Karol Suszczyński: Character – simulacrum – object – symbol. The ontological versatility of dummy-like puppets in contemporary puppet theatre for youth and adults in Poland.

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Character – simulacrum – object – symbol

The ontological versatility of dummy-like puppets in contemporary puppet theatre for youth and adults in Poland

Dummies or mannequins – as is well known – are not classified among classical puppet forms or techniques. So it is important to answer the following question, right at the outset: Just what is a dummy-like puppet?

First of all, a dummy-like puppet is an anthropomorphic figure imitating a human. Its appearance is very similar to that of the puppet, which is why it is seen so often in puppet theatres. Usually it has a human-sized form, and could be called a fake human, an artificial man or a figure of the other. It can be used as a substitute or a partner of a human actor on stage. In performance, the body of the dummy-like puppet can exist as a whole, a portion (usually its upper half), or even in its independent pieces (loose heads, legs and arms). Its appearance can be natural, similar to that of a human, or grotesque, strange, fanciful, caricatured or abstract – devoid of human attributes such as facial features, or painted in eye-catching intense colours that are not natural for a human. The face and body of the dummy-like puppet can be stiff and hard, or supple and easy to animate.

Depending on its appearance and technical construction, we can use different synonyms to talk about this kind of puppet. Popular terms – as has been already mentioned – are 'dummy' and 'mannequin', but other terms like 'manikin', 'model' or 'figure' are also popular.

The information presented above indicates that dummy-like forms are a large group of puppets, but their most interesting fact is their

ontological versatility, especially since becoming very popular in Polish puppet theatre at the beginning of the 21st century.

History

As has been mentioned already, dummies or mannequins are not considered to be a classic puppet form like hand puppets, string puppets or shadow puppets. However, from its very beginnings (approximately the mid-18th century¹), the mannequin or dummy has exhibited very strong performative properties that have influenced its history.

This form came to the theatre from the outside, perhaps from fashion (where it was a tailor's mannequin or an exhibition dummy) or from the visual arts (where it was a figure with moving limbs: a clay figure, a wooden model or a sculpture). Overall, since its invention, it has greatly expanded its scope and, over the centuries, it has touched various areas of human life. Today its fields of use include scientific research (to perform crash tests), sports (to practise movement), medicine (to learn how to save lives) and during war (to confuse the enemy). Dummies are even used to provide sexual satisfaction to people.

The term >mannequin < as a synonym for >puppet < first appeared in Poland in 1904 in a translation of Heinrich von Kleist's essay *Über das Marionettentheater* (cf. Kleist 1904: 32–40), written originally in 1810. This was an unusual interpretation, because in those years in Poland, the most popular term for all puppets was >marionetka < (>marionette <), from the French. Kleist's text uses the term >Gliedermann < three times in relation to the puppet, though the word itself does not refer to any classical form of puppet. >Gliedermann < (>man of limbs <), or >Gliederpuppe <, which is more popular today, is a term employed to describe the mannequins used by painters. Perhaps it was Kleist's Romantic soul that had prompted him to apply this term instead of >puppet < when describing an anthropomorphised, artificial figure that differed from a living man.

However, the publication of Kleist's text in translation did not change much in Polish theatre, and the mannequin had to wait a long time before becoming a part of it. Interestingly, it was not puppeteers who first introduced him to the stage.

The most important 20th-century Polish theatre artist who used mannequins in his performances was Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990). In a text published in 2019 in *Teatr Lalek (Puppet Theatre)* magazine, Tadeusz Kornaś – a theatre historian from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow – wrote as follows in reference to the mannequins used in Kantor's performances:

[...] [they] appear on the same rights, as live actors. Individual characters, duplicating the live actors, being attached to their bodies, sometimes so close to them that no one knows, whether there is more of an actor or a mannequin in the character, bio-objects... What is their ontological status? One would like to ask. (Kornaś 2019: 23)

Kantor used mannequins to present topics related to death. This was the case in his performances entitled *Umarła Klasa* (*Dead Class*) from 1975, *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* from 1980 and *Nigdy tu już nie powrócę* (*I Shall Never Return Here*) from 1988. In his opinion, life in art or in a play can only be represented by its lack, with the mannequin being a model of death – a model that should inspire the live actor.

Tadeusz Kantor is not the only director who has used mannequins in his work, but the constraints of this paper do not allow for a discussion of all the others who have done so.² However, one 20th-century puppet theatre performance in which mannequins played an extremely important role must be mentioned here.

This is Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewiczy's drama *Gyubal Wahazar*, directed by Wiesław Hejno and staged in 1987 at the Wrocławski Teatr Lalek (Wrocław Puppet Theatre). It is by far the most interesting Polish puppet theatre performance for adults from the last century. Its puppets were created by Jadwiga Mydlarska-Kowal. Their grotesque appearance reflects the tragedy, ridicule and cruelty depicted in Witkiewiczy's drama. These large figures, close in size to a human being, were the play's main characters. They were seated on special constructions whose upper parts resembled medieval mansions, while

their lower portions were reminiscent of winged altars. The characters included only one live actress, playing an adolescent. The titular tyrant, Gyubal Wahazar, falls in love with her, which ultimately leads to his downfall. An interesting fact is that this was one of few performances in which the animation of the dummies was hidden – though not completely throughout. In the third act of the play, in which the stage set resembles Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, the animators, dressed all in black after the manner of Japanese bunraku theatre, can be seen behind the puppets. This work was performed approximately 160 times and was seen by over 30,000 people, thanks to several tours abroad, thereby proving the power of expression that can be achieved through the use of dummies in puppet theatre.

The early 21st century

More than a century has passed since >mannequin< was first used as a synonym for >puppet< in Poland. During that time, wood has been replaced by plastic, and papier mâché by sponge, giving mannequins used in puppetry a different style and character. They have become more distinctive, the way they are animated has also changed, and their ontological status is now more diverse than before. All of this has prompted today's artists to use them far more often than was the case in the previous century. In the almost 200 plays for young people and adults that have been created in Poland since the year 2000,³ we can find around 40 that make use of dummy-like puppets. Several of those considered by the present writer to be the most interesting are offered here to illustrate the different ways in which dummies have been utilised⁴ in puppet theatre.

The dummy-like puppet as a character

The largest group of performances includes plays in which dummy-like puppets play the role of one of the main characters. Their part is most often that of a partner to the actor-animator who brings them to

life and, at the same time, shapes their character.⁵ However, relationships between the pair differ, each time slightly changing the ontology of the puppets.

Bacon is a monodrama with puppets about Francis Bacon, the Irishborn, British figurative painter. It was created by Marcin Bikowski, directed by Marcin Bartnikowski, and staged in 2013 at the Teatr Malabar Hotel (Malabar Hotel Theatre) in Warsaw, using various forms of puppets and masks. Several of the dummies employed were made of sponge and fabric (two of them represented the painter's friends). The performance's central figure was a live actor. The puppets appeared only sporadically; their roles were episodic, and were used to comment on particular situations. Despite this, the relationships between all the characters were placed on an equal, balanced footing, with the puppets playing the actor's stage partners. At the same time, however, they came across as strong, effective characters, which was most probably due both to their grotesque appearance and to the comic-dramatic situations occurring on stage. There were even sequences where the puppeteer animated two dummies simultaneously and conducted a dialogue with them. In these instances too, however, the balance between them was maintained.

A similar situation can be found in Arszenik (Arsenic) by Marcin Bartnikowski, a play directed and designed by Marcin Bikowski that was based on Arsenic and Old Lace by Joseph Kesserling and staged at the Teatr Baj (Baj Theatre) in Warsaw in 2011. Here, two live actresses played two old ladies while also animating dummies representing the apparitions of their murdered lovers. These were really half-dummies: each comprised a body with a head and hands draped in coats, making the animators' work much easier and allowing for an interesting theatrical concept based on shifts in dominance. Sometimes the actresses were dominant, while at other times the roles were reversed. There were even situations in which the dummies were on stage without their female partners and the only part of them that was real were their legs, provided by the actresses, with the mannequins so dominant that they had >swallowed< their respective animator, hiding her inside themselves, >forcing< her to provide their motor skills, their legs, but making the viewer forget about her existence. This created a

fascinating stage form that was a hybrid of a living woman and a dead puppet – an absorbing phenomenon that will be addressed in more detail below.

The performance entitled Dzień osiemdziesiątypiąty (The Eighty-Fifth Day), based on Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea and directed by Aga Blaszczak, is yet another interesting example in which dummies were used. This play was staged at the Teatr Lalki i Aktora (The Puppet and the Actor Theatre) in Wałbrzych in 2017. The creators changed the story's setting and moved Santiago, the old fisherman, from his old cutter to a hospital room. It is from here that he embarks on his final journey, accompanied by a male nurse who appears to be the reincarnation of Manolin, the old man's young helper. The director's idea is for Santiago to be animated by the actor, Pawel Kuźma, who also plays the role of the male nurse at the same time. This play is a monodrama with a puppet, though in several scenes, Kuźma was assisted by another actor, playing live music. The performance was similar to that of Arszenik in that both the actor and the puppet played equally important characters. They also appeared together throughout the entire performance, forming an inseparable duo that made their relationship unique, as was the ontological status of the puppet. The performance uses the act of animation to portray the process of departing, of dying. Santiago, the dummy, is perfectly aware that he exists only thanks to the help of his nurse-animator who is the only person capable of fulfilling Santiago's last wish, which is for death. The mannequin, a stage being, a subject, knows that it is only an object in the hands of the actor-animator.

Sometimes, the dummy-like puppet can completely dominate the animator. This occurs in *Molier* (*Molière*) by Neville Tranter and Adrian van Dijk, which was staged in 2015 at the Teatr Animacji (Animation Theatre) in Poznań. In this performance, mannequins similar to Muppets seem to become individual, independent stage entities, though they never appear without their puppeteers. The viewers are quickly made to forget the animators, who are dressed all in black like servants (the sole exception is the one person who plays a live character). The animators fade into the background, giving the puppets complete precedence, which is a situation we know well from Japanese



Arszenik (Arsenic), directed by Marcin Bikowski, Teatr Baj (The Baj Theatre) in Warsaw (2011). Photo by Bartek Warzecha.

bunraku theatre. Here, the dummies also take the lead, thanks in part to their grotesque appearance and the show's comedic style.

The last example in this group of performances is *Fasada* (*The Facade*), directed by Duda Paiva and staged at the Białostocki Teatr Lalek (Białystok Puppet Theatre) in 2007. In this play, Paiva uses his own unique forms, which are human-sized puppets made entirely of sponge. These dummies are very supple and can be animated by a single actor. One particularly interesting puppet is that of the Old Woman, to which its actress lends her legs (Paiva also did this in 2011 in his monodrama with puppets entitled *Bastard!*). The design of the dummy produces a specific form of symbiosis between the puppet and the animator – they both share the same pair of legs, creating a hybrid, a joining of two bodies (puppet and human). Through their physical coexistence, they blur the boundary between the living and the dead, between the dummy and the actor, creating a new type of stage being.

The dummy-like puppet as a simulacrum

The next group of performances concerns situations where the dummy-like puppets function as doubles or simulacra of live actors. Henryk Jurkowski, one of Poland's most outstanding researchers of puppet theatre, described this phenomenon as "superabundance, an excess of measures and chaotic meanings" as well as a "disturbance of the unity of the image" (Jurkowski 2015: 44). This statement not only applies to the use of the dummy, but also to general trends that have existed in Polish puppet theatre since the beginning of the current century. He writes that:

Poland has become the scene of a universal dichotomous theatrical world, i.e. the sort, whose objects are marked twice or thrice, thus conspicuously shattering the unity of the portrayed world of drama. (ibid.)

Although Jurkowski was critical of this phenomenon if it appeared in children's theatre, he did not seem to mind when it appeared in performances for young people or adults. This was because, in his opinion, »adults will manage to deal with postmodern structures« (ibid.).

The use of dummies as doubles could be seen, for example, in Bertolt Brecht's *Opera za trzy grosze* (*The Threepenny Opera*), directed by Waldemar Wolański and staged at the Teatr Lalek Arlekin (Arlekin Puppet Theatre) in Łódź in 2008, as well as in Juliusz Słowacki's *Balladyna*, directed by Petr Nosálek and shown in 2007 at the Teatr Lalek Banialuka (Banialuka Puppet Theatre) in Bielsko-Biała. Here, dummies portrayed the same characters as live actors; both productions saw beautifully, colourfully dressed dummy-like puppets that drew more attention than the actors who were dressed in black (or in white), which meant that the audience saw two Mackie Messers, two Polly Peachums, two Balladynas and two King Kirkors on stage, all at the same time. The manner of this doubling, however, varied in each play.

In *Balladyna*, whose stage design was by Eva Farkašová, it led to the transformation of the mannequins into passive characters around whom the action took place. In most scenes, their manner of animation



Balladyna, directed by Petr Nosálek, Teatr Lalek Banialuka (The Banialuka Puppet Theatre) in Bielsko-Biala (2007). Photo by Agnieszka Morcinek.

was very simple – puppets were pushed from side to side (these were tall constructions placed on racks with wheels), and the actors talked to them as if they were talking to their own souls. The puppets became passive, numb, depressed, cut off from the play by becoming a mere figure, sculpture, sign or message that the living actors talked about.

A contrary situation could be observed in the *Opera za trzy grosze*, with stage designs by Maria Balcerek. Here, the doubling of characters led to the expansion of puppet forms on stage. It should be noted, however, that in this performance each dummy had two animators, one of whom played the character while the other took the role of a helper. Initially, this idea introduced chaos, which resulted from the incomprehensible switching of roles between the actor and the dummy. However, after the viewers got used to it, the mannequins, thanks to their dynamic and complicated animation, dominated their actor-doubles through their abilities and their grotesque appearance.

Wesele (The Wedding), staged in 2015 at the Teatr im. Hansa Christiana Andersena (Hans Christian Andersen Theatre) in Lublin, is yet another interesting example. It is one of the most important Polish dramas, written by Stanisław Wyspiański in 1901. It is a symbolic story

about Poles and Polishness at a time when Poland had vanished from the map of Europe. The director, Jakub Roszkowski, and the stage designer, Eva Farkašová, gave each actor a dummy that defined their character. In this way, the puppet acquired the form of a simulacrum, an additional signifier of the stage character – similar to what Jean Baudrillard writes about in his works. These dummies imitated the characters faithfully, and tried to gain their independence, to break free from the hands of their animators and to separate themselves from them like a soul leaves a body. However, as in most such cases, the puppets found out that they were, after all, subordinate to the will of humans. During the performance, their initial desire to dominate and escape control was stopped by the animators. In the final scene, the actors threw off their dummies, hung them on hangers, and made them into ordinary objects.

The dummy-like puppet as an object

In modern puppet performances, dummies can also become objects that are part of the scenography. However, they do not always play the role of an ordinary, passive object, as often happens in dramatic performances. Very often they are objects that have an important function, making them more than just an element of the background.

One example of this was to be found in the staging of *Matka* (*Mother*) by the Teatr Malabar Hotel in 2010, based on a drama by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. In its last act, the titular mother appears as a mannequin lying on a catafalque – a symbol signifying a dead woman – and as an incarnation of her younger self, played by another actress. The stage thus has two mothers from different periods of her/their being. The Teatr Malabar Hotel's artists introduced the mother dummy at the very beginning of the performance, showing it as something that was unwanted, a useless piece of junk, always trodden underfoot. This mannequin was constantly moved from here to there, taken out and put away again. Although without it the story could not take place, it nevertheless made life difficult for the play's characters, since it was a meddlesome thing that nothing could be done with.



Szewcy (The Shoemakers), directed by Anna Rozmianiec, Teatr Animacji (The Animation Theatre) in Poznan (2014). Photo by Jacek Gajewski.

In their 2014 production of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's *Szewcy* (*The Shoemakers*) at the Teatr Animacji in Poznań, Anna Rozmianiec and Cecylia Kotlicka used dismembered shop mannequins as part of the story. This astonishing decision symbolically highlighted the revolutionary content of Witkiewicz's drama. Parts of mannequins performed various functions, being used as decorative elements or to fill out the on-stage crowds. Their interactions with the actors created hybrid characters, and they eventually became objects that were necessary for the performance of various activities, such as shoemaker's

tools. This manner of treatment stripped them of all subjectivity. They became utilitarian items, just like the ordinary store mannequins that they actually were. They became subordinated completely to the will of their animators, allowing themselves to be tortured in any way seen fit by them without raising any objection.

Our final example in this group is Moskwin, directed by Lena Frankiewicz, with set designs by Mirek Kaczmarek, which was shown at the Wrocławski Teatr Lalek in 2018. In this performance, the stage was filled with various mannequins. There were so many of them, and they were so different, that the stage was more reminiscent of exhibition in an art gallery or a shopping mall display than a theatre. The living cast consisted of only one actor-animator, who was constantly trying to revive the mannequins - playing with them, feeding them, watching TV with them or putting them to sleep. His efforts, however, remained unsuccessful. The dummies never reacted to any of his ministrations, remaining unmoved, dead. Even the act of placing one of them on a robotic vacuum cleaner, one that runs around and cleans the apartment on its own, only caused it to make forced, artificial movements. The aim of the story did not become apparent to the viewers until the middle of the performance. The play's title, Moskwin, related to Anatoly Moskwin, a Russian historian and linguist who spoke thirteen languages and was an expert on Celtic culture and the funeral rites of the Siberian people. The mannequins represented the corpses of children whom this mentally ill scientist dug out of their graves. 28 of them were later found at his home. All of these bodies were carefully embalmed and protected, making sure nothing happened to them. The performance's character was sure that death was only a transitory state and continued looking for ways to bring the dead children back to life. In his imagination, his house was full of life, though this was only an illusion created by his diseased mind. He strove to make mannequins into real entities, but succeeded only in maintaining their presence as objects.



['dzadi] (Forefathers' Eve – title presented in Polish phonetic symbols), directed by Paweł Passini, Opolski Teatr Lalki i Aktora (The Opole Puppet and Actor Theatre, 2015). Photo by Krzysztof Ścisłowicz.

The dummy-like puppet as a symbol

The last, but certainly not the least, category here is the dummy-like puppet as a symbol. Several of the above examples also portrayed the mannequin in a symbolic role, including *Moskwin* and even *Wesele*. However, in some performances, the mannequins' function is solely symbolic, for they neither play the main characters, nor tell their stories. One of the best examples is a production entitled ['dzadi'] that was directed by Paweł Passini at the Opolski Teatr Lalki i Aktora (Opole Puppet and Actor Theatre) in 2015. This was a unique interpretation of Adam Mickiewicz's canonical Romantic drama *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*), its title being given here in Polish phonetic symbols. In this production, the artists used more than three hundred rough dummies, all made of thick white fabric, decorated with red elements, and of varying sizes. They ranged from small dummies attached to the actors' trousers via human-sized dummies to enormous dummies several

metres high. Their presence was rich with meaning. They could represent bodies that had been raised from the grave, or souls that wanted to integrate with higher powers. However, as representatives of the spiritual sphere, they were primarily a theatrical means of helping the audience – who were active participants in the staged ritual – to join in the mystical experience of Forefathers' Eve, and reach the springs of the collective unconscious. These dummies were not animated during the performance, but were moved from place to place and arranged like figures in an art-gallery display, making their symbolic role undeniable.

Conclusion

These performances represent only a fraction of those Polish puppetry productions in which artists have utilised dummy-like puppets. It is noteworthy that this theatrical form of expression is just one of many that can be found on the stages of Polish puppet theatres today, though it is also the most varied one. No other form of puppet comes in so many shapes and types. The anthropomorphic status of dummy-like puppets can surprise us with a multitude of meanings, and only the future will show what abilities they still hide from us. It is more than likely that there are many more of them ...

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Notes

- 1 The term >dummy< is two centuries older and at one point referred mainly to people who could not speak.
- 2 Another outstanding artist who deserves to be mentioned is Józef Szajna (1922–2008). He used mannequins many times in his works (both in theatres and in galleries). During the Nazi occupation of Poland he was a prisoner at concentration camps in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, a fact that most certainly influenced the nature of his artistic work.
- 3 Teenage viewers are mentioned here because for many years now in Poland, there has been a division between performances intended for children and those for young people and adults.
- 4 During the Communist era, Polish puppet theatre was pigeonholed as being theatre for children. Up to 1989, there were only about 100 productions for young people and adults, but thousands for younger audiences. The early 21st century brought a new phenomenon to Poland: puppet theatre for older audiences.
- 5 At present, there are no ventriloquists in Poland this being a typical example of the animator and the dummy performing on equal terms.

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