

Demis Quadri & Yvonne Schmidt: Performing agency. Exploring puppetry from a disability perspective.

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Performing agency

Exploring puppetry from a disability perspective

This paper explores parallels and intersections between disability performance and puppetry. It does so from different angles, while remaining on the level of hypothetical suggestions and without aspiring to be exhaustive. We shall emphasise issues such as metaphorical approaches, agency, negotiation, appropriation, externalisation and the process of ›becoming‹.

One possible perspective when trying to intersect disability with puppetry studies is to focus on performers with disabilities working on stage with their prostheses and other devices (wheelchairs, crutches, etc.) from a point of view that can be read in terms of puppetry. This is what happens in some studies that take into account the concept of ›cyborg‹, in the sense of a »person whose body contains mechanical or electrical devices« (Merriam-Webster n. d.). As briefly mentioned in an article by Laura Purcell-Gates and Emma Fisher, such cases can enable researchers to analyse hybrid corporealities (a combination of biological and technological elements) that emphasise disability or change our perspective on the different forces acting on human bodies; they can also analyse the idea of cyborgs as bodies that develop in a way different from biological determinism (cf. Purcell-Gates/Fisher 2017: 363–364).

Another possibility is to take advantage of the metaphorical potential of working with puppets, for example by exploiting the similarities between the puppet-puppeteer relationship and other power dynamics. This metaphorical approach towards puppetry has a long history, as witnessed by the reflections and artistic experiences of the Surrealists, Dadaists and Futurists in the early 20th century. The representatives of these artistic currents saw in puppets an immediate, effective

image of the submission and lack of power of human beings, and highlighted power games as a central element of the interactions between living performers and animated objects (cf. Allain/Harvie 2014: 240). If we consider cultural readings of disability in theatre and performance, an important statement comes to mind by Petra Kuppers, a disability culture activist and community artist:

The physically impaired performer has [...] to negotiate two areas of cultural meaning: invisibility as an active member in the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorization as passive consumer and victim in much of the popular imagination. (Kuppers 2003: 48)

When performers with disabilities use their prostheses or other devices related to their disability to construct their artistic discourse, giving them aesthetic and dramatic meaning (or postdramatic meaning, if the focus is more on presence, manifestation and performativity rather than on representation, signification and narration (cf. Lehmann 1999: 146), they try to become subjects who take control of visible signs that are otherwise often read as displaying passivity and dependence. In this sense, they can assume a position of power analogous to that of a puppeteer towards his or her puppet, with the difference that in daily life the »puppet«, in the specific case of a prosthesis, can be integrated into the »puppeteer's« body itself. Prostheses and other devices can be read negatively as a physical materialisation of a person's disabilities, in the sense of dead objects (as puppets would be without a puppeteer). It thus seems that by taking possession of them (by giving them life) in an artistic/performative sense, artists, actors and dancers can change an audience's perception of disabilities and of the objects that accompany them. But maybe it is also not that simple.

As John Bell puts it in his paper »Playing with the Eternal Uncanny. The Persistent Life of Lifeless Objects«, we can see »the essence of puppet, mask, and object performance« as »the animation of the dead world by living humans« (Bell 2015: 43). At the same time, we can see puppets as »threatening, doubt-inducing, and anxiety-provoking [...] because they remind us that we are not necessarily in control of as

much as we thought we were« (ibid.: 50). We can also see puppets as »constantly unsettling because« they lead »to doubt about our mastery of the material world« (ibid.). Bell writes also that the »essence of puppet, mask, and object performance [...] is not mastery of the material world but a constant negotiation back and forth with it« (ibid.). Prostheses and other disability devices, in their interactions as objects with living bodies, cause similar feelings and at the same time demand similar negotiations from the performer with disabilities. One consequence of this is that the relationship between the work of puppeteers with their puppets and that of performers-with-disabilities with prostheses and other devices can go beyond analogy or metaphor to find concrete common features.

We shall here offer three examples of performers who use their prostheses or wheelchairs with performative meaning, and whose work is in certain aspects related to an object theatre where »the untransformed ›thing‹ is explored, either in itself (to find its inherent movement/physical properties) or to use as a character/symbol in a story« (Foley 2014). These examples feature artists who do not necessarily refer to puppets in their work, and who may be connected to the performing arts in a broad sense of the term. Nevertheless, the work of these artists with prostheses and wheelchairs puts these objects at the centre of possible readings of their performances. Through their art, they engage in a dialogue with their physical characteristics, their disabilities, their prostheses and their skills, giving these new cultural, aesthetic and performative meanings.

Mari Katayama is a Japanese artist born with tibial hemimelia who chose to have her legs amputated at the age of nine. In performances like the TED Talk *My way of conveying feelings beyond words*, she stages her relationship with her own prostheses, in particular by means of a presentation of the act of preparing them, putting them on and/or taking them off. The TED Talk itself is dedicated to a reflection on Katayama's artistic journey through the discovery of personal ways of communicating through her body and her prostheses (cf. Katayama 2015). In Katayama's work, which includes a series of self-portraits called *Shadow Puppets* (cf. Katayama 2016), the idea of the relationship between ›puppet‹ and ›puppeteer‹, or between artist and

objects, is questioned through choices that make the artist herself an object. One of Katayama's lectures is called *My Body as Material*; in her artistic work, Katayama uses herself in the same way as any other material by hand-stitching, staging and photographing reproductions of her unusual body. In the conference abstract we read that:

In order to fill a deep gap between her own understanding of self and physicality and contemporary society's simplistic categorizations, Katayama began to explore her identity by objectifying her body in her art. (Katayama 2019)

Lila Derridj is a French dancer, performer and choreographer who also trained as an architect. In her work as a choreographer and dancer, she tries to propose a different idea of ›body‹, setting out from the peculiarities of her mobility, of her relationship with her body and of her perceptions (cf. Derridj 2016). In her solo *Une Bouche* (which is a sort of condensation of her experiences), her presentation of prostheses and other devices on stage plays a very important role (Derridj 2017). Derridj separates from her prostheses and wheelchair before starting the main part of the choreography, suggesting a need on her part to get rid of them and to give them a symbolic death in order for her to start dancing. But the emphasis that Derridj gives in her performance to these acts of separation itself underlines the presence and the gaze of the wheelchair and prostheses on the whole choreography.

In his writings on the *Übermarionette*, the British actor, set designer and director Edward Gordon Craig emphasised the evolution of puppets from ritual and the representation of other dimensions (cf. Allain/Harvie 2014: 239–240). If we look at the introductory part of the performances by Mari Katayama and Lila Derridj, it is interesting to note how their acts of removing or changing their prostheses, during or before their choreography or talk, seem to acquire a ritual value. These are not merely gestures that show them actively taking possession of their prostheses, explicitly making these artists the directors or puppeteers of their movements and destinies on stage; these acts also prepare the performers and spectators for an encounter in a Grotowskian

sense (cf. Grotowski 1975: 55–59) in which they together enter a new, shared dimension.

The third example comes from the work of David Toole, a British dancer, actor, dance and theatre teacher who was born without legs. In his work as a dancer, his wheelchair is no aid to limiting the consequences of a disability, but a vector of artistic meanings defined by the performer at the core of his theatrical and choreographic actions. In this way, the performative perspective on his wheelchair changes completely. It is also important to note that Toole does not speak of the wheelchair in terms of an object at the service of his choreographic work, but as something that gives the idea of having a partner on wheels in one's own body (cf. Di Meco 2007: 181). This theme brings us back to the idea of negotiation that we posit here is as important for David Toole as it is for Mari Katayama and Lila Derridj.

In his paper »The Co-Presence and Ontological Ambiguity of the Puppet«, the French researcher and theatre director Paul Piris writes that »the puppeteer and the puppet appear co-present because spectators have the impression that they are witnessing two distinct subjects. This distinction results from the apparent presence of two bodies and two gazes on stage« (Piris 2015: 38). Partners like Toole's wheelchair and Derridj's or Katayama's artificial prostheses obviously have no eyes, but as we mentioned with respect to Derridj's performance, they may have other ways of giving the impression of seeing or observing. Moreover, to suggest in a ›normate‹ way (cf. Garland-Thomson 1997: 8) to the audience's imagination the possibility that an inanimate object might be able to see may not necessarily be the only way to suggest the possibility of its subjectivity. One interesting consequence of considering the intersections between puppeteering and works such as those of Katayama, Derridj and Toole can be to question the requirements for perceiving an object as a performing subject.

If, according to Ziemer, bodies are »vulnerable places« (Ziemer 2008: 11), then the bodies of actors with visible disabilities are at the same time places of memory (cf. *ibid.*); prostheses visualise the loss or absence of body parts in the sense of a presence through absence; and bodies may also conceal invisible disabilities or pain. While performances by people with disabilities play with the visibility and invisibility

of stigma, and disability does not necessarily have to be visible to the audience, it is not possible for performers to achieve a ›neutral‹ body. The ostensible goal of training as an actor – to achieve a neutral, permeable body, and to discard the phenomenal body – is impossible (cf. Sandahl 2005: 255). Some disabled performers use their unique body along with wheelchairs or crutches as bodily extensions in a way that challenges concepts of an integral, stable or fixed body. Instead, theirs is staged as a ›fluid‹ body that is constantly in a process of becoming.

The US-American performer, musician, visual artist and author Nomy Lamm, who describes herself as »bad, fat ass, Jew, dyke amputee« (cf. Schmidt 2020: 168), says she had one leg amputated and replaced by a prosthesis at the age of three years due to a disease that prevents bone growth (cf. Schmidt 2020: 168). This experience has had an impact on her work as a political activist and artist. Lamm, who is committed to fighting discrimination against the overweight and began her career as a musician in the queer-core scene in Olympia, Washington, is a member of the performance collective Sins Invalid in San Francisco. Sins Invalid deals with the themes of disability, sexuality/gender and racism. Their works are both political manifestations and intermedia art performances (cf. Schmidt 2020: 168–170).

Lamm uses her body as the vehicle of her self-staging, which is a mixture of burlesque show, American body art, feminist performance art and multimedia art situated between video art, performance art and music. In the 2009 annual Sins Invalid performance, which was shown at the web-screening performance *Sins Invalid: An unshamed claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility* 2012 in Chicago, she appears as a fantasy figure. Dressed in a skin-tight, glittering body, she sits enthroned on a huge pile of human bones that represent the tentacles of an octopus and at the same time refer to the prosthetic leg of the actress. By a process of aestheticisation, she turns herself and her body into an artwork. The aestheticisation of the body as a vehicle for play focuses on the notion of beauty, which Siebers describes in *Disability Aesthetics* (cf. Siebers 2010: 20).

At the 2008 annual Sins Invalid Performance at Brava Theatre in San Francisco, Lamm sits as a diva on a bar stool in a red gala dress and sings a ballad with her deep, blues voice. Suddenly, she takes off her

prosthesis, revealing the stump of her leg, and uses the prosthesis as a percussion instrument in a polemical reinterpretation. It is a play not only with the body, but one in which the body itself becomes the playing site. Plessner's much-cited distinction between ›being a body‹ and ›having a body‹ takes on a new dimension, since parts of the body are here actually put on and taken off like pieces of clothing (cf. Plessner 1941/1970: 43).

This staging of the body shares similarities with the work of the British performance artist Mat Fraser. His *Beauty and the Beast*, performed together with the burlesque dancer Julie Atlas Muz, picks up on an iconography of the grotesque in the tension between »a narrative of the marvellous to a narrative of the deviant« (Garland-Thomson 1996: 3). At the beginning of the show, the silhouette of a naked man with bull horns appears behind the curtain. This Pan-like figure moves rhythmically to the beat of the music, parts of the body bob, a dark voice murmurs the fairy-tale words ›Once upon a time...‹, and the performer literally lets the covers fall. The audience is already in the middle of the performance, which can be described as a mixture of burlesque, freak show and poetic love story. The exaggerated emphasis on individual body parts is reinforced by the shadow play from which new body images develop, as in Bakhtin's description of the grotesque:

The grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world. [...] This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus. (Bakhtin 1968: 317)

This process results in the disposal of the body in an imitated sexual act by the two performers at the end of the performance. In *Beauty and the Beast*, as in Nomy Lamb's prosthesis discussion, the disabled body of the performer with its openings becomes a bodily drama – a body that is in the process of becoming, to the point of its externalisation. This brings us to another parallel between object theatre and

disability theatre: in both, bodies are to be experienced on stage in a process of becoming, which takes place over the duration of a performance.

Man anam ke rostam bovad pahlavan / I owe Rostam my fame by the French-Iranian performer Ali Moini (Company Selon L'Heur), which was shown at the international Figuretheaterfestival in Basel 2019, is an interaction between a human performer and a non-human machine, a steel frame with scraps of meat. The huge machine connects the performer's body to a life-size puppet via hundreds of threads. When he begins to dance with his double in a gentle manner, Ali Moini animates the puppet by animating his own body through an idiosyncratic dance that he has to perform in order to guide the puppet correctly.

The title in Farsi means »Through Rostam I have come to my fame«. The figure of the Persian mythical hero Rostam here refers to an Iranian proverb that says we owe our own success to our ability to imitate another talented person. But the proverb also means that through this moment of appropriation, one has become a little bit of the person one has robbed. Moini's work is a choreographic reflection of appropriation and adaptation, of the possibility of being able to view one's own movements and intentions from the outside.

The puppet is his alter ego, but in the course of the performance it becomes unclear who animates whom, who brings whom to life. The avatar, whose form was initially identifiable as a reflection of the human body, mutates more and more into a fragmented, dissymmetric something in which the limbs change, take on new forms, and are only vaguely recognisable as an integral body or double of a human body scheme.

This spectacle of the fluid body in the process of becoming on stage, animated by a counterpart, is reminiscent of works by disabled performers who animate their prostheses and stage them as grotesque body drama or spectacle.

Both puppetry performances and disabled performers on stage deal with the issue of agency and body concepts. The examples discussed reveal – albeit not conclusively – different perspectives on disability and puppetry that provide new insights into both disability

performance and the puppetry discourse. The dialogue between these two fields, also with regard to other aspects of object theatre such as the cyborg discourse, which cannot be examined here, has only recently begun, with events such as the *Broken Puppet: A Symposium on Puppetry, Disability and Health* in the United Kingdom (with three editions since 2017). It also offers potential for further research.

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