

Doctoral School of the University of Theatre and Film

**Subjective object**

Analysing the functional object theatre and the creative workflow of *The Knot Fairy*, a  
doctorate piece

Thesis of dissertation

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### Thesis

The topic of my thesis is the object's on-stage animation, the object theatre. This is a type of puppet theatre wherein, instead of designed and pre-made puppets being used, objects in the ordinary sense are being moved.

During my career as a puppeteer, director and teacher, I have worked with various forms of puppetry techniques and based on my experience object theatre play hasn't been highly esteemed in Hungary. The Hungarian puppetry groups and puppet theatres prefer using puppets in their shows that are dreamed up by designers. For me, object theatre as a genre is a challenge and a special, cathartic creative process. Imagination, creativity and poetry gains ground in making object animation shows.

Within this topic I put the emphasis of my research on functional object theatre. The primary goal of my research is to thematise this young genre of puppetry through studying thought and movement systems and as a result prove that functional object theatre has a set of distinctive characteristics that make it an individual genre of puppet theatre. I intend to achieve this primarily through show analysis and additionally based on my own practical experience. I analyse shows which are not unequivocally puppet theatre productions, yet the thought processes and artistic palettes of their creators share mutual aspects with the genre.

Puppetry has been taught at the University of Theatre and Film for 21 years. Object theatre is the first form of puppet theatre that can be explored in my classes this year. While working with objects we develop our first year students' capability for abstraction and prompt them to be able to construct their own semiology on stage. However, our students struggle with understanding the theoretical part of this type of puppetry. With my thesis I would like to offer aid with illuminating the theoretical background of the functional object theatre education practice.

As a result of my research I have designed a solo object theatre production based on *The Knot Fairy (A csomótündér)*, a book by Dóra Gimesi. I found it important to clash my

theoretical conclusions in a creative artistic process myself, and doing so gave me an opportunity for the knowledge, conclusions and principles gained in the genre of functional object theatre to be put into practice.

The story of *The Knot Fairy* covers the parent's divorce, in an easily interpretable way and realm, for kids. During the rehearsals my collaborators and I aimed to prove that the functional object theatre is the best possible form for such a show as stylisation works more gradually than in a figurative puppet theatre. Objects have no faces, their appearance doesn't resemble children or adults, therefore the viewers can distance themselves more easily from the characters. This form allows a more playful retelling of such a story and requires constant imagination which makes the tension, the result of the topic discussed in the show, easier to process.

The central goal of my system is to help the prospect of puppet theatre animation not only on an instinctual but also on a conscious level during puppeteer education as well as in puppet theatre shows.

### **Defining puppet theatre terms**

In order to have a discourse about the object as puppet the definitions of object and puppet must be defined. Additionally, further key terms must be outlined to help us navigate in the "labyrinth of object theatre".

What is the material? What does the object mean? How should puppet theatre be defined? I clarify these terms in the first chapter of my thesis in order to define object theatre as a genre and, furthermore, its two forms: figurative and functional object theatre. The figurative (anthropomorphic) object theatre, similar to figurative puppet theatre, imitates function and its ways of play are typically anthropomorphic movements. In functional object theatre, however, the animation is defined by the set of movements which stem from the object's shape and physical attributes.

The sole subject of my study is the functional object theatre play and one of its special forms, static-functional object theatre. Static-functional play means that the object isn't animated, but the surrounding subjects' system of relations turn the object into a symbol or subjectify it. In this case the object does not perform a set of movements on the stage; it is static.

Narrow is the line that divides the object's on-stage identity, the prop, from the puppet used as an object. In order to examine how the static-functional object theatre performs in practice, defining the prop is fundamental, and also the subject of this chapter.

### **Prop or puppet**

In my second chapter I study the on-stage differences between the prop and the personified object through the works of theatrical creators who placed the objects into special systems of relations in their shows. One of them, Tadeusz Kantor peeled all conventional theatricality from the theatre and pushed aside what the stereotypes of the institutional theatre are made of: the box stage, the set, the actor who portrays. He was searching for the theatre's pure elements and wanted to create individual, autonomous theatre. In Kantor's theatre the set turned into items, into peculiar artistic objects.

In the first part of this chapter I analyse Kantor's *White as the Colour of Snow*, *Let the Artists Die* and *The Dead Class* from a functional object theatre's perspective. The question I propose about all three is the same: when does the object function as a stage prop and when as a personified object?

The second part of my chapter continues the analysis of the difference between the prop and the object used as a puppet through Ionesco's *The Chairs* which debuted in 9. March 1996 at the Thália Theatre's New Studio and was directed by Tamás Fodor. Simultaneously I begin describing the examples that will clarify how the object animation's static-functional form works under live theatrical circumstances.

### **Functional object theatre shows in a Hungarian context**

When one researches the history of functional object theatre, finding shows in which the style and thought processes of this puppet theatre form can be clearly tracked are not without difficulty. One was certainly made in Hungary: *Story of Chairs* (*Székhistória*), which premiered at 1975, was considered the revealing production of the National Puppet Theatre, and was made for a mature audience. No motion picture recording remains of *Story of Chairs*, therefore I reconstructed the on-stage motions based on photographs and the original script of the show. The original script by Dezső Szilágyi from 1975 is available as the appendix of my thesis. The next show I study in the chapter is *Small suicides* (*Piccoli Suicidi*), created by

Gyula Molnár, an artist living and creating abroad and only known in Hungary by the innermost puppetry circles. Even though the executions of the two shows are without any resemblance, in the third chapter I analyse how they can both be considered a part of the functional object theatre genre. The analysis of the two examples reveals the operating principles of functional object theatre in both a black theatre and when we see the manipulator on the stage.

In this chapter I also analyse the static-functional type of object theatre within the puppetry genre. Hungarian puppeteers have just recently started working with the static-functional object theatre. Analysing the two earliest attempts of domesticating static-functional object theatre provides an opportunity to clarify stylistic and genre-related questions. One was *Kiwi (Kivi)*, the joint show of Budapest Puppet Theatre and FÜGE Productions; the other, *Roast Swan and Other Tales (Pecsenyehattyú és más mesék)*, by Vaskakas Puppet Theatre in Győr.

I demonstrate through the acting how in both cases the object is subjectified by the surrounding subjects' systems of relations in the static-functional object theatre.

### **The puppeteer's presence and work in functional object theatre play**

I have observed various types of the puppeteer's presence in the analysed shows, therefore the fourth chapter discusses the actor's work in a functional object theatre play. Does playing in a black theatre require a different kind of attitude from the puppeteer? When is the object emphasized and when is the actor? How can concentrated emotions be expressed through an object? How can the main manipulator cooperate with the assistant puppeteer?

The wonder, or if you will, the illusion of the object with a soul is the result of the animation, let that be in a black theatre or a show with the puppeteer present as an actor. Whether it's a functional or a static-functional type of object theatre, neither works if the puppeteer doesn't have the ability to imagine the object coming to life. Without this factor it's not only the object theatre that doesn't work, but neither does the puppetry genre.

## **Phases of *The Knot Fairy*'s creative process**

After my research about the functional object theatre I have reached the stage where I constructed my own, individual creation of the genre. This chapter concludes the workflow of my production: *The Knot Fairy*. I chose the functional object theatre as the show's puppetry form in order to utilize the research done for my thesis and my accomplishments in practice. Our goal during the rehearsals with my collaborators was to prove that a one-person show can be created in the functional object theatre's genre that translates a problem for children through abstraction. The script is available in the appendix of my thesis.

I thematised the creative process based on the selection of objects, the coherent world of objects, the merging of on-stage timelines, the actors' attitudes, and the objects' system of movements. I summarized the audience's reception and the observations of the adaptation process of *The Knot Fairy* in the last, concluding chapter. The genre of monodrama meeting the object theatre resulted in an incredibly exciting workflow, and its insertion into a theatre's education program gave us the child audience's feedback which proves that object theatre is an independent form of puppet theatre and has no generation limits.

