

# Puppet



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The word, 'puppet,' is derived from the Latin pupa, meaning little girl or doll. The metaphoric extension of the word first recorded in the 1540's is: 'person whose actions are manipulated by another. ' [2] Puppetry is the art of taking an inanimate object or representational figure, manipulating it and giving it life. In this essay, I wish to discuss the theatrical fascination surrounding puppets with, in particular, contemporary audiences. I will focus on the emotional factor they bring to performances and, in some cases, why they may be preferred tools of performance.

I will do this by discussing various forms of puppetry and comparing films to production adaptations. Puppets are a vessel of emotion. " Thinking It And Fainting," is a puppetry production about the inescapability of domestic life. The production starts with Isobel Stone, the puppeteer, repeating several household chores. In the midst of her impositions, she begins to daydream about household items coming to life. At this point, I think it is important to mention that Isobel has a background of fine-art, and her aesthetic was turning everyday objects into sculptures, giving them personality and life.

Her production outlines boredom and monotony, which causes her mind to wander giving birth to these household puppets. At one stage, an animal skull appears out of her washing like some sort of obnoxious laundry monster staring down at her. Almost instantly, the audience's attention jumped from the puppeteer to this character she had created. I think women, especially, were able to associate well with these feelings of anguish when having mind numbing tasks put upon them. The puppet created this bridge of emotion for the audience as this heavy feeling of frustration can often feel like a malevolent creature coming at you. It is controlled and manipulated at

the best of the controller... " [3] Isobel gave life to a tablecloth by disguising herself within the fabric. She created shapes and gave this large white sheet an eerie character. Derren Brown said that it is human nature to try and make sense of something random. When we see a sheet moving, we concentrate on the folds, the tone, the movement and create an image in our minds. It is, therefore, important how the puppeteer moves to give sentiment to an inanimate object. In this part of the production, I did not truly believe the tablecloth's character.

I was unable to devote all my attention to the puppet because I could still see too much of a clear figure within the sheet. It is up to the puppeteer to overcome the challenge of focusing the audience's attention from the puppeteer to the puppet. Gwenday, a puppet that Isobel had formed as part of herself, appeared several times in the production. This focused the audience as the puppet took control and we, as onlookers, were captivated by wooden life. I guess the interest lies in curiosity of the unknown.

We can sense human emotion and can often predict a person's actions whereas we are intrigued to find out more about a puppet and what it may do. In puppet theatre, it is often the audiences fascination with the puppets on stage that make you think how powerful these figures are, especially when bearing the eyes of a large audience. "... it's motions and shapes have the look of things we often turn away from or put off or bury. " [1] The uncanny valley is the idea that when something aesthetically appears humanlike, but moves and acts unnaturally, it causes a response of revulsion amongst human observers.

When viewing puppets, their absolute size is ignored and their appearance and movements are similar to that of a human being. This evokes greater familiarity and creates this simulacrum of life, which induces this innate fear of death within people. It can be argued that puppets may not reign over actors. They can get away with topics that are more controversial and have greater means of manipulation, however; they are inhuman and may not have an actor's credibility. In an episode of, 'Black Mirror,' they demonstrate why giving life to an inanimate object may not be enough sometimes.

A widow is given the option to bring her husband back to life in the form of a robot. His personality is extracted from messages and voice recordings and transferred into a lifelike robot. The widow is content, as her husband's life has been restored in a machine however; she is troubled by the thought that this machine has no soul. This once again brings us back to the hypothesis of 'uncanny valley,' humans are able to distinguish when something is not quite right and may then detach themselves from a puppet. Actors are meant to portray characters.

It is up to the audience whether their performance was convincing and, therefore, audiences can be critical of an actor's performance. This may be when puppets have the upper hand. The puppet is the character, therefore, the performance may be more credible to audiences, and in turn, the response to a production would be more positive. Puppets are repeatedly used in comedy. It is no surprise that when comedians bring up controversial issues in their material, they can often get a negative response. Frankie Boyle, for example, is notorious for this, and as a result, it cost him his job on, 'Mock the Week. When a comedian has risky material, it is almost as if

the puppet then takes the blame off the comedian, and as it is a non-living thing; audiences have less of a negative reaction. Comedians are then able to make fun of serious political issues without causing any adverse feelings amongst an audience. Examples of this are: 'Achmed the Terrorist' and 'Team America. ' Both touch on issues about terrorism, war with the Middle East and the senselessness of powerful political figures such as, Kim Jong-il and George Bush. However, unlike 'South Park,' neither of these has caused much controversy.

Another point to mention in 'Team America' is the sex scene. Rather than being crude or graphic, it is an entirely comical scene, in which only wooden puppets would be able to get away with. It also demonstrates that puppets are not only amusing to young children, but can entertain all ages. In some cases, puppets may be necessary to a production. In Matthew Bourne's, 'Sleeping Beauty,' a puppet baby was used to represent Sleeping Beauty as a toddler. A child actor that young on stage would be unreliable and impossible to have in a ballet. Using a puppet overcame this issue and meant that the story was achievable, with the added benefit that the puppet will be consistent in every production. The Sleeping Beauty puppet was used to link the beginning and end of the production. It gave the ballet a comic element and, in my opinion, was the most memorable part of the production. The puppet has a cheeky personality, Sleeping Beauty, as a baby, would get up to mischief and this was demonstrated well. They had the puppet crawling up walls, flying and jumping over other characters to escape them. All of this would only have been possible with a puppet.

It reflected all the phantasmagorical elements of the story, making the use of the puppet very successful. At the end, Sleeping Beauty has a baby and the puppet reemerges for a final bow. This brought the production together at the end as the audience had instantly warmed to this puppet. It was clear that even though the puppet was on stage for less than half the production, it was key to the success of this ballet. 'Ecstasy and Death' is a ballet production performed by the English National Ballet. In the opening scene, the ballerinas were hidden behind realistic dancing puppets.

At first, the audience would assume that these puppets are genuine ballerinas with incredible skill and fluidity, but after a short performance, they push the puppets away to reveal themselves. The puppets were on wheels to make their movements appear smooth as they glide across the stage. The dancing puppets captivated the audience, and it was interesting how, in this case, the puppets movements were unnatural to that of a human, yet we were led to believe that they were in fact human. The puppets were essential to this part of the performance as the dancers themselves would not have been able to create such fluid motion. The Lion King' has already had years of popularity behind it and it was no surprise when the theatre production was in such high demand. The reason for its success is not the storyline or animation, but the choreographed puppets on stage. It is possible to recreate the magic of Disney, and to see the translation of a herd of animals from screen to stage was incredible. The costumes, set and puppets created an atmosphere that didn't take away from the story, the film, and the characters, even though humans were playing them.

It was not just face paint; the costumes were from head to toe allowing the entire human to become the animal. The way the puppets and the costumes were made enabled the actors to create the dynamic of a four-legged creature and forced the actors to move in an animalistic way. During the production, I did not feel as though I was watching humans. Theatre falls down when aspects become unrealistic. The costumes and puppets added to the performance without restricting what the performers can do. If anything, they enhanced their acting of animals.

It is good that they put a lot of money into the aesthetics of the production as it visually transports you to Africa. The reason theatre productions may not be as authentic as films is because they are unable to have as many costume changes, they are not able to rectify any mistakes in post production and there is no added benefit of special effects. In this sense, theatre productions face more challenges, however, because there was so much going on in terms of the costumes, set and puppet props, no costume changes had to be made, and as an audience member, you would visually notice something new each time.

They almost build a stage using puppets and props, creating levels with puppet birds, giraffes and antelopes. They also used forms of shadow puppetry, which was a pleasant use of traditional puppetry mixed in. This rather simple use of puppetry was a good way to realise parts of the film that may have been too difficult and complex to act out on stage. The resurgence of puppetry in contemporary theatre and film may be down to the success of, 'War Horse. ' After seeing both the production and film, I, personally,

found that I became more attached to the horse in the film, possibly because it is a living thing.

Although the film may provoke a higher emotional factor, as it is more realistic, visually, the production was outstanding. I felt there was less emphasis put on the horse in the film. The audience's focus remained on the puppet horse throughout the production, as it was the most significant thing on stage. The actions and movements of the horse in the play are more enthralling as every action is considered. The creators of the puppet wanted to focus the audience's attention on certain details of the horse.

The action of the ears was used as an emotional sensor; the movement of the legs and feet were very lifelike to make it appear as realistic as possible and its breathing was key to giving this inanimate object life. Certain things may be more difficult to convey with a puppet such as the interaction with non-puppets. In the film, there is a real connection between animal and human. When Albert strokes Joey, for example, there is a transfer in weight from the horse's body to Albert's hand. To mimic this natural movement can be difficult when using a puppet.

Puppets face a wall with human interaction. To tackle this problem on stage the puppeteer and actor must keep in conversation with each other to know who is bearing the weight, and it is up to both parts to puppeteer the horse's weight accurately. To make this play successful they used actions that a horse would take when a human acts a certain way. This makes it easier for the puppeteer to know when and how to respond appropriately as a horse to the actor. Things such as looking a horse directly in the eye will cause a negative reaction.



They established this connection well in the production, which conveyed the powerful relationship between Albert and his horse. The puppet is capable of movements that a real horse is unable to do, this, in some cases, is an advantage however; when certain movements appear unnatural, the puppet then loses credibility. The puppeteers maneuvering the horse puppet did not allow any stances to appear unnatural. They even visually created slow motion movements of the horse, which was more interesting to look at as its unusual in theatre to have this cinematic effect.

Each aspect of the puppet is supposed to help the audience be more in tune with the horse's emotions. All in all, I found the production to be a more captivating performance due to the attention given to the puppets. The smaller details of an animal's movements are the focus in the play as it is how we connect it to a living thing. In summation, I feel that puppetry may be considered as a traditional form of live performance; however, I think it will be an undying art form. It is something audiences do not get to see everyday, so when they do see it their reaction tends to be positive.

The art of giving dead objects life is fascinating to humans and as a collective we thrive on the magic of life. Not only are puppets commanding but they can also be easily forgiven, whether it is in terms of risky material or even a glitch in a performance, I think it is hard to form any sort of resentment or negative response to a non-living thing. I would not go as far as saying that puppetry is more powerful than acting, however, it is an increasingly successful form of live performance and this evidence demonstrates that it has enhanced certain performances.

In some cases, puppetry has been essential when it comes to being unable to use actors or wanting to create lifelike beings that can accomplish more than humans. It is essentially up to the puppeteer to draw attention off from themselves and put it upon an inanimate object. Giving a dead body a pulse, making it appear to be inhaling and exhaling so that for a short amount of time this entity may appear to have a soul. Finally, it is up to the audience how much they wish to believe of a puppets performance.