

## Teaching philosophies in Puppet Theatre Puppeteer – actor-puppeteer - performer

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**Abstract:** At first – terminology. The words should respond to their designates. So the puppet theatre means theatre in which puppet (as a three dimensional figure of the real or fantastic beings) dominates. All the other phenomena like shadow, hand or objects theatre should have their own names to exclude the terminological chaos. Thus the paper speaks on teaching of real puppeteer working within the real puppet theatre. There are four type of puppeteers: 1. natural one – a nugget, 2. taught within the theatre or at various courses, 3. puppeteer- actor taught in the higher academies according to the drama principle, 4. a virtual puppeteer-performer, taking his impulses from the fine art and the energy of the matter. As the experiment with actor-puppeteer’s teaching failed the performer might be real puppeteer of the future.

**Keywords:** Puppet. Puppeteer. Actor. Performer. Material puppet theatre.

I admit – regarding terminology I am conservative. The word “Puppetry” means for me the world of puppets with their adequate names, that design their production, their technological variety and the ways of presentation on the puppet stage. I insist that words refer strictly to their designates. Naturally I have nothing against neologism; neologism refers to a new designate. Also I have nothing against metaphors, since they bring new senses within extemporary poetic pictures. I am protesting against custom quite popular now to use the “Puppetry” or the “Puppet

theatre” as designation of the new parallel phenomena such as hands theatre, objects theatre, theatre of diverse means of expression, theatre of animation. All these phenomena should have their own names if we do not wish to get drown in the formative chaos.

The word “puppet theatre” for me means the theatre in which the puppet as a character dominates as its most important part. This kind of theatre still exists. It exists as continuation of traditional puppetry but also as creation of some contemporary artists. Everybody may find own place within it. So in this paper I intend to speak about the “puppeteers” training for such “real” puppet theatre.

Naturally the puppet theatre exists within a rich cultural environment that constitutes its context. This is a territory of osmosis, synergy which leads to crossing the genre’s boundary. It is not surprise that puppet theatre adapted other means of expression such as actors, mannequins and masks, which served to metaphorisation of its language. The theatre of diverse means of expression dominated by the puppet player was born in this way.

Nevertheless the puppet has its own independent life beyond the puppet theatre. It attracted many artists starting with Samuel Foote, German romantics, French modernists and contemporary modernists such as Tadeusz Kantor. Theatre visionary, Gordon Craig, favored it and foresaw the great impact of the puppet on the actor theatre. And so it happened. The puppetry achievements led the puppet to enter on the actor stages. Today it is difficult to say whether the puppet theater adapted other means of expression, or the actor theatre domesticated the puppet. Independently from the destiny of the “classical” puppet theatre, the puppet remains an attractive means of expression keeping an interest of the authentic artists of the “big” theatre. The contemporary tendencies in art assured its existence. It was not an accident that at the beginning of XX century the Spanish writer Ortega y Gasset announced existence of dehumanized art, meaning its reification.<sup>1</sup>

The theatre artists have been interested in the puppet as a possible substitute of the life actor. Heinrich von Kleist identified the puppet with the mannequin and stated, that it has some predomination over an actor because it does not simper, it does not sin being narcissistic, it simply

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<sup>1</sup> See: ORTEGA y GASSET, José. *La deshumanizacion del Arte e ideas sobre la novella*. Madrid, 1925.

submits to the laws of the matter.<sup>2</sup> Of course the puppet's manipulator may simper, but Kleist did not allow such thought. Edward Gordon Craig did understand such threat and he did give the clear advice to puppet's manipulator saying: "You do not move it. You let it move itself!"<sup>3</sup> In one word: create conditions for it may display its charm. Its material charm.

This Kleist's and Craig's message is still valid both in the real puppet theatre as well as in the theatre of the diverse means of expression. In this kind of theatre the puppet preserve its status of the material actor and as such is very appreciated.

The attitude of Kleist and Craig, strengthened by interest of French and German modernists contributed to the splendid development of the puppetry, which in the form of the theatre of the diverse means of expression has dominated during XX century. Many excellent artists produced important works. Many of them crossed boundaries of the folk and children puppetry and triumphantly entered at the territory of the theatre art. In consequence puppetry generated existence of various puppet organizations, institutes, magazines and the puppetry schools of different levels, intending to form the future puppeteers.

It was understandable that essential became the question: who is to be the contemporary puppeteer. In the past it was a casual player, who with the help of puppets assured his family the relatively honest life.

Contemporary successor of the ancient puppeteer has however several faces depending on his creative motivation and the professional circumstances:

(1) It is a puppeteer of the old pattern, a nugget: he himself makes his puppets and he himself perform in front of the audiences.

(2) It is the puppeteer, who is trained in the theatres, in the courses and in the puppet schools, but stil he is only modified model of a puppeteer mentioned in point (1). He might use puppets made by some craftsman.

(3) It is the puppeteer – actor, trained in the higher theatre schools, according to the principle of drama actor training. The above mentioned schools train an actor, who might work both in drama and in puppet theatre. In relation to his colleagues points (1) and (2) he is privileged, because the theatre technical stuff stands to his service.

<sup>2</sup> See: KLEIST, Heinrich von. *Über das Marionettentheater*. Berliner Abendblätter. Den 12ten-15ten Dezember 1810.

<sup>3</sup> See: CRAIG, Edward Gordon. *Poets and Puppets*. The Chapbook, 1921, Feb. 18.

(4) It might be the puppeteer – performer. A new proposed term to name a player fully aware of the specificity of his art, that is created during the process of enlivening of the dead matter. The word “performer” is borrowed from the visual improvised demonstrations such as happening and performance art presented normally by sculptor, fine artists and sometimes actors.<sup>4</sup>

(1) Puppeteer – a nugget – generally was the wandering comedien, tightropewalker, acrobat, story teller – a man of many skills. He was probably a successor of ancient shamans or priests but his ritual fuctions disappeared in the mists of history. He was skilled to manufacture his puppets, to made a stage for them and to give short representation. He was not perceived as an artist. He belonged to the social margins and he started very slow only to get some social respect. He was considered to be craftsmen. For very long time the term “craft” referred to all human products, including the artistic creations as confirmed by Greek and Latin philosophers who called them “techne” and “arts” (COLLINGWOOD, 1958, p. 05). The craftman had devinite target, his tools and first of all - material, that has been transformed in his hands.

(2) Puppeteers, who were conscious of their profession’s specificity, and well prepared to its execution, appeared in Europe, as we can guess, in the XVIII century. In most cases they were family clans which has survived to our time. When they work in groups their activities underwent some specialization. They knew how to manufactures their puppets, but very often they entrusted this work to the experts. It was a starting point of profession’s desintegration considered up to that time as a skill of one body. A process was natural, but obviously in this way the “play” or “performing skill” was separated from its material sources.

(3) Puppeteers – actors are the product of the Central European countries, where the puppet theatre developed under the influence of the great puppetry master Siergiej Obratsov (1901-1992). Puppeteers took his ideas in many countries and founded puppetry school applying theatrical methods taken from Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). Obratsov understood Stanislavski’s system most widely. Presenting his impression from the famous festival in Bucarest (1958) he wrote:

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<sup>4</sup> See: The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance. New York, London: Routledge, 2014.

The Stanislavski's wording - "Faith in the established circumstances" – in its precision is the genial definition of the essence of the acting. The faith in the established circumstances constitutes a talent of an actor. The lack of this faith speaks of the actor disability. No matter if it is opera singer, dancer, drama actor or an actor manipulating puppet – each of his aria, each of his lines, each gesture without the belief in the established circumstances will lose all its sense and will hang in an emptiness. And no matter if an actor of the puppet theatre will manipulate a marionette, a glove puppet, umbrella or naked hand – his performance without the faith in the established circumstances will lose its expressiveness and all his convincing strength (OBRAZTSOV, 1981, p. 388-389).

Bertolt Brecht proposed other principles for the theatre art as he claimed the necessity to reveal the fact of playing with the help of so called "effect of alienation" (*Verfremdungseffekt*)<sup>5</sup>. When in the case of drama the alienation effect was an extemporary signal of the theatre acting, in case of the puppet theatre (or diverse means of expression) this effect became a permanent element as the director Konstanza Kavrakova Lorenz presented it:

There is a basic difference between "alienation effect" as method and acting's technique in the drama theatre and the permanent "effect of alienation" in the puppet performance; actor performing without the "alienation" is conceivable, but the puppet performance without "alienation" is not conceivable, because tension of the developing duality is inscribed in the essence of this performance (KAVRAKOVA-LORENZ, 1989, p. 235).

In the process of schooling both methods became exhausted as well as the principles of Obraztsov's and Brecht's esthetics. The eclecticism and intuition have reigned in the puppetry schools what have served more to the actor training than to the puppetry teaching. A puppeteers – actors as a product of this training might act in the multimedia theatre, but they are more interested in "dramatic" selves exposure. From the point of view of puppet theatre after the half century existence the higher puppetry schools

<sup>5</sup> See: BRECHT, Bertolt. *Małe organon dla teatru, tłum. A. Sowiński*, "Pamiętnik Teatralny" 1955, z.1, pp.39-62 [*A Small Organon for the Theatre*].

has proved to be the unsuccessful experiment.

(4) Puppeteer – performer as a term is a proposition, connected with the new visual phenomena such as happening and performing arts. He belongs to the circle of sculptors, painters and similar masters of the craft, who knows the principles of contemporary arts. He knows how to manufacture his own puppets and put them on stage. He is a parallel fellow to the puppeteers *sensu stricto*. Not all performers are puppeteers. However the American theatre researchers try to find for them the common milieu – a sort of executives of the material performance.<sup>6</sup>

No teaching body is forming an artist of this kind. The most close to such concept was the Parisian master Jacques Lecoq's (1921-1999) school. Lecoq was not a puppetry master, he was engaged in the general instructions of a theatre artist. However he confronted his students with the expression of various objects.

Interaction of the subject and the matter constitutes the basic characteristic of the puppetry art. The matter next to the player brings a lot of special creative energy. The puppet ready to perform is only transformation and arrangement of its strength. The perfect performer should create himself the instrument of his acting. He should understand resistance of a stone, hardness or submission of the clay, he should admire the mastery within the tree's structure, he should exploit submission of the straw. He should learn their language, understand their gravity, their way of existence. He should be humble in the front of the Earth's gifts, that will undergo the creative transformation and will agree to transmit puppeteer's emotions.<sup>7</sup>

Sculptors and fine artists have a special, personal relation to material, which serve them due to their expressive values. They are a little as primary men, who lived closely linked with their environment. It is worth to remember their faith, that the whole matter of the world is filled with the divine energy and are worth of the great respect.<sup>8</sup> The hinduist thinkers have followed the same path, going in the direction of

<sup>6</sup> See: *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*. London: Routledge, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> See: JURKOWSKI, Henryk. *Materiał jako wehikuł treści rytuału*. Warszawa: Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2011. [Matter as a vehicle of ritual's contents] Publishing House of Warsaw University.

<sup>8</sup> See: TYLOR, Edward Burnett (1832-1917). *London: Primitive Culture*, J. Murray, 1871.

philosophic monism and considering that all existing beings are filled up with the divine substance although not in the same degree:

Upanishads present hierarchy of various degrees of reality, starting from the intense absolute, which is equally the original source as well as the final realization of the world process. Various kinds of beings are the higher or the lower appearances of the unique absolute spirit. Nothing at the earth did not stand by its own strength, even it might seem to be relatively complete and intrinsically. Each limited object includes some variations, which point at something that exists behind it. While the absolute resides in all limited things, infiltrating them, the objects differ by the degree they are infiltrated as well as by the fullness of reflection they are giving.

Not all parts are the same, but all lighted in the same way by the radiant light... (RADHAKRISHMAN, 1958, p. 211).

“Absolute in limited things” and on the other hand the Plato’s thesis about the ideas that were accomplished as an image of the material reality demands from the contemporary artist (puppeteer-performer or performance’s director) to have his own concept of the world of ideas and the world of material reality mutual interaction.<sup>9</sup>

The contemporary linguistic prompts us to apply in this case the semiotics’ methodology. Contemporary world of ideas exists thanks to its material basis in the function of its vehicle.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary systems of communication have their background in the material. This material may be in primary form or may be transformed, because everything that surrounds us is sending their statement. This material may be also biological one when the function of the vehicle is taken by a human.

In the world of spectacle the communicate is transmitted by performer (puppeteer) or actor (we remember that in background there is their leader in the person of theatre director). Performer uses the simple matter, which he transformed himself, actor uses the biological matter, that he presents himself as a part of the artistic communicate.

<sup>9</sup> See: Platos Republic. Edited with the notes and essays by the late B. Jowett M.A. and Campell M.A. LL.D. in three volumes. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894.

<sup>10</sup> See: ELAM, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London and New York, 1980.

We may say, that the performer for the most natural reason, which is the distance between him and the puppet, manipulates it in a conceptual way contrary to the actor, who is more spontaneous since he engages in his acting his own body and mind.

These differences remind us the earlier discussion of the theatre theoreticians on the “hot” spontanically play and the “cold” conscious performance in the actor theatre. Proponents of the “hot” playing performed in spontanically way, the proponents of the “cold” acting used their brains and analytic skill as presented by Denis Diderot in his “Paradox of the comedian”<sup>11</sup>. We may remember also that Diderot’s analysis was supported by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who declared his aversion to the subjective lyrism, that was to overcome by the actor.<sup>12</sup>

In our times we have doubts whether these supposition have been right, because we know that the emotional tension in acting cannot be an obstacle in rational role’s analysis. In fact, what is important, is the scenic effect and in general the effect of the work of art in relation to its receiver. It means that we still respect the theory of “stimulation and reaction” coupling, well known already in Antiquity.<sup>13</sup> This coupling does not respond to criteria of the pure artism, but is not to be avoided in spectacular art.

The puppeteer’s education as well as education of puppeteer-performer should be executed independently from the actor teaching. The sculptor enlivening their figures is closer to the puppeteer than the actor exposing his body. The schooling of the puppeteer-performer should consist in shaping him as a human who is conscious of the material sources of his art, who has some knowledge of the primary cultures and the material’s religion functions, as well as ritual origins of the art of theatre not forgetting the theatre obligation in relation to the modern spectators.

It is wishful that puppeteer – performer believes in the primary

<sup>11</sup> See: DIDEROT, Denis. *Paradoks o aktorze i inne utwory, tłum.* Warszawa: Jan Kott, Czytelnik, 1950. [Paradox of the actor].

<sup>12</sup> NITZSCHE, Friedrich. *Narodziny tragedii, czyli Helenizm i pesymizm.* Trans. L. Staff, J. Mortkowicz, Warszawa 1907, s. 40-41 [The Birth of tragedy or Helenism and pesymism].

<sup>13</sup> *Stimulation – reaction* relationship are discussed in X book of Platon’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Horace’s *Ars Poetica*.

strength of the matter. He should experience its powerful influence in the process of creation, while looking for the means of expression for his own judgment of the contemporary human problems. Among dozens general concepts of creative acting Edward Nęcki's concept of the creative interactions seems to be most attractive:

The creative interaction is the process of permanent and mutual effect of two elements: (1) the target of the creative activity and (2) the probationary structures incessantly appearing as a trial of target's achieving. The creative activity's target may be a problem's solving, poem's writing, actual joke's finding – anything to what human may endeavor, what does not have equivalents in the existing knowledge or in the environmental resources. The probationary structure may be any product, which responds to the target. The probationary structures may have the material or immaterial shape that is symbolic or imaginary one (Nęcka, 2012, p. 51).

In our case the “activity's target” means theatrical presentation and the “probationary structures” mean dozens of repetitions starting from the first creative idea to the achievement of the target. In this process important is mutual interaction of the “target” and the “probationary structures”. We would like to see it as “material probationary structures”. The success of one from many “material probationary structures” may lead to modification of the whole project's “target” (Nęcka, 2012, p. 52).

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In my deliberations I tried to give the answer regarding the schooling of the future puppeteers. Naturally I did not enter in the detailed program mentioning all additional teaching subjects completing its main goal. However I want to make clear that puppetry needs a puppeteer who is conscious of the existential diachrony, who links in his personal culture the most ancient creative reflexes with the endeavors to participate in the modern achievements.

The “material puppet theatre” might define this diachrony. This might be the theatre which restores the unity of material and spiritual values of our universe. Restoration of this theatre would be achieved in the creative process that is in the state of incessant activity in the transformation of our opinions and feelings into the theatrical signs. According to the tradition of theatre

art our individual opinions and feelings would serve to general, human endeavoring to the perfect reality, radiant by the beauty of artistic creations.

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