

Sequence of Thoughts for the MobileLab lecture
Homo Alibi 2008, August 27th, Riga

INTRODUCTION

Puppetry's rise to the mainstream in theatre can be mainly attributed to the rise or the return of the public's interest in a theatre that offers as much visual and musical enjoyment as verbal. It may be termed a 'Total Theatre' since it draws on a plurality of performance disciplines and resources.

'According to Mario Kotliar, an Israeli writer, theatre has reached the stage of "open composition", in which verbal communication no longer possesses the pre-eminence it had in the past. Words have lost their evocative power and precision, and the realistic and psychological conception of drama obtaining hitherto no longer suffices. The viewer's purely personal reaction is far more significant than formerly. He responds to "image", and the contemporary artist/director will aim to convey his meaning through form - that is to say, a way in which the piece's diverse elements are ordered and interact. The actor's traditional centrality has been superseded; he has become part of a general image composition - as a performer or manipulator or both. But this actual role is not greater than that of the objects he manipulates or with which he otherwise shares the stage. "Visual theatre", as it is called, combines different arts. The creator, in searching for the most felicitous mode of expression, is by no means confined to traditional categories, but can have recourse to plastic arts, poetry, music, dance, etc. Nor can the result be judged by the usual standards of logic. In conventional drama, the spectator is in a recognisable world. Perhaps the content of the play is personal, but its dialectical laws are universal. In visual theatre, however, these rules are suspended and replaced by a private logic, based upon artistic associations; the viewer enters the creator's mind. If, therefore, the former cleaves to a preconceived set of ideas and expectations, the performance can be disconcerting. The visual, as stated above, is stressed over the verbal; objects and situations are dislocated from their customary contexts; and new combinations are essayed. The production, moreover, requires our participation, because visual theatre provokes the audience's own associations.

(from Fa Chu Ebert, "Bama", Jerusalem's Visual Theatre, "Assaph C" 1990, no.6, p.160)

Here was shown a DVD of the Handspring production of 2005 'Tall Horse' to demonstrate excellence in most of the following proposed list of criteria for the critic when reviewing and evaluating performance with puppet figures and objects].

The proposed list of criteria for the critic when reviewing and evaluating performance with puppet figures and objects:

Personal enjoyment/satisfaction or their opposites

Originality of the conception, the idea.

Compatibility of the dramaturgy – why did the producers use puppets or animated objects?

The artistic or poetic level of the text or scenario.

The aesthetic integrity of the whole: lighting, sound, materials, colours, scale, movement and speech style.

The execution: the level of visual invention, the organisation of the space, the lighting, the choreography of the puppets, the skill of the puppeteers in animating the figures and objects and convincing the spectators of their liveness.

The crafting skills manifested in:

the puppets, the settings, the manipulation, the acting etc.

An essay “reviewing puppetry” (2005), in which I try to hold to the criteria:

Having been roving the world for some years in search of good productions which include puppetry, it occurred to me that I had not recently read any articles that attempted to lay down a set of criteria for making evaluations of this kind of theatre. As one who regularly makes and transmits the said evaluations I’d like to list a few of these criteria - as a measuring stick, though hardly a checklist.

Only too naturally our ‘feeling’ for a show, **a personal enjoyment, satisfaction, disappointment or distaste**, dictates our first reaction, and no matter any academic analysis, our judgement will usually hold to that. It’s the ‘I know what I like’ factor. Nevertheless as any good critic knows this is too personal a reaction to pass without examination.

At an international festival in Rijeka (Croatia, 2004), I saw only two productions which I rated highly. One was an extensively adapted version of Moliere’s *The Miser*, and the other a Japanese mime and object play called ‘Triangle - Four Seasons’. They were both exceptionally well received, and brought standing ovations and demands for encores. Why? it’s your turn to ask, what made them good?

To start with, the **conception or the idea of each was original**, if not groundbreaking, and second, the execution in both cases was superb. You may rightly argue that this first criterion is no different for human theatre. But in both the interesting basic idea had been conceived in a mode which suited the medium of puppet and object animation. The puppets had been employed to act in a manner which would not have been possible with human actors.

A text springs from an idea. For my present purpose the text is the elaboration of the conception in terms of a script or a storyboard, and in both these productions the text was inspired. Moliere is in any case inspired, but there are dangers in altering any of his plays. In this version of *The Miser* the adapted text served the original idea brilliantly while using a minimum of the original dialogue: two actors played behind a long black-covered table with small, roughly made tabletop figures whose legless bodies were pieces of cloth and whose heads were bath or basin taps, hand-held under the cloth. This *Miser* was hoarding not gold but water, in a world where water had become the most precious commodity. We can all identify with that. He even caught his daughter’s tears in a cup and added them to his store beneath the stage.

For *Triangle- Four Seasons* there were no words, just two players onstage with an array of vast triangular shapes (painted polystyrene, probably - very light) in bright colours and many sizes, all constantly rearranged into a dynamic serial narrative loosely linked to the seasons. They transformed into a myriad objects from flowers and butterflies to landscapes and space rockets, with the two performers adding dance, song, humour and mimed commentary to add to the show’s **richness of invention**.

Unity of style in the design and performing elements of a show might be the next consideration. Each of these two productions had an understanding of sculptural and pictorial values (**the fine art**

element - a sine qua non of the puppet theatre) making for a unity which satisfied the spectators' sense of aesthetics. This meant that the material, colour and scale of the settings, the lighting, sound and music merged as part of a whole, without jarring or discordance. Where the puppets and acting style applied to *The Miser* was satiric absurdism and the scenography minimalist, in *Triangle* the aesthetic was of bright colours, clean outlines, innocent simplicity. Inventiveness and **meticulous choreography** contributed to the pleasures of the stage pictures.

Finally - finally? - my criteria must include the crucial question of craft, that part of the preparation of any show which results in the excellence of the execution so obvious in both these productions. All the performers were highly trained and skilled (though the actors in *The Miser* would do well to improve the voice). All were capable of establishing a relationship with their spectators which drew the two groupings, performers and audience, close together. Complicity it's sometimes called. The on-stage pianist (Rin Heitetsu) who accompanied the *Triangle* piece was accomplished enough to be super-sensitive to the mood and the action. **Music and sound that is sensitive to the scale and style is essential, and I will almost always argue for live playing.** The level of craft is important in every aspect of the show – as in human theatre. But in puppetry the craft is applied also to the design and making of the figures, and the skill of their manipulation: the puppets and objects should seem like extensions of the puppeteer, invested with his or her breath and energy. In the *Triangle* show the female mime artist displayed a refined expressivity of movement, and her partner excelled in the puppet manipulation. On all counts the shows were rated well above average.

At a festival in Lleida, Catalunya, I had the great pleasure of seeing two first-rate productions for young people, both of which won a prize for best festival show. It might be worth applying my newly expressed criteria to them both, to see if the list (personal enjoyment, originality of conception, suitability of the dramaturgy or text, level of execution, unity of style, aesthetic satisfaction, level of craftsmanship) is long enough or whether there are other considerations affecting a reviewer's judgement that should be included.

This second pair of shows, one for children, the other for teenagers, were first of all remarkable for the idea or message contained in them. The first, *Embollic a la Granja* (*Trouble on the Farm*), was about the fear of strangers (xenophobia, racism), and the other, *Operacio A.V.I.* (*Operation A.V.I.*) approached the fear of growing old. Both fears were resolved to leave the audience feeling very good indeed (on the available evidence of smiles and loud applause). While hardly original as dramatic themes, they are not often served up for children and teenagers, and in both cases the dramaturgy was exemplary in every aspect. Second, the execution elevated both productions into the 'first class' category. Each was consummately played by two men, clown-puppeteers and actor-puppeteers respectively, whose level of skill (some poor mouth-synch in *Operation A.V.1* apart) was high.

The style of *Trouble at the Farm* was comedic, a humour applied with a broad brush, which extended into the clowning, the puppets, the scenography and the music and intelligently conveyed a serious theme to a young audience. Unity of style was perfect. *Operation A.V.I.* was humorous, but with a tender, almost rueful, core. The inclusion of a villainous machine which restored youth to people and animals provided the excitement; and allusions to the values of popular legend, together with a sort of universal Gran'pa not at all desirous of regaining his youth, gave the text depth and humanity. Didacticism was entirely avoided. It was a text that teenagers could identify and grapple with.

As for the craftsmanship, it was a joy to experience, in every part. The puppets were superbly designed, made and operated, and there was especial pleasure in the **organisation of the space** in both shows. The scenery sprung surprises throughout both stories, transforming itself into several areas of action in endlessly **inventive** ways. This spoke of an application of enormous care and skill (with no fat budget, I suspect) and of a respect for young people who were here offered the best in production values.

Both spoke too of a certain generosity of spirit in the producers. Is 'generosity of spirit' another criterion then? Academically, no; but the spirit which informs a show is sometimes a palpable thing, part of the good or bad feeling generated in the theatre and carried away by the spectator.

The highest praise of any reviewer must be reserved for that rarest of productions wherein he or she finds herself in the presence of a performance of real artistry. There are great difficulties in identifying criteria for the recognition and evaluation of true art or the true artist. A unique personal vision that adds somehow to our appreciation of humankind and its potential for greatness is one.

An editor of any journal containing reviews must decide on their purpose: in newspapers they are both a guide to quality and content and an entertainment; in a semi-trade journal like *Animations Online* they are not only a guide but a record for aficionados, historians and academics. In the latter case therefore it seems necessary that a generous element of description as to the manner of the staging should be included.

The Miser is presented by the Spanish company *Tavola Rassa* and the performers were *Olivier Benoit* and *M. Gallardo*. Scenography: *X. Erra* and *X. Sallo*. Tabletop technique with actors in view.

Triangle- Four Seasons has as its producing company *Etsuko World*, the performers are *Chica* and *Ogawa Kosaku*. Techniques: *Objects, mime, hands-on puppetry*. Director: *Kinosuke Tsubame*.

Trouble on the Farm is produced by the Spanish company *La Baldufa*, and played by *Paco Paricio* and *Ramon Molins*. Technique: *large hands-on and table-top figures*.

Operation A.V.I. is by the *Farres Brothers, Pep* and *Jordi*, who come from *Lleida*. Scenery and puppets are by the great *Alfred Casas*, and the director is *Jordi Palet*. Technique: *small table-top figures*.

Aesthetics and how they differ from those of human theatre. It must not be forgotten that the roots of puppetry reside in magic, ritual and religion, and in their mirror image, the low satirical humour of the common people. It is a theatre of art and artifice.

Modern puppetry is not anything like real life: it transcends, exaggerates and subverts in order to debase, ridicule, satirise, poeticise reality. Also of course to tell stories. Like fairy tales puppetry tells stories in archetypes, symbols and metaphors. And in pictures. The text for a puppet play is more a cinematic scenario, a storyboard, a series of graphics to be brought to theatrical life.

The Modernists in the first half of the twentieth century (for example the Symbolists, Lorca, Craig, Klee, the Bauhaus, the Futurists et al), understood the principles. The dramatic application of puppetry, whether through object, material or figure, is obviously of use to the creative means of expression of the author(s). The puppet whether figurative, material or object, often has impact as a wholly appropriate dramatic vehicle for the representation of an existential state, e.g. victimhood; or of an idea, e.g. pre-destination and supernatural control (**Pierrots**); an archetype, the dominant facet of a character illustrated in the manner of its crafting, e.g. simplicity, greed, villainy, saintliness.

The spectator and especially the critic need as part of their training an appreciation of the fine arts since puppetry is an element of a visual theatre, also an appreciation of the physicality embodied by the figure and the operator, since a puppet in its appearance is part of a corporal theatre. A puppet that dances needs to be operated by a puppeteer who understands dance, for example.

To read: the essay by Heinrich von Kleist written in 1808, 'On the Marionette Theatre'. There are various easily available translations from the German, including a good one on the web.

In general the difference between the animated object and the puppet figure is simply one of intention: the object is not manufactured, not intended to be a performing character, whereas the puppet is.

An outline of the control techniques, but please note that there are no rules and puppets are nowadays made in all manner of ways:

Marionettes (operated from above on a variable number of strings or a wooden/metal rod to the head plus two or more strings or another rod)

Gloves, hand puppets, sometimes with moving mouths

Rod figures operated from above, from below, from behind

The 'Bunraku-style' or 'table-top' figure, both names equally misleading, but this technique is the most used today. One or more operators, depending on the figure's size and capabilities operate from behind.

'Hands-on' – as above but without any control mechanism

Shadows which can be silhouettes or coloured, lit so as to appear on many varieties of screen, from the gigantesque to the miniature.

Giant processional figures (think of the Bread and Puppet Theatre of the U.S.)

Body puppets, worn as a costume on the puppeteer with internal mechanisms

Mouth synch: different kinds of control but with a mobile mouth hand-synchronised to live speech or song (e.g. the Muppets)

NOT automata, but certainly ventriloquist figures

In fact any figure directly manipulated and animated by cable, rod, wire, string or hands is a puppet.

Penny Francis