John Bell's 'Playing with the Eternal Uncanny' (43–52) – reflect on two specifics of the puppet from philosophical and psychological points of view, applying Sartre's and Levinas' concepts of *perception* (Piris) and Freud's and Jentsch's notions of the *uncanny* (Bell) to the puppet. The usage of these terms are innovative in this context, though perhaps not the most efficient in addressing the respective arguments; neither of these concepts were intended for the theatre, and I would argue that *perception* and the *uncanny* in the theatre is not interchangeable with both notions in real life (cf. Zich's essay 'Puppet Theatre' in this volume).

The following section brings contributions from puppetry practitioners. Among them, Eric Bass's 'Visual Dramaturgy' (53–60) is a lively and refined reflection of a sophisticated performer. It is refreshing to read that '[i]n visual dramaturgy, it is the audience who brings psychological content to a scene' (59) or to reflect on the citation by Kermit Love, one of the creators of *Sesame Street*, who 'distinguished between the puppet and the actor in this way: when the actor comes onstage, he needs to make a statement; when the puppet comes onstage, it IS a statement' (55). Without slipping into the practitioners' rule-of-thumb assumptions, Bass brings informative and enlightening thoughts

on puppetry, putting us, theoreticians to shame for inanity.

However, at times it is difficult to establish rapport with the contributors – as when Handspring Puppet Company's Basil Jones opens his essay 'Puppetry, Authorship, and the *Ur-Narrative*' (61–68) with the following statements:

Perhaps it would be useful to begin by asking whether we can define what it is that characterizes the 'work' a puppet does onstage and how this form of work is distinguished from the 'work' of an actor. The work of the actor is surely to perform the text written by the scriptwriter under the guidance of the director and informed by his or her own research into the character being interpreted.

Ostensibly, the same might surely be said for the work the puppet performs onstage. Both the puppet and the actor are interpreters of the playwright and the director's artistic vision. The traditional chain of meaning and interpretation starts with the playwright, passing through the director and finally to the actor or the puppet. (61)

While Jones' musings are meant to open the dialogue between the text and the reader, they are based on a number of false assumptions: the work of the actor is NOT to perform the text; it even doesn't have to be guided by a director; and the actor doesn't need to have a character to play; there doesn't have to be playwright; and, finally, I doubt the validity of the approach of trying to characterise the puppet in opposition to the live actor. Jones introduces

several notions – most notably the 'ontological narrative' or '*Ur-Narrative*' as he prefers to call it, that the puppet inherently possesses. On the example of Handspring Puppet Company's most famous work – *War Horse* for a production at the National Theatre in London – Jones elaborates on the notion of the puppet's *Ur-narratives* in what comes – bluntly put – as a discussion of the audience's emotional involvement and projection of themselves in the onstage metaphor. The terminological forest Jones builds results, however, in lyrical and slightly sentimental inertia, rather than in productive communication of matter.

It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss each of the 28 contributions to the *Companion* – however briefly. Among the most inspiring are those contributing to Part II, Section III (Revisiting History) and Section IV (Negotiating Tradition). To the most profound belongs, to my view, Jane Marie Law's 'Puppet Think' (154–63), a principally ethnographic study of the culture underlying Japanese puppetry – its rituals of loss and emotional pain permeating the everyday life in historical Japan:

There is a deeper tradition behind these stylized dolls, one that embraces what puppetry does best – allows a space set apart from the real to explore that which is most disturbing, or overwhelmingly sublime, in human experience. (161)

Profoundly and inconspicuously sensitive, Law's essay captures what is unique to puppetry as a theatre form – the ability to resonate with the deep and often painfully concealed moment in the human condi-

tion and in a particular culture. Pronouncing it would be vulgar and rude; ignoring and suppressing it, barbaric and dull. The puppet – as a stand-in, a super-metaphor of vicarious awareness – allows that.

Other essays that stand out is Matthew Isaac Cohen's (178–91) informative and well-researched discussion of the 'post-traditional' Javanese *Wayang* puppet theatre in the *Kreasul* style – or '*kreasi tanpa melupakan asul-usul* (experiment without forgetting origin)' (186) – a very sensitive negotiation of the religious tradition of the *wayang* with a rigorous theoretical backing; or a similarly informative article on Korean *kkokdu gaksi* puppet theatre by Kathy Foley (192–204).

The last part of the *Companion* brings essays that expose puppets to novel usage and in new research directions. Methodologically innovative is Jane Taylor's essay (230–44) giving a detailed account of her production *After Cardenio* – a theatre research project in South Africa that combines the story of Cardenio from *Don Quijote* with early modern English social history and, most importantly, with empirical philosophy that addresses questions of individuality and identity. Taylor's show used a dual impersonation of the heroine – as a puppet and a live actor in coexistence – embodying the central philosophical theme in a material form.

Mark J. Sussman's 'Notes on New Model Theatres' (268–78) refers to two toy-based productions, by the German-Swiss Rimini-Protokoll and by the Belgian Hotel Modern companies, and uses mainly Walter Benjamin's and Roland Barthes's writings on toys, theorising their noetic potency

onstage. This is a very inspiring discussion utilising theory and theatre practice to unpack generally held assumptions that sit at the heart of today's culture – the division of play and serious business, and of child and adult thinking.

The final section of the book, VI 'New Directions and Hybrid Forms' – with essays by Cody Poulton (on puppets and robots in Japanese theatre), Colette Searls (on puppetry and animation), Elizabeth Ann Jochum and Todd Murphey (on puppets, robots, and engineering), and finally, Eleanor Margolies (on clay, food, and compost performance, which would more logically belong to the preceding sections) – bring novel and multidisciplinary engagements with the power of the puppet. All four essays talk serious business and are backed up by rigorous research – both in the library as well as in the lab. This final group of texts is a commendable conclusion to the *Companion* in that it walks outside the theatre into applied arts and industry (perhaps again partly with the exception of Margolies's essay) and works with the puppet as a powerful epistemological tool whose potential is far from explored.

Posner, Orenstein and Bell's *Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance* covers an impressive range. It is 'the most expansive collection of English-language puppetry scholarship to date' (1), as the editors proclaim. It may serve as a useful starting point for those interested in puppetry and its role in today's world. This is no mean feat. The necessary omissions and gaps in the global map of puppetry are understandable and, naturally, inevitable. A second edition might like to

redress some of the most crying discrepancies that I have somewhat pedantically listed here. All criticism aside, the *Companion* presents a rich world of puppetry and a number of inspiring and incisive essays.

P.S. Three additional pedantic editorial critical comments: (i) For students of theatre history it is appropriate to give names of plays and institutions in the original too; that avoids trite confusions such as when reading of what was originally the St Petersburg organisation *Mir isskustva* (The World of Art) but presented by Posner as 'cabaret The Players' Rest' (130) and elsewhere as 'the Players' Halt' (142 n. 5). In this context the confusion is even more striking since the author omits reference to Harold Segel's *Pinocchio's Progeny* (1995) that gives not only the standard translations but also discusses the same documents as her essay. (ii) When an explanation of a prop is given as '*that without which the plot cannot advance*', the example is 'the

letter that Hamlet discovers and then rewrites in order to contrive the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern' (230). To be sure, the letter is not a prop but Propp's morphological actant; besides, it never appears in *Hamlet* as a physical object but is only referred to by Claudius (at 4.3.66) and then told about by Hamlet (in the beginning of scene 5.2). A detail – and yet. (iii) The work of Basil Jones's and Adrian Kohler's Handspring Puppet Company is referred to in many places in the collection. *War Horse* is cited a dozen times – clearly as a most persuasive argument for puppet theatre's liveliness as an art-form in today's world. However – and that strikes me most – the directors of the show at the National Theatre in London, Marianne Elliot and Tom Morris are never mentioned in the entire book! The disproportion between the Handspring Puppet Company's two creators' presence in the *Companion* and the two production directors' absence from it is most staggering.

DOI 10.5817/TY2015-2-16