

The Puppet, a Ritual Artefact or a Magic Object?

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Abstract: *If we talk about the puppet of the 21st century, we find that it is an important element of culture: its symbolic and functional capabilities are used in the ritual, theatrical, museum spheres, we see an active use of it in cinema, animation and television. So far there is no universal definition of the theatrical puppet, which is caused by the state of contemporary theater, marked by a movement that tends towards performance, synthesizing different traditions, forms and theatrical signs. The era of total theater, creating productions on a universal scale, addresses animation theater as an impressive allegorical medium. The metamorphoses of the last years change the traditional idea about the theatrical doll, which allows the researchers to include in this concept all the means of artistic expression of the puppet art, united by the motor function.*

Key-Words: *puppet; puppet theatre; ritual; magic; tradition*

1. Introduction

Throughout its existence, mankind has constantly communicated with what we might generically refer to as *a doll*, starting with the cave people who hunted mammoths, and up to this day, whether it be art, children's games, rituals or traditions. We cannot omit these aspects if we want to draw an imaginary boundary line between *Art* and *Life*. Throughout his life, man has created a multitude of dolls: figurines carved at the bow of ancient Greek, Viking or other types of ships, weathervanes in the shape of horses at the top of Russian huts or the rooster on our own native buildings, the eagle spreading its wings or the panther jumping from the car radiator, - all these representations, decorative applications, a kind of *everyday aesthetics*, are they not part of the *Animation Theatre*, in its various forms? Dolls are often used as a term of comparison in classical literature; this is indisputable proof that they were known and appreciated by the public.

The first attempts to theoretically understand the peculiarities of animation theatre and its means of expression date from the 19th century. First of all, we refer to the classical study of Charles Magnin, a French scientist, writer, playwright and poet. The last work in his life was, at the same time, the first and greatest research, which served as the foundation for the study of the history of international animation theatre; it is *The History of Puppets in Europe (1852)*.

This work is an extensive and consistent proof of the way in which this magical art appeared and developed from the ancient pagan rituals and then from the Christian rituals, bearing the seeds of ancient magic. Brilliantly written, it amazes not only through the depth of the author's knowledge and erudition, which operates with numerous unknown or lesser-known sources in ancient Greek and Latin, but it also attracts through its refined French humor.

For the first time since its origin, following the development of the European animation theatre, which at that time was regarded as *pariah, a negligible quantity* among the arts, Charles Magnin made some fundamental discoveries for that time, and at the beginning of the twentieth century, a special contribution to the development of the genre was brought forward by the

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theoretical works of the famous English director, Gordon Craig. It can be argued that they greatly influenced the development of the theory of animation theatre.

2. From rite and superstition to virtuosity and talent

One of our oldest sources - Herodotus (5th century BC) - speaks of iron figurines handled by strings, which had their origin in ancient times. He mentions, for example, a fertility figurine worn by the Egyptians that he observed during the celebration processions of the cult dedicated to the goddess Osiris. This figurine is the first mobile statue we have testimonies about, with a height of about fifty centimeters and a phallus of the same length, like a wire directed at will and at ease. The Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg also has a similar terracotta fertility statuette, dating from about the same period and which may have been present in ceremonies, similar to the one in honor of Osiris, measuring about twenty-five centimeters in height, holding in his right hand a stylized sun, and in his left a sheaf of wheat. Under the dress one can observe attached the articulated legs and a curved phallus, and above the wrists are some holes for the strings that should control the limbs.

In order to explain the simplicity with which the Creator governs the Universe, Aristotle said that men only need an act of divine will, similar to that which guides a puppet, claiming that if God pulls a string to move the head of these little beings, then the shoulders, eyes and limbs, they all gracefully obey.

Let us attempt to define more clearly what *a doll* is. The English have two words to name it: *doll* and *puppet*, and if we refer to the doll in the animation theatre, we think that it is somewhat contrary to the toy, they are antagonistic - *the doll* is dumb and motionless and *the puppet* is characterized through word and action. The French also have two names: *pupet* and *marionette* - the first referring to the toy. And yet it is quite difficult to pinpoint the characteristics of the theatrical doll, as it is also: a sculpture, and a painting, as well as live action and film ... Does it bear resemblance to man?, but what if it represents an animal? .. the resemblance to anything that is alive? ... and what if it is a fantastic face? ... but what if it does not claim to be a being? Only the doll - as an object itself, could represent both an object and an animated being, in the imagination of the child or of the puppet actor.

Bil Baird stated in *L'art des marionettes*: "What is a puppet? The puppet is an animated figure, which, upon guidance by a hand, moves in front of the spectator. No other definition is satisfactory. A puppet is neither the saint who bows when the cathedral clock strikes the hour, nor the weapon that beautifies a shop window. These are mechanical. A doll, once again, is not a puppet: the little girl who plays with her doll, performs an act of intimate importance, limited to two characters as the child communicates the game she is endowed with; this is not a show at all".²

There are documents and sources attesting to the appearance of the artistic act, with a mask or a doll, since the primitive Native American communities, located at the northwestern tip of the United States. This society bequeathed many totems to us, and the custom of using the articulated mask in religious ceremonies was widespread. The totemic society is a society in which people were spiritually related to some animals or plants. The shaman, who wore masks and conducted the ceremonies, enjoyed great power and settled the general problems of the seasons, diseases, family quarrels; he gave names to everything, he knew when hunting was favorable, when it was time to harvest or sow and when he evoked the spirits of his ancestors,

² Bil Baird. 1965. *The Art of the Puppet*, trans in French Jeanne Fournier-Pargoire. New York: The Ridge Press Inc.- Mac Milan Company, p. 13.

they appeared in the form of a mask, worn on the head, resembling an articulated figure, manipulated by its lower part.

Gaston Baty claimed: "The puppet's strength begins where the actor's strength ends".³ We find a similar idea in Pepino's book, *Automata, Idols, Dolls - The Magic of a World*, where on quoting Serghei Obraztsov, he talks about the animation theatre which "...starts where the actor's possibilities end".⁴

The puppet appears to have had its debut in religious ceremonies, as an auxiliary of priestly power. After its inception, it was a means of communication and influence of divine spirits on people. In India, it has long been believed that puppets were small deities sent to earth to amuse and instruct man, in fact there is a charming Hindu legend that explains where their divine gift comes from.

In a New Delhi museum, a very old clay monkey was discovered, no more than seven or eight centimeters high, which was drilled vertically, both in its joined hands and on its feet. This monkey was discovered in the ruins of Harappa (a city in Pakistan), the place where the oldest evidence of Indian civilization was found. If this monkey survived for centuries, it turns out that it was made of a fairly solid material. Articulated puppets, made of cloth or other less durable materials, have not had such a long life and this makes historical research difficult.

According to Indian mythology, Adi Nat (the first puppet) emerged out of the mouth of Brahma, the Creator. This is the highest origin attributed to them and it is assumed that the emergence of the art of puppetry took place before the spectacular forms played by living actors. In ancient times the representation of a living being was forbidden: it was like a prediction of death. Hence, the theatre was inconceivable. However, this taboo did not affect the puppet. In fact, this story resembles in origin the appearance of the theatre in Japan, where the art of stage performance was reserved for goddesses, whereas later, the actors were only mediators between deities and people.

In the live theatre of India, the producer or the director was called the *sutradahr*, which meant the manipulator, the one who pulled the strings, confirming that the puppets made their appearance first, and ever since its origin, the Hindu puppet has taken many forms. Bil Baird, in his book, stated: "*It is difficult for us Westerners not to imagine India as a cultural ensemble. But even today, when the ancient Kingdoms have been united, thus forming India, the country is not homogeneous, there are eleven types of writings, and the cultural differences are numerous.*"⁵ The genre and style of the puppets depends on where they are born.

In Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, the descendants of extremely refined puppets, known as *bomalattam*, were found. They are sumptuously dressed and decorated wooden figurines, manipulated at the same time through wires and rods. There are also *tholubamata*, shadow puppets, which are moved from behind a screen lit by an oil lamp. The shows lasted all night and the puppeteers had to have the strength and endurance of an athlete. The play was performed for several months. The spectators came with their whole family, being supplied with everything they needed.

If in India puppets appeared due to the so-called pagan rituals, then in 1443 France, we find the first dolls in churches. They appear during church services in the form of representations of deities: God, Jesus, angels and biblical figures. But in addition to the biblical characters, there was also a clown. The people know this comic character as *Grimpesulais* and his antics synthesize the action of the play. Puppets were slowly introduced into the ceremonies

³Barba, Eugenio, Savarese, Nicola. 2018. *The Five Continents of the Theatre: Facts and Legends from the Actor's Material Culture*. Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House.

⁴Pepino, Cristian. 1998. *Automata, Idols, Dolls - The Magic of a World*, Galați: Alma Publishing House. p. 37

⁵Baird, Bil. 1965. *The Art of the Puppet*. New York: The Ridge Press Inc.- Mac Milan Company. p. 46.

of the medieval church throughout several centuries, but not without opposition, as the Christian church hated profane images and spectacles.

Therefore, puppets were introduced in religious drama during the Middle Ages, with such plays having their debut in France, later in England and taking place until the 15th and 16th centuries. These plays were, in fact, episodes from the Bible or from the lives of the saints that accompanied religious holidays. Medieval Poland called its Christmas play *szopka* (nursery) and it was presented on a cathedral-shaped stage. In Ukraine and Belarus, this is called the *verte*, illustrating Bethlehem and depicting the birth scene, cycles of mysteries that connected the Divine Creation to the Last Judgment. In other regions, the puppets had brightly lit cathedrals as their theatre, often on three levels, representing heaven, earth, and hell.

As the success of the puppets is asserted in church, the comic begins to occupy an increasingly important place. Through a slow evolution, religious drama turns into profane drama: it is difficult to ensure the solemnity of a service, when people laugh out loud. Little by little, the comic characters and scenes, destined to illuminate the miracles, became noisier and coarser. The shepherds of the Nativity became clowns, Noah's wife turned into a scorpion, grotesque devils lured fishermen into the flames of hell. The clowns walked around the stage, without being part of the action and were endowed with a free, even licentious vocabulary, which became characteristic of the stage during those times. If the puppets were rejected by the church, it was because of their vulgarity. Once in the street, they revealed their true colours, and the drama actors signed petitions, theatre owners and directors complained, while the puppets became more and more immoral, and all efforts seemed to be in vain.

Meanwhile, in Germany, starting from Marlowe's play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, the most elaborate puppet play in the Western world emerged. It centred on Johann Faust as its hero Johann Faust, the learned doctor who, tired of his virtuous life, sells his soul to the devil in exchange for wealth and power. The whole legend of Faust was woven around his name, and German folklore developed it. Marlowe's original tragedy underwent numerous changes before reaching Germany. The main change was the introduction of a comic character that had nothing to do with the original play, but had the mission of arousing laughter, as opposed to Mephistopheles. The Germans called him Hanswurst (a kind of Ion Cârnat). Eventually Hanswurst is driven out from the drama theatre, exiled to the puppet theatre, and he gives birth to a nation of comic and indecent devils. Undoubtedly, the shamelessness and impudence of a puppet are more agreeable than those of a human being.

Feruccio Marotti, in the article *Movement is everything, the beginning and the end*, remarked the following aspects regarding the puppet: "The puppet is the art of moving shapes, and movement is what gives evidence and value to shapes, along with light and its shadow complement. From Gordon Craig's suggestive words to Meyerhold's sharp paradoxes, from Gaston Baty's lucid reasoning to Oskar Shlemmer's rigorous precepts, the puppet - "the offspring of the dream" as Anatole France called it - crosses the history of modern theatre as an evanescent presence from the afterlife."⁶

Mankind's childhood is *populated* by dolls, and there were even times when people went on the last road with them, as evidenced by the dolls discovered in graves.

In 1964, due to archaeological discoveries made in northern Italy, the word *Fanciulla* (meaning "little girl" in Italian), spread around the world. "... *Fanciulla* – a miracle!", "...*Fanciulla* - the sleeping beauty" - exclaimed the newspapers, the radios, the televisions. Crowds of people rushed to Rome. *Fanciulla* was born somewhere around the middle of the 2nd century AD. and was probably from northern or central Italy.

⁶ Apud. Marotti Ferruccio, in Barba, Eugenio, Savarese, Nicola. 2018. *The Five Continents of the Theatre: Facts and Legends from the Actor's Material Culture*. Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, p. 227.

The eight-year-old girl was found near Rome, in the *Grottarossa* region, which is why she received the name of *The Mummy of Grottarossa*. She was found in a landfill near Via Cassia, later called Via dei Martiri de la Storta. The white marble sarcophagus, along with several funerary objects, were exhibited at the Roman National Museum of *Palazzo Massimo*. The mummy was perfectly preserved. It is important to mention that this means of embalming was only known by the priests of another long-gone civilization, so the presumption that the girl's parents lived for a while in Egypt might be considered viable. She may have died there as well; she could have been embalmed according to the custom of this country and then transported to Rome. But these are just speculations and assumptions, nothing can be said for the time being by archaeologists, historians or criminologists.

After performing tests, it was found that the girl was suffering from malnutrition, yet despite this fact, we cannot assume that she was born into a poor family. This state of affairs is attested to us by the precious objects found in the marble sarcophagus, which was itself a valuable piece. We could surmise, instead, that she was part of a Roman family, possibly converted to the cult of the Goddess Osiris if we analyze the decorations on the sarcophagus, which depicted scenes of deer hunting, or if we inspect the fine Chinese silk tunic, in which the girl's body was wrapped, including the gold ornaments that accompanied it. However, all these aspects are not the essential elements for the subject under discussion, but something else ... In the white marble sarcophagus, along with the mummy of the little girl and her funerary objects, next to the gold sapphire necklace, the earrings and the other jewelry, there was an ivory articulated doll, measuring 16.5 cm in height.

In fact, it is neither the first nor probably the last discovery of this kind. The habit of putting household items, personal belongings, even food, was common. The belief of the pagan world according to which after dying, people were awaited by almost the same way of life they were accustomed with, implied that for a while they would get those necessary things. So what would be odd about the fact that a doll was found in the coffin of an eight-year-old girl if she wanted to play on the other side of the Styx? Yet it seems that the question about the dolls that were present in ancient tombs is not so simple, since there are so many reliable data about the discovery of dolls in adult tombs. Supposing that they are just toys, as in the case of *Fanciulla*, is simply foolish. Obviously, there are ceremonial dolls, rite dolls, faces of deities, spirits of ancestors ...

Nonetheless, this is complicated by the fact that some of them show clear signs of theatrical puppets. It must be taken into account that many more such dolls could be found in ancient tombs, but given that the most used material in the creation of the doll or the puppet, was wood, we understand its instability and its destruction over time. Most frequently, dolls made of ivory, bronze, silver and even gold are the ones to survive and reach contemporary times.

Experts from various fields and specializations, who once crowded *Fanciulla's* sarcophagus, have probably long since reached a conclusion regarding the characteristics of her doll. However, a great deal of uncertainty persists concerning the dolls of ancient burial ceremonies. There is evidence of dolls discovered in catacombs, those underground galleries that served as refuge for the early Christians. What could this mean: the inertia of pagan rituals or something else?

The puppets are also active participants in social-historical events, artistic events, parades, political demonstrations. It seems that man needs dolls; they are necessary for a part of the psyche, of his consciousness and it is obvious that man's relationship with the doll have undergone changes, in accordance with the times. However, what is curious is that neither man nor the doll changed much, almost not at all.

If we are to tackle the 21st century puppet, we find that it is an important element of culture: its symbolic and functional capabilities are used in ritual, theatrical, museum fields, we see it being used actively in cinema, animation and television. So far there is no universal definition of the theatrical puppet, which is caused by the state of contemporary theatre, marked by a movement that tends towards performance, synthesizing different traditions, forms and theatrical signs. The era of *total theatre*, which creates universal productions, addresses animation theatre as an impressive allegorical medium.

Nowadays, humanity has entered the era of *robotization* or gradual fusion with the artificial, which means that it is more and more willing to correlate its identity with the artificial image of a robot, mannequin, mechanical doll, etc. The theatrical puppet, due to its predilection for allegory, imitation and the ability to model objective existence, which differs favorably from reality, becomes unusually contemporary, relevant during crucial moments in history. In our century, people often sense the feeling of change and instability of the world, longing for the lost integrity of a world vision, which leads to the emergence of artistic-aesthetic, philosophical and social strategies for the formation of *the new man*. The tragic social, military and class conflicts have made people think about the fragility of the Earth and everything that is alive.

It is the 21st century, with its astonishing scientific victories, that has shown the other side of the coin, visibly demonstrating the sinister consequences of great scientific discoveries, greatly exacerbating the alarm for the fate of the Earth. In this situation, the doll, including the theatrical puppet, draws special attention to itself through its resemblance and imitation of man, as an element of a specific relationship with reality, by means of artificial matter.

The amazing resemblance of the puppet to living beings has always served as a reason for reflection and it has also served a broader plan, related to the thoughts of philosophers about the dualism of our life, that of our being as a puppet and of a higher entity as a puppeteer. On the other hand, it is important to note that the theatrical puppet is still a mystery to theatre theorists. Theorists and practitioners argue about its essence, about the limits of its expressiveness, the nature of its reflection on the reality of the human world. The open nature of these questions is also related to the fact that the development of modern theatrical art is dominated by the tendency of diffusion of the means of expression, which appears at the borders of its individual genres and types.

3. Conclusion

The puppet is one of the most interesting images in culture, which allowed the metaphorical presentation of the theme of human existence in the world, through the phenomenon of the resurrection of the controlled inanimate object, which illustrates the interdependence between the creator and his creation, the human being's cultural acknowledgement and the consideration of the process by which an artist creates a work of art in general, and in the theatre, in particular. This metaphor is associated not only with the history of human theatre, but it is a reflection of one of the main problems in determining the specific characteristics of the animation theatre itself, which clearly demonstrates the division of the acting performance, separating the actor from his external image, that of the puppet.

The wonders of science and technology are interspersed with *the theatre of miracles*, which is exactly what defines the animation theatre, where it all starts with a small miracle: the inanimate nature of the doll, who breathes and lives in the hands of man. But if today's spectator is really tuned to the same wave as the animation theatre, he has all the reasons for further growth, for evolution.

We may not have given clear, explicit answers to many questions. These answers would have given rise to a greater amount of reasoning. General reasoning does not always help us to understand the essence of one phenomenon or another, especially in the field of art. In connection with this, Charles Dullin wrote in *Memories and working notes of an actor*, that the theatre is full of mysteries, which even the most skilled theorist will not discover, and if he faced these problems directly, he would be seized by a sense of humility and he would understand that he is more likely to penetrate them with his heart rather than with critical reason.

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