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Wood and Waterfall: Puppetry training and its anthropology

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Wood and Waterfall

Puppetry training and its anthropology

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PREMISES AND PARADOXES

Little has been written in English about training for the puppeteer, and what has been written focuses predominantly on understanding the nature of the puppet, not that of the puppeteer, or concentrates on exercises and techniques. During the twentieth century, the pioneering Russian director Sergei Obraztsov suggested experimenting with the qualities of 'puppet-ness' (in contrast to the puppet as imitator of the human) (Obraztsov 1938: 78). The Swedish puppeteer and director Michael Meschke later elaborated a 'grammar' for puppetry action, through dividing and classifying types of training techniques. These included exercises such as the dead point, which he referred to as the state of concentration necessary in order to initiate clearly defined action, achieved through four clear steps: emptying the mind, abstracting the thought, focusing on the immediate task and initiating the task with passion (Meschke 1988: 54); he also analysed different categories of looks and leans, extensions, counterbalance, rhythmic and balance exercises and patterns of speed and focus engineered to develop the dynamic potential of the puppet (Meschke 1988: 48–68). Puppetry training, however, clearly goes beyond technical exercises (although these are very useful) and can be considered as a deep approach that seeks to understand the basic essence of the art of the puppeteer and their approach towards the animated object.

It is apparent that the practice of puppetry is inherently the practice of paradoxes. These paradoxes differentiate puppetry from live theatre since, generally speaking, actors wish to be seen and to have the audiences identify them as performing presences within a dramatic context. Puppet theatre presents us with a wholly different set of stylistic intentions: the puppeteer's intention is generally not to be seen, or if seen, as is usually now the case in contemporary puppetry, then not perceived as the primary focus of attention. Despite the puppeteers' so-called scenic 'invisibility', signified semiotically in contemporary theatre through devices such as the wearing of 'blacks', covering the head with caps, not making eye contact with the audience, and so on, they are required by the dramatic purposes of the performance, to generate and transmit huge amounts of energy towards the inanimate figure, material or thing, to create a sense of presence beyond their own bodies. This is the first paradox, and consequently the main question for consideration here: what is the training of a sensibility that requires the performer to locate their focus of expression outside the body while keeping the source of energy *within* the body?

A further paradox concerns the presence, absence or projection of ego on stage: how can the puppeteer successfully work with a sense of self while serving something else? Lastly, for the purposes of this article (in the Western context, notwithstanding the claims of animism, shamanism and so on), how can the puppeteer work with opposing concepts of inanimate

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