



WAGNER'S *DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN* (SEE PAGE 12)



FALL and WINTER, 2021 Issue #50

# PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

*the puppet in contemporary theatre, film & media*



THE **EPIC** ISSUE

# PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

ISSUE NO. 50

Editorials by *Andrew Periale and Dassia Posner* ..... 2

## PUPPETS ARE EPIC!

Unbounded in Time: Puppets and Epics by <i>John Bell</i> .....	4
Agrippino Manteo and His “Irreplaceable Scripts” by <i>Jo Ann Cavallo</i> .....	8
Puppetry in <u>The Ring</u> by <i>Lisa Aimee Sturz</i> .....	12
Who is Monkey? by <i>Stephen Kaplin</i> .....	16
Amir Hamzah: Epic of Islamization by <i>Kathy Foley</i> .....	20
Stewing an Alternative Epic: <u>The Soup of Reincarnation</u> by <i>Chee-Hann Wu</i> .....	24
A new epic: Anna Cuticchio’s <i>cunto</i> on Salvatore Carnevale by <i>Anna Carocci</i> .....	28
Epic Traditions in Puppet Theater: 4 Mini-Symposia by <i>Jo Ann Cavallo</i> .....	31
Tholpavakoothu: the Tradition of Narrating the <u>Ramayana</u> by <i>Rahul Pulavar</i> .....	32
Exhibit: Dan Hurlin retrospective by <i>Claudia Orenstein</i> .....	36

## SPECIAL FEATURE

<i>PIR Review: A Sneak Peak at Our NEW JOURNAL</i> .....	38
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Cover photo: From *The Soup of Reincarnation* (see page 24 )

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# Welcome to issue #50 of *Puppetry International*

When Bonnie and I first put together our proposal for a new UNIMA-USA publication, 31 years ago (after 5 years of producing *A Propos*), we couldn't have foreseen how the magazine would evolve, thanks to the efforts of a handful of dedicated colleagues and our wonderfully supportive board members. We had planned to feature the efforts of our core staff in this issue, which has, however, become so chock-a-block with interesting articles, that we have decided instead to highlight their contributions (to both *PI* and the field) in a series of profiles in the next several UNIMA-USA newsletters. In addition to the unflagging support of our General Secretary, Vince Anthony, our Historian and Book Review Editor John Bell has worked with us since our first planning meeting for issue #1. Dassia Posner began writing for us in 2002 and eventually became our Peer Review Editor. These two have helped us plan our upcoming issues for many years now, with a generosity of time and spirit that have helped make *PI* what it is today. And then there is my wife and creative partner for nearly 40 years, the incandescent Bonnie Periale, who not only creates the look of each issue of *PI* through long days and into the wee hours for weeks on end, but deals with the unending minutiae that printers require of manuscripts to make them look good.



Our theme in this issue is “the epic,” which is to say, grand tales that help us understand our history, culture and, indeed, our very existence. John Bell does an exemplary job of explaining “the epic” in his essay on page 4, so I don't need to say much here, only that it is a form of storytelling that has been with us since prehistoric times wherever human culture has thrived, and it is still with us today. One of my contemporary favorites is the remake of *Battlestar Galactica* – a made-for-TV odyssey in six seasons that is almost biblical in scope, beginning in the far reaches of space and ending in Africa.



SOUNDIATA KEITA: FOUNDER OF THE EMPIRE OF MALI, INITIATOR OF THE MANDIAN CHARTER, SON OF THE BUFFALO WOMAN (SOGOLON KONTE)

An epic that begins in Africa is seen in the puppet production *Sounjata*. The story dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and tells the story of Sundiata Keita, a prince and the founder of Mali, which became the largest empire on that great continent. We didn't have room in *PI* for this story, but we wanted to include it here, both to have Africa represented and to highlight a recent collaboration that included Compagnie Sogolon (Mali), Awaln'art (Morocco) and Nouveau Théâtre Expérimental (Québec). Their production points up the relationship between East and West, between the Colonial powers and the nations they colonized. *Sogolon* (the Malian company headed by Yaya Coulibaly) is actually named for Sogolon Konté, mother of the hero Sundiata. She is portrayed as ugly, with a humped back, but is also the subject of a prophecy, namely that she would give birth to a great leader.



PUPPETS FROM SOUNJATA, INTERNATIONAL COPRODUCTION

The king at that time agreed to marry her, after being tricked into accepting a bride, sight unseen. He went through with the marriage because he had heard of the prophecy. His son Sundiata was crippled from birth, but through sheer determination (and some magical intervention?) got up and walked one day. There are many episodes in this story, which spans several decades (as befits a proper epic), and I urge you to look it up.

Otherwise we look at puppet traditions (and a few modern productions) that breathe life into the epic tales of Germany, Italy, India, Indonesia and China. Please enjoy this EPIC issue and a look at the new magazine, too!

—Andrew Periale



FARAKROU KANTE: THE ANCESTOR WHO PREDICTED THE BIRTH OF THE KING OF MANDÉ, TEACHER OF MANDIAN SOCIETY, BLACKSMITH, INITIATOR AND HOLDER OF POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

## UNIMA-USA IS STARTING A NEW PUBLICATION!

In addition to *PI*, we are initiating *Puppetry International Research (PIR) Review*, which will be devoted entirely to peer-reviewed research on puppetry topics. Eventually, we foresee this as an online annual publication, but, for the next two issues of *PI*, we will feature a cluster of new research articles in the latter portion of the magazine, so you can get a taste of the riches to come.

*Puppetry International* first began publishing exciting and accessible peer-reviewed scholarship in 2007, when John Bell became *PI*'s first Peer Review Editor. Since John's initial three-year term, Dassia N. Posner, the current Peer Review Editor, has served in this role for eight years and Dawn Tracey Brandes for three. In that time, puppetry scholarship has grown significantly—not only in the form of dozens of articles published in *PI*, but also in the context of exciting new books, conferences and festivals, and other settings in which sophisticated dialogue about puppetry has expanded into new spheres in new ways.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 39]

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BY JOHN BELL

Puppets and epics! What a great subject for a *Puppetry International* issue; or a book! But what do we mean by epic? First of all, in its basic western sense, epics are connected stories with continuing characters whose conflicts define the fundamental aspects of a particular society. Second, Bertolt Brecht defined a related vision of epic performance in the 1920s which is totally relevant to puppetry because it is fundamentally opposed to the realism of most actors theater—Brecht’s epic theater wants the audience to recognize, embrace, and enjoy the artifice of theatrical performance, aware that it is *not* witnessing “real life,” just as audiences at puppet shows know that the puppets aren’t real, and yet luxuriate in the idea that the figure of wood, clay, or Muppet fur is alive. And thirdly, the recent slang version of “epic”—as something “awesome!,” “great!” or not so great, as in “epic fail!”—is, I would say, also completely relevant to puppetry, since puppets are **AWESOME!**



TWO PUPPETEERS FROM THE FAMIGLIA GRECO IN PALERMO, SICILY IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY, WITH ROD MARIONETTES FROM THEIR PERFORMANCES OF THE ORLANDO FURIOSO EPIC

The long-form cycles of epic theater or poetry can be found around the world, and are particularly connected to puppet theater. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and their many variations are the backbones of much of Indian and South Asian puppetry; the episodes of *Journey to the West* are part of the dramaturgical strength of Chinese shadow theater, hand puppet theater, and rod puppet theater; and episodes of the *Popol Vuh*, a central epic of Mayan culture, are performed by puppets today in Guatemala.<sup>1</sup> In Indonesia, a series of at least seven sometimes interlinked epic cycles is at the heart of *wayang* puppet theater: *wayang purwa*, based on the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*; *wayang menak*, based on the exploits of Amir Hamzah, uncle of the Prophet Mohammed; *wayang cepak*, based on stories of Javanese kings; *wayang babad*, drawn from historical chronicles; *wayang wahyu*, based on Christian Bible stories; *wayang kancil*, about the adventures of a mischievous mouse-deer; and *wayang suluh*, based on histories of such 20th-century revolutionary heroes as Sukarno. Amazing!

But in scholarly circles in the West, the epic form has largely been considered to be inferior to stand-alone tragedies. This is a bit ironic, since various forms of epic performance, including soap operas, professional wrestling, television series, *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, the Marvel Universe, endless arrays of Netflix and Amazon Prime mini-series, *Sesame Street*, *South Park*, *Thunderbirds Are Go*, and *The Great British Bake Off* are all based on the long-form repetitions and changes of epic structure.

One of the first things theater students learn when they study the roots of European drama is that Aristotle, the Greek philosopher who is deemed to have defined western drama in his 350 B.C.E. *Poetics*, considered tragedy to be superior to epic poetry. Both forms include a lot of the same elements—they are representations of “serious people” involved in serious actions—but tragedy tends to depend on dialogue, while epic depends on narrative, and tragic plots (Aristotle says) “attempt as far as possible to keep within one revolution of the sun,” whereas “epic is unbounded in time.”<sup>2</sup> In terms of plot, Aristotle goes on to say that episodic plots “are the worst,” because “there is neither probability nor necessity that the episodes follow one another.” Aristotle liked tragedy because its limited storylines wrapped things up nicely in one package, whereas epics, as we know, can go on and on, drawing us in with the comfort of familiarity. But while Aristotle may have preferred tragedy to epic, did the rest of Athenian society agree with him? The popularity of *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* would seem to indicate no.

Coming into graduate theater studies as a puppeteer, one thing I noticed about western drama classes I took was a certain discomfort with the 600+ years of medieval theater (this discomfort has changed more recently, with new and

exciting research into puppet and object performance in the Middle Ages by Kamil Kopania, Michelle Oing, and others!). The professors’ problem was that the happy march of Aristotelian tragedy, from Greek theater into Roman theater, had been interrupted for 6 or 11 centuries (depending on what you count) by the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Catholic Christian ritual performance, which was interested not in concise tragic plots, but in the long-form interlinked stories of the Bible: the epic of western European culture. From the 5th to the 16th century, the dramaturgical basis of medieval theater—and the basis of European puppet and object theater—was Bible stories and related tales, which offered a complete history of mankind, from the Creation to the coming of Christ, and the end of the world.

While many western theater historians marked the end of medieval cycle dramas and miracle plays and the return of tragedy in the Renaissance with a huge sigh of relief (thank you Shakespeare!) puppetry continued to explore the Bible and branches of that epic through the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, as part of its low-culture, slow-to-change aesthetic conservatism.

Ben Jonson’s 1614 play *Bartholomew Fair* is set at one of London’s most popular summer fairs, which were rife with puppet shows, *commedia dell’arte*, peep shows, and other popular forms of object theater. Although Jonson portrays Puritans disapproving of all these entertainments, he also asserts that such shows were exceedingly popular. At the beginning of Act 5, the puppeteer and “hobby-horse seller” Lantern Leatherhead describes the content of 17th-century puppet shows (also known as “motions”) as a mixture of Bible stories and more recent events: “O the motions, that I Lantern Leatherhead have given light to, i’ my time since my Master Pod died! *Jerusalem* was a stately thing; and so was *Nineveh*, and *The City of Norwich*, and *Sodom and Gomorrah*.”<sup>3</sup> Such biblical fare continued in the next century. In his 1949 history *The Puppet Theater in America*, Paul McPharlin quotes a 1709 description of puppeteers doing a pre-show parade in Bath, England which notes: “the puppet drummer, Adam and Eve, and several others who lived before the flood, passed through the streets on horseback.”<sup>4</sup> *Das Jahrmakstfest zu Plundersweilern*, a 1769 comic play that the 20-year-old Johann Wolfgang von Goethe based on his own fairground experiences, features a puppet show based on the Old Testament book of Esther, followed by a shadow-puppet show re-telling the Genesis stories of the creation of the world, Adam and Eve’s fall from grace, and Noah’s flood.<sup>5</sup>

Low-culture European puppetry expanded its dramaturgical repertoire to cover popular history, romance, and stories drawn from everyday life, but it also continued to perform episodes from the Bible long after actors’ drama had quite abandoned that source material. Furthermore, the chivalric

JAVANESE WAYANG GOLEK ROD PUPPETS PERFORM EPISODES OF THE CLASSIC HINDU EPICS THE RAMAYANA AND THE MAHABHARATA



Unbounded in Time:  
PUPPETS AND EPICS

# PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL



## BREAD & PUPPET

PERFORMS THE EPIC OF THE BIBLE IN  
"THE CRY OF THE PEOPLE FOR MEAT,"  
NEW YORK CITY, DECEMBER, 1969

legends performed by Spanish, Flemish, and Sicilian rod marionettes into the 19th century maintained a medieval sense of conflict between Christians and Muslims in sometimes daily installments of new episodes. Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater has continued (in a radically different way) these European epic puppet traditions with such Bible-based productions as *The Cry of the People for Meat*, *The Stations of the Cross*, *The Christmas Story*, and *The City of Brotherly Love Passion Play* (which retold the story of Philadelphia's violent persecution of the African American MOVE family as a modern-day crucifixion story).

Why do puppetry and epic structure go together so well? I think of three reasons:

1. The reassurance of repetition. We like to see familiar characters represent consistent traits in slightly different contexts: Elmo is always friendly, Chewbacca is faithful, Semar invariably has comments about the local news in Java, Gano di Maganza (in the *opera dei pupi*) is ever a traitor, and Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, is always causing trouble. We don't know exactly what these characters will do in any one episode, but their consistency is something we can count on.
2. The vastness of their scope. When we participate in an epic, we enter a rich and full world, which includes the most profound beliefs (often religious) of the community of which we are part, as well as the most affecting romance, passion, and low comedy we could want. Epics amount to a whole and different world which we can temporarily visit again and again.

3. Puppetry's innate desire and ability to give us that whole world. When we make and perform puppets we are not simply inventing variations on the human condition, based on those we see around us, but instead we are invited to create uncanny material images of great and small powers, beauty and ugliness, cowardice and bravery, death and resurrection, happiness and misery. Puppetry always wants to burst forth in creation of complex worlds that are *like* ours in some ways, but, thankfully, *not* ours in essence. And thus puppetry is always striving for something "unbounded in time."

**JOHN BELL** is the Director of the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry. (See page 60 for more details.)

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Pablo Luciano Medina, "Guatemala," *World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts*. UNIMA. <https://wepa.unima.org/en/guatemala/>. Accessed 31 May 2021.
- <sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Richard Janko. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987: 7.
- <sup>3</sup> Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, edited by E. A. Horsman. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979: 5.1.6-10.
- <sup>4</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theater in America*. New York: Harper, 1949: 19.
- <sup>5</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Junkdum Fair (Das Jahrmaktsfest zu Plundersweilern)*, in *A Repertory of Marionette Plays*, edited by Paul McPharlin. New York: Viking Press, 1929: 243-270.



SEPT 29 - OCT 24, 2021

### TICKETS:

**Total Puppet Package - 7 Shows!**  
Purchase by Oct 3: 7 shows for \$150

**5 Show Package**  
Purchase by Oct 10: 5 shows for \$110

**3 Show Package**  
Purchase by Oct 17: 3 shows for \$65

**2 Show Package**  
Purchase by Oct 24: 2 shows for \$45

**Single Tickets**  
\$25 Adults | \$20 Students & Seniors



SEPT 29 - OCTOBER 10, 2021  
THE JIM HENSON FOUNDATION PRESENTS:  
AMERICAN PUPPET THEATER TODAY:  
THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF  
RICHARD TERMINE

New York-based photographer Richard Termine has documented American Puppet Theater for over 30 years. Termine's work captures the animated gesture of the puppet in still images.

LA GALLERIA  
WED - SUN from 1PM to 7PM

Photo by Richard Termine



SEPT 29 - OCTOBER 3, 2021  
LUNCH WITH SONIA  
By Loco7 Dance Puppet Theatre  
Co-Directed by Federico Restrepo and Denise Greber (Colombia/USA)

Lunch with Sonia is a dance-puppet theatre piece inspired by Restrepo's true-life experience with his Aunt Sonia, a woman who decided to end her life with dignity after a long illness at the age of 72.

THURS & SAT at 7PM  
WED & FRI at 8:30PM, SUN at 2PM

Photo by Richard Termine



SEPT 30 - OCTOBER 3, 2021  
THE TALL KEYAKI TREE  
By Watoku Ueno (Japan/USA)

The Tall Keyaki Tree is a shadow puppet fantasy with live music, inspired by the novel *The Five-Storey Pagoda* written by Koda Rohan (1867-1947). It centers around a peculiar carpenter who builds a five storey pagoda using the wood from the Keyaki tree.

THURS & SAT at 8:30PM  
FRI at 7PM, SUN at 6PM

Photo @ Watoku Ueno



OCTOBER 7 - 10, 2021  
WHEN I PUT ON  
YOUR GLOVE  
By Sandglass Theater | Performed & Created by Shoshana Bass (USA) | Creator of the original Autumn Portraits, Eric Bass

When I Put On Your Glove is a puppetry, dance, and spoken narrative piece that explores a daughter's relationship to her father's work, building on the premise that puppets are containers of memory.

THURS & SAT at 7PM  
FRI at 8:30PM, SUN at 2PM

Photo by Klige Bosch



OCTOBER 7 - 10, 2021  
BODY CONCERT  
By Lone Wolf Tribe | Performed & Created by Kevin Augustine (USA)

Body Concert is a hauntingly romantic duet of muscles, tendons and bone inspired by Japanese Butoh dance. Kevin Augustine's minimalistic spectacle is achingly animated in a rigorous solo choreography about life's beautiful impermanence.

THURS & SAT at 8:30PM  
FRI at 7PM, SUN at 4PM

Photo by Vane Terran



OCTOBER 13 - 15, 2021  
PUPPET SLAM  
Curated by Jane Catherine Shaw

These condensed works of puppetry are original, compelling, brilliant, witty, tragic, funny, stunning, startling, ironic, exotic, political, lyrical, musical, beautiful, intellectual, experimental, wild... and always demonstrate genius in a matter of minutes!

WED at 7PM, THURS & FRI at 8:30PM

Photo of WAVE: An Incantation by Michelle Behaw (2019) | Photo by Theo Cote



OCTOBER 14 - 17, 2021  
DREAMING  
Story by Howard Craft | Script by JoMeeka Holloway & Tony Bend | Directed & Designed by Tony Bend

Dreaming examines the complicated legacy of American animation, as the son of Winsor McCay meets a Black portrait artist who redraws racist caricatures into human beings.

THURS - SAT at 7PM  
SUN at 2PM

Photo by Alex Boerner



OCTOBER 21 - 24, 2021  
JUMP START  
A Presentation of Works-In-Progress

Developmental residencies were the core of La MaMa's 59th Season. Jump Start invites our five puppet resident artists (a program funded in part by the Jim Henson Foundation and Cheryl Henson) to showcase a live presentation of a new work. Featuring: Rebekah Crisanta de Ybarra, Charlotte Lily Gaspard, Tom Lee, Leah Ogawa, and Tarish "Jeghetto" Pipkins.

THURS - SAT at 7PM & SUN at 2PM

Photo of Leah Ogawa | Photo by Richard Termine



FAMILY EVENT  
SEPT 30 - OCTOBER 24, 2021  
NOSTALGIA  
A TOY THEATRE VIDEO INSTALLATION  
Conceived by Loco7 Dance Puppet Theatre

Nostalgia reveals instances of love through stories based on imagined or remembered reality from members of Loco7's Sirovich Senior Center's community of artists and teenage students from NYC Public Schools.

Will run on loop Thurs - Sun, one hour before curtain, in The Downstairs Lobby

Photo of toy theatre by Margaret Yuen



SPECIAL EVENT  
OCTOBER 30, 2021  
OUT OF THE SHADOWS  
Panel discussion with Leslee Asch

A panel in which author and curator Leslee Asch discusses her book *Out of the Shadows: The Henson Festivals and Their Impact on Contemporary Puppet Theater*. Panel: Nehprie Amenii, Cheryl Henson, Federico Restrepo, and Richard Termine. Leslee Asch and Cheryl Henson will be available for a book signing immediately following the panel.

SUN at 4PM

Cover Design by Laura Case | Photo by Richard Termine from Mabou Mines' Peter and Wendy

**The Ellen Stewart Theatre**  
66 East 4th Street, 2nd Floor

**The Downstairs**  
66 East 4th Street, Basement Level

**La Galleria**  
47 Great Jones Street, Ground Level

**The Puppet Lounge**  
Join us for snacks, drinks, and conversation in The Puppet Lounge! Meet up with festival artists.

**Located in the lobby of Ellen Stewart Theatre, visit between shows:**  
THURS - SAT, 6 - 7PM & 8PM - 9PM  
SUN, 1PM - 2PM & 3PM - 4PM

The 9th La MaMa Puppet Festival Fall 2021 has been made possible with public support by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and New York State Cultural on the Arts, and support from the Howard Gilman Foundation, The Jane Henson Foundation, The Jim Henson Foundation, Puppet Slam Network, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and The Shubert Foundation. Additional support from Cheryl Henson is gratefully acknowledged.

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PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

# THE CATANESE-AMERICAN PUPPETEER

## *Agrippino Manteo* (1884 -1947)

### AND HIS “IRREPLACEABLE SCRIPTS”

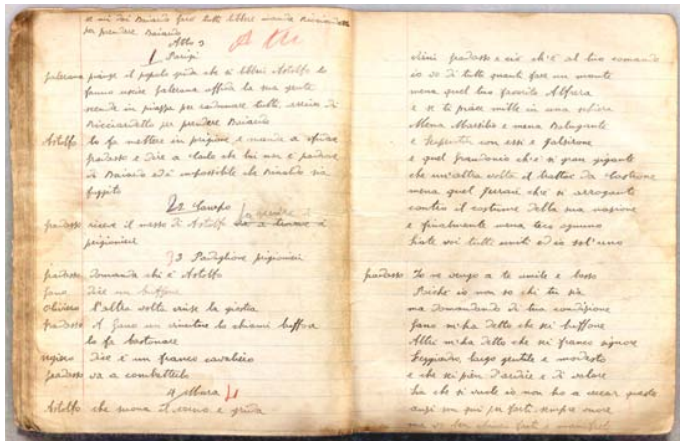
BY JO ANN CAVALLO

Agrippino Manteo opened his first New York City puppet theater at 76 Catherine Street on the Lower East Side in 1923, and then moved his theater to 109 Mulberry Street, in the heart of Little Italy, in 1928.<sup>1</sup> Although initially one of a number of puppeteers who carried on the *opera dei pupi* tradition in the New World beginning with the large wave of Italian immigrants in the 1880s and 1890s, within a short time he became “the most important Sicilian puppeteer of his generation” performing in the Big Apple (Adler).<sup>2</sup> In 1933 he owned “over 400 different puppets, including a six-foot giant Ferragus” (Greene). He continued to run his theater until 1939 when his 18-year-old son Johnnie contracted tuberculosis and died. Considering that Agrippino is said to have offered shows on a daily basis during these years—and had previously founded a puppet theater in Mendoza, Argentina—he may have staged well over 6,000 performances in the course of his career.

Bil Baird recalls having seen Agrippino perform: “Altogether it was a tremendous tour de force, and at the core of it were Agrippino Manteo’s dramatic inventiveness and irreplaceable scripts” (125). What most captured Baird’s attention about the scripts was their material state, which exhibited the traces of untold battle scenes:

I have seen these scripts, all in Papa’s handwriting. They are written in a small mountain of copybooks, each containing a bare outline of the action, plus certain key lines and poems transcribed in full. They all bear the marks of battle. Here there is a thumb print red with the blood of a giant (beet juice in an eggshell that broke when the sword hit), there a tear occasioned when some unlucky foot soldier’s head flew too far. (125)

Nor do other mentions of the scripts that I’ve encountered in newspaper articles go beyond their physical appearance. The theater critic Lois Adler, with much less imagination than Baird, simply remarks on the quantity of the scripts along with the quality of Agrippino’s penmanship: “They are to be found in several stacks on one of the tables. Actually, they are composition books in which Manteo wrote in a small neat hand.”

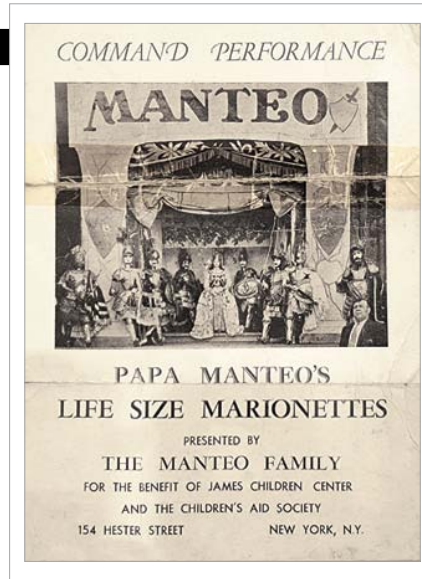


AGRIPIPPINO MANTEO SCRIPT SAMPLE PAGE PHOTOS COURTESY OF SUSIE BRUNO

But what about the actual content comprising those “irreplaceable scripts”? Although Baird (and many others) stated in passing that the subject matter was Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, that claim is misleading. Like virtually all Sicilian puppeteers from the 1860s to the present, Agrippino Manteo based his plays on Giusto Lodico’s *Storia dei paladini di Francia*. First published in Palermo between 1858 and 1860, this prose compilation of over 3,000 pages combined twenty medieval and Renaissance chivalric poems into an uninterrupted narrative stretching from before the birth of the paladin Orlando to after the fateful battle of Roncevaux. In 1895-1896, fellow Sicilian Giuseppe Leggio extended Lodico’s already monumental adaptation by including episodes from additional works. This expanded version of the *Storia dei Paladini* was reprinted several times in the early 1900s, and Agrippino owned a copy published in Naples in 1909.

Anyone interested in reading the stories contained in the Paladins of France cycle can still find Leggio’s expanded version of *La storia dei paladini* in print (most recently published in 13 volumes between 1993 and 2000). For those who do not read Italian, there are excellent English translations of the most canonical Renaissance poems refashioned by Lodico, namely, Torquato Tasso’s *Rinaldo* (1562), Matteo Maria Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato* (1483, 1495), Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (1516, 1532), and Luigi Pulci’s *Morgante* (ca. 1478, 1483). These poems take the reader from Rinaldo’s initiation into knighthood (Tasso) to his departure from the Frankish court following his heroic exploits at Roncevaux (Pulci), and include the central episodes of Orlando’s enamourment of the princess Angelica (Boiardo), descent into madness, and miraculous recovery (Ariosto).

Given, however, that Agrippino and his fellow Sicilian puppeteers did not perform directly from the printed volumes—nor has the staging of the Paladins of France cycle been captured and preserved on film—our only window into the actual content of the plays are the scripts themselves. In the inner cover of one of the notebooks, Agrippino’s son Mike Manteo states: “Written by my father ‘Papa Manteo’ at the theater 76 Catherine St N.Y. year 1919. Finished his writing



ANNOUNCEMENT OF A 1950 PERFORMANCE BY THE MANTEO FAMILY FEATURING A PICTURE OF THE LATE AGRIPIPPINO MANTEO AND HIS PUPPETS

at 1935. All this time his work never ended.” If the scripts were written in 1919 and would have had to be complete in order for Agrippino to perform the cycle beginning in the early 1920s, why does Mike say that his father only finished writing in 1935, a full sixteen years later? Agrippino himself did not register the composition date on the notebooks, but a perusal of the scripts suggests that the extended period of writing that Mike alludes to must have been a constant rewriting. Not only were there penciled-in modifications on the pages of individual plays, but the scripts were also recopied from scratch. Indeed, rather than constituting one complete set, the extant

notebooks in Agrippino’s handwriting contain two partial sets with slightly different numbering due to variations in the structuring of the plays. Agrippino, then, did not simply recopy the plays because the pages were subject to wear and tear, but he revised them in the process.

The most complete extant set of scripts originally consisted of twenty-three notebooks. The thirteen remaining notebooks (6-12, 14, 18-19, 21-23) all together cover the following plays: 46-181, 198-210, 245-266, 282-305, and 319-330. *Serata* 330 is the final play in the Paladins of France cycle.<sup>3</sup> Each play begins with a full paragraph summarizing the events and providing a list of characters (and, occasionally, props). The action is then structurally divided into three Acts that would have allowed for two intermissions during performances. With few exceptions the Acts are further broken down into various Scenes that note a new location next to the number (whether the name of a city or a generic place such as “forest” or “battlefield”). During performances, this location change would be rendered primarily by the lowering of a new backdrop. The plays contain not only precise stage directions with a detailed description of the action, but also extensive dialogues, speeches, and monologues, with occasional stanzas of *ottava rima* poetry. Further verbal exchanges would also have been improvised at the time of each performance.

Agrippino’s scripts follow so closely the *Storia dei paladini* that he sometimes notes the volume and chapter number to which a particular play corresponds. And when the narrative is especially complex and requires accuracy, as in the case of



"TEATRO MANTEO. RECUERDO A MI QUERIDOS PRIM[OS]"

ACCORDING TO SUSIE BRUNO, THE PHOTO WAS ADDRESSED TO AGRIPPINO'S COUSINS IN ARGENTINA. AGRIPPINO MANTEO AND WIFE CATERINA (BACK ROW, R); DAUGHTER IDA MANTEO (FRONT ROW, L) AND TWO OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS, POSSIBLY MARY MANTEO (M). THE MARIONETTES MAY BE THE WIZARD MALAGIJO (R) AND ANGELICA

the enamoration of the North African Saracen Ruggiero and the Frankish Christian Bradamante, Agrippino notes the exact page of the *Storia dei paladini* to be consulted in advance of the performance. Yet there is evidence that Agrippino did not rely exclusively on the Sicilian prose adaptation but also went back to the original poems since he sometimes inserts *ottava rima* stanzas that are not found in the *Storia dei paladini*. Most notably, in composing verses for the entrance of Angelica into Charlemagne's court taken from the opening of the *Orlando Innamorato*, Agrippino not only combines the wording from an edition more faithful to Boiardo's original with that of Francesco Berni's popular Tuscan *rifacimento* (refashioning), but he also includes stanzas that have no known origin and may have been composed by the puppeteer himself.

The scripts not only present the substance of the nightly performances, but can also aid in reconstructing a portrait of Agrippino as an artist. Although he was judiciously sparing in his comments in the margins of the notebooks, the few remarks he does interject offer a glimpse into his emotional engagement with the material, his rapport with his team, his commitment to excellence, and his heartfelt tension between adhering to traditional convention and innovating for emotional effect and poetic justice. To give just one example, Agrippino's comment in the margins of *serata* 328 is both a practical stage direction and a personal reflection on his own *modus operandi* as theater director. The play dramatizes the culminating moments in the battle of Roncevaux, itself the tragic climax of the entire Paladins of France cycle.<sup>4</sup> After Orlando has blown his olifant for the second and third time, he begins to bleed and will die by the conclusion of the evening. In the meantime, the previously exiled Rinaldo and his brother Ricciardetto arrive and turn the tide of the battle, single-handedly defeating all

the remaining Saracens and chasing King Marsilio from the field. At this point Agrippino comments upon an invented scene he inserted in which Rinaldo encounters his two dying sons: "N.B. I wanted to write in Rinaldo who embraces his sons, but it would be better to have the latter die first as the book says." With the freedom afforded him as a puppeteer in charge of the action, Agrippino chose to modify the plot in order to give his hero a few final moments with his children after all the undue hardship that Charlemagne had brought down upon them. Nonetheless, his stated unease with regard to this deviation from the *Storia dei paladini*'s plotline suggests that, as a principle, he aimed to faithfully dramatize events as he found them in the prose compilation.

Agrippino's granddaughter Susie Bruno remarked how the *Storia dei paladini* remained at the center of family life even outside the performances. "My grandfather would study it," she recalls, "this was like their Bible. They would sit down and look at the book and they would play games, like to say 'Who did this and who did that?'" And Agrippino's passion for staging the chivalric stories was so contagious that years after his death his children were determined to keep the tradition alive. Mike's revival of the family's theater, together with his sister Ida, son Pino, and other family members, is lovingly rendered in Tony De Nonno's documentary *It's One Family, Knock on Wood* (1982). What may not be widely known, however, is that—in addition to constructing marionettes and giving voice to the male characters during performances—Mike recopied all of his father's scripts. Like Agrippino's original Paladins of France cycle, Mike's set also comprises twenty-three notebooks copied by hand. Indeed, it is thanks to this labor of love that today we may surmise what was contained in the lost notebooks in Agrippino's hand.

With an appreciation of the notebooks as historical artifacts, Mike also duly registered his various dates of composition. The starting date, found in the inner cover of the first notebook, is September 2, 1962. The date recorded at the completion of the *Storia dei paladini* cycle was almost twenty-four years later, March 1, 1986. Unlike Agrippino, moreover, Mike numbered his pages consecutively from one notebook to the next. The conclusion of the Paladins of France cycle in the twenty-third notebook is to be found on page 2,355.<sup>5</sup> The rest of that notebook contains the first episode of the *Guido Santo* sequel (pages 2,356-2,363) which is then continued in several more typewritten notebooks.

While copying *Serata* 244, Mike Manteo inserted a note to his own son Agrippino (Pino) dated April 4, 1985. After announcing that he was "finishing the manuscripts," which, however, would only reach the concluding play of the Paladins of France cycle with *Serata* 330, Mike bequeaths the scripts to Pino: "Take them. If you show them to the right people – they could be priceless." And the originals, he goes on to say, are even more valuable because they go back to 1923 when he was 11 years old. Mike concludes his note to his son by pointing out the uniqueness of the scripts: "You're the only one in the U.S.A. with these documents."

Pino—finding himself the proprietor of these priceless documents after Mike's death in 1989—would eventually donate the collection of notebooks to the Italian American Museum in New York, along with many puppets, publications, and other materials. In 2022, the Italian American Museum is expected to reopen in their new space at 151 Mulberry Street—just down the block from the former Manteo puppet theater. In addition to a Manteo puppet display in the Museum's permanent exhibition, future plans include a full exhibit on the Manteo family and the placement of the scanned Manteo scripts on the Museum's website. Given that most of the traditional *opera dei pupi* scripts are either lost, closely guarded by the puppeteer families who own them, or buried in the archives of Italian institutions, this online open access to a global audience will greatly advance our understanding not only of the Manteo family but of Sicilian puppet theater more generally.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the historical information in this essay was provided by the descendants of Agrippino Manteo, primarily his granddaughter, Susie Bruno. I was able to consult the notebooks containing the Manteo family scripts thanks to Joseph V. Scelsa, founder and president of the Italian American Museum. I am currently writing a book on the Manteo family marionette theater that will include transcriptions and translations of select plays. In the meantime, the "Manteo family puppet theater" page on the *eBOIARDO* website provides a photocopy of a privately owned notebook containing fourteen plays (<https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/manteo-puppet-theater>).
- <sup>2</sup> Susan Kalcik notes the existence of puppet theaters in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, New Jersey, Chicago, San Francisco, and Cleveland, as well as Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires (13).
- <sup>3</sup> For the record, the Paladins of France cycle is followed by sequels that extend Agrippino's repertory to almost 400 consecutive plays.
- <sup>4</sup> Lodico (and hence traditional Sicilian puppet theater) followed the version envisioned in Luigi Pulci's *Morgante* in which the rebel knight Rinaldo intervenes to turn the ambush into a Christian victory (see Cavallo).
- <sup>5</sup> The initial notebooks are entitled *Storia dei Reali di Francia*, echoing Andrea da Barberino's early fourteenth-century prose epic, *I Reali di Francia*. Although not included in Lodico's original edition, these stories became part of Leggio's expanded version.

# Puppetry in The Ring

BY LISA AIMEE STURZ



Puppetry is often used to express our mythic sagas. With roots in folklore and magic, puppets are simultaneously animate and inanimate. They are the perfect vessel to bring audiences across the divide between reality and imagination.

## Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen or The Ring

*The Ring*, based on German and Norse legends, is a four-part opera spanning 15½ hours over several days. It features supernatural elements and characters such as gods, dragons, dwarves, giants, and a coveted gold ring that holds the fate of the world.

The musical score, which took Wagner 26 years to complete, demands a mega-sized orchestra. Only a rare breed of singer has the range, tonal quality, and vocal stamina to repeatedly perform this operatic marathon. There are Wagner enthusiasts who follow *The Ring* around the world.

In several stagings of this epic theatrical production, puppets have played a pivotal role.

## The Lyric Opera of Chicago

In 1993, the Lyric Opera of Chicago began their multi-year journey to produce the *The Ring*. They put together a renowned production team, which included Zubin Mehta (conductor), August Everding (director), John Conklin (designer), Duane Schuler (lighting), and Debra Brown (choreographer) from *Cirque du Soleil*. They enlisted several of the world's top Wagnerian singers.

The plan was to launch one opera each year and then present the entire cycle in succession. It sold out seven months in advance.

For the first opera, *Das Rheingold*, Debra created an amazing underwater sequence with Rhinemaidens somersaulting through the ocean on bungee cords as the dwarf Alberich tried to gain their affection. Later in the opera, they used shadow puppets to portray Alberich transforming into a dragon and frog.

*Das Rheingold* met with mixed reviews. While the music was "superior" according to the New York Times, reviewers were critical of the shadow puppet sequence.

For the second opera *Die Walküre*, mounted the following year, Debra choreographed the famous *Ride of the Valkyries* with costumed gymnasts leaping into the air, throwing spears with musical precision. She did this by hiding a row of trampolines behind low mountains in the foreground. It was a huge success.

But opera number three, *Siegfried*, requires the giant Fafner to transform into a monumental dragon. While vocal performances are critical, how the giant dragon is represented is a standard measure of success for any production of *The Ring*. Given the underwhelming dragon effect in *Das Rheingold*, The Lyric determined to upgrade their production by adding a Puppetmaster to the team. Debra Brown, who had seen several of my previous productions, recommended me.

PHOTOS BY DAN REST EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

## Entering "The Ring"

When I got the call, I took a deep breath, smiled broadly, and booked a flight to Chicago. With little time to prepare, I uploaded the music to my laptop and read a comic book version of *The Ring Cycle* on the plane. I met with the production team for several days and studied the libretto at night. I was brought onboard to animate a forty-foot dragon, revisit the dragon/frog sequence in *Das Rheingold*, and create puppet effects for several other scenes.

## The Dragon

The Lyric's overall design concept embraced a quasi-feudal Japanese aesthetic with sparse lines and saturated color. John had some preliminary sketches for the giant dragon but did not know how to make it move. We came up with a segmented figure whose mouth could open and close and whose claws could crawl and scrape through the air. The separate pieces allowed us to lower the weight of individual sections while providing a dramatic opportunity for the puppet to explode across the stage when struck by Siegfried's fatal blow.

John knew a scene shop in Brooklyn that could construct the figure from lightweight carbon fiber. Knowing I would have a team of seventeen puppeteers, I noted where to attach rods to best animate the beast. Then the specs were sent to the scene shop.

## Supporting the Music

With the dragon's design and construction settled, it was now time to choreograph its movements to the libretto. The musical currents are integral to the story, so it takes an aficionado to understand their symbolism and depth. For this expertise, I turned to a well-informed musical friend, Gwenn Roberts.

Gwenn loaned me a book about the Jungian interpretation of the E-flat chord, which introduces the main theme of power. She read through the libretto with me and identified specific musical inferences, leitmotifs, sound effects, and measures of extreme emotion that Wagner had thoughtfully written into the score. I listened to the flamboyant orchestration for hours, envisioning the battle. Then I plotted the scenes, measure by measure, shaping the dragon's movements leading up to the explosive climax.





### The Forest Bird

The scene just before Siegfried slays the dragon is a pastoral moment set in a forest clearing. Siegfried communes with a woodland bird to achieve the mental fortitude needed for his epic battle. We wanted the bird to appear unexpectedly from different parts of the stage to give it a numinous quality. I created two similar origami-looking birds out of a lightweight condensed foam. Each was manipulated by an identical twin dancing on the ground. The audience could not tell the figures (or their manipulators) apart as one flew in, surprising Siegfried from behind seconds after flying off in front of him. To create a sense of Siegfried's intrepid resolve at the close of Act Two, the dancer holding the bird soared up and across the stage on a belted apparatus suspended from a track high above.



### The Fire Dragon

Based on the success of the puppetry in *Siegfried*, I was asked to improve the dragon sequence in *Das Rheingold*. In the script, the dwarf Alberich uses the powerful ring to force the enslaved Nibelungs to mine vast quantities of gold. Wotan (King of the gods) and Loge (God of fire) visit him to steal the ring.

Alberich is cocky and likes to show off his power. He transforms himself into a dragon to impress them. They taunt him by asking if his power is enough to become something small. When he turns into a frog, Wotan and Loge capture him along with the ring and the gold.

### Casting and Rehearsal

I cast the puppeteers based on size, strength, musicianship, and puppet sensitivity. They needed to play their instrument as skillfully as any musician in the orchestra. And they needed to work together as a tight ensemble. For example, a slight tilt of the head had to resonate through to the tail.

We created a physical vocabulary that included breathing, thinking, creeping, rising, and recoiling. We practiced a slow approach over the horizon. It took eight puppeteers to raise the dragon's head to open and close its jaw. We devised a traffic pattern for the dragon to rupture from Siegfried's sword strike and scatter to the far corners of the stage.

The stage manager helped us time our movements to match the conductor's tempo. Once we were confident with our routine, we brought in the tenor. Slaying a dragon with a longsword while singing the complicated score requires a sublime mix of capabilities. We staged the dragon to make Siegfried look heroic with the least amount of physical exertion.

DRAGON PHOTO BY ROBERT KUSEL

I designed sixteen two-dimensional pieces to look like fire and a jointed frog. The plywood panels were painted with ultraviolet on one side and black on the reverse. The lighting designer hung an arsenal of blacklights for the desired effect. As the gods approached, Alberich summoned small fires to appear and disappear about the stage to amaze his guests. On a musical cue (that Zubin playfully added to his conductor's repertoire), the pieces instantly came together to form a dazzling fire dragon. And just as quickly, dissolved into a frog.

### The Giants

*Das Rheingold* is also inhabited by the giants Fafner and Fasolt. For these colossal beings, the Lyric had built two 16-foot rod figures, each operated by three puppeteers. Their large foam hands, wearing red leather gloves, were housed inside a skeletal metal structure. The singers portraying the giants wore a similar pair of red gloves and stood in front of their giant doppelgängers. When the actors left their proximity, the giant figures still loomed over the action. I took over as manipulation coach and created synchronized movements to animate the characters at moments of heightened emotion.

For the final opera, *Götterdämmerung*, I created a similar figure to represent Fafner after his dragon-self is slain by Siegfried. He turns back into his giant-form to die. The head was similar, but the body was flushed out with shape and fabric to give him a more corporeal essence. The puppet sank below the horizon of the set as the singer sang his final words in a glowing red light.

### A Dream Come True

Working on this production of *The Ring* was a dream job. I was asked to invoke the magical power of puppetry to dramatize a legendary opera in one of the finest opera houses in the US. For me, this was a gift from the gods.

I still smile when remembering the thunderous bravos from the audiences when Fafner enters as a dragon. I cherish the *New York Times* review from 1996 entitled: "Going up against the Dragon." They declared our dragon "must have satisfied even the wildest expectations."<sup>2</sup>

But the first onstage rehearsal with a full orchestra is still my most precious memory. I grew up near New York City. In my family, Zubin Mehta was a household name. When it was time for us to present the big dragon scene to the production

staff, Zubin sent his assistant to the conductor's box, and came to the production table in the center of the opera house for an optimal view. We delivered one of those rare, near-perfect first rehearsals. Zubin jumped up and down applauding the dragon, and then gave me a big hug!

*That was a dream come true.*



LISA STURZ is the Founder and Artistic Director of Red Herring Puppets, an award-winning puppet company specializing in custom fabrication and curriculum-based productions. Lisa has created figures for the Field Museum, Shedd Aquarium, Asheville Symphony, Silver Dollar City Theme Park, Tucson's Children's Museum and many more. Screen credits include: *Elmo in Grouchland*, *Muppets from Space*, *Howard the Duck*, *the Flintstones*, *Ninja Turtles 3*, *RoboCop2* and *Batman Returns*. Lisa's production of *My Grandfather's Prayers*, airing internationally on JLTv, received a 2021 Telly Award.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [www.nytimes.com/1993/02/09/arts/review-opera-the-lyric-in-chicago-starts-its-ring.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1993/02/09/arts/review-opera-the-lyric-in-chicago-starts-its-ring.html)

<sup>2</sup> [www.nytimes.com/1995/02/04/arts/opera-review-going-up-against-the-dragon.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/04/arts/opera-review-going-up-against-the-dragon.html)

## Who is Monkey?

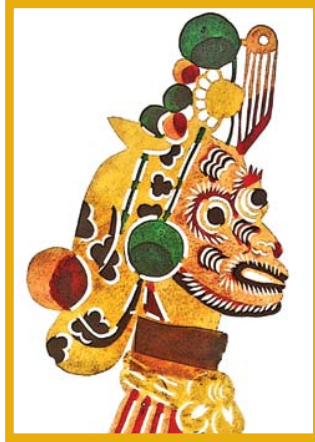
BY STEPHEN KAPLIN

On its surface, *Journey to the West*, the 16<sup>th</sup> century novel, written by Wu Cheng'en, is an account of an actual historical event—a Buddhist monk's dangerous overland trek from China to India and back again at the behest of the Tang Emperor. Master Wu's literary account of this religious pilgrimage leaves no doubt from its first page that the true hero is not a vagabond Buddhist monk, but the superlative superhero, Monkey.

### WHO'S THIS MONKEY?

Let's start with his names. He's got quite a list of them, including: "Sun Wu Kung" ("Aware of Emptiness," his religious name), "Stone Monkey," "Lord of Water Curtain Cave," "Handsome Monkey King"; his professional titles "Pi Ma Wen" (or "Celestial Stable-Boy," his least favorite name), "Guardian of the Immortal Peach Orchard" and "Great Sage Equal to Heaven" (his favorite name); casual monikers such as "Pilgrim Sun" and "Eldest Disciple"; and lastly, "Buddha Victorious in Strife." Each of these names represents a chapter in his epic story and a particular aspect of his very complicated personality.

PUPPETS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE AUTHOR EXCEPT THE SHADOW FIGURE, ABOVE. PHOTO PAULINE BENTON



### WHAT'S HE LIKE?

If you're talking to someone from India or Southeast Asia, you could describe Monkey as a smaller, spicier Hanuman. But to a Westerner you might say, "He's like Bugs Bunny, crossed with Superman. Gandalf AND Jackie Chan!"

### WHAT'S HIS STORY?

This question needs a longer answer—100 chapters, in fact—to follow his career from Birth to Buddhahood. Monkey deities have been part of folklore and myth across Asia for millennia, but his first appearance in Chinese literature was his starring role in Wu Cheng'en sprawling novel. Wu was not a great star in the Ming Dynasty's literary sphere. He was an obscure, small-town polymath, who scratched out a living as a provincial tutor, scribe and poet. This apparently gave him plenty of time to gab with the neighborhood farmers, workers and storytellers. He explains in the introduction to "Journey" how he came to write his masterpiece:

I was very fond of strange stories when I was a child. In my village school days, I used to buy steadily the popular novels and historical recitals. Fearing my father and my teacher might punish me for this and rob me of my treasures, I carefully hid them in secret places where I could enjoy them unmolested...

When I was in my thirties, my memory was full of these stories accumulated through years of eager searching... Hence this Book of Monsters. I have sometimes laughingly said to myself that it is not I who have found these ghosts and monsters, but they, the monstrosities themselves, which found me!<sup>1</sup>

If he sounds apologetic, it's for good reason. Writers, and scholars of his day weren't praised for their originality, but for the ability to quote and imitate 3000 years of poetic and literary sources. Ming literary tastes favored elaborate formality. Ancient, rural performance traditions and storytelling practices weren't of much interest to the literati, but they were a source of great inspiration to Master Wu. He blended them together with polished poetic conventions, Buddhist scripture, Taoist mystical texts, ancient books on geography, history and romance, stewed it all up with lots of battles and comic banter, and the result was this exquisite, panoramic, X-ray of Ming society, disguised as an adventure tale and vision quest—one of the most unique achievements of all World literature. But in his eyes, Wu thought the book was such an embarrassment that he was ashamed to put his name on it. The first editions were printed anonymously, and it wasn't until after his death that fellow townspeople in their chronicles connected his name to Monkey's.

The book begins at the moment of Monkey's birth out of a stone egg on top of a mountain, a perfect fusion of Heavenly and Earthly natural forces. The first several chapters follow his career as an energetic local nature spirit, king of the tribes of monkeys and animals on Flower-Fruit Mountain, and he gets bored with this and sets off on a restless search for enlightenment. He studies with a Taoist sage, who trains him in the mystical arts, and he soon obtains magical powers to fly and shapeshift at will. But at heart, he's still an ape, and he gets kicked out of the master's temple for showing off his superpowers to the other students. He returns to Flower Fruit Mountain and with his new powers, manages

<sup>1</sup> Translated by Hu Shih in the preface of Arthur Waley's *Monkey: Folk Novel of China* by Wu Cheng'en

to obtain a staff of primal celestial steel from the Dragon King of the Eastern Ocean. With this powerful magic weapon in hand, that can change shape and size according to its owner's will, Monkey becomes invincible, which leads him into deeper trouble. When the Jade Emperor hears reports of Monkey's mischief, he summons him up to Heaven and appoints him to a menial job in the Heavenly Stables. Offended by this snub, Monkey rebels, escapes back to Earth and declares himself "Great Sage Equal to Heaven." The Jade Emperor sends his armies down to capture him, but Monkey fights them to a draw with his formidable staff. To make peace, the Jade Emperor invites Monkey back up to Heaven, and gives the "Great Sage" a job tending the Immortal Peach Orchards.

This would have been the "Happy Ever After" moment for any normal hero, but not for Monkey. He embarks on an escalating chain of mischief, which culminates when he crashes the Queen Mother's Peach Party, then runs amok across Heaven in open rebellion. In desperation, the Jade Emperor calls on the Great Buddha of the West to capture and destroy the upstart fiend. Confronting Monkey, Buddha calmly proposes a wager—if the ape can jump clear off his hand, he can occupy the Heavenly throne. Monkey accepts the challenge and somersaults off to the far edge of the Universe, where a huge five-peaked mountain stands. He writes his name on the base of the peaks, pisses on it for emphasis, then flies back to Buddha to claim his prize. But the Buddha shows the astonished ape the tiny letters on the palm of his hand, "Monkey was here." The rebel ape is shocked, but before he can escape, Buddha transforms his hand back into a great mountain, smashes it down on Monkey and imprisons him in a stone cave for 500 years.

But this is not the end of the story—it's only the first 7 chapters. Centuries later, Buddha's colleague, the Bodhisattva Kuan Yin, inspires the Tang Emperor to send an emissary to India in order to bring back a collection of sacred Buddhist scriptures for the betterment of the Chinese people. A young monk, Hsuang Tsang, is selected for this important mission. Knowing that a lone human could never survive the many monsters and demons lining the long road to the West, Kuan Yin liberates Monkey and tasks him to be Hsuang Tsang's bodyguard and guide. If he can get the human priest to India and back again, his crimes against Heaven will be pardoned. Monkey agrees and the two odd companions,



human and immortal spirit, start out on their long trek. They soon meet up with three other Heavenly misfits: a slapstick pig, a wild, water spirit, and a rebellious young dragon, who eats Hsuan Tsang's horse and then is forced to take its place for the duration of the journey.

The rest of the book charts the wild adventures of this motley travel party, as they trek westward over endless mountains and rivers. They face demons and overcome obstacles every step of the way. Each ordeal they face refines their spirits, so that when they ultimately arrive back in China, they are elevated to the high ranks in the Buddhist Heavens, where they live on happily forever and ever after. Amen! All except for Hsuan Tsang who, before ascending to Heaven, must first spend the rest of his earthly life translating into Chinese the piles of Buddhist scriptures he had labored to acquire.



Master Wu's intention was never to portray Monkey as an orthodox religious hero. He is not at all like the other great Asian Monkey deity, Hanuman, who serves his master, Rama dependably as their battle against the arch-demon, Ravana. The epic journey of Sun Wu Kung (AKA "Mind Monkey") and his companions are a map of the road to human enlightenment. When left to his own devices, Monkey's unlimited powers turn destructive and threaten the very fabric of the Universe. But when reined in and focused by the sacred quest, the Mind Monkey blasts through all obstacles and finds roads through pathless mountains. While Master Wu plays up Monkey's crazy antics and impertinences, he

is clearly more concerned with Monkey's spiritual Journey.

It should be clear why the Chinese people love Monkey so deeply. He acts out the common people's distrust of tyrants and ruthless government bureaucracies. It's not just that he subdues monsters and demons with his superlative martial abilities—any good hero can do that. It's that he does so with such flair and unflinching good humor. His wit and his magic staff are used to puncture the inflated egos of self-serving power seekers. These populist tendencies have kept Monkey popular even in the face of the great political and cultural upheavals of recent Chinese history.

Monkey has been a natural star of the Chinese stage for centuries. Episodes from the novel are part of the core repertoire of any professional Opera company, as well as those traditional shadow, rod and hand puppet troupes. In the opera, favorite scenes include "Havoc in Heaven," "Havoc in the Dragon Palace," "Fighting the White-boned Demon," which showcase the martial skills of the actors. On stage, his travel clothes are loose yellow pants, floppy hat and a tiger-striped tunic. He has a distinctive red and white heart shaped painted face pattern that emphasizes his thin cheeks, narrow lips and a black, slit nose. This face pattern reads as extremely monkey-like, even from a distance. He usually carries his slender staff, white with red tips. His role is one of the most difficult and physically demanding in the Chinese Opera. It takes decades of training to achieve the rare combination of top-notch martial arts and acrobatic skills, on top of which the actor must also possess superb comic acting abilities. First rate Monkey actors are highly valued by their companies and by the aficionados of Chinese Opera.

Chinese traditional Puppet theater (shadows, rods and hand puppets) also love the Monkey King. They favored episodes from the novel that provide ample opportunities to showcase magical transformations, comic banter and strange non-human characters. Naturally, the puppets hold a distinct advantage over human actors in defying gravity and shape shifting.

Chinese Theatre Works has been greatly inspired by Monkey's richness of character. In addition to featuring him in our traditional opera programs, we've also presented episodes of Monkey's adventures with Shadow, hand-puppets and in various combinations of Opera performers and puppets: "Birth of the Monkey King," "Monkey Versus the White Boned Demon," and "Monkey and Mountain of Flame" (which is on permanent display at the Chicago Field Museum). We've also created a series of productions, "Day Jobs/ Opera Dreams" that used the novel's characters to portray the real-life cultural dislocations of our immigrant Chinese opera



performers, who had performed the Monkey repertoire in China before embarking on their own personal "Journeys to the West." These included scenes of Monkey delivering pizza or chopping broccoli in a restaurant kitchen, or Pigsy laboring in a nail salon. These shows gave our actors a feeling of empowerment that was key to their being able to cope with the pressures and feelings of hopelessness engendered

by immigration into a strange, unfathomable culture. And Western audiences also find him totally captivating as well. He effortlessly leaps across linguistic and cultural barriers. We only hope that the folks at Disney don't ever discover his talents and exploit his supernatural box-office draw.

### SO NOW, WHO IS MONKEY REALLY?

He's the wild brainchild of a modest Ming scholar; the untamable, quintessential trickster on a great spiritual quest; an ape who embodies the full gamut of human potentiality; an inspiration and model for transients and cultural warriors the World over.

**STEPHEN KAPLIN** studied puppetry at UCONN and received an MA in Performance Studies from NYU. Based in New York City, Stephen has been involved in productions with Bread and Puppet Theater, Julie Taymor, Ping Chong, Theodora Skipitares, Lee Breuer and many others. He is co-artistic director of Chinese Theatre Works and founding member of Great Small Works.



### UNIMA Citation Winners, 2020

Citations are awarded to productions deemed exceptional by at least 3 reviewers. There were fewer awards than usual last year because of pandemic restrictions. The two winning productions were:



*Chimpanzee* by Nick Lehane ---AND--- *The Plastic Bag Store* by Robin Frohardt

PHOTO: MARIKA KENT

BY KATHY FOLEY

Amir Hamzah (Hamza ibn Abdul-Muttalib, d. 625 CE), Uncle to Mohammed and defender of the faith, was an important hero in Indonesian *wayang* (traditional puppetry/drama). In Java and Sunda (West Java), his story was played in wooden rod puppetry, *wayang golek menak* (“noble”). In Lombok, *wayang sasak* shadow puppetry used *Amir Hamzah* as the narrative. However, popularity has waned and the form has been beset by modern media, aging artists, and conflicts between its self-identification as Islamic theatre and fundamentalists questioning its Muslim bona fides.<sup>1</sup>



RAJA JOBIN,  
WAYANG GOLEK, CIREBON

<sup>1</sup> *Wayang menak*'s best hope for survival is probably in the curriculum of central Java's arts academies; it is seldom hired for performances. (Setiodarmoko 2002).

## HISTORY

In Southeast Asia, tales of Wong Agung Menak Jayenrana, (Great Noble Lord, Victorious Monarch), as Amir Hamzah is called, served as an “epic of Islamisation” (Bruckmayr 2017:476), presenting a world first embracing Islam. The *simpingan* (stage decoration with puppets filed on each side of the banana log playing space), largely divides characters into two: the positive heroes—Muslims and those bound to convert—and the hopelessly *kafir*—non-Muslims and ogres, whose greed obviates redemption.

As early European popular performance once featured Christian knights defeating the “Turk” and marrying the “King of Egypt’s Daughter,” so encounters with non-Muslim kingdoms supply Wong Agung with many foes to convert or destroy and numerous wives who embrace this heroic Muslim hero and Muslim faith simultaneously. Opponents who join Wong Agung include Prince Tamtanus from Yuni (Greece) and Raja Machtal from Albani (Albania). In Serandil (Ceylon), King Lamdaur becomes Amir Hamzah’s man. Wong Agung’s arch-foe and conniving father-in-law, Nursiwan, King of Medayin (Persia), demands Lamdaur’s head as a condition of Wong Agung’s marriage to Nursiwan’s daughter, Princess Munnigar. Instead, Lamdaur joins Wong Agung. Nursiwan sometimes pretends openness to convert, yet constantly defers.

Additional ladies from countries Wong Agung conquers vie to become his brides. Warrior-princesses strike out alone to find him. Encounters may start with battles for blood, but end in trysts of love. Despite his many marriages, his soul is bound to Munnigar.

The Muslim world of Amir Hamzah (together with his allies, wives, and offspring), keeps expanding—the Balkans, Middle East, and Indian Ocean. Persian-Indian *naqqali* (storytelling) and *pardh dari* (story cloth narration) valued this story and it was a tool of Muslim proselytization along trade routes. It spread in the Malay peninsula through recitations in *peasantry* (Islamic boarding schools). Mughal Emperor Akbar (1542-1605) commissioned his ultimate Mughal manuscript version.<sup>2</sup> The Islamic courts in Southeast Asia embraced it from the early sixteenth century, as Islamic conversion and Muslim commerce competed with Christian missionization and colonialization for hearts, minds and maritime trade money. Ordinary people knew it from puppet versions through the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the then Dutch East Indies. Amir Hamzah was a triple blessing at Muslim circumcision and wedding events—religious benefit, entertainment, and political correctness—foreign *kafir* always fell. European colonialism was narratively rebuked; local Islam celebrated.

<sup>2</sup> Akbar loved the story and from 1562-1577 supported artists to create his *Hamzanama*'s Mughal miniatures (see [https://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?q=Hamzanama&year\\_made\\_from=&year\\_made\\_to=](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?q=Hamzanama&year_made_from=&year_made_to=)). An earlier Javanese language version was done pre-1629. William Herbert, Shakespeare’s patron, donated his manuscript to Bodleian Library that year.



L TO R AMIR HAMZAH, RAJA MACTHAL, UMAR MAYA,  
WAYANG GOLEK, CIREBON



R TO L KING NURSIWAN, LADY MUNNIGAR, AMIR HAMZAH, UMAR MAYA,  
WAYANG GOLEK, CENTRAL JAVANESE

PUPPETS ARE PART OF THE  
DR. WALTER ANGST AND SIR HENRY ANGST COLLECTION  
OF INDONESIAN PUPPETS, YALE ART GALLERY

PHOTOS: KATHY FOLEY

Those who avoid conversion in the stories are shifty and greedy. Foremost among them is Nursiwan with his Minister Bestak, plotting Wong Agung’s death while offering Munnigar to a *kafir* king. By contrast, Wong Agung, King of Kuparman, embodies the perfect refined Javanese monarch. Hamzah takes his visual and character cues from the refined heroes of earlier Indonesian epics (Batara Guru/Siwa [Shiva], the high god of the Hindu tales, gives him his iconography). Wong Agung’s magically endowed cousin Umar Maya is his right-hand man. As Wong Agung is tricked by Nursiwan, Umar Maya continually saves him. Umar Maya borrows iconography from Narada, chief emissary god of Batara Guru. On Lombok where puppetry instead follows Balinese prototypes, Umar has the shape of Merdah, clown of the positive side in *Mahabharata* tales. Body type, voice, and movement were routinely appropriated from the Hindu epic characters. A Javanese mood song introduces this trickster:

Uarmaya is clothed in ancient magic—  
A necklace of gold, shining bracelets,  
On his right, the sword Wilah,  
His belt is Tali Datu,  
His hat is Basunanda,  
His magic pouch (Jimat Kasang)  
Has within it all creation (Peterson 1993: 86)

The action takes place before the birth of the prophet: Hamzah is making the world safe through Islamic values. The animosity between the Indo-Persian Islamic area (Medayin’s Nursiwan) and the Hijaz (Kuparman’s Wong Agung) is a constant—Shi’a and Sunni splits of today are not new. Nursiwan-Wong Agung rivalry shows “one family divided” and this Persian connection contributes to the problem Menak puppetry encounters today—Indonesia’s ultra-Sunnis decry Shi’a traces in Muslim culture.

Women in the Menak stories are proactive characters compared to their sisters in the Hindu tales. Many, like Munnigar, defy parents, choosing their own partner and religion. When the men are missing, they grab swords and ride into battle: Munnigar dies in the saddle, fighting Raja Jobin, ogre king of Kos to whom her father has promised her. Though her character corresponds to Sumbadra in the *Mahabharata* or Candra Kirana in *Panji* stories, Munnigar shows greater agency.

## PROSELYTIZATION THROUGH PUPPETRY

It is said the Wali Songgo (Nine Islamic Saints), who converted Java in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, created most *wayang* genres including Amir Hamzah forms. First came *wayang kulit purwa* with Hindu epic characters—Sunan Kalijaga (1460-1513) is said to have performed to convert viewers to Islam.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by Kalijaga (they say), Saint Sunan Giri (1442-1506) from Gresik developed



AMIR HAMZAH AND DEWI MUNIGGAR,  
WAYANG SASAK, LOMBOK

Panji stories, *wayang gedok* shadows. Sunan Giri's grandson, Sunan Prapan (1510-1605), is said to have converted Lombok in 1545, missionizing with Amir Hamzah puppet tales, *wayang sasak* shadows. It is thought Sunan Prapen's missionary zeal created the community of *Waktu Telu* ("three times" [a day praying] Muslims), which, until the Muslim revival of the 1960s, predominated in Lombok. The group is now disappearing as the *Waktu Lima* ("five times" [a day]), fundamentalists Muslims) have become the majority. They attack *wayang sasak* as un-Islamic.

<sup>3</sup> History shows he only tweaked a pre-existing form, but contemporary *dalang* on Java see him as their role model.

On Java, Sunan Kudus (Sayyid Ja'far Shadiq Azmatkhan, d. 1550), yet another of the Nine Saints, it is said, made *wayang golek*, wooden doll rod puppetry presenting Panji, Amir Hamzah, and local histories in 1584. Sunan Kudus' personal name, "Ja'far Shadiq," is that of the sixth Shia *iman* and his grave is refurbished on the tenth of Muharram, when Shi'a commemorate the day that the Prophet's grandson Hussain died at Karbala. The puppeteer-saint seems linked to Shi'a Islam.

Aristocrats also patronized the tale. Written works were more for oral recitation in courts and Islamic schools, but some puppeteers probably first learned stories there. Islamic kings and queens found Amir Hamzah a good role model for princes and warriors. Struggles and conspiracies with *kafir* infidel and collaboration by duplicitous relatives fit the politics of the time: Western *kafir*—Portuguese and Dutch—advanced colonial projects with the help of antagonistic relatives in Java's Islamic courts.

First reference to Hamzah tales in Southeast Asia comes in the *Malay Annals* (1612) which say that the night before Malacca (Melaka) fell to the Portuguese in August 1511, Sultan Mahmud Shah sent warriors *Hikyat Amir Hamzah*, hoping Hamzah's exploits might steel them for battle. Likewise noble parents saw the epic as good pedagogy: A world won by Islam might inspire young princes to protect kingdom and faith. For example, in 1717 the mother of King Paku Buwana II, encouraging her son in Islamic virtue as he faced the Dutch East Indies Company, commissioned the court *pujangga* (poet) Ki Carik Narawita to create a Javanese language version largely following the Malay language *hikyat*. Despite her efforts, Paku Buwana II lost ground to the Dutch, yet perhaps fictive wins over *kafir*, consoled real life failures. Ratu Ageng (c. 1730-1803), the main queen-mother of Hamengku Buwana II (1792-1810), commissioned the great Yogyakarta court poet, Yasadipura I (1729-1803) for another version. He expanded the cycle exponentially and further Javanized the story. Popularity of Amir Hamzah persisted in Yogyakarta: Sultan Hamengku Buwono IX (1940-1988), a major hero of the Indonesian revolution, created the *wayang wong* ("human puppetry," dance drama) *Beksan Golek Menak*, modeled on a *wayang golek menak* performance of a Kedu *dalang* in 1941. Islamic perseverance in the face of *kafir* aggression may have still resonated as the Dutch colonial yoke was replaced by Japanese occupation.

This short article can only touch on Javanization and feminism of Indonesian versions. One example is the tale of *peri* (fairy) Rengganis, said to come from Rangga Janur of the Kartasura era (pre-1755). She is a *ladak* (semi-refined character puppet) in West Java where I studied with Dalang Otong Rasta. She imbibes flower fragrance and incense, converting them to useable energy. This wonder woman flies, fights and finds her own mate (spurning Amir Hamzah's son for a mountain ascetic). She releases Umar Maya when he is imprisoned under a mountain. She finds Wong Agung in a coma, laid low by a battle with forces of Nusantara. Taking her arrow and holy water to the battlefield, she unmasks the true identity of the attackers. In cahoots with Nirsivan, Raja Kendit Birayu has

pledged to kill Wong Agung with the help of his minister, Naga (snake/dragon) follower, and Garuda (eagle) subordinate. Rengganis uses her weapon on the four and they morph into Wong Agung's four spirit siblings. In Malay and Indonesian traditions the afterbirth, umbilicus, water from the birth sack, and bloody show of coming into the world are thought of as four siblings (*dulur opat*), that through life, help or harm one. Wong Agung has neglected his siblings! Rengganis wakes Wong Agung to a Javanese Islamic understanding of interconnectedness with ancestral



AMIR HAMZAH AND PRINCESS MUNIGGAR,  
WAYANG SASAK, LOMBOK

spirit siblings. Her arrow and holy water may refer to indigenous ancestral rituals. Rengganis is a local figure, showing that local practices can live within global Islam.

How the fierce Arab warrior Hamza ibn Abdul-Muttalib came to be the epitome of a refined Javanized king Wong Agung Menak and helped win adherence to the Islamic order of the seventeenth-nineteenth century through puppet shows is his progress on Java and Lombok. However, today on both islands there are only limited practitioners and *wayang menak* and *wayang sasak* have largely pulled back to the relative sanctuary of "intangible cultural heritage," hoping for life support from local departments of culture or a place in school curriculums. Defining the story as an Islamic epic

brings fundamentalist ire. Though puppeteers, like Dalang Otong, taught me stories, he rarely played them. In the 1950s, fundamentalist revolutionaries (Dar'ul Islam) played havoc in West Java, hoping to create a fundamentalist Islamic state. *Wayang menak* did not fully "fit" that definition of Islam: Though the group failed, *wayang golek* was impacted. In Lombok, a similar situation has grown since 1965, as definitions of "Islamic" have narrowed. While Lalu Nasib and other *dalang* still perform at heritage events, they focus on clowning, not Hamzah stories. Rituals that once opened the show are cut, fundamentalists call them *shyrik* (idolatry). Lombok's current Islamic teachers (Tuan Guru) condemn the form as insufficiently Islamic (Ecklund 2002, Hamish 2003). Thus, puppet forms that started as a tool of *dakwah* (Islamic teaching), telling an epic of Islamization, find themselves caught in ongoing battles of contemporary Southeast Asian modernization and Islamization.

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BY CHEE-HANN WU

Stationed by the River of Forgetfulness, Mengpo prepares the soup of forgetfulness for those who have served their wrongdoings and are ready for rebirth. Mengpo is one of the deities in *Diyu*, the Chinese mythological version of Hades, a fiery inferno, and an underground maze where the souls of the deceased go to receive their final judgments and to atone for their earthly sins.



This mythological figure first appeared in *The Jade Record (Yuli Baochao)*. The soup she offers would wash off all past memories, happy or sad, so the soul can start afresh in the next life. Thus, Mengpo is also a symbol of oblivion and the gatekeeper leading to the afterlife.

*The Soup of Reincarnation (Mengpo Tang)* is a Taiwanese glove puppet show (*budaixi*), by Jin Kwei Lo Puppetry Company in 2018, that reimagines the encounters of three archetypal female characters in classical Chinese texts, Wang Baochuan, Bai Suzhen and Pan Jinlian—the wife, the lover, and the wanton—interacting with Mengpo in the last moment of their journey. The play unveils three women’s stories that have never been considered epic, though they are indeed from Chinese epics.

STEWING AN ALTERNATIVE EPIC:  
*The Soup of Reincarnation*

Wang Baochuan was the Penelope-like chaste and loyal wife who endured all sufferings and yet still wholeheartedly awaited her husband for eighteen years while he served in the military; Bai Suzhen was a white snake female spirit who fell in love with a man and was condemned for the forbidden love; Pan Jinlian, a beautiful woman sold into an unhappy marriage, was condemned as wanton because of her pursuit of true love and sexual freedom. The three characters have varied lives and fates—Wang showed her faithfulness and chastity under difficult circumstances, Bai believed that her love could transcend boundaries, and Pan bravely pursued love and sexual freedom. The play asks: If reincarnation is certain, what comes to their minds when they are about to consume the soup of forgetfulness? Who forgets, and who is to be forgotten? At the end of their journey, they recount conflicts in their hearts and resentment toward life and fate. Through monologues expressing characters’ innermost emotions and their interactions with the puppeteers, *The Soup of Reincarnation* tells a story about oblivion and rebirth, interweaving the real and the illusional, the traditional and the modern.

The majority of traditional puppet theatres in Taiwan are family-run, and almost exclusively led by male puppet masters, including most *budaixi* companies. It was taboo to have female puppeteers perform in early society due to its association with local religion. Plays therefore often center on male characters and their epics, such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, and *Journey to the West*. Female characters are mostly delegated to supporting roles who are to be saved or punished. For instance, Pan Jinlian’s story appears in *Water Margin*, an epic about 108 heroes, in which she is depicted as the ultimate wanton who is fated to be brutally killed.

The founder of Jin Kwei Lo Puppetry Company, Chiang Szu-mei, is one of the first female puppeteers of traditional *budaixi* in Taiwan. Despite the long-standing popularity of martial arts *budaixi* in Taiwanese local society, Chiang Szu-mei develops her expertise in performing stories accentuating female protagonists and focusing on family, friendships, as well as romantic relationships. She deconstructs traditional patriarchal epics and in turn puts emphasis on female voices in her work. As the first generation female puppeteer in traditional puppet theatre, Chiang’s mastery and aesthetics have a huge impact on puppeteers of the later generations, including Ko Shih-hung and Ko Shih-hua, her grandsons, the third generation puppet masters of Jin Kwei Lo Puppetry Company, and also the performers and main contributors to *The Soup of Reincarnation*.

On the same lineage, *The Soup of Reincarnation* sheds light on the inner voices of the three famous female characters who are, though well-known in traditional theatre, often neglected or reduced to melancholy and miserable roles. The play is an alternative epic to the mostly masculine narrative of shows. Mengpo is one of the very few Chinese female deities, and the only figure in *Diyu* that does not punish but breathes life into wandering souls and offers them rebirth. The forgetfulness she offers connotes not only the characters’ last moment before sinking into oblivion, but also the audience’s inability to truly remember their stories.

Indeed, epics are not born epic, but evolve into epics as they are remembered and appreciated by people through time. The play is a response to the HISTORY in which women are often excluded from or replicas of archetypes, just like in classical texts and traditional plays. Wang, Bai and Pan are all appendages to their male counterparts, and are either praised for their compliance with “female virtues” or condemned for their defiance. *The Soup of Reincarnation* allows them to be the protagonists of their own life and death, and to challenge the narratives that have been forced on them.

In the scene when Wang and her husband, Xue Pinggui, finally meet each other after eighteen years apart, instead of depicting the tearful and touching reunion like other classical plays do, *The Soup of Reincarnation* shows Wang’s frustration being questioned by Xue about her chastity. “My eighteen years’ waiting for a doubt! What an insult! You’re awfully heartless!” lamented Wang. When Wang reflects on her life in front of Mengpo, she is finally given the chance to not be the virtuous and obedient wife, and truthfully face all the emotions that have been concealed from the audience.





Additionally, in the play, Pan Jinlian exclaimed in front of Mengpo, “I don’t want to be powerless anymore. Why can’t I be a competent person?” Her words bring out the grief of all three characters, and how much their lives could have been different. As an alternative epic that revisits the classics, *The Soup of Reincarnation* retells those epic stories from women’s perspectives. It denotes the absence of female figures in history, classics and epics, as well as how they were made to be forgotten. “Tears allow everything to be forgotten,” said Mengpo. In *The Soup of Reincarnation*, her soup is made of the three women’s tears which wash off their pain and sorrow, and give them strength to be the protagonists of their lives.

Directed by Cheng Chia-yin and written by Chiang Fu-chin and Ko Shih-hung, the puppet show uses traditions as its foundation and incorporates modern theatrical techniques and designs. Ko and Cheng are long-time friends and collaborators, and both studied Western puppetry under Professor Bart P. Roccoberton, Jr. in the Puppet Arts Program at the University of Connecticut. It is often seen in their pieces the intersections between the East and the West, as well as the modern and the traditional. Ko Shih-hung explained in a radio interview, “Culture is fluid. The traditional *budaixi* we have now might have been an extremely innovative means for theatrical expression in the past. [ . . . ] It is truly beneficial to cultural development when we create connections with contemporary audiences by infusing modern techniques” (Ko).

The fluidity of culture is indeed the core of their artistic practices that allows Chiang to *break the tradition* to be a puppeteer, and can also be applied to the mystical and fantastical world they create. *The Soup of Reincarnation* takes place in a realm between life and death, *this* reincarnation and *the next* reincarnation, the tangible and the intangible, and the real and the illusional. When stepping onto the threshold and offered Mengpo’s soup, Wang, Bai and Pan are asked to let go of all sorrow, remorse and bewilderment, and step into the unknown, the emptiness. In the Taoist and some Buddhist philosophies, true emptiness does not equate nothingness,

but signifies fullness or an expansion to a bigger universe. In *Qingjing Jing* (Scripture of Clarity and Quiescence):

Observe emptiness using emptiness,  
and see there is no emptiness.  
When even emptiness is no more,  
there is no more nonbeing either.  
Without the existence even of non-being,  
profound and everlasting all is serenity.  
When serenity dissolves in nothingness,  
how can desire arise?  
When no desire arises, there is true tranquility.

It is through recognizing that emptiness itself is void and there can be no such thing as emptiness, one can fully reach the depth and clarity of eternal serenity. As the characters walk toward the emptiness, they are in truth living the fullness of their lives.

In *The Soup of Reincarnation*, Mengpo is sometimes presented by an actor with a mask and other times by a puppet head of modern design, dressed in a long silver gown covering the entire body and with an extending and flowing cape. The cape is at times Mengpo’s body; at times a screen for shadow play; at times a symbol of the three women’s inner struggle; and other times a blast of wind, a stream of water or path to reincarnation. The cape also creates a surface that functions as a *budaixi* stage. Traditionally, *budaixi* puppets’ feet are always grounded and land on the platform to mimic the impact of gravity in reality. Yet in *The Soup of Reincarnation*, puppets sometimes stumble and fall from the landscape created by the cape, and flow in the air. If the platform is the stage for puppets, then the physical black box theatre is the stage for puppeteers. When puppets’ feet move away from the platform, they are breaking the traditional theatrical illusions created on the stage for puppets, and entering and sharing the same space with the puppeteers.

## PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

*The Soup of Reincarnation* keeps the narration, puppets, music, text and method of traditional *budaixi* heritage, while removing the traditional platform stage to allow the presence of the puppeteers—their emotions, movements and facial expressions become an essential part of the performance. Puppeteers sometimes manipulate the *budaixi* puppets and be their voice, while other times stand out in front of the audience to share their own stories. *The Soup of Reincarnation* is not just a show about the three female characters, but also about the puppeteers’ autobiographical reflection on their life and career as successors of a traditional puppet troupe established by the very first female puppeteer in Taiwan. The play-within-a-play adds another layer and dimension to the show, embodying and connecting the characters’ state of mind and the physical space, as well as the family history. Chiang Szu-mei’s dedication to challenging the taboo of tradition as a female puppeteer echoes the three characters’ defiance to their fate, the destined forgetting. At the end of the play, no one but Mengpo, or her gown, or the river is hung above the empty stage; abruptly, it drops to the ground and returns to a lifeless piece of cloth. The last scene further brings reality back to the audience, and connotes that what they have just seen may be just a play, an illusion.

So, what comes to their minds when the characters are about to fall into forgetfulness? Maybe a relief, a feeling of being ready for the ultimate fulfillment of their lives, for embracing who and what they have been. Ko Shih-hung once said, “the first thing puppeteers do after finishing a show is to take all clothes off from puppets. When we stage another play in a different place the next day, the same puppets will be dressed in different costumes, playing another story, and living new lives” (qtd. in Bai). Mengpo breathes new lives into souls, just like *budaixi* puppeteers. *The Soup of Reincarnation* reimagines the life and death of characters from the classics. The transformative portrayal of the mythological figure, Mengpo, gives the audience a peek into the realm of the dead, and the final moment of their journey of life, “with dawn and dusk, joy and grief,” so said in the play. Founded and led by Chiang Szu-mei, Jin Kwei Lo Puppetry

Company, along with director Cheng Chia-yin’s aesthetics of “everything can be a puppet,” creates a fantastical world of puppets, transcending the boundary between tradition and innovation and breathes new life into the ancient technique of *budaixi* with a soft, tender, yet powerful touch.

*The Soup of Reincarnation* has generated several awards in Taiwan, and was invited to Festival Off d’Avignon in 2018 and Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes in France a year later. The interdisciplinary and multimedia work goes beyond the limitations of language and culture, and was well-received by audiences from different backgrounds. The three female protagonists and the puppeteers’ stories may not be epic, but together they are making epics of their own.

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## A NEW EPIC: ANNA CUTICCHIO'S *cunto* on Salvatore Carnevale

BY ANNA CAROCCI

Since the Middle Ages, chivalric epic has provided the most beloved stories and heroes to the Italian public – the popular public particularly: from people gathered in Italian squares listening to a *cantastorie* (storyteller) to people watching Sicilian *Opera dei pupi* and *cunto*, everyone has seen these stories not just as a shelter for their fantasy but as a value system with which to identify. The triumph of justice and honor, the hero who, after hard trials, is able to single-handedly achieve a victory that is a win-win for the community, but especially the hero who fights any type of unjust power, even that of his own king: these are the ideals that – from the Middle Ages to post-World War II – have bewitched the public. Moreover, alongside these secular components, it should be noted that the forms of popular theater that stage epic repertoire (*Opera dei pupi* and *cunto*) had always been able to express the values of the particular historical moment they were going through – that is to say, they have always been forms of contemporary theater: For example, in the pre-Unification era, puppet shows were used to convey secret messages against the Bourbons; and when Giuseppe Garibaldi arrived in Palermo in 1860, the puppeteer Gaetano Greco rushed to put the Italian tricolor rosette on his puppet of Orlando. Nowadays, Orlando still wears the rosette.



ANNA CUTICCHIO WITH THE PUPPET CAGLIOSTRO, 1978  
PHOTO COURTESY OF VANNA SAPUTO

In popular theater, the types of characters, the values they embody, even the narrative framework of the stories are so essential that they are applied even to narratives that, strictly speaking, are not epic at all: In the post-Unification era, alongside Charlemagne's cycle, puppeteers used to stage stories about bandits. Here, the bandits were seen as the heroes who – like the rebellious paladini Renaud (not coincidentally, the most beloved hero from the fifteenth century to the present) – fight an unjust power until victory or death. We need to see this in context: during the second half of nineteenth century, banditry was a widespread phenomenon, and a symptom, among other things, of the difficulties that the Unification of Italy caused in Southern Italy. At the beginning of the 1980s, when, due especially to television, there was a great crisis of *Opera dei pupi* and many puppeteers gave up their trade and closed their theaters, a Palermitan woman opened the way for another type of traditional repertoire's renovation with another kind of theoretically non-epic material, staged with all the criteria and according to the values of the epic code: stories against the Mafia. Here, I will focus on this artist and this particular performance.

The woman I'm talking about is Anna Cuticchio, a puppeteer from an exceptionally prominent family in the world of *Opera dei pupi*. Her father was Giacomo Cuticchio (1917-1985), a well-known puppeteer and almost the archetypical figure of the traditional puppeteer: a lower class man, with little formal education, ruled by an overwhelming love for his *pupi*, to which he dedicated his whole life. When Anna was a child, immediately after World War II, she travelled with her parents and brothers from village to village, sleeping in barns and warehouses and performing puppet shows, bewitched by the magic of the stories of Roland and Renaud. Anna's brother is Mimmo Cuticchio (b. 1948), showman, narrator and artist of exceptional talent, today probably the most important voice of *Opera dei pupi* and *cunto* and, more generally, a fundamental figure in traditional and non-traditional theater. To Anna Cuticchio, *Opera dei pupi* has been much more than a childhood experience or a passion: It has been a challenge and a battle, and also a way to regain possession of her life. Married at the age of fifteen after a *ratto* (kidnapping) and after living in the North of Italy for almost twenty years, Anna backed out of an unhappy marriage and went back to Sicily with her daughter and son. Here, with her brothers, she resumed the *Opera dei pupi* learned from their father.

It has often been said that Anna is the first woman-puppeteer: That's not exactly true – she has some antecedents, especially in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, she is the first female *capocompagnia* (head of a theater company) in the puppet world, because in 1981 she founded her own puppet theater: the Theater Bradamante, named after the chivalric heroine whom Anna described as “a courageous and combative woman” and as “my favourite puppet, because she mirrors my life” (Cuticchio 56). The Theater Bradamante stayed open until 1995, when growing economic problems resulted in its closure. But, even after this watershed, the story of Anna's life is an incessant source of surprises and new challenges: In 2000 she decided to become a missionary nun and went to Tanzania, where she teaches in schools and she builds simple puppets with recycled objects.

Besides being one of the first women-puppeteers and the first female to lead a puppet theater company, to the best of my knowledge Anna is also the first woman to try her hand at the *cunto*, that she learned from her brother Mimmo, one of the few and surely the greatest of the artists who still perform this form of theater. The *cunto* is a direct equivalent of *Opera dei pupi*: It was born in Sicily in the same period and in the same environment of *Opera dei pupi*, it was performed by the same artists, and it stages the same stories – the chivalric-epic repertoire – not with the puppets but with the artist's voice. The artist (called a *cuntista*) accompanies himself with a sword or a stick, alternating slower narrative sections to faster ones in which the rhythm picks up, suspense increases, and the sword scythes the air, the foot stamps the ground, the

words break. The direct speech among the characters (whose voices in Palermo are all performed by a single puppeteer) is replaced by the *cuntista's* voice, that tells the story and reproduces the lines of the various characters; the armours' clanging is replaced by the bangs of the *cuntista's* foot on a wooden bench; the puppets' sword swings are replaced by the movements of the *cuntista's* sword that accompanies the tale.

After having practiced the *cunto* with the epic stories of Roland and Renaud, as she did in *Opera dei pupi*, Anna Cuticchio decided to use it for one of her most innovative performances: *The Death of Turiddu Carnevale*. Salvatore (diminutive: *Turi* or *Turiddu*) was a Sicilian farmhand and trade unionist: He founded the local section of the Italian Socialist Party in Sciarra, near Palermo, and fought for his fellow workers' rights. After a symbolic occupation of Princess Notarbartolo's lands, he managed to win the right to the eight-hour workday and back-pay; but a few days later, at dawn on May 16, 1955, he was murdered by the mafia with a *lupara* (the typical mafia shotgun). He was thirty-one.

Extraordinary pages have been dedicated to the story of Salvatore Carnevale: In particular, we have to remember *Words are Stones* by Carlo Levi, writer, painter and politician, a central figure and symbol of antifascism. But while Levi was a great intellectual, he lived in Rome. He looked at the Sicilian world with solidarity and interest, but from the outside. In a period in which (in Sicily and among Sicilian people) the fight against the mafia was still almost a taboo, the perspective of a Sicilian (even better: Palermitan) woman such as Anna Cuticchio deciding to tell this story is completely different.

Anna told her story in strictly epic terms: Carnevale is the young hero who, despite all personal risks, puts himself on the line, challenges power for the good of his fellows and – like the paladins at Roncesvaux – dies fighting to the very last breath. But in Anna's show a crucial role is played also by a female character, a sort of real-life Bradamante: Salvatore's mother, Francesca Serio, a woman from humble origins who collected her son's legacy. She has been the first woman to break the mafia's *omertà* and report the presumed murderers of her son and their instigators. Anna Cuticchio decided to close her show with the words with which Francesca Serio asked for an objective trial, a trial not influenced by the local power dynamics of Sciarra; but above all she asked that all those who know something show up and speak out. In her letter to the authorities, Francesca Serio wrote: “For these reasons I believe it is necessary that the inquiry is being carried out directly by the officers of Palermo and removed by the local setting, sadly controlled by the mafia. It is necessary that all those who know something are encouraged to speak, and they will speak only if they understand that the inquiry is in good hands and that their safety is not in danger” (Rizzo).



## PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL



ANNA CUTICCHIO SPEAKS BRADAMANTE'S VOICE...

FROM CUTICCHIO: *IN VIAGGIO CON I PUPPI* (2008), DIRECTED BY MAURIZIO SCIARRA  
<https://youtu.be/Sybd7x10wK8>



...WHILE ROSA CUTICCHIO MANIPULATES THE BRADAMANTE PUPPET

In the trial for her son's murder, Francesca Serio brought a civil action and was represented by Sandro Pertini, who would later become President of the Italian Republic. But the defendants, initially sentenced to life imprisonment, were acquitted on appeal for insufficient evidence: a sadly common procedure at that time.

Anna Cuticchio's show was staged for the first time in 1981, in a meaningful place, because it was a very popular one: the lido *La Sirenetta* (*The Little Mermaid*), on the well-known beach of Mondello in Palermo. Since this very first time, according to Anna, the show was a success: "It thrilled the public," Anna says, "because of its political subject and because of its message against the mafia" (Cuticchio 61), but also—and importantly—because this message was entrusted on one hand to the traditional *cunto* and on the other hand to the novelty of a female artist. From this very first staging, and for many years, *The Death of Turiddu Carnevale* was one of Anna's *pièces de résistance*.

As we said, when this performance was first conceived, the idea of a show against the mafia was something of a taboo.

But – also thanks to people like Anna Cuticchio – times change: Nowadays, there are many companies of puppeteers, especially made of young people, who make the fight against the mafia a central topic of their shows.

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## EPIC TRADITIONS IN PUPPET THEATER

Mini-symposia to be held in

Palermo, Italy • Mumbai, India • Tehran, Iran • Kyoto, Japan

Each mini-symposium will focus on a different theme, namely, exile (Italy), love (India), friendship (Iran), and transcendence (Japan). This international project is part of the Columbia University Humanities War & Peace Initiative, which "fosters the study of war and peace from the perspective of scholars in the Humanities, in conversation with colleagues from around Columbia and the world [...] with an ultimate goal of perpetuating a more peaceful world."

The first mini-symposium, dedicated to the theme of exile, will take place at the Museo Internazionale delle Marionette "Antonio Pasqualino" in Palermo on Friday, November 12, from 4pm to 7pm local time, and will be available online through the Museo's [website](#) and/or [Facebook page](#). The five speakers (in alphabetical order) will be: Anna Carocci (Sapienza University of Rome), Olga M. Davidson (Boston University), Alessandro Napoli (Marionettistica dei Fratelli Napoli, Catania), Elizabeth Oyler (University of Pittsburgh), and Paula Richman (Oberlin College). This mini-symposium is part of the Museum's annual Festival di Morgana (edition XLVI), which will be held between November 11 and 21, 2021. As the Museum stated: "The Morgana Festival is a theatrical review focused on traditional theatrical practices and contemporary puppetry. The event is aimed at promoting the transnational mobility of artists and operators in the cultural sector through collaboration with numerous festivals and national and international organizations. Since its first edition, the Festival has encouraged intercultural dialogue by adopting an interdisciplinary approach through the inclusion of visual and performance arts with animated figures and music. In the last five editions, the Morgana Festival has hosted more than 500 artists, and not only theatrical performances have been organized but also conferences, meetings, and guided tours involving Italian and foreign artists and teachers as well as exhibitions focused on puppetry. The 2021 edition schedules performances by Italian and foreign companies and includes some related events, such as conferences, exhibitions, installations and book presentations."

The epic genre characteristically consists of long-cherished stories of memorable deeds by larger-than-life characters whose actions have significant and wide-ranging consequences. The epics of India, Iran, Japan, and Italy span several centuries, encompass different religions, and originate in cultures thousands of miles apart, all with their

own multifaceted political, social, and literary histories. Nonetheless, they contain parallel features that invite comparative analysis and critical thinking on a number of themes related to the human condition that remain utterly relevant today.

Until a short time ago, many epic stories remained at the forefront of their respective cultures (and beyond) through folk performance traditions, including puppet theater. Even today, puppeteers can be found who bring to life episodes from epic masterpieces for contemporary audiences. Moreover, some puppet theater companies rework narrative backdrops presupposing hostility between opposing groups in order to actively question collective confrontations and promote understanding across cultures.

These four mini-symposia will focus on the dramatic capabilities of puppet theater to present epic narratives across languages, religions, and territories, and thereby aim, albeit indirectly, to challenge war's inevitability. The contemporary global situation is admittedly very complicated, but greater contact between individuals across national borders focusing on topics of shared human interest and outside the scope of current political events can only help foster greater mutual goodwill and respect among all peoples.

Academic committee: Jo Ann Cavallo (Columbia University), organizer; Olga M. Davidson (Boston University); Claudia Orenstein (Hunter College, CUNY; UNIMA-US); Elizabeth Oyler (University of Pittsburgh); Paula Richman (Oberlin College); and Poupak Azimpour Tabrizi (University of Tehran, Iran).

Co-sponsors thus far include: the Humanities War and Peace Initiative, through the Division of Humanities in the Arts & Sciences at Columbia University; the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture, Columbia University; the University of Pittsburgh; the Museo Internazionale delle Marionette "Antonio Pasqualino" in Palermo; the Columbia University Global Center in Mumbai.

The following webpage will provide regularly updated information regarding the various mini-symposia as well as suggested resources on epic narratives in the puppetry arts of Italy, India, Iran, and Japan (additional suggestions welcome):

[edblogs.columbia.edu/worlddepics/2021/03/21/world-epics-in-puppet-theater-italy-india-iran-japan/](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/worlddepics/2021/03/21/world-epics-in-puppet-theater-italy-india-iran-japan/)

Palermo, Italy (11/12/2021), Mumbai, India (3/2022), Tehran, Iran (5/2022), Kyoto, Japan (6/2022)

— BY JO ANN CAVALLO



# Tholpavakoothu

## THE TRADITION OF NARRATING RAMAYANA\*

BY RAHUL K. PULAVAR

Shadow puppetry is an ancient form—a precursor of theatre and modern cinema. There are many varieties and styles of puppets depending upon their form and intended use. A puppet is an object that gets its “life” from a puppeteer. The puppeteer manipulates the puppets and often speaks in the voices of the puppet character to emote feelings, synchronizing the movement of the puppet as required. The gestures, actions and narration are acted out by the puppeteer and that typically progresses into storytelling. Puppetry is basically classified into four types that are considered as the base for all other types. This classification is done on the basis of the manipulation techniques of the puppets that are glove puppetry, rod puppetry, shadow puppetry, string puppetry.

Every state in India has had a diverse puppet tradition, and these traditions still exist in many parts of the country. Traditional shadow puppetry in India is most popular among the southern states. These shadow puppets are flat, and are manipulated on the back of a tightly stretched white cloth screen. The material used for shadow puppets can be leather, paper or palm leaves and can be cut out and projected on the screen. Shadow puppets are usually placed directly on the screen to be in sharpest focus. The puppet is handled at the center by a split bamboo that is attached vertically to the puppet. Shadow puppetry is performed traditionally in south Indian states of Andhra Pradesh (Tholu Bommalata), Karnataka (Togalu Gombeyata), Kerala (Tholpavakoothu), Maharashtra (Chamadyache Bahulya), Orissa (Ravana chaya), and Tamil Nadu (Tolpavaikoothu).

\*Also known in Kerala as *Kambha Ramayanam* or *Khambaramayana* [ed.]

## PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

### THE SHADOW PUPPET THEATRE OF KERALA – THOLPAVAKOOTHU

*Tholpavakoothu* is believed to have originated in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century. This traditional puppet play of Kerala is still being performed annually in many places. Considered as a temple festival, it will last 7, 14, 21, 41 or even 71 days without any break. This performance strictly follows all customs and rituals in the temple, lasting 6 to 8 hours in each temple. The show starts at 10PM every night and continues till 5:30AM. Each puppet stage is constructed in front of a goddess *Bhadrakali* temple. It is believed that the goddess will be pleased to watch the show and bless the devotees.

The legend behind the performance of *Tholpavakoothu* shadow puppetry traditionally performed in Devi temples in North Kerala has long since been dispatched to oblivion. All that we can say is that it is a very ancient art form—some 1,200 years old. As we heard from our ancestors, this art form originated at Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu. It is named as *Bommayattam* or *Bommakali*. The verses of *Tholpavakoothu* are in Sanskrit and contain a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam. *Kamba Ramayana* is the basic text that we following now. The artist or puppeteer who performs *Tholpavakoothu* is given the title *Pulavar*—which means scholar. Though shadow puppetry exists everywhere in the world, a thing peculiar to Kerala puppetry is our uninterrupted puppet theatre tradition called *Koothumadam*, in which we perform according to ritual each year from of January to May.

The myth of performing in mother goddess temples is *Bhadrakali – Darika* culture. It relates that, in the combat between Devas and Asuras, the Asuras were bitterly defeated by the former. After this prolonged battle, only the four women, left alive were *Dhanapathy*, *Dheenapathy*, *Vanika*, *Maneeshika*. Among these four women *Dhanapathy* was blessed by Lord Brahma and gave birth to a son. Long ago the creator, Brahma, blessed an *asurasthri* (demoness) and, as a result of his blessing, she gave birth to a son named *Darika*. When this *asura* (demon) boy grew up, he became so strong that he became a constant source of annoyance to the gods and maharshi’s-sages and hermits, so they approached lord Shiva for help. In order to kill *Darika*, Shiva created the goddess *Bhadarakali* (*Kali*) from his third eye. *Bhadrakali* and *Darika* engaged in an

enormous battle until at last the goddess *Kali* won and took the head of *Darika*. She was making her way back to *Kailas*. The goddess was quite full of herself, having killed such a demon as *Darika*, but the people she encountered were only interested in the battle that was going on between *Rama* and *Ravana*. *Kali* was quite upset that she wasn’t able to witness that battle and complained to her father, Lord *Shiva*. Lord *Shiva* said: “Don’t worry my dear, you can go and sit in the holy place in Kerala, and there you can see *Rama* and *Ravana* fight through shadow puppets.” That’s what we consider to be the origin or myth that our ancestors told to us. It is believed that the goddess will be pleased to watch the show and bless this devotee. This *Tholpavakoothu* is utterly based on *Kamba Ramayana*, and the language used in its performance is a mix of Tamil, Malayalam and Sanskrit. In this puppet theatre it’s a platform for arguments and counter-arguments that will go on for many hours.

The antique puppets were made of deerskin, but nowadays buffalo and goat skin is used. These puppets are held up by a thin stick in one hand. That controls the central part, while the limbs are manipulated by another thinner stick held in the other hand of the puppeteer. For a complete *Ramayana Tholpavakoothu* performance, more than 160 leather puppets are used. These puppets portray 71 characters in four main categories—sitting, standing, sleeping and fighting—besides puppets to depict nature, battle scenes and ceremonial parades. For contemporary stories, puppeteers follow the pattern of traditional puppets in order to create new figures.



PUPPETEERS RAMACHANDRA PULAVAR (PADMASHRI AWARDEE 2021) AND HIS SON RAHUL PULAVAR MANIPULATING THE CHARACTERS OF SITA AND RAMA PHOTOS: PRASOB



PUPPET MAKING BY RAJEEV PULAVAR, RAHUL PULAVAR AND RAJALAKSHMI PHOTO: PRASOB

As the traditional source of leather is now prohibited, artists have shifted to buffalo and goat skin to make the puppets. The puppeteer makes the puppet himself and shows his artistic craftsmanship by using a specially made iron chisel. Each pattern has its own specific meanings, which makes the resulting character ideal. For instance, a puppet of Rama has many patterns, each of which symbolizes various characteristics of Lord Rama.

The puppet theatre called *Koothumadam* is the performance area where the play happens, the ritualistic sacred theatre that follows all rituals and worship requirements in the performance. The screen is illuminated by 21 lighted oil lamps made out of coconut shells filled with coconut oil, provided with cotton wicks and placed equidistant from each other on the *Vilakku-madam* (wooden beam) behind the curtain. These traditional lights are considered as the mother deity who watches the whole performance. The puppet theatre is 42 feet in length, 8 feet high and 12 feet wide. This shadow puppet theater resembles the modern cinema screens. There were around 105 puppet theatres in olden times, but that number is now down to 85.

The colors of the puppets are from natural dyes that the puppeteers make from pieces of tree bark that is allowed to boil in water for many hours. After boiling, the color will be reduced and suitable for painting directly on the puppet. These colors make the puppets translucent and show off the carving of the puppet when light is projected onto them. The bark is collected from teakwood, saponwood and jackfruit wood for the different colors.

Instruments used for *Tholpavakoothu* performance include *Chenda* a cylindrical percussion instrument with leather at both ends. *Maddalam* is a drum made out of the wood of the jackfruit tree. *Ezhupara* is a cylindrical drum made out of jackfruit wood and covered with calf-skin on both ends. *Ilathalam* (cymbals) are made of four alloys: bronze, copper, brass and nickel. *Shankha* (conch), *Chengila* (gong) and *Kurum-kuzhal* (a short pipe) are further instruments to be used on special occasions of *Tholpavakoothu*. The rhythm mix of *Tholpavakoothu* performance is a unique style and requires special training.

Each performance consists of around eight artists. Five of them will be doing puppet manipulation, two will sing songs and do the narration, and one will be playing instruments. Although the training is not confined anymore to the *Pulavars*, all the puppeteers have to be experienced in all branches of knowledge, as the presentation of the story will be filled with references to current events and wisdom. The troupe at Koonathara was founded generations back and was revived by the renowned and award winning *Tholpavakoothu* artist late Guru Krishnan Kutty Pulavar and is now the only surviving puppetry community in Kerala to preserve the art form and train new artists in the traditional repertoire as well as in new productions. The name *Pulavar* itself is a title bestowed on such a person who has gone through an intensive training in puppetry and puppet making that includes an in-depth knowledge of Tamil literature and especially the *Kamba Ramayana*. The name is thus used as a prefix like *Sir*, *Lord*, *Shree* like the *Pandit* in Sanskrit and Hindi.

### Glossary

- Bhadrakali:** Hindu goddess worshipped in Kerala.
- Kambharamayanam:** a Tamil epic written by Tamil poet Kambar during the 12<sup>th</sup> century.
- Koothumadam:** permanent puppet theatre for performing shadow puppetry of Kerala.
- Vilakkumadam:** a wooden beam where traditional oil lamps are placed for performance of *Tholpavakoothu*.
- Pulavar:** honorific title for a scholarly artist who performs *Tholpavakoothu* in traditional puppet theatre of Kerala.

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## Saved From Drowning

### DAN HURLIN: A SOLO EXHIBITION

The Gallery at Heimbold Visual Arts Center,  
Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York

March 22 - June 6, 2021

Seeing puppets you once admired in performance on exhibit in a gallery can feel like getting reacquainted with old friends. That was my experience of *Saved From Drowning*, a retrospective of the puppetry work of theatre and visual artist, Dan Hurlin. The bulk of the show is comprised of puppets from Hurlin's three major productions: *Hiroshima Maiden* (2004), *Disfarmer* (2009), and *Demolishing Everything with Amazing Speed* (2016).

*Hiroshima Maiden*, Hurlin's first full-length puppet piece, is based on the true events of Japanese women, disfigured by the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, brought to the U.S. for reconstructive surgery. As part of their trip, they participated in an astonishing encounter with the pilot of the plane that dropped the bomb on the television show *This is Your Life*. Three large *bunraku*-style figures stand on display, each within its own setting. A Japanese woman with long black hair, dressed in vibrant red blouse and skirt, sits in a small tatami room, encircled by shoji screens and red walls. In conceptualizing the show, Hurlin associated each character with a color that permeated their clothes and surroundings and also formed a base coat underneath their white body paint. The Maiden's red evokes the streams of blood of battlegrounds, the wounds of victims, the operating table, and the red sun of the Japanese flag. Red forms excised from her face mar her otherwise perfect alabaster complexion; corresponding shapes hang dangling underneath. These fractured pieces reawaken memories of the show: the woman running from the destruction of the bombing in a dynamic, choreographed staging of soaring puppets and rolling set platforms, animated by an ensemble of dancer-puppeteers.



Her subsequent disfigurement was enacted by these pieces slowly dropping off her face. In contrast to reconstructive surgery, which aims to correct deformities, Hurlin turns facial distortions into their own delicate beauty, reminiscent of *kintsugi*, the Japanese technique of using gold to fix broken pottery, highlighting rather than hiding cracks.

On the next pedestal, the pilot puppet stands within a non-descript wooden room, his face a portrait of dejection, dressed in tan jumpsuit, white scarf, and full flight gear – aviator hat, goggles, gas mask. Hurlin's attention to detail is always astounding. Lastly, an American bureaucrat sits at a desk, a deep blue background revealing the shadowy silhouette of the U.S. capitol building behind him. He reads a newspaper; the Hiroshima maidens' story printed on its diminutive front page.

Hurlin created an elaborate storyboard to prepare the show, sketching moment by moment images and actions to understand what the puppets needed to do and how many puppeteers were required for each moment. The pages for scene one appear in the exhibit, spread along almost the full length of the hall. They reveal Hurlin's meticulous thought and planning of the project. They are artworks themselves with their clean lines, occasional splashes of color, and clearly written, descriptive notes.

Figures from *Disfarmer*, based on the life of the reclusive early twentieth century Arkansas photographer Mike Disfarmer, famous for his portraits of depression-era subjects, are scattered about the center of the gallery floor. Each is of Disfarmer himself, who, in the show, gradually became smaller and smaller, an echo of the vanishing rural America he documented. Disfarmer's face, body, and outfit blend in their uniform light tan color, redolent of fading photographic images and the dustbowl landscapes his subjects inhabited. Blending into his own clothes also reflects Disfarmer's utter reclusiveness and slip into near obscurity. His many doppelgängers are posed in solitary tableaux – sitting with a suitcase on a bench, setting up a studio camera on a tripod, lying in bed with empty beer bottles strewn about. Props and furniture are all faithfully created to each puppet's scale. Scenes from the show play out in an adjacent video projection of *Puppet*, David Soll's documentary film about the making of *Disfarmer*, allowing visitors simultaneously to appreciate the puppets in stillness and in action.

*Demolishing Everything with Amazing Speed*, which Hurlin conceptualized while on Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome, is based on four short, wordless plays by Italian Futurist Fortunato Depero. The exhibit includes copies of early sketches for the puppet heads alongside eight large, colorful figures. The sketches reveal Hurlin taking inspiration from Futurist artworks and their emphasis on dehumanizing, geometric form. Among them, sketches based on fellow Fellows at the American Academy and one inspired by Renato Giuseppe Bertelli's *Profilo Continuo (Testa di Mussolini)* – *Continuous Profile (Head of Mussolini)* – in which Mussolini's profile stretches around the form's full 360 degrees to evoke the Fascist leader's expansive powers, watching everything in all directions.

Each character for *Demolishing Everything* is again associated with a specific color. In contrast to *Hiroshima Maiden*, however, these do not sit subtly under white paint, but burst out in vibrant geometric displays. The red lady's oval head is painted with several shades of red and a single large white eye with green swirls. The blue woman's facial features have been replaced entirely by horizontal, colored blocks in various shades of blue. The purple man's lavender head, shaped like a large pear, sports two small, black rectangles for eyes.

These figures, in contrast to others in the exhibit, were crafted by 3-D printer, allowing Hurlin easily to reproduce the same character in different sizes for different scenes. This mode of fabrication aptly parallels the Futurists' own celebration of technology and industrialization. The characters' clothes, however, seem lovingly handsewn with inviting fabrics, their thoughtful designs are by Hurlin's longtime collaborator, Anna Thomford, who did the wonderful, intricate costumes for all the puppets in the exhibit and deserves her own round of applause.

The show includes one set of works not related to puppetry: a series of sketches and photographs for a heretofore unrealized book project entitled *North Main Street* investigating interplays of time, memory, and forgetting in photographs and drawings.

Having had the pleasure of following Hurlin's work for over a decade, I feel fortunate to have seen all the productions represented in the exhibit. The exhibit, however, allowed me to more fully appreciate the artistry, craft, imagination, and careful detail Hurlin puts into all his work, something that can easily be lost on spectators from the distance of the house, especially when our attention is monopolized by stage movement and dramatic action. *Saved From Drowning* shows Hurlin's puppet figures as true works of art that, even in stillness, captivate.

—REVIEWED BY CLAUDIA ORENSTEIN

Hunter College/Graduate Center,  
City University of New York



# PIR **review**



**THE PUPPET IN THEORY AND PRACTICE**

— EDITORIAL —

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3]

Once *PIR Review* is launched, we will continue our tradition of publishing short academic pieces in *PI*—but now there will also be a dedicated home for more in-depth research by the growing number of scholar-puppeteers in the field. We hope this new venture brings you a richer understanding of the world of puppetry and its history.

In the meantime, we invite you to immerse yourselves in the three pieces featured in this issue, which together illustrate the far-ranging topics and perspectives characteristic of puppetry scholarship today: Alicia Hernández-Grande's essay, "Laughing at Violence: A Puppet-centric Revisiting of *Mori el Merma*," by Joan Miró and La Claca," illuminates the significance of a pioneering Catalan puppet adaptation of *Ubu Roi* in the political, cultural and artistic context of Francisco Franco's dictatorship in Spain. "Puppetry in the Age of Posthumanism: The Terrors and Pleasures of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*," by Kelly I. Aliano, muses on the timely, reassuring pleasure of puppeteering video-game avatars during the pandemic. And finally, Poupak Azimpour Tabrizi, in "Dolls and Beyond Dolls: The Cultural Function of Dolls in Iranian Folk Beliefs," reveals the astonishing range of traditional dolls in Iranian folk culture in the context of human belief in the life and spiritual power of inanimate objects.

*Enjoy!*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Laughing at Violence: Joan Miró and La Claca by Alicia Hernández-Grande .....	40
Dolls and Beyond Dolls in Iranian Folk Beliefs by Poupak Azimpour Tabrizi .....	46
Puppetry in the Age of Posthumanism: <i>Animal Crossing</i> by Kelly I. Aliano .....	53
Book Review	
<i>The Persistence of Mask Culture in Mexico</i> , book by A. A. Shelton, review by John Bell .....	62

# Laughing at Violence: A Puppet-centric Revisiting of Mori el Merma by Joan Miró and La Claca<sup>1</sup>

BY ALICIA HERNÁNDEZ-GRANDE



JOAN MIRÓ POSTER DESIGN, 1977

Miró used Catalan puppetry to construct a performance that could simultaneously encapsulate the violence of the Franco regime and celebrate the dictator's demise.

*Mori el Merma* used puppet theatre to combine humorous mischief with the violent brutality of the Franco era. As Joan Baixas described the Merma (tyrant) and his administrators:

They are all violent and at the same time grotesque, cruel but also ridiculous, sexually obsessed but impotent, nightmarish and simultaneously clownish, with eyes, mouths, and stomachs that reveal egoism, fierce and cowardly, the depravity and excess of power (Bravo, 39).<sup>2</sup>

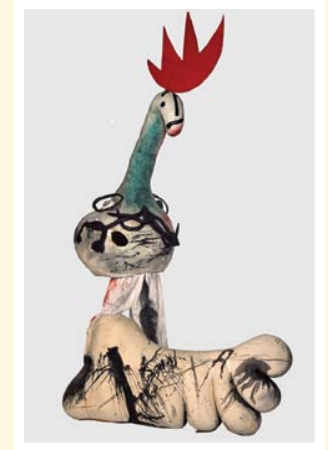
This simultaneous humor and violence was integral to depicting the real horrors of the Franco regime while also poking fun at it after it ended. Using a storyline loosely based upon Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, the show depicts the Merma's regime as foolish and ridiculous, although with a violent edge that threatens to ruin any moment of celebration. The extremes of the production were a way for the puppeteers and their audiences

to "purge the dictatorship... without analyzing it" (Baixas, "Nedar" 231) or to attain a therapeutic catharsis from the past.<sup>3</sup>

The political aims of *Mori el Merma* were a continuation of Miró's long-standing resistance against the Franco regime. Even before the rise of fascism across Europe in the 1930s, Miró developed a political resistance through "a revolution of form" that "in bothering people, forces them to wake up" (Szymusiak, 145).<sup>4</sup> Although he was forced to keep a low profile to survive, during the Franco regime, Miró's work, like those of other Spanish artists, was promoted through gallery openings, awards, and more "so as to project an image abroad, albeit fictitious, of cultural and political normality" within Spain (Lax, 169). Using this to his advantage, Miró began creating an aesthetic of resistance, where his "revolution of form" was paired with orchestrated public resistance, such as paying off fines levied against university students who created unions. He also designed the cover art for the record sleeves of the anti-fascist singers of the *Nova Canço*; he retained his Catalan name to sign his artwork; and named all his work in French to further avoid the Spanish-language mandate imposed by the regime (Daniel and Gale, 172). *Mori el Merma* was the next step, a foray into the world of theatre, in which his political statements and the artistic form of the puppet could create an aesthetic of political resistance to Franco's version of fascism.

Understanding how the puppets of *Mori el Merma* move is crucial to analyzing the production's commingling of ridicule and violence. These puppets, stored at the Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona, Spain, were preserved as an example of Miró's extension of his sculptural work. When they are exhibited, it is as stationary pieces of art, with mannequins that hold them in place in the gallery.<sup>5</sup> Examining the original puppets from the 1978 tour allowed me to understand not only the size and scale of these puppets but also how they were built, including interior mechanisms hidden from audience members that ensured that the puppeteer within the puppet could see, move, and interact with others onstage. In illuminating the significance of the movement design of these puppets, I also recover the labor of Calafell, who led the puppet construction for *Mori el Merma*, a significant contribution that both here and in Catalan theatre overall has been inadvertently overshadowed by the continued touring of *Mori el Merma* after she left La Claca in 1983, as well as by her early death from cancer in 2000.

The *Mori el Merma* puppets are built as *capgrossos*, literally "big heads," a type of traditional puppet used in Catalan summertime festivals (Baixas, interview). With their oversized heads, *capgrossos* often depict brightly colored caricatures of historical people or animals. The *capgrossos* engulf the puppeteer's head and torso, leaving the legs exposed, allowing the wearer to run around in festival crowds, engaging in tomfoolery and mischief. Unlike other traditional Catalan puppet forms, which tend to emphasize gracefulness or skill, *capgrossos* prioritize humorous interaction between performer and audience member. When the Franco regime banned the Catalan language and cultural events in an attempt to impose a single culture upon the whole country, this included the festivals that celebrated the *capgrossos*, the result being that the tradition fell into disuse (Astles, 324). Although the *Mori el Merma* puppets are *capgrossos* in that they cover the puppeteer's head and shoulders and have exaggerated features (Baixas, interview), they also veer from the *capgrossos*



CARBASSA

PHOTO COURTESY OF FUNDACIÓ JOAN MIRÓ, BARCELONA

in that they are constructed from cloth and foam, making them much lighter than the traditional papier-mâché. If the *Mori el Merma* puppets had been built from papier-mâché, the puppets would be too heavy to move around the stage and the blows they endure over the course of the show would damage the puppet's surface, requiring constant upkeep. La Claca used the *capgrossos* tradition to imbue this show with humor and to celebrate Catalan culture, while also modifying the puppet construction to allow for the freer and more specific kind of movement the show required. Significantly, recreating Franco as a *capgross* allowed La Claca to construct a caricature of the dictator, tapping into the humor inherent to the puppetry tradition and doing so with the very same cultural elements the dictatorship had tried to destroy.<sup>6</sup>

A close examination of the main puppet, the Merma, reveals how the internal construction of this puppet allows for breezy movements, like skipping, as well as startling violence. The Merma, an allegorical representation of Franco himself, is amongst the largest puppets in the show, thanks to his enormous round head, which gives him the general shape of a lumpy light bulb. This shape allows him to become a battering ram by leaning forward and striking his foes and allies with the crown of his head. Inside, the Merma's head is a hollow dome constructed from strips of cane and supported by cloth-covered, small-diameter PVC pipes. Foam then cushions the puppeteer's body within the puppet. Rather than being installed in a systematic way, the puppet's interior support structures show evidence of being layered atop one another as needed to reinforce and support weak spots within the Merma's head. An examination of the Merma's feet reveals that La Claca sought to ensure safe and dexterous movement for the puppeteer as he bounded across the stage or ran at the other puppets. The Merma's feet are round disks, about 30 centimeters in diameter and 15 centimeters thick, from which large toes protrude. Invisible to the audience, each foot is built around a laced shoe, meaning that the puppeteer's foot is snugly encased in the shoe. The bottom of the Merma's feet are the sole of the shoe, allowing the puppeteer to make direct contact with the floor and run, jump, and move about the stage.

Other elements of the Merma's construction are specifically designed so the audience can enjoy the contradiction between humor and violence. A gargantuan face dominates the Merma's body: two bulging eyes, a long, tubular nose, and a protruding, gaping jaw, from which a set of sharp teeth erupts. Tacked to his head with thick string, the Merma's eyes and nose bounce in response to the puppeteer's movements. By making the Merma's facial features independently mobile, *Mori el Merma* complemented the tyrant's jingoistic speeches, composed of "screams, whistles, and guttural sounds" (Bravo, 39), with exaggerated, frenzied, ridiculous movements. Alongside the wild bouncing of his eyes and nose, however, the Merma's stable jaws and teeth provide a constant reminder to the audience of his potential for violence. The Merma's face has a layered ability to make the funny violent and the dangerous ridiculous.

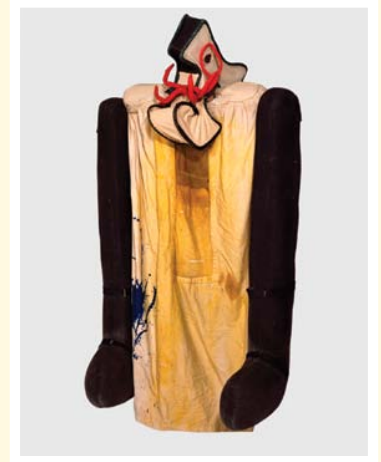
Retaining the puppeteer's ability to utilize exaggerated body parts was essential to all the puppets in *Mori el Merma*, even if it meant deviating from the *capgrossos* form. The show also featured a series of complementary puppets, less powerful than the Merma, that administer the Merma's government and are able to quickly turn ridiculous features into weapons. The Carbassa (calabash) would be a long, elegant puppet, were it not for its humanoid foot, which rivals the size of its body and needs to be dragged across the stage alongside it.<sup>7</sup> This gigantic foot contains the same mechanism used in the Merma's feet, incorporating a shoe for the puppeteer. The Carbassa's shoe is not flush with the ground, however, but at an angle, with the result that the puppeteer always has one leg bent, with each step rising into the air only to come back crashing down, like walking with only one high heel. This is amusing at times, such as when the Carbassa trips over himself to deliver tea to the Merma, but his foot also becomes a weapon to kick other puppets out of the way.

The Gos (dog) is another administrator whose ridiculous appearance also allows him to perform great violence. The tall puppet has two long arms at his sides in the shape of hockey sticks. The puppet's arms are thick, sturdy, and filled with foam. Although *capgrossos* sometimes do have arms, they are rarely articulated at the shoulder into independently moving body parts. The Gos's straight arms and articulated shoulders do not allow him to fetch items or be of much use—until he is needed to forcibly disperse a crowd. Moving both his arms in a large circle, like the sails of a windmill, the Gos charges into a crowd of villagers, quickly dispersing them. In fact, the Gos's arms are so large and have such a wide range of motion that the Gos is one of the few puppets to have extra structural reinforcements within. A "backpack," a harness made of small metal pipes, holds the Gos's body firmly to the puppeteer, allowing him to rotate the arms without being destabilized. Hence, the puppet is able to make enormous, sweeping gestures that are childlike in their abandon while also evoking the violent history of the police's use of clubs and cudgels under Franco. In deviating from the *capgrossos* form, then, *Mori el Merma* explores the disturbing duality between humor and violence.

The puppets of *Mori el Merma* were designed to depict and reflect on the Franco regime's horrific brutality, while also gleefully celebrating the dictator's death. *Mori el Merma*'s spectacle arises from the capacity of these puppets for exaggerated movement, with each puppet built specifically to meld violence with humor. The significance of this landmark production in Catalan and Spanish theatre history lies in its combination of traditional puppetry with Miró's artistic aesthetics to mark a moment of both celebration and trauma, emotional responses to the Franco regime that continue to resonate throughout Spain and Catalonia today.



MERMA



GOS

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**ALICIA HERNÁNDEZ-GRANDE** is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Theatre at Northwestern University. Her dissertation considers Catalan public performance from the end of the Franco dictatorship to the 2017 independence referendum. She is interested in sport, protests, and monuments as opportunities for national negotiation, where communities and nations are created and (re)presented.



PRODUCTION POSTER, 1978

POSTERS ON PAGES 40 AND 44 © MORI EL MERMA. COMPANYIA: LA CLACA. MAE. INSTITUT DEL TEATRE

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This article benefited immensely from the wise advice of two anonymous reviewers and the keen eye of my editor, Dr. Dassia Posner. My deepest gratitude to my writing group, and especially Chelsea Taylor, who helped this article see the light of day.
- <sup>2</sup> [Catalan] "tot ells violents i a la vegada grotescos, cruels però també ridículs, sexualment obsessos però impotents, sortits d'un malson i a la vegada tremendament divertits, d'ulls, boques i panxes que revelaven l'egoisme, la ferotgesa i a la vegada la covardia, la turpitud i la nimietat del poder." All translations are my own.
- <sup>3</sup> [Catalan] "Que tot l'espectacle sigui com un vòmit. Vomitar el franquisme, sense analitzar-lo... Considerar els personatges com una colla d'assassins, de gent que està completament al marge de tot. Interpretar amb agressivitat, amb exageració."
- <sup>4</sup> [French] "Vous ne pensez pas que la révolution des formes peut être libérateur? En dérangeant les gens, en les obligeant à se réveiller."
- <sup>5</sup> The puppets have rarely been exhibited and are more commonly found residing in the basement of the Fundació.
- <sup>6</sup> For more on Catalan puppet theatre after Franco, see Cariad Astles, "Catalan Puppet Theatre: A Process of Cultural Affirmation," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2007, 323-334.
- <sup>7</sup> Translating "carbassa" is tricky due to differences in meaning between English and Catalan. The closest translation is "pumpkin," but the shape of the puppet clearly indicates the calabash, or "birdhouse" gourd (carbassa vinatera).

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## Dolls and Beyond Dolls: The Cultural Function of Dolls in Iranian Folk Beliefs

BY POUPAK AZIMPOUR TABRIZI



BRIDE WITH NEWBORN BABY, ĀDAMAKEH DOLL FROM GERASH. IRANIAN DOLLS & CULTURE MUSEUM

### Introduction

Dolls and puppets have long played an important role in the rituals and customs of various cultural communities worldwide. In addition to being toys for children, these figures are also used as expressive elements in performance. In Iran, the primary function of dolls and puppets—and their origin—is closely connected to ritual needs and to religious beliefs and practices. Within this, dolls and doll-like figures are among the man-made objects that, in many cases, play an important role in apotropaism, a folk practice for repelling evil and transmitting it to others. Significantly, such handmade figures are also often used to fulfill its maker's or bearer's desire to save a human life. This practice can be traced back to ancient Iranian myths about the belief in the life of objects and in the mysterious power that lies within them.

For nearly two decades, I have focused on collecting and researching the dolls and puppets of different Iranian ethnicities in the fields of ritual, folklore, and traditional puppet shows (see especially Azimpour Tabrizi 2010). In this research, I have discovered the widely varying cultural functions of dolls in the lives of nomadic and rural people. When these people are unable to solve their own problems, they turn to the beliefs of their ancestors, often using dolls as a mediator through which to solve problems or reclaim and even fulfill their desires, some of which I introduce in this article.

Before delving into these beliefs and practices, I first explain the etymology of the word *Arusak* (doll) in order to show how Iranian people think about this word and why they use dolls as toys for children, specifically for girls, and the functions of this word in a variety of cultural contexts that include dolls—but also go beyond dolls. Beginning with a consideration of how the word *Arusak* has been used in an animist context, this article introduces the ancient beliefs and rituals of apotropaic figures and wish dolls in an expansive variety of Iranian folk practices. By examining and analyzing beliefs in the living spirit of objects among different Iranian ethnic groups, I provide an extensive categorization of the varied ritualistic purposes of eight different types of *Arusak* in Iranian folklore, thus highlighting the broader, enduring importance of dolls in apotropaic and wish-maker practices.

PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

### The Etymology of *Arusak*

*Arusak* (doll) is an Iranianized word. In the Persian language, *arus* is an imported term from Arabic. In Arabic, it refers to a man and a woman who want to marry each other, whereas in Persian it refers only to a woman, and, more specifically, to a bride. *Arusak* is a combination of the word *arus* with the diminutive suffix “k”. This term originally likely referred to girls' dolls that looked like brides. In Persian, there are no ancient Iranian roots for either *arus* or *arusak*. The equivalent Persian terms are: *ba.yōg*, as well as *Beyo*, *Vaio*, and *Vaiog*, variations on references to the bride *Bayogani*; *vadv-akā\**, from the root *vad*, means pulling, winning, and marrying. Like “wedding” and “to wed” mean getting married, in Middle Persian the equivalent word became *wayōdgān*, meaning to get a wife. The initial “w” is sometimes converted to “b” in later language periods” (Hasandoust v. 2, 580-82).

Zoroastrians have a word in Avestan, *auruša*, which means white, the color of the divine horses that were harnessed to a chariot. These white horses with golden saddles and harnesses were ridden by gods in the sky. Some believe that *Eros* may be a derivation from the Avestan term *Arus*, and since today the clothing of a woman who is getting married is often white, she is called *arus*, meaning white-clothed. The word *Arusak* is also attributed to this. Because of Iranian beliefs that idealize beauty and innocence for girls who become brides—something that is culturally deemed an important moment in their lives, the transition from celibacy to marriage and to a new life—Iranian dolls are also called *arusak*, that is, little brides. In children's games, girls display these ideals with their dolls in an imaginary world full of childish dreams.

### Animism

The idea, common in the practice of puppetry, that objects can be animated or given life is also a longstanding belief in many ancient traditions that think of inanimate objects as encompassing a living spirit within them (Francis 5). According to Penny Francis, this belief is at the core of animism, and, consequently, learning about animism is significant to learning about puppetry's origins. Francis writes that animism was “humankind's first belief system and informed the early stages of awakening to its small world, its place in that world and its first questions as to the reason for its existence” (5). Animism can commonly be observed in three spheres: Firstly, animism in living things in which it is easy to imagine an innate consciousness, such as plants and animals. Secondly, animism in the phenomena and elements of nature. Thirdly, animism in man-made objects and tools.

The Iranian Plateau was the birthplace for many rituals and beliefs, such as *Zurvan* (Zorvan), *Mehr*, and other ancient beliefs. The Plateau's geographical location and its history of migrations and invasions by various ethnic groups and races over time resulted in the gradual coexistence of many different peoples, who, in turn, influenced the customs, traditions and rituals of more recent ethnic groups. According to signs in ancient Iranian literature and beliefs, it is clear that in Iran, as in many other countries, the presence of diverse ethnic groups, the worship of nature, the worship of the sun and the earth, totemism, and beliefs in objects and animals were also common.

*Mana*, the invisible and spiritual essential force that is present in every strange and supernatural phenomenon, has long been sanctified in Iranian belief. As the unseen, hidden force in nature, animals, objects, and human beings, *Mana* is manifested in the religion of Zoroaster as the *Farrah* or *Farrah of God*. *Farrah* (also *khvarenah*) is a heavenly gift that can bless anyone, although the level of prosperity was, according to this ancient belief system, bestowed according to one's social status. Warriors, kings, and leaders had *Farrah*. *Farrah* would remain with them if they did good deeds; otherwise, they would lose it. *Farrah* is a Minoan and divine force: whoever receives its blessing will achieve salvation and happiness.

It also is important to note, in the context of the discussion that follows, that objects like magical amulets and figures in the form of women were also symbols of benign magic in ancient times. Such figures and painted amulets were believed to increase fertility and wealth.



IRANIAN APOTROPAIC FIGURES, TRIANGULAR PENDANTS FILLED WITH SALT OR SYRIAN RUE

### Apotropaic or Protective Dolls

There are two ways in which evil can be driven away in a society; as Frazer shows, these are distinctly applied for cases in which evil is either immaterial or material. In the first case, evil is directly dispelled, and in the second, evil is intermediately dispelled (Frazer 601). In the popular thought and beliefs of different Iranian ethnic groups, some objects, especially statues and figures, but sometimes abstractions, can be used as shields and protection for newborn babies, as these kinds of objects dispel bad energy and harmful forces. This type of belief is rooted in the practices of ancient societies that acknowledged *Mana*. This power can be passed from people to objects and vice versa (Nas 14). Iranian apotropaic figures can often be seen in human, plant, and animal forms, and sometimes in geometric and abstract shapes—for example, triangular pendants filled with salt or Syrian rue. Some of these figures, which I will turn to next, are in the shape of dolls made to protect newborns from harmful forces.

### The Pamle Par Ritual

Based on extant evidence, the origins of the *Pamle Par* ritual—in which a doll that functions as a surrogate twin is destroyed—can be traced back to centuries and perhaps even to several thousand years ago. As a way to avoid possible harm from the evil eye, eliminating the invisible, spiritual twin this doll represents will keep a baby healthy. The description of the ritual is as follows:

In Lorestan, on the seventh night of the baby's birth, a brief ceremony is held in which all the participants are women. In this ceremony, the oldest woman puts the child lying on her lap and puts a piece of thin cotton cloth (*Pamle*) on the baby's face. Then she makes a Doll out of cotton, places it on the cloth, and carefully lights it on fire. Next, while repeating over and over again *Pamle Par*, which means go away *Pamle* (the word for cotton doll or twin of a newborn baby), she throws the cotton doll into the air and extinguishes it. The purpose of holding *Pamle Par* ritual is that the people believe by burning a cotton doll, the baby's twin will burn. (Changhayee & Hanif 2)

In this ritual, the belief in the mediation of an apotropaic figure that is made to resemble the baby and burned to protect them from the harm of evil forces is described concisely. This practice only occurs as part of a folkloric tradition. The ritual is not intended as a performance, but it makes a performative gesture within the realm of performance.

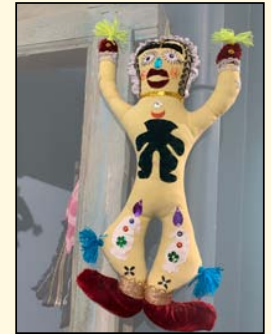
### Ādamakeh Dolls

The people of Gerash, an area in the south of Fars province in Iran, have specific beliefs and take special measures to repel evil energy and stay safe. One of these is to place various kinds of apotropaic figures on house entrances and even on babies' cradles to protect newborn children. These dolls are made of fabric filled with cotton, and sequins, beads, and various fringes are used to decorate them. Yellow cloth and food-based materials, such as pecans, salt, alum, and bran, are mainly used in making these dolls, in order to dispel negative energy.

These *Ādamakeh* (little human) dolls are most often made from yellow fabric because the color yellow is believed by the people of Gerash to prevent evil forces from working successfully. Gerash scholars Salahi and Mohseni describe the appearance and function of these dolls, as they have changed over time:

*Ādamakeh* dolls didn't have faces in the past, but today they have eyes and eyebrows. Sequins were not previously used to make the dolls, but today sequins and beads are used for decoration.

*Ādamakeh* is used for banishing evil forces. (Salahi & Mohseni 3)



ĀDAMAKEH FROM GERASH (SOUTH OF FARS PROVINCE), IRANIAN DOLLS & CULTURE MUSEUM

This kind of doll functions as a talisman and as protection against disaster.

The people of Gerash believe that setting fire to Syrian rue on Wednesday will ward off evil, and, by hanging salt, Syrian rue, and cotton dolls on the house entrance, they will prevent evil eye and hexes. These dolls have impressionistic forms, as the people believe that the lack of facial features prevents the entry of evil spirits.

### Galin Bālā Dolls

In the village of Talib Gheshlaghi, in East Azerbaijan, during illness, poverty, drought and other calamities, a doll called *Galin Bālā* is made. In the Azeri language, *Galin* means bride and *Bālā* means small. First, the doll's hands and feet are made from two pieces of wood. Then her dress, similar in appearance to the village's traditional dresses, is sewn. This consists of a multi-layered pleated skirt together with a short shirt. Additionally, both sides of the doll's hands and feet are tied with white cloth, since the bridal figure must wear white. The doll's head is also filled with white cloth and tied with a thread. The doll's eyes are sewn with black thread and her lips with red thread, and a nose is also placed on her face. Elders suggest that young girls and brides make these dolls, because they believe that when pursuing marriage and leaving the parents' house, girls take the blessings of their own homes with them.



GALIN BĀLĀ DOLL, EAST AZERBAIJAN

Based on my own research in Azerbaijan's villages and interviews with villagers, I have learned about beliefs in the hidden power of these small bride-like figures. One villager told me about this kind of protective doll:

When *Galin Bala* leaves the house, it takes away the evil eye. The doll is given to the children to take out outside, and the children, believing that the small bride-shape doll will remove pain and calamity from the house, bury it at crossroads and in distant places or throw the doll out of reach. (Narrator: Zeinab Abedi, Talib Gheshlaghi village, Ardabil. Azimpour Tabrizi 521)

Although simple and handmade, these little figures possess mystical energy and abilities that extend beyond and are greater than a human being's and help individuals avoid evil spirits and bad fortune.

### Valikān Dolls

On the occasion of Chaharshanbe Suri, an Iranian celebration involving bonfires and fireworks, the children of Kurdistan also look forward to receiving dolls made by their mothers and grandmothers. These dolls are given to children along with an onion, and sometimes a broom, to be taken outside and thrown away in order to repel evil and hexes. Along with the doll, the children also throw the onion away after they and their family members have taken a bite of it. These must be thrown as far as possible without looking back. The children then return home and resume the celebrations that are held throughout the evening. As Chaharshanbe Suri is held on the last Tuesday before the Persian New Year, and the belief in good and evil is abundant among the people of the Kurdistan region, this doll is believed to be a symbol of evil that needs to be kept away.



VALIKĀN DOLLS FOR IRANIAN CELEBRATION CHAHARSHANBE SURI  
PHOTO: JAMSHID FARAJVAND, BIJAR-KURDISTAN REGION

### Wish Dolls

In ancient times, from a man's perspective, a woman's ability to bear children was deemed godlike, and she was celebrated as a symbol of piety and creation in the formation of society and civilization (Perrin and Panoff 99). A woman's fertility endowed her role as a nursing and nurturing organism, with these responsibilities bestowed upon her by the universe. However, sterility in a woman was deemed a bad omen, as this condition was, at that time, considered to be an anomaly in the natural order of things (Lantier 301).

For these reasons, in some villages of Iran, women who are unable to bear children of their own still resort to white magic today, and, by asking for help from transcendental forces, they express their desire to have a child. In his book *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*, Frazer discusses this type of magic in conjunction with the principles of the law of similarity and the law of transmission. By applying these principles to the notion of wish-making, the idea is to transmit one's desire to a humanlike figure in order to replicate the effects of imitative and homeopathic magic in real life (Frazer 87- 90).

### Putak Dolls



PUTAK, A WISH DOLL FROM  
THE SISTAN REGION IN THE  
SOUTH OF IRAN

The word *Putak* means newborn baby in the Sistan region, located in the south of Iran. This doll is made by infertile women and cared for as if it is alive. If a *Putak* has fallen on a path or street and an elder person sees it, as a common courtesy, they will pick it up, kiss it and place it on a high place so it will not be harmed. In many Sistan villages, women who cannot conceive make a *Putak* doll for their own comfort and hold her while telling her their wishes. They then take her to the shrine and pray to God and the Imam for children.

*Putak* dolls are also sometimes made by women who have children, as they place them on top of their child's cradle to keep the baby entertained while they are occupied with housework (Narrator: Mrs. Hamideh Sarooni 2007). In ancient symbolic and folkloric beliefs, this doll was deemed to have a positive effect on women's fertility and, therefore, it has similarities with the collections of dolls associated with Anahita, the goddess of water and fertility. Taking a *Putak* doll to the shrine reinforces the faith that *Putak* is being taken to a sacred place (such as the temple of Anahita). By requesting to Anahita that the *Putak* doll child be given a mother, infertile women also are requesting that their wish to become a mother and have a real child come true. Fertility is still an important issue in rural Iranian communities today, where one of the most important desires for new brides is to have children.

### Šeš'e Celebrations

Among the Azeri tribes, a highly symbolic ceremony that also expresses the wish for a child, especially a male child, is the *Šeš'e* celebration. In this celebration, the purpose of which is to protect a baby boy from the plague of death, the presence of seven girls and seven symbolic dolls plays a primary role. The dolls and the girls are an allegory for the origin of fertility and a symbol of human survival. The organizers of this ritual aim to emphasize the manhood that lies in the potential future life of a baby boy and to strengthen the unconscious desire for life within him.

In the village of Qaraqosh, one of the suburban areas of Zanjan province, if a couple cannot conceive a boy or if their son does not survive beyond early childhood, they vow to God that in exchange for a male child's longevity, they will hold a *Šeš'e* celebration on the night before his birthday for up to six years. If a boy is born during this time, between one and forty days after his birth, the family has the opportunity to hold a naming ceremony, in which relatives and acquaintances are invited to participate. This ceremony may be held during the day or at night. On the day of naming, the first preparations for the *Šeš'e* (the sixth day after a baby's birth) celebration are made. The seven dolls, which are called *qolčâg* or *galin* (meaning bride), are made of wood, cloth, and cotton, and, on the day of naming, by the mother's orders, they are named after the daughters of the family's relatives. The seven girls, called *shadchi* (meaning fun people), are present at the naming ceremony, as they are previously informed that they must attend. After all the preparations, the dolls are kept in a safe place by the baby's mother. Through this ritual, these dolls, which represent the baby boy's future bride, become a symbol of his future male fertility, wished for him from his youngest childhood days.

\* \* \*

In this article, I have briefly traced some of the common traditional Iranian beliefs about dolls that serve ritualistic purposes. These dolls require a two-way contract to be established between the doll maker and the doll itself, as a powerful object that is sacred and tied to beliefs in transcendental forces. In addition to protecting humankind from calamities and misfortunes, these dolls also give women psychological relief to fulfill their human desires, especially in cases of infertility. With this in mind, these beliefs in the existence of hidden and mysterious forces within man-made objects and the imagined lives they contain, play out in how figures such as dolls and statues are used to overcome fear and fulfill desires in ritualistic and folkloric settings. Thus these figures—and the lives they contain and enrich—prove always to have had a practical use.

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## Puppetry in the Age of Posthumanism: The Terrors and Pleasures of Animal Crossing: New Horizons

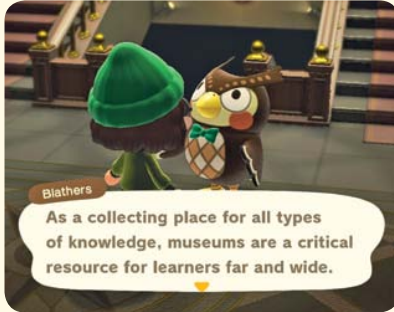
BY KELLY I. ALIANO

To play a video game is, in a sense, to become the puppeteer of a digital object, manipulating it to create or complete the story world that constitutes the game itself. It is also a deeply posthuman experience, in that it embraces a technological entity that extends the human experience into a virtual landscape. This prospect, which N. Katherine Hayles sees as one that “both evokes terror and excites pleasure” (283), can allow us to do things in simpler, more efficient ways—or even to complete tasks previously thought impossible—while reminding us of our human fragility and replaceability. Johanna Seibt furthers these concerns, stating, “Technologies of the twenty-first century such as biotechnology, robotics, AI, and prosthetics dramatically amplify the longstanding narrative topos of the ambiguous entity, a body that is both living and non-living, which is threatening and fascinating at once” (289-304; 290). The posthuman expands the human in many ways, some incredibly positive and some that complicate our entire notion of what it means to be human in the first place.

And yet, the posthuman is neither an unknown nor a particularly recent adaptation to our human experience. Any time we use an object beyond our physical selves in order to act, we are, in a sense, posthuman. From this perspective, any form of puppetry could be claimed as posthuman, as manipulating a performing object is an extension of the human form through a non-living entity, which allows for “what Penny Francis has called the puppet’s ‘life-death,’ the idea that an object can be inanimate and yet simultaneously appear to contain life” (Posner 131). Continuing in this vein, video gaming, as a digital kind of puppetry, only throws this further into relief, allowing the player to interact in a virtual realm through the persona of their digital avatar.

The word posthuman is a complex and multivalent theoretical term. As Mads Rosendahl Thomsen and Jacob Wamberg remind us, it “has become an umbrella term for numerous recent analyses of our world and its prospects for future development” (1). For my purposes, when I think of the posthuman, I consider the ways in which a manipulatable object, outside of the human body, allows the human being to perform or complete a certain action. I also embrace the ways in which the posthuman reminds us that humans are not special because we can think; as Hayles notes, “The posthuman view considers consciousness... as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show, when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow” (2). This matters if we are to claim puppetry as posthuman, because “In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (3). From this theoretical vantage point, we are not distinct from our mechanized or technological creations.

By moving toward a posthuman definition of puppetry, we must confront some of the inherent challenges that manifest when an object—and in the case of gaming, a virtual as opposed to a physically tangible object—does the performing. Elizabeth Ann Jochum and Todd Murphy discuss, “While a human actor never has to prove their ‘liveness’ to a spectator, puppets and robots hover in a liminal space between the animate and the inanimate...” (309). These objects need to convince us of their liveness, something human beings never have to do. In so doing, they expand our human experience through the interaction with a physical, material, or, in the case of gaming, virtual prosthesis.



SCREENSHOT OF BLATHERS AND AVATAR KEL, INSIDE BLATHERS'S MUSEUM, DISCUSSING THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSEUMS

This essay considers how performance of playing a video game—in this case, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020)—allows the player to create a “second life” in-game through their interactions with and manipulations of their digital avatar. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is uniquely compelling because a) its avatars are largely customizable and b) the game became immensely popular due to its release at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Playing the game, to many, came to feel almost essential to survival: It offered meaning, purpose, and even joy in some of the darkest days of the quarantine. For many, the digital world of the game felt more human than the corporeal world of the pandemic.

*Animal Crossing* allows individuals, via their digital performing object, to impose order on their virtual island, thus evoking a sense of normalcy that eluded the real world of the pandemic. *Animal Crossing* supplants human experience with a virtual one, but, in the context of the pandemic, this replacement principally evoked pleasure that contrasted with the conditions of the contemporary moment, due to the fact that the game provides its players with a sense of purpose each day, assigning daily chores and making the player responsible for the “quality of life” on their island. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is a recent—and uniquely relevant—incarnation of how our lives have become posthuman through acts of play that both replaced the physical with the digital and, at the same time, enhanced the human experience with the virtual.

This paper uses the posthumanism of puppetry as a lens for understanding contemporary video gaming. I begin by exploring puppetry, in both live and digital incarnations, and identify its connections to video games specifically. I then offer a close analysis of the terrors and pleasures of *Animal Crossing* in order to synthesize and analyze its broader significance to our contemporary, mediated, world.

### Corporeal and Virtual Puppetry and Posthumanism

Puppetry, in all its forms, emphasizes the ability to extend the self. This brings with it both the pleasures of expanding our human experience and the anxieties inherent in considering our own obsolescence. As John Bell asserts, “Modern puppet performances can be threatening, doubt-inducing, and anxiety-provoking events because they remind us that we are not necessarily in control of as much as we thought we were. ... [P]lay with puppets, machines, projected images, and other objects is constantly unsettling because it always leads to doubt about our mastery of the material world” (50). Are we, as human beings, really so all-powerful if the machinic seems to work independently of our control? This question underlies the common technological paranoia that accompanies many of the scientific and technological interventions of the modern age. And yet, puppetry was not invented in or by our modern world. It stands to reason, then, that perhaps we have always been posthuman, from the first choice to use any object to perform a task that our physical bodies could not successfully complete on their own.

Human action can be expanded by the use of performing prostheses, but what about the objects themselves: Can they claim their own “existence”? When considering puppets, especially those that are in some way anthropomorphized, audiences certainly yearn to see them as living beings as they perform. As Dasia N. Posner observes in the context of her analysis of Russian puppeteer Nina Simonovich-

Efimova, “An inanimate object miraculously comes to life anew each time a puppeteer brings it into play” (130). For artists like Simonovich-Efimova, “A puppet begins when the audience believes in the puppet as a living being” (Posner 128). This idea of the puppet as having a life that is awakened through belief has become more and more common in video gaming, as players are often offered the ability to personalize their avatar—to give them a specific identity and let them shape a self through their actions and interactions in the digital landscape. These digital puppets that we manipulate online become a kind of supplemental identity, while also taking on a life of their own.

In many ways, puppeteering allows us to create other planes of existence, ones in which what is impossible in this reality becomes possible. Video games push this possibility to its furthest extent: Through the mediation of the gaming technology, I can go anywhere; by adopting an avatar in place of the self, I can be anyone; by manipulating the game’s code, I can do anything (within the framework of the play experience). Gamers are free not only to imagine but to embody other ways of being when they perform via an avatar in a digital world.

Yet, such “improvements” upon the human experience through the technological have also historically provoked questions and fears. In creating our virtual selves, are we somehow supplanting or undoing our own humanity? Is giving life to the inanimate taking life from the human? Viewing video gaming through a posthuman lens prompts larger conversations about technological beings, more broadly speaking, that have been created to improve upon or supplant the humans, such as robots, a word famously coined by Karel Čapek, first used in his 1920 play *Rossum’s Universal Robots (R.U.R.)*.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, we understand our human experience through mirroring it with the technological. Alan M. Turing argues, as one answer to the question, “Can machines think?” (433), that energy should be put toward creating and using machines that learn and thereby adapt to the instructions they are given. Turing offers, “We may hope that machines will eventually compete with men in all purely intellectual fields” (460). Yet, Čapek’s play proposed that this is something to be feared: If robots become too much like humans, it will mark the end of humanity. In creating these posthuman extensions of ourselves, have human beings put ourselves on the path toward becoming obsolete?

### Video Gaming and Posthuman Puppetry

In the words of one of Čapek’s characters, “Robots are not people. They are mechanically more perfect than we are, they have an astounding intellectual capacity, but they have no soul” (9). Čapek’s vision of the robot is a frightening one, as it suggests that humanity could create a more perfect humanoid devoid of the one thing many believe makes us human: a soul. In the contemporary era, we have gone further than even Čapek imagined; we have created many new possible usurpers of corporeal human dominance, one of which is the virtual avatar. Video games allow the player to extend the possibilities of the self through what is effectively a digital puppet. The gaming apparatus serves as extension of self; the gamer becomes, through hitting the correct buttons on the controller in the right combinations, a puppeteer manipulating their avatar self in virtual space. Our digital puppets are no longer simply theatrical; they serve as an extension of the real self. In Rune Klevjer’s definition, “An avatar is an instrument or mechanism that defines for the participant a fictional body and mediates fictional agency; it is an embodied incarnation of the acting subject. It... acts as a dynamically reflexive prop in relation to its environment” (87). The avatar is both the gamer’s self and separate from it; it acts on behalf of the player and for its own ends within the game, via the player’s control.

This duality connects avatars back to the realm of puppetry. Two decades ago, before today’s complex

<sup>1</sup> Isaac Asimov notes in *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*: “Robots are often given other names. One of the first was ‘automaton’ (from the Greek for ‘self-acting’). ‘Robot’ itself came from the *R.U.R.* (1921), derived from the words ‘robota,’ meaning ‘compulsory labour,’ and ‘robotnik,’ meaning ‘workman.’ The robots in *R.U.R.* are indistinguishable from humans. Such creations are now called ‘androids’” (172).

video game worlds, Steve Tillis drew parallels between puppets and “media figures,” or “figures whose performance is made possible through technological mediation” (182). Like media figures in stop motion and animation, video game avatars require an intermediary in the form of a video gaming apparatus—be it arcade machine, home console, or handheld device. Similarly, as Tillis argues, “Media figures share with puppetry the crucial trait of presenting characters through a site of signification other than actual living beings” (183). The meaning of an avatar is defined within the virtual landscape of the game, which takes its meaning beyond the human puppeteer toward a digital or mediated object. In this way, video gaming, as a form of puppetry, complicates how we understand the form. They remind us, as Marshall McLuhan once said, “The medium is the message” (151): i.e., when we deal with the mediated—especially in our technological age—how we experience or learn something is as central to what we are experiencing and learning as the information itself.

To play a video game is to create this type of mediated experience: One feels one has experienced what one’s avatar has experienced. As Patrick Jagoda explains, “. . . games make realities, through particular design decisions, formal properties, and modes of play” (8). In this sense, gaming is a kind of performance that redefines puppetry within the realm of the virtual. Across the past four decades, video gaming has gone from a niche hobby to something many can claim to have had some experience with. When we game, we allow ourselves to have experiences beyond what is possible in the corporeal world through the prosthesis of the game device and, in the case of avatar-driven games, through the extension of self within the game’s world.

Indeed, the avatar is both a prosthesis and a portal into the digital performance world, much as a puppet invites the performer into the imaginative space of the stage. As Voorhees, Call, and Whitlock argue, “The game’s player-character, or avatar, serves as the portal through which players are allowed access to the game and the means by which the player’s presence in the game is represented” (8). They continue, “The very etymology of the word ‘avatar’ from its Sanskrit origin means ‘to cross over,’ and is suggestive of the transubstantial movement of deities. Read in this light, the player is imagined as ‘crossing over’ and sharing substance with the avatar through the interface of the game’s controls” (8). From this viewpoint, the avatar not only allows the player to enter the digital realm, but also extends and expands the player’s abilities so as to be able to perform within that landscape.

For many, the extension and expansion of the self was deeply felt in 2020, when gamers took to their Nintendo Switches to play *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. During a time in which entire communities and countries were confined to their homes, the game offered an escape to a remote island of anthropomorphized animal villagers. Each day was filled with tasks to complete and interactions to be had. In ranking it as the #2 game of 2020, Nicole Carpenter noted in *Polygon* that *Animal Crossing*:

...came at precisely the right time—right at the beginning of global quarantine lockdowns. The Nintendo game would have been huge without the pandemic. But more people at home with less to do meant diving into a world that was everything the one we were living in wasn’t, an island getaway where the only problem is a mortgage payment—interest-free!—paid off in Bells.

For those stuck at home, this game filled a timely need: It provided a life that had been rendered temporarily impossible in the physical world.

## The Pleasures of Animal Crossing

The immense popularity of *Animal Crossing* cannot be underestimated. According to Paige Szmodis of *Popular Mechanics*, in May 2020, the demand for the game was a major reason why Nintendo Switches were “nearly impossible to find.” In his book of short personal essays, *Goodbye, Again*, writer Jonny Sun waxes poetic about the game:

The more time you spend playing, the more money you make, the bigger your house gets, the more stuff you accumulate. It is a lovely fantasy of capitalism, but the enjoyment—the relaxing, calming nature of it—is simply in knowing what to do, and then achieving a desired, reliable outcome in doing it. There is a comfort in knowing these tasks were designed so I could do them, and then, well, doing them (77).



SCREENSHOT OF *ANIMAL CROSSING* VILLAGERS, INCLUDING AVATAR KEL, WATCHING SUMMER FIREWORKS ON THE PLAZA

While its pleasures perhaps uniquely suited 2020 needs, a recent Oxford study links video game playing to overall psychological health, with *Animal Crossing* as one of its case studies: “Players who objectively played more in the past two weeks also reported to experience higher well-being” (Johannes, Vuorre, and Przybylski 13).

In its historical moment, especially, the game offered an escape. As Imad Khan wrote in *The New York Times*, “*Animal Crossing* doesn’t have an end and can be played indefinitely—which is especially prescient when there’s no deadline to the current crisis. This pace bestows on the game a level of calmness, one that gives the player total control over progression.” Players were afforded the opportunity to do things that the pandemic prevented: spend time with friends, make money, or go to a museum. Even without quarantine confines, the game allows the

player to indulge in the fantasy of escaping to a deserted island whenever they want—or need—without the consequences of actually doing so.

In addition to offering a positive psychological benefit, as Jane McGonigal argues of gaming practice generally (12), one learns actual applicable real-world skills from playing *Animal Crossing*. Consider the turnip (“stalk”) market, which, in miniature, replicates how stock trading works. An article in *Bloomberg Wealth* notes numerous examples of young people taking what they learned from the turnip market and applying it to actual financial transactions. The author, Berber Jin, notes, “For Angie Fung, 24, Nintendo’s hottest game of the season led to something unexpected: It turned her into a stock investor.” Jin discusses examples of other individuals doing the same: entering into actual trading based on what they learned in-game.

And this isn’t the only real-world knowledge embedded in the game. Blathers’s Museum includes real information for the player to learn by filling in its hallowed halls: The educated owl will tell you facts about the bugs, fish, and fossils that you donate, and the artworks that you purchase for the gallery are famous paintings and sculptures. It is up to the gamer to figure out which works are real and which are fakes, teaching them to study the art scrupulously, paying attention to the smallest of aesthetic details, in order to make the right purchases.

Perhaps most important during pandemic isolation was the game's ability to approximate social interactions. The non-player villager characters create a digital community of sorts, and island hopping to the virtual homes of friends, and even strangers, allowed for actual interactions when in-person contact was too dangerous. In this way, life could continue, albeit digitally via gaming, even when it was too dangerous to be together in physical spaces.

### The Terrors of *Animal Crossing*

*Animal Crossing* allows players to take on a second, fully customizable life as their avatar, in order to have these interactions. While the template remains much the same—a small oval body with an oversized round head—hair, skin, and eye color can all be individualized, along with hairstyle and fashion choices. Thus the game allows the player to create or recreate themselves for the game space. I will admit that I have seen my avatar, Kel, as an extension of myself: Her daily to-do list overlaps with my own. I must make sure that she logs in to collect her Nook Miles, check the daily turnip price, water her flowers, and perhaps catch a fish or bug before I feel my own day is complete.

Yet, despite the fact that I see Kel as an extension of myself, aspects of the game play challenge this. For example, when one catches a fish or bug, the avatar holds the item up to the screen. This has often made me wonder: To whom is the avatar showing this item? Is she aware that I exist on the other side? If so, how is that possible if she is an extension of me? Perhaps the role of the gamer here is that of the ventriloquist: I “give voice” to this digital avatar by playing as her, but she also exists separate from me, an extension but also a unique entity.

I will admit: There are times when this aspect of the game does allow me to indulge certain aspects of the “terror” side of Hayles’s consideration of the posthuman (283). There is the implication here that this digital world exists beyond our own, even as it remains aware of our existence. And, if one scrutinizes the landscape of the island I call my virtual home, it does have some qualities of the post-apocalyptic. For one, the player’s avatar is the only human and while, from time to time, letters from “Mom” arrive, and you can visit other islands and meet their solitary human inhabitants, there is little evidence of the presence of an abundance of other humans in this world. In addition, consider the identities of the other villagers: They are anthropomorphized animals, able to walk on two legs, talk, and hold jobs. Is this a mutated planet Earth? Or has the avatar moved to another planet, not just a deserted island? If so, where is this planet? And what happened to Earth and the other people living on it?

To push this idea of posthuman terror even further, the game punishes the player for abandoning it. Most people probably do not play a single video game every day, no matter how avid a gamer they are (though I will admit: Since March of 2020, I have not missed a day of play). I have read of islands overgrown with weeds and furious villagers who feel betrayed by the human who has abandoned them. Even when I go a few days without speaking to a specific neighbor, that individual says something snarky to me about how I have been ignoring them. The labor of *Animal Crossing* is never-ending and every day brings a new—and seemingly infinite—list of tasks to complete. The expectations of the world of this game may go beyond what is pleasurable—or necessary—from a mode of entertainment.

### Conclusion: We Have Become Posthuman, So What?

Indeed, to do *everything* within *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* would be to fully supplant one’s human life with a digital existence: There is no way to balance full workdays and human interactions with completing every activity within a single day of game play. Thus, this game serves as a reminder of the many ways in which our physical human lives can be replaced with our digital interactions. If human life is too hard or too frightening, one might ask, why not supplant it with a more pleasurable digital experience? Yet the more exciting opportunity here is not to replace the human with the puppet, but to expand the experience of the human with the puppet. The avatar in *Animal Crossing* does not replace corporeal self; rather it extends the self, expanding and enriching its experience, within the digital realm. The digital has the ability to expand what it means to connect, to experience, to interact, and to exist.

*Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, like many avatar-based video games, creates a space to play in an imagined reality via digital objects that perform on behalf of the human. These objects take on lives of their own but also enrich and expand the life of the puppeteer-gamer. Nintendo’s simple game about island life offered a particular respite during a difficult time. But is *Animal Crossing* a worthy replacement for actual human interaction? Of course not. As Rossum’s robots discover:

FIRST ROBOT (RADIUS): Sir, the machines cannot work. We cannot reproduce.

ALQUIST: Call in people.

RADIUS: There are no people.

ALQUIST: Only people can reproduce life. (73)

None of the robots, machines, and the digital islands of *Animal Crossing* can live without the human touch that brings them to life.

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SCREENSHOT OF IRL KEL

PAIRED WITH PHOTO OF AVATAR KEL

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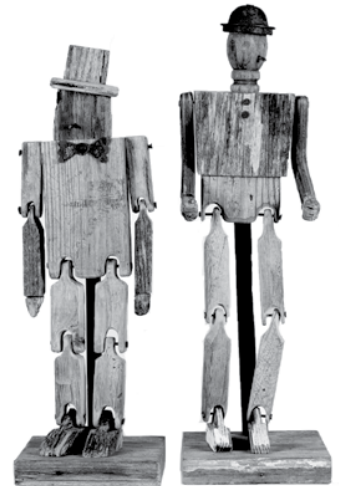


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## The Persistence of Mask Culture

Anthony Alan Shelton, *Theatrum Mundi: Masks and Masquerades in Mexico and the Andes*.

Vancouver: Figure 1, 2021. \$50.

From the perspective of a puppeteer or puppet historian, masks, puppets and performing objects often appear to be ubiquitous and invisible. Although those of us on the lookout for contemporary examples of these forms find them all over the place—from sports mascots to music videos, political demonstrations, new opera and theater productions, and street performances, not to mention the burgeoning world self-identified as puppetry—and there is an exciting growth of puppetry studies in academia, there don't seem to be analytical perspectives in place through which popular culture and mass-media critics can adequately account for material culture. Since masks and puppets are ubiquitous and visually striking, they frequently show up on the front page or the home page of a media outlet, but often without any sense of their function or place in the larger culture; instead, there is a kind of stupefied awe, as if to say, “wow, look at this amazing event! Wherever did that come from?”

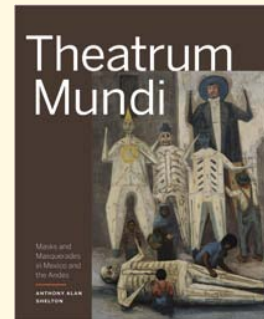
Modern culture has not been good to masks. In the earliest days of modernity, in the 16th century, an emerging belief in scientific method, reason, secular culture and—especially in theater—realism made masks suspicious holdovers from primitive (or Catholic) cultural systems. The invention of anthropology and race theories in the 19th century further sidelined masks (especially from Asian, African, and Native American cultures), considering them the last remnants of primitive cultures that would soon disappear in the face of modernity's global triumph.

In the late 1930s, Minneapolis puppeteer Donald Cordry, after stints building and performing marionettes, first with Rufus and Margo Rose, and then with Tony Sarg, left the U.S. with his wife Dorothy for Mexico, where he spent the rest of his life fascinated by the rich world of Mexican mask performance and folk culture. Cordry collected and commissioned scores of masks from Mexican mask-makers, and started to write a book about them, which Dorothy had to finish when her husband died in 1978. *Mexican Masks* was published in 1980, and soon became a landmark source on the subject.

But Cordry's approach was problematic. As a good modernist, he wanted to see Mexican mask culture as timeless tradition of pre-Conquest indigenous traditions, which had little to do with modern contexts. Anthony Alan Shelton, in his own new study, *Theatrum Mundi: Masks and Masquerades in Mexico and the Andes*, calls this “romantic anthropology,” criticizing the way such perspectives miss the important ways that mask performance throughout the Americas is a vibrant contemporary culture, fully attendant to mass media, marketing, and global capitalism, in addition to extending and re-interpreting centuries of performance practices. According to Shelton, Cordry and others, in their zeal to capture a view of a timeless, non-European world of masks, commissioned or collected masks made by prolific Mexican carvers who recognized a growing global market for “archaism, fantasy and nostalgia,” and thus created a kind of fantasy to fit their own perspective.

Shelton is as obsessed with masks at least as much as Cordry was, but *Theatrum Mundi* wants to set the record straight about how exactly mask culture has developed in Mexico and Andean cultures. It is a complicated story that requires diving deeply into the cosmology, history, and culture of indigenous belief systems; knowing and understanding major artists in the field; having a command of European cultural and political history, including the nature of Spanish Baroque aesthetics and their influence in the Americas; and, especially, understanding the nuanced ways that indigenous resistance to European colonial forces might be realized through the evolution of masked dance and combat dramas that perform the conflict of the Conquest.

Much as Terri Silvio's *Puppets, Gods, and Brands* and Fan Pen Li Chen's *Journey of a Goddess* have recently examined contemporary puppet and object culture in Asia, Anthony Alan Shelton's *Theatrum Mundi*



THEATRUM MUNDI COVER



TIGER COMBAT



TEOTIHUACAN FUNERARY MASK

also accepts at the outset that a deep engagement in multi-disciplinary subjects is a necessity. He has clearly spent years devotedly studying the necessary array of subjects, and the results are deeply enlightening. In the course of reading this book you will become familiar with the cosmology of *Mexica* people, from Olmec civilization to the present; the city-state of Teotihuacán; Incan and other Andean ritual performance perspectives; and a panoply of *Mexica* gods, from Huitzilopochtli to Tlaloc, Quetzalcoatl, Tlaltecuhli, and Chalchiuhtlicue. You will also get a clear introduction to the importance of medieval and renaissance religious dance dramas in Spain and western Europe, and how that theater of masks, focused on the conflict of Christianity and Islam, was imposed upon the indigenous peoples of Nueva España, who already had their own rich culture of “militant, mystic theology”—as Shelton describes it—expressed through the design and performance of masked performance.

Shelton is scrupulous in addressing and respecting the people who are creating and innovating mask culture in Mexico and the Andes. He details the history of individual mask makers, and such mask-making dynasties as the Blanco family of Iguala, Mexico; and is conscientious in crediting “Indigenous ritual specialists” and “traditional knowledge holders” in the same way he credits scholarly sources. He engages fully with spiritual worlds and non-modern concepts so much involved with mask performance, noting, for example, that Indigenous peoples in the 16th century considered paintings of saints “not as representations but as the saints themselves.” Shelton often refers to such powers of the material world as “numen”: the spiritual force “often identified with a natural object, phenomenon, or place” (according to *Oxford Languages*).

Shelton's range of concerns is vast. He devotes two chapters to the materials used in mask making, especially turquoise in Mexican masks, and how the colors, luminescence, and reflective powers of these stones, metals, and colors represent complex and enduring cosmologies. He is also able to delve deeply into the supply-and-demand details of global mask markets. Sometimes Shelton's scholarship is a bit intimidating as he goes down a rabbit hole of particular expertise, whether it is European “Medieval Military Cosmology” and the history of the anti-Muslim Catholic military hero Saint James (Santiago), or the dynamics of church and state conflicts in the Spanish Baroque period. These examinations often stray far from the subject of masks and mask performance per se.

But the experience of working through all these strands of mask performance history is definitely worth it. Donald Cordry, since he was a puppeteer, deeply appreciated the importance of the Mexican masks he documented, but wasn't fully able to deal with the deep and complex nature of their history and contemporary functions. Shelton does, and shows us how we might actually understand how and why Mexican and Andean mask culture is utterly 21st century, and yet also fully representative of centuries of European and American history.

—REVIEWED BY JOHN BELL

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