

THE RADICALITY OF THE

PUPPET THEATER BY PETER SCHUMANN



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**THE
RADICAL
OF CALIFORNIA
THEATRY
PUPPET
THEATER**

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BREAD
& PUPPET 1990

The Radicality of the Puppet Theater

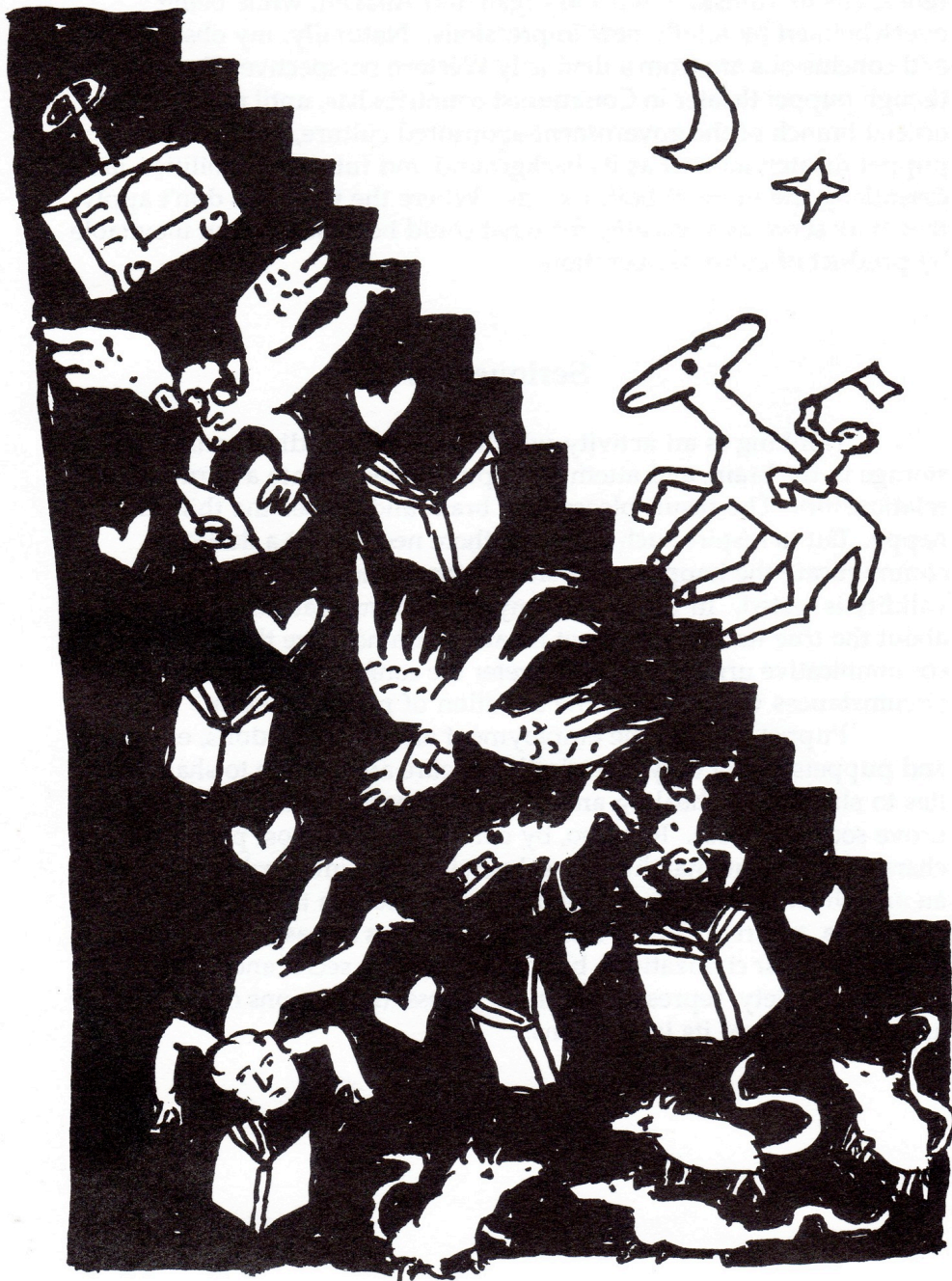
I wrote this essay at the request of Irina Uvarova and Viktor Novatsky for a brand-newborn Russian puppetry magazine, during Bread and Puppet Theater's first tour to Siberia, in May, 1990, between rehearsals in Tomsk, Novii Vasyugan and Abakan, while being overwhelmed by totally new impressions. Naturally, my observations and conclusions are from a distinctly Western perspective. But even though puppet theater in Communist countries has, until now, been an official branch of the government-sponsored culture, the malaise of puppet theater, as well as its background and future possibilities, are essentially the same in both worlds. Where the polemics don't apply, they may serve as a warning for what could be in store as an inevitable by-product of cultural liberation.

Seriousness

Thinking is an activity which takes bulky, disorganized storage in the brain, and attempts to put the pieces into a harmonious relationship. The result pleases the brain and makes the thinker happy. But to inspire such a process there needs to be a desire to communicate the happy conclusion to the world-at-large where its validity is tested. In the case of any revelations that can be made about the true nature of puppet theater, I am not sure that I feel the communicative urge, that I don't prefer the confused and obscure circumstances which typify the situation of puppet theater.

Puppet theater, the employment and dance of dolls, effigies and puppets, is not only historically obscure and unable to shake off its ties to shamanistic healing and other inherently strange and hard to prove social services. It is also, by definition of its most persuasive characteristics, an anarchic art, subversive and untameable by nature, an art which is easier researched in police records than in theater chronicles, an art which by fate and spirit does not aspire to represent governments or civilizations, but prefers its own secret and demeaning stature in society, representing, more or less, the demons of that society and definitely not its institutions.

SERIOUSNESS



The puppeteers' traditional exemption from seriousness --e.g. from the seriousness of being analytically disciplined and categorized by the cultural philosophy of the day -- and their asocial status acted also as their saving grace, as a negative privilege that allowed their art to grow. The habitual lament of modern puppeteers about their low and ridiculous status is unfortunately disrespectful of their own art, or proves an impotent attempt to market their work as so-called serious art. (The physiognomy of modern puppetry is often a sad example of this impotent seriousness, especially where animals are portrayed with the jolly stupidity of chewing-gum advertisements, adding the creatures' fateful features to the already existing set of human stereotypes, defunct physiognomies, really, meant to be cute but desperately sarcastic at heart.)

In the meantime, the modern German puppet-interpreters have come up with a grand solution to the social-status-problem of puppetry, rebaptizing it "Figurentheater," so that nobody will find them guilty of complicity with Kasper, Punch or Petroushka. Luckily, the old art of puppetry is much too old to be seriously affected by such silly ploys, and luckily there are plenty of live examples to prove it.

And yet, despite the general tendency of our cultural effects to be subservient to the power of the market, to money-making and to the associated steeping of our souls into as much nonsense as possible, despite the fact that puppet theater exists mostly in the feeble manner of an art obedient to the demands of the entertainment business, puppet theater also exists as a radically new and daring art form: new, not in the sense of unheard-of newness, but in the sense of an uncovered truth that was there all along but was so common it couldn't be seen for what it was. Radical in the sense of not only turning away from established concepts, it also succeeded in a widening of the heart that allowed for greater inclusion of more modern and ancient art into the ancient art of puppetry.

LANGUAGE



Language

The radicality of the puppet theater includes a redefinition of language as not merely a tool of convenient communication. Puppet language is more than an instrument of fine-tuned information. It is an experiment which strips words and sentences of their secondary fashionable contexts and condenses quantities of habitual gossip into singular terms. The puppets need silence, and their silences are an outspoken part of their language.

In puppet language words sing and stutter in the mouths of singers and stutterers who are especially equipped for this task, whose vocabulary is not academically learned or extracted from everyday uses of language, but shows an ongoing struggle to come to terms with the naming of things by their right names in a slow, haphazard way. In the puppet theater words are attached to faces which don't move externally but are all the more obviously able to produce meaning.

Acting

Language in the dramatic arts is the reflector of human thought and trivia through the actors' imitative efforts. Acting is an art that the actor knows about from the growing-up practices of children, who mimic adults as a means of entering their world just as they mimic animals to cast off their fear of the wild. Unfortunately, the actor lacks the child's sincerity at this game and has to replace the child's urgent need with an education of trickery, with facial and vocal gymnastics aimed at a most naturalistic pretending of something unreal and intangible: the ghost of a reality that is not there but insists on our acceptance of its existence. His whole education is geared towards the intensification of this fakery that is supposed to transport the viewer over the gap of the missing reality. It isn't this gap between made-up and real reality, though, which is so bothersome. The weightiness of the unasked-for and affected sincerity in the aping of kitchen and bedroom intimacy, and the intimacy of pain -- that is what is so demeaning. Real pain in life is a serious relative of death, a terrorizer,

ACTING



usually a visitor of great consequence. The detailed, imitated pain in movies makes a mockery of the vital resources which enable our nature to fight pain or even submit to pain gracefully.

Sincere intimacy, if anything, seems to be the addictive spice with which the movie industry -- the most visible exponent of the art of acting -- has modern humankind hooked. Subject matter and visual adornment are secondary to this technique: the peep-show secrecy blown up into the dimension of public frenzy, but a frenzy without teeth because of the regularity with which it occurs. Eventually, real intimacy has to bear the weight of the imitated intimacy.

Because of its domineering status in the consciousness of the general public, acting performs an unquestioned political role in the manipulation of public self-consciousness. The self-conscious viewer's second-nature sincerity feeds entirely on the viewer's educated identification with nothing much, with replay of his own littleness. And even if one would consider this an endearing trait which is generally justified considering our decrepit circumstances, it is defeatist by nature, not modest. On the whole, it amounts to weeping and whining in the face of the harsh world.

I find acting sad, a sad art, especially in the movies: the jollier they try to be, the sadder they are. (The glib, self-satisfied expressions on so many faces of First World beneficiaries are a direct result of the movies. The faces seem to belong to actors who use their features to perform the standard role of the Good Life for the benefit of everybody else.)

Remember, not long ago, B. Brecht took a look at the Chinese theater (and, also, I suppose, at puppet theater) and realized that the actor's service to the dramatic arts could be salvaged from this psychological dilemma if the actor was allowed to enjoy his art as an art of faking, and with that be liberated from the self-possessed art of acting, and instead be allowed to concentrate on the text. And B. Brecht went to Hollywood and half-heartedly fought with Hollywood about this issue. But Hollywood understood very well the human weakness for perfect recreation, the abandoning of ourselves and our unrewarding lives, the need for a pillow for our brains which translates into the sentimental excuse for any brutality whatsoever, and has since served us countless sentimental brutalities, successfully avoiding Brecht's message.

MUSIC



Music

The radicality of the puppet theater is further evident in its employment of music as music, as sound production in its own right, operating in its own sphere, parallel to and not governed by the visual theater. The listening which the puppet theater teaches is diametrically opposed to the modern notion of music as a service tool for the consumer and his vacationing and working habits, a wishy-washy something between Muzak and white noise, meant to stimulate the desired moods in an exhausted brain. It is exactly this service attitude, culminating in the unquestioned duplicity of effect of vision and sound, or rather, the misuse of sound for the purposes of vision, which keeps music from acting as music for the benefit of the larger scheme of collaborative production.

(Modern puppet theater suffers from the tape recorder just as much as it suffers from foam rubber. As in so many other examples of twentieth-century inventiveness, the genius of engineering also seeds the virus of decay. The all-purpose, multi-talented cassette player, loaded to the brim with wonderfulness, inhibits modern puppetry like nothing else. The little machine is an international omnipresence in the puppet world. It stinks. It takes the guts out of the trade.)

Music hurts as the animal kingdom hurts. From what? From the dispirited understanding of its sense, from the exploitation of its innards by a race of spoilers and manipulators, from not being allowed the circumstances it needs for its own growth and life.

The tolerance and indiscriminate loving-power of music are proverbial. But the political usage of the healing and soothing traits of music makes it hard for musicians to create actively helpful sounds or to extract already existing sounds from the world of sound without losing them to an exploitive culture. Air which is burdened with tons of carelessly discarded sounds has trouble carrying selective sounds and needed sounds. If music is the relationship of some and all sounds to each other and the psychic effects of these, but also if music is one of the rare, wholesome utterances of self, where the self is not only bone and brain but an attuned part of a large body of selves, like ourselves

and more than ourselves, then the concert stage with its thoroughly specialized clientele is too small a forum for the messages of music.

I think of puppet theater as a possible context for music, a place where music can be useful without being corrupted.

Sculpture

Finally, the radicality of puppet theater derives from the definition of puppet theater as applied and socially embedded sculpture. Puppet theater is committed to common sense as a guiding principle in the making of sculpture. The sculptural effigies which try to give meaning to our public places have long ceased to represent public heartbeat and yearning. They also don't frighten us any more, other than intellectually, as symbols of status quo cultural politics. The meaning of sculpture has long been connected to its expense, and with that, to its sponsorship. The shift of sponsorship from princes and churches to governments and cigarette-makers is as sad as the drudgery of history, a shift from one oppressive authority to another. The liberating momentum of sculpture in puppet theater lies in the fact that it provides a better *raison d'être* for sculpture than that of sculpture's retirement into statues, be they in private chambers or public places. In the puppet theater sculpture serves a quasi-narrative purpose, if narration is understood as the revelation of an inner world and if we allow the possibility that the narration hinges on and is inspired by the sculpture.

CONCEPTUAL ART



Conceptual Art

Puppetry is conceptual sculpture, cheap, true to its popular origins, uninvited by the powers-that-be, its feet in the mud, economically on the fringe of existence, technically a collage art combining paper, rags and scraps of wood into kinetic two-and three-dimensional bodies. The conceptual element, the sheer concentration on concept at the expense of communicative pleasantness, the sacrificing of the decorative or handsome appearance of an inner theme in an outside form or art object for a greater adherence to this inner theme, are practiced with a certain restraint in puppet theater.

Unlike most modern conceptual art, puppet theater realizes its conceptualizations in an atmosphere of what is possible or of what can be understood and taken from it, and not as an exercise which demonstrates an extreme example of concept. This excessive exhibition of process and avoidance of the art object confine most modern conceptual art to a tiny clique of makers, interpreters and investors.

Basically I think of conceptual art or of the preeminence of concept in art as the result of a lot of art-making, as in old artists' art, in the sense of a much higher concentration on essentials like gesture and meaning of gesture, or the daring of bare-bones composition in lieu of the show and its opulence. The priest in the Russian Orthodox Church service is so sure of his performance of accurate motions, which are given to him and which are totally inaccessible to his private interpretations, that, indeed, he can afford to gossip between his sacramental duties. The shaman, whose handling of objects is an accumulation of pointed, purposeful gestures which derive from attempts at divine communication, can turn his back to the audience.

The puppeteer whose performance starts somewhere else, namely with a passion for the correct or right raw materials, judged by their former uses, availability, origin, cost, weight, beauty, can perform confidently with the help of these raw materials. None of these qualities is immediately obvious to an audience. The process of their selection, their actual importance as participatory forces in the

final product, are nothing more than a subtle presence, and yet he owes his show to these invisible ingredients.

To wrap it up: the modernist puppeteer struggles with the same basic questions which bother or don't bother and provoke or don't provoke all modernist artists. All art producers, even puppeteers, are children of Modernism.

What has Modernism achieved? It has destroyed taboos of perception. It has released powers of hand and brain of which hand and brain were not aware before. The tragedy of Modernism is its political and social failure, its inability to apply more than the formal discoveries to the historical situation. The liberation process of Modernism has been confined to art and art-related production. The lofty ideals of Modernism did not penetrate the social sphere of habit or of the oppressive exercises of organizational authority. Maybe the question is: how far did Modernism mean to go? Did it ever direct its dreams beyond the Russian Revolution which it failed to survive? Kandinsky and Schoenberg believed in some higher, quasi-religious aspirations of Modernism, but Nazi Germany and modern Capitalism dwindled these hopes into the specialization of sheer esoteric practices which we now think of when we say "Modern Art."

The homeless look into the elegantly empty, super-expensive gallery spaces of Soho and defy progress in art.

Does the idea of doing with art more than art still exist? Are the arts interested in more than themselves? Can puppet theater be more than puppet theater by giving purpose and aggressivity back to the arts and make the gods' voices yell as loud as they should yell?



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