

The Puppet Phenomenon – in Drame History and Today's Pracktice

Theses

I am a dramaturg, the administrator and creator of texts for puppetry.

The basis of my doctoral thesis is the book entitled "*Bába bukra*", written jointly with puppeteer *Zsolt Szász*, with a monographic claim and with the intellectual background of an alternative theatrical workshop (1988-89: Prolihistrió, 1990-93: MEG, 1993- Hattyúdal, temporarily 2001: Magyar Királyi Bábszínház /Hungarian Royal Puppet Theatre.)

In 1987 and 1988 we started to examine the puppet tradition home and worldwide in the hope of a new theory of the puppet theatre. At start it seemed resumable and renewable, but...

The experience of our first performance (1988: *The Bearded Knight, or the Woman Tyrant*) already was that festive time is to be restored for valid communication - and also for reception. This is shown by festivals increasing in number all over the world. We also created one in the name of the unity of the sacred and the profane, to assure these festive frames. (We have been organising the International Nativity Play (Betlehemes) Meeting, the muster of Hungarian folk nativity plays, since 1991 and the Winged Dragon Week International Street Theatre Festival in Nyírbátor, annually since 1993.)

Based on 15 years of festival experience the original question of how it is possible to make valid theatre today has been modified this way: what is the place of the puppet phenomenon in festive scenes today? What is tradition worth now, after the turn of the century?

1 Are the thousand-year dramatic experiences of identical cultures suitable for theatrical communication today, in the time of mass production and the spread of increasingly fast globalisation? Is the theatre, this cultic rooted institution still capable of the maintenance of spiritual roads?

2 Nations worldwide preserve common knowledge conserved in the puppet. Is it possible that it is in this ancient unity that the magic force helping today's man to find his own essence in the reordering of his own world is hidden?

3 I am asking: are we able to develop by puppets a modern and effective theatrical language in this confusion of values at the beginning of a new epoch?

Being a writer-dramaturg, I was primarily interested in the role of the text in the puppet theatre. So I set out to study the ancient language of the puppet theatre, back in time, till the source.

As puppeteers we are *tied to the dead material*, "bringing to life" *objects* to be animated in the daily theatrical practice. That is why, talking of drama and theatre, we use concepts with an almost compulsive *objectivity*. "Puppet" tools and cultic *objects* very far from each other in historical space and time convey to us the meaning recorded by the predecessors - because they were born in the spirit of "eternity", of *analogic thought*.

For me, the puppet as a phenomenon does not only mean the puppet as a magic object but also its symbiotic mover through the changing times. The essence of the puppet paradox is that the puppet and its mover together present the third party: the dramatic hero. In the puppet theatre, also called the theatre of objects, manipulation makes it possible for the object to go over from the non-animated to the animated, from the lifeless to the living, and this evokes such enchantment in viewer and player alike as worth analysing.

From such a standpoint do I follow the puppet phenomenon to the institutionalised theatre -in the Greek sense- in the dramatic, pretheatrical and sacred forms of mankind that are still alive, in their surviving medium. These forms appeared in the age of societies leaving the dream time of primitive community and being organised at a kin-tribal level. However, they survive in the ethnic content of the cults of syncretic world religions and are adaptable and reinterpretable in today's theatrical practice as well.

We travel the *secret* road where man of archaic thought (the child, the artist) is searching for the answer to basic philosophical questions -where am I from?, who am I?, where do I go?-, and in the meantime he is getting to know himself as well as the laws of the natural world around him. His (cosmogonic) view of the world is being formed, which co-ordinates his social contacts. For the orientation in this secret story I am presenting five conceptual categories as guiding threads.

The first weft is *sacredness* itself. So the first argument goes like this: in every theatrical move (in today's, too) the *symbolic gesture of sacrifice* is to be discovered. A parallel law with this is the following: this event may be realised only in *distinguished space and time*. The second weft is dual: the diamond horse-nail on the leg of the magic steed quoted by Attila József: that is the need and law of the work of art as a "*final aspectual whole*" (1). And, at the same time, depicted in the world of children's game is "song linked with movement and plot... the naive, primary instinct for play, which allows the deepest ever inspection into the prehistory of culture...This forever burning forge - in which the new is born and the old dies simultaneously...*Panta rei* is nowhere else so perceptible as in children's games!" - and this is Zoltán Kodály's golden thread.

The third golden thread is the undeniable relation of the puppet to *death* and *death cult*. In the cultural history of mankind the birth of the puppet is simultaneous with the ancient human recognition that all that is living will die one day. The place of the puppet is the passageway, "inter-existence". Being dead and living at the same time, the puppet may act as intermediary between these two worlds.

The fourth sphere of thought, according to which real knowledge may be attained only by way of *initiation*, is still connected with the cult of death. In fact, initiation is to be experienced by a return to the ancestors, by an identification with them - as if stepping in their place. However, I treat it as a separate item because different techniques (or primary images) according to sex, age, space and time are highlighted on initiation. It is in this domain that the individual *personality* of all times is born for the community.

The fifth guiding idea concerns the area of *mimesis* (*imitation, representation, expression*). At the level of anthropology it means that human ability surpassing animal mimicry which holds a balance between self- and race preservation. Animal mimicry still shows two directions. The *application of camouflage* serves *the preservation of the self, ie survival*, whereas attraction, the tools of *dazzling* serve *the preservation of the race, ie reproduction*. With man, as an ultrasocial race able to reproduce itself all year round, these two directions, giving the foundation of human ontogenesis, are connected and, at the same time, form the dispositional charge of every theatrical manifestation.

Based on all this it can be stated that man is an ontologically dramatic being. His life is finite and soul immortal.

Methodological instructions for reading the thesis

The thesis is not built on the proposition and verification of theoretical theses, but it developed organically, in the interaction of theory and practice during the years. Some of the present chapters (the one about nativity playing or the one entitled *Hejjető*), also readable individually, are "filtrates" of experience gained in the course of festivity-making practice and our own performances, too.

The description and analysis of the bear feast rite is the product of a different kind of "text formation", when my knowledge of theatre theory and Éva Schmidt's results of her anthropological research realised in the framework of a Hungarian Academy of Sciences research programme are added up (Winged Pasker and the bear feast).

Texts "of the third type" are translations from foreign languages (French, English, Czech and Russian), concentrates of descriptions of distant cultures, or they appear on the paper, explained, in the transcription of information in stationary or motion pictures (see the chapters on patlecs, kebe-kebe and cam). These dissimilar resources are connected by their common, aspectual foundation.

The sequence of chapters, also readable independently, represents a line of development. I was trying to keep to a schedule which takes into consideration historically-minded reading. First come layers of meaning dating from earlier times in history and primary in the anthropological sense, and I move from the description of simple (children's world) to complex theatrical phenomena (cam). This is why the Tibetan opera, truly theatre, got into the appendix.

Although I drew material from several fields of science, this thesis is actually to be looked at as basic research into theatre, and as such, it has yet not been organised into a discipline proper, with its concepts not fully-fledged. At places I did not get further in interpretation than posing a question, than fertile doubt and intuition - and these I marked with square brackets.

In the practice of our alternative theatre as well as the Nyírbátor street theatre workshop we experienced that the revelations and recognitions described here lead forward and can be put into practice. We hope to have followers.

Summary of Contents

I Eternal Return

The doubts of a puppet-dramaturg: do puppeteers need texts at all, and if yes, who can we learn from? A theatre historical survey from the rediscovery in the romantic era of the puppet theatre to our days. The place of the puppet theatre among theatrical pathfinders.

II Winged Pasker (The analysis of Jávör song and its variants)

This example with a supporting-pillar function, focussing on the pair of *game and hunter*, comes from the mythology of our relatives, the Ob-Ugrian people. This example captures the birth of human psyche, the culture creating power of the conscious tool-user (use of bow, ski), the adjustment of the cult to ensure the harmony of the divine, human and natural world (burning sacrifice), and the representation of man as an ontologically dramatic being with a dual consciousness. (1) *I was solving the riddles together with Zsolt Szász.*

III Children's World

In the world of children's games syncretism, the unity of teller, incantation chanter, agent, dancer, singer and drama player is evident. I am trying to present this variety through a few examples -from the cradle to mate finders- and show the signs of initiation, background knowledge and the dramatic core in them.

IV For the connection between the *death cult* and puppets we bring an example from Africa, the *unil*, which is a ritual of remembrance still being practiced in Congo.

The motivation is childlike faith in life, in the soul and in the fact that from the puppet state of death - in the image of the descendant arriving in the family - there is a return. The puppet takes the role of the intermediary in the collective make-believe, which contains multi-"act" farewell and welcome rites at the same time.

V The chapter on *puppets and initiation*. The gist of woman and man initiation is that they give support for experiencing the woman-man opposition. The role of the tale, as the symbolic journey of initiation, in the child's life. The great plots of initiation.

The individual initiation of the fisher and hunter szelis people in the west coast of Northern America, the multi-act, horroristic-comic initiation ritual of the hamacsá cannibalistic, secret society of kvakiutl indians, and the presentation of the initiation palaver of nutka wolf-cubs, a group of children. Metamorphosis masks and several tricks of mimetic pretension were employed for the representation of transition, and great gags and brutal "draw-in" games were going on for those to be initiated.

The African example, *kebe-kebe* shows how the order of joculars, amusers is formed out of the man initiation ritual, and how initiation itself is transformed into a "professional" puppet show first - where it is the acquired knowledge and not the individual that glitters -, then finally into a public contest, a folk festival.

VI The bear feast as a pagan mystery play

In this chapter we commemorate researcher Éva Schmidt, who provided us with the key to understanding the Ob-Ugric, hanti ritual side.

The co-existence of the sacred and the profane, the variability of pretheatrical props and the omnipotent role of the puppet are to be seen here. The bear demonstrates the brother and puppet plays demonstrate creation, the relationship between the creator and his world created. That is how the small wants to influence the big. The soul of the bear receives a world panorama and takes the message into heaven.

The collective bear feast of hanti and manysi people carries the germs of genres.

Another important characteristic is that the festival, the game is the common concern of the whole community. Player and viewer on the man side may at any time change roles but women may join the dance as well.

VII The one-person actor, the *shaman* is the next subject of our investigations.

The shaman is the "institutional" intermediary, master of ceremonies, doctor and oracle of a community.

Besides the examples of shaman and drum initiation we draw form and content parallels between the drum and the functions of the Hungarian puppet-dancing nativity play figures.

VIII The forms of *liturgical dance* in lamaistic or diamond sceptre Buddhism

The description of Erlik-cam, Milarepa-cam and Geszer-cam. Cam-play also originates from the shaman faith (on the basis of the bön religion and folk religiousness) that is why we evoke New Year's customs in Tibet, the top of the world. It became a bound form during the time of Buddhism. The battle of light and dark in the Mongolian Erlik-cam dance drama takes place in the multiplying system of dual pairs. The final aim of the battle is the extinction of passions, liberation in the sacrificial fire.

Geszer-cam originates from a heroic song. The talking, arguing heroes of Milarepa-cam mean a step forward to the folk theatre.

IX *Betlehemjárás* (nativity playing) -written jointly with Zsolt Szász- discusses what the theatrical proceeds of this winter festive seasonal folk make-believe are. 15 years of festival experience made us place the analysis of Székely mask games and puppet-dancing nativity plays towards the end of the pretheatrical studies. (2) *We ourselves also played the Lövété nativity play and took it as far as Prague. We are to this day playing "Regös mystery", the visualised Bucsu regölés, with the element of deer dance built in from the oriental theatre. In the hunter and deer pair we arched over to Milarepa-cam and Winged Pasker.*

X The street mystery play of the Hungarian Royal Puppet Theatre: *Hejjető, or the mystery of bread*, or wheat, that is bread = life ("élet"). This great welcoming piece for the turn of the century is the concentrate of our folk festivals. By describing and analysing the play in detail we wish to demonstrate our theoretical as well as practical results.

Source-texts and pictures are presented in the Appendix.