

Cariad Astles: The return of the puppetress/sorceress. Feminism and ecology.

In: Uneins – Désuni – At odds. Identitätsentwürfe im Figurentheater.

Hg. v. Laurette Burgholzer, Beate Hochholdingler-Reiterer.

Berlin: Alexander 2021 (itw : im dialog 5), S. 206–215.

Cariad Astles

(Royal Central School of Speech & Drama, University of London)

The return of the puppetress/sorceress

Feminism and ecology

Terminologies of puppet theatre

For many years, puppet theatre was virtually an invisible art form in scholarship and academia, with few researchers considering it worthy of much attention. Now that it has, thankfully, begun to take its place within serious academic theatre research, I have noticed how scholars have begun to create new expressions or terminologies in order to try and express the very specific and detailed act of animation and to better understand the creative, cognitive, affective and relational processes that are engaged in puppetry. Puppetry, as a discrete and particular art form, requires its own etymologies and terminologies. We have seen, for instance, Paul Piris's notion of »manipulacting« (cf. Piris 2014) and Alissa Mello's concept of »transembodiment« (cf. Mello 2016). In this article, I would like to bring another of these to the table: the act of »puppetressing«, which I will proceed to define and articulate.

I have been inspired by the idea expressed by the Swiss journalist Mona Chollet, in relation to contemporary feminism, that »magic fights back« (Chollet 2018a): in other words, that contemporary feminism and, for the purposes of this article, puppetry, are returning to the figure of the witch or sorceress. Chollet's contention is that if we are told by those in power that the reasonable perception of the world is that it is right and just, despite evidence to the contrary, reason itself is thrown into doubt. She suggests that we return to embodied, instinctive knowledge drawn from feminist and ecological thinking; and reclaims the figure of the witch as a magical and powerful figure who stands against patriarchy and ideologies of hierarchy. I

suggest, drawing on Chollet's ideas, that puppetry is returning to ecological thinking in the form of contemporary animism and moving more towards a relational encounter than a technical domination of material. The ›puppetress‹ is a puppeteer who engages with material through an eco-conscious, ecofeminist and egalitarian approach to performance, in order to discover and meet, rather than to manipulate and dominate. I use the term puppetressing since much of this work has been led by woman puppeteers who seek animistic encounters in order to enter other worlds, rather than to display technical mastery. The term puppetress is ungendered. Any performer working in this way can be a puppetress. I choose to use the term knowing that it may be controversial; I am mindful of similar discussions around the use, or not, of the term ›actress‹ (cf. Pritchard 2011). The term is used as a conscious, non-diminutive, deeply feminist and ecological way of approaching puppetry. In the following article, I will use the term ›she‹ to refer to all puppeteers working in this way.

Puppetry, technique, and ecofeminism

A number of contemporary puppeteers – many of them female – are increasingly eschewing traditional modes of viewing the relationship between the puppet and the puppeteer, and instead embrace egalitarian relationships with the inanimate, focusing on the intangible and mystical nature of matter. It can be said that feminism arrived late to puppetry. When setting up a symposium on women in puppet theatre in 2013, I was surprised to receive a death threat from an anonymous person who was outraged that such a discussion should be permitted. This alarming reaction made me ponder how Western puppetry has struggled to assert itself on account of its marginal status, and has for this reason on occasion tried to align itself with high art. By this I mean that in certain contexts, including its endeavours to procure state and financial support, puppetry has sought to establish itself within the canon of male-dominated Western theatre. Technique, skill, power and manipulation have therefore been important issues in the process of establishing it.

›Technique‹ in puppetry performance is usually recognised as one of the markers of excellence. It relates to the way in which puppets are ›manipulated‹. This refers to their material structure, their mechanism and their anatomy. Trainee puppeteers in schools around the world focus on the acquisition of dexterous manual skills in moving puppets of a particular style to indicate movement, emotion, impulse, thought and relationships. I am not challenging the value of excellent performance skills here. Duda Paiva, Stephen Mottram, Ronnie Burkett and Neville Tranter – all them highly regarded puppeteers – demonstrate superb technique and manipulation skills. But to use the term ›manipulation‹ still suggests control and dominance. Instead, I propose an ›approach‹ to puppetry that foregrounds ›spiritual animism‹ in performance rather than technique. This means an intention to recognise the deep, honouring, ecological and spiritful belief that consciousness, agency and life ›already‹ exist within nature, living things and matter itself. I therefore suggest that the word ›manipulation‹ should no longer be used in relation to puppetry performance. Increasingly, puppeteers are engaging with matter, especially natural matter, to perform alongside it, and not to dominate or manipulate it, but instead to investigate it, share it, attempt to understand it, and highlight its magical and intangible qualities.

Puppetry and power

Power is another key concept in relation to the way puppetry is viewed. The puppet has frequently been seen as a metaphor for the powerful, terrifying or omnipotent figure; or, equally, the manipulated, vulnerable or powerless (cf. Fleury/Sermon 2019). It plays with the concept of power relations, using Weber's definition of power (1922) that exists between individuals, in order to coerce or control. Foucault (2019) suggests that resistance to power relations in fact reproduces and strengthens the norm. A puppet, for example, by challenging and breaking free of its operator, enacts resistance to being dominated by its manipulator, but in breaking free finds it impossible to be animated without that same manipulator, thus reinforcing its state of dependence.

In recent years, however, a growing number of ecofeminist puppeteers has tackled questions of power, material and the relationship between bodies in ways that fundamentally unsettle the patriarchy. The puppeteer's relationship to animism therefore connects deeply to concerns raised within ›deep ecology‹ theory, in which the world, its environment and all living beings within it are understood as deeply and intrinsically interconnected, and in which the world is constructed through ›deep consciousness‹ that is not predicated on anthropomorphic perceptions of reason, logic or individuation. Identity is seen as something changeable and something shared. The question of power relations is therefore challenged within this mode of thinking.

Puppetry and the body

A third aspect of much contemporary puppetry is the relationship with the body of the puppet. It is common for the puppet to be presented as a grotesque body, sometimes emerging from the body of the puppeteer, variously prompting revulsion and ambivalence. To have a body emerging from oneself can be seen as something negative, because freedom is still predicated on the idea of the individual, separate body. The puppet bodies that emerge are shrieking, challenging, forceful, sometimes puking and engulfing, often needy or dominant. These extra bodies/identities thus clearly enact abjection, as defined by Julia Kristeva (1982): that is, the horror that is experienced when the self is confronted with the distinction between self and other. The abject body, according to Kristeva, disturbs reason and represents taboo elements of the self. Being faced with the abject body, the puppeteer experiences trauma through the experience of confrontation of the disturbed body which is outside the established order.

The work done by contemporary women puppeteers, however, suggests that the experiential, phenomenological and affective qualities of matter are more important than power relations or abject bodies. Matter is seen as a co-explorer and partner in processes that do not situate the human at the top of the hierarchical structure, or in trauma at the discovery of other identities or bodies, but as interconnected

and dependent upon matter as matter is dependent upon them for its stories. Uncertainty is not seen as terrifying, but as part of an ecological journey. Some of these women puppeteers include Ilka Schönbein (Theater Meschugge), Magali Chouinard, Yngvild Aspeli (Plexus Polaire) and Élise Vigneron (Théâtre de l'Entrouvert).

Puppetressing as mediation

Women puppeteers in some cultures have been gatekeepers at the threshold of the liminal animate/inanimate world. Women puppeteers in Nigeria play with gender fluidity in a ritual practice which turns female puppets into men and vice versa. In Côte d'Ivoire, female puppeteers communicate with the otherworld via puppets with their feet pointing backwards; in China, the Himalayas and Indonesia, women prepare puppets and effigies for funeral rites (cf. Jurkowski/Pawlik 2009). Consciousness in these rituals is teased and welcomed into the puppet through a series of respectful rituals that invoke the power and potential of animistic matter. In ritual puppetry, the puppet cannot be tamed, controlled or ›manipulated‹, but rather ›inhabits‹ the matter, puppet, object or environment with powerful and self-regulating ›anima‹. The ›anima‹ of matter is therefore not something which is determined and bestowed from outside, in the manner of a puppeteer giving life to the puppet, but which is both invoked and recognised. This ritual approach to puppetry is one that is used by contemporary women puppeteers. To return to the stance of Chollet mentioned above, puppeteers are returning to the mystical in matter, rather than to reason.

This approach considers that matter has ›consciousness‹, ›purpose‹ and ›intention‹ within a world in which humans, animals, natural phenomena and objects are deeply entwined and inter-dependent, and that this consciousness is part of the mystical and magical world of animistic belief. The relationship with matter is perceived as uncertain, and this uncertainty is viewed as part of the positive grotesque, rather than horrific or dangerous. Animistic belief responds to a plurality and diversity of consciousnesses and identities that are dependent upon each other. It is thus an ecological belief.

The French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty refers to consciousness as being aware of one's body in *connection* with other bodies: (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 141–143). This extended consciousness involves the perception of ›everything else‹ and the registration of the individual self as part of a connected self. Rather than diminishing the autonomous identity, we find that it is strengthened in terms of the network of sense-making in collaboration with everything else. In this enmeshed, relational world, therefore, there can be no hierarchies or closed experiences, since everything is mediated by the ongoing nature of perception and experience. The puppetress does not see herself as a dominant figure, manipulating forms that emerge on stage, nor does she see herself as a sole, lonely figure dominated by terrifying forces beyond her control. Instead, the puppetress is experienced as being ›at the service‹ of the forms that appear alongside her. Her consciousness is that of interbeing. She consciously and deliberately invokes her other selves and other, equal selves in the performance space through her interaction with matter, nature and herself, and in so doing invokes the intangible, mysterious, sacred aspect of life. Magic therefore fights back in its insistence that the mystical, ecological, animistic relationship with performed matter is sacred; the human performer approaches the sacred matter with a view to stepping across the shared threshold rather than completing the story. I will now offer some brief examples of this work.

Puppetresses

In *Nomad Soul*, the Canadian puppetress Magali Chouinard goes on a metaphorical and literal journey in which she explores different aspects of herself as expressed in the natural world. She draws directly on the relationship between female identity, nature and interbeing in her work. Her performance emphasises that the self (the microcosm) exists only in relation with nature (the macrocosm) and is a deep exploration of the interior world in relation to the natural environment. The performance has a dreamlike quality and is based on Chouinard's own exploration of indigenous spirituality and the quest



Magali Chouinard, Nomad Soul, Guadalajara, Mexico, Luna Morenas festival, 2019. © Halejandro Cortés. Photograph courtesy of Magali Chouinard.

for consciousness. The self, therefore, which is semi-autobiographical in this work, is only seen as something that exists as it is manifested amongst the workings of the natural world. Here Merleau-Ponty's concept of core and extended consciousness can be seen to be deeply entwined in Chouinard's performance; the interior world of multiple selves only exists in relation to how it is expressed, both multiply and differently, in a series of ongoing and always-changing encounters with material.

Similarly, Élise Vigneron of Théâtre de l'Entrouvert asks us to enter the liminal spaces of the puppetress in order to understand and respect the nature of material. In her work, the audience is invited into an intimate experience that allows them to journey internally through a sensory experience. Vigneron's aim is to evoke changing, ephemeral landscapes and to get audiences to consider the frontiers between worlds. In this she deliberately evokes the ritual role of the puppetress from tradition: audiences are invited to seek knowledge, wisdom and understanding from their internal encounters with other worlds.



Théâtre de l'Enrouvert, Animisme, Vallée de l'Aigue Brun, France, 2020.

© *Elise Vigneron.*

She is fascinated by the space between states and worlds: visible and non-visible, animated and non-animated, shadows and light. There are strong resemblances to the process and intention shown in Chouinard's work: Vigneron's piece *Traversées/Fragments* presents a female character in search of her own identity; puppets and images, effigies of humans, appear fleetingly to suggest the ephemerality of identity and existence. Oneiric imagery leads the figures to a series of concrete ›thresholds‹; at these thresholds, shown through light, the figures hesitate, err, pass through, appear and disappear in a series of visual questions about presence, non-presence, story and self.

The last of the three puppetresses I will mention here is perhaps the best-known. Ilka Schönbein of Theater Meschugge uses her own body as the canvas for the puppet figures which emerge from within and around her body. Schönbein's temporary puppet bodies are welcomed, however painful, as parts of a whole, multiple, diverse, complex, shared identity. She often uses European fairy tales as starting points to open up aspects of identity that can cause pain: birthing, ageing, death, birth and other rites of passage. It is, in the words of

Janni Younge, only the »interdependent body« that can be the »source of life for both the puppeteer and the content of her work« (Younge 2019). This interdependence is the central feature of Schönbein's work. The idea of control is an anachronism in her work; it is irrelevant.

Puppetressing therefore proposes that the body in all its manifestations exists within and amongst nature: dangerous at times, a temporary home for spirits, ancestors and nature-filled powers; a positive force. Being a »witch«, as described by Chollet, means to embrace the need for and validity of the in-between space. It is feminist theatre in the narrative of complex existence and coexistence and as it challenges narratives of power, unitary identity, manipulation and anthropocentrism. The puppetress locates the puppeteer as mediator between life and death, between human, animal and other matter. The puppetress also engages with matter and material in order to better understand her own consciousness, her own being, her own identity. She locates herself amongst and amidst matter and material to communicate with and through it as a means to share, ecologically, her experience as part of the tapestry of eco-experience.

Bibliography

- Chollet, Mona (2018a): »Magic Fights Back«, *Le Monde diplomatique*, November 2018: <https://mondediplo.com/2018/11/16magic-fights-back> (Last accessed 21 July 2019).
- Chollet, Mona (2018b): *Sorcières. La puissance invaincue des femmes*, Paris: Éditions La Découverte.
- Chouinard, Magali, »Nomad Soul«, <https://www.magalichouinard.com/nomad-soul.html> (Last accessed 13 February 2020).
- Fleury, Raphaële/Sermon, Julie (eds.) (2019): *Marionnettes et pouvoir. Censures, propagandes, résistances*, Montpellier: Deuxième Époque.
- Foucault, Michel (2019): *Power*, in: James B. Faubion (ed.), *The essential works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 3, London: Penguin.
- Jurkowski, Henryk/Pawlik, Jaček (2009): »Rites«, in: Henryk Jurkowski/Thieri Foulc (eds.), *Encyclopédie Mondiale des arts de la Marionnette*, Montpellier: UNIMA/Entretemps, pp. 589–594.
- Kristeva, Julia (1982): *Powers of Horror*, New York: Columbia University Press.

- Mello, Alissa (2016): »Trans-embodiment: embodied practice in puppet and material performance«, in: *A Journal of the Performing Arts*, vol. 21, Issue 5, pp. 49–58.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1968): *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Piris, Paul (2014): »The co-presence and ontological ambiguity of the puppet«, in: Dasia Posner/Claudia Orenstein/John Bell (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, London: Routledge, pp. 30–42.
- Pritchard, Stephen (2011): »The readers' editor on... Actor or actress?«, www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2011/sep/25/readers-editor-actor-or-actress (Last accessed 4 January 2020).
- Schönbein, Ilka, »Theater Meschugge«, <http://theatermeschugge.com/?lang=en> (Last accessed 14 February 2020).
- Vigneron, Élise, »Anywhere«, <https://lentrouvert.com/> (Last accessed 5 March 2020).
- Weber, Max (1922): *Economy and Society*, Oakland: University of California Press.
- Younge, Janni (2019): »Reconfiguring Being: Puppetry and Perspectives on Being Human Explored Through the Work of Ilka Schönbein«, in: *Critical Stages* June 2019, Issue 19, www.critical-stages.org/19/reconfiguring-being/ (Last accessed 2 December 2019).

Shows

- Magali Chouinard (2017): *Nomad Soul*. Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes de Charleville-Mézières.
- Élise Vigneron/Théâtre de l'Entrouvert (2009). *Traversées*. Théâtre de la Marionnette Paris.

Redaktion und Druck wurden unterstützt durch die Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften, die Philosophisch-historische Fakultät der Universität Bern und das Institut für Theaterwissenschaft der Universität Bern

Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften
Académie suisse des sciences humaines et sociales
Accademia svizzera di scienze umane e sociali
Academia svizra da ciencias umanas e socialas
Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences



u^b

u
**UNIVERSITÄT
BERN**

© by Alexander Verlag Berlin 2021

Alexander Wewerka, Postfach 19 18 24, 14008 Berlin

info@alexander-verlag.com | www.alexander-verlag.com

Alle Rechte vorbehalten. Jede Form der Vervielfältigung, auch der auszugsweisen, nur mit Genehmigung des Verlags.

Die vorliegende elektronische Version wurde auf Bern Open Publishing (<http://bop.unibe.ch/itwid>) publiziert. Es gilt die Lizenz Creative Commons Namensnennung – Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen, Version 4.0 (CC BY-SA 4.0). Der Lizenztext ist einsehbar unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de>

ISBN (Druckversion): 978-3-89581-565-2

ISBN (elektronische Version): 978-3-89581-572-0

DOI: 10.16905/itwid.2021.17