

Doctoral School of the University of Theatre and Film

Three-dimensional heroes

A few dramaturgical matters of adaptation in contemporary puppet theatre

Thesis of Dissertation

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THESIS

As puppetry dramaturge, I had had to face the fact already at the start of my career that there are hardly any or no canonised texts or pieces meant for the puppet stage. In Hungary, there are currently 12 puppet theatres with a permanent building and many independent ones, producing some 2-5 premieres per season each. This means that an incredible amount of puppet show pieces is needed every season. A negligible part is based on original scripts (that is, new scripts expressly for the puppetry stage), a small part consists of puppetry adaptations of actor theatre pieces, and the majority are tale, short story or novel adaptations prepared for a given show.

In the last case, the person responsible for the adaptation has several options:

- To do the adaptation himself, in close cooperation with the crew, that is, to take an active part in the workflow as script writer
- To invite a contemporary writer or dramaturge to do the adaptation, cooperating with the latter from the moment of writing the synopsis to assert the puppetry aspects of the text
- To revise (adapt and streamline) an existing adaptation to match the puppetry concept defined jointly with the other creators.

This is the reason why ever new adaptations are made of even the most popular stories. Sometimes good and even excellent texts are used on the puppetry stage but, with only a few exceptions, the “products” do not survive, they are not presented elsewhere, with a different director’s concept.

This is attributable to what is probably the most typical genre characteristic of contemporary puppetry: the amalgamation of the contributions of the director, the designer(s) and the writer.

Tales and puppets

Whether one chooses a folk or a literary tale, familiarity with the various science-of-tale trends will be particularly important for him. For, the dramatic adaptation of a tale often raises the same questions as the puppeteer will encounter during his professional activity: Does, can, the protagonist change, or is his/her character constant? Is he an independent personality or the embodiment of an archetype? How can the personality changes of puppets be expressed? How can an archetype be converted into a stage character? The first part of the dissertation gives a summary of the basic results of tale science that can be helpful for a puppet dramaturge. The process of making an adaptation is described in the third chapter taking the example of a popular hungarian folktale, *The Princess, Who Saw Everything*.

Human and/or puppet?

Therefore, one should ask right at the time of choosing the tale what the puppet can add to it, will it ascend to a new level through puppetry or should it be staged simply with live actors. Once a satisfactory answer is given to the first question, we can focus on the next problem: Should the manipulator be visible and, if so, who is he?

The paradigm change that took place in the second half of the 20th century in European puppetry has led to the gradual replacement of the puppet show with the manipulator behind the screen by the visible puppeteer and his puppet, that is, productions relying also on relationship of the manipulator and the manipulated. This change in form has brought about a radical change in dramaturgy and text treatment. Today's shows seldom aspire at offering a perfect illusion: most productions use a mixed technique and the manipulators are almost always visible. The relationship of the puppet and the puppeteer is of a kind that affects also the adaptation. The same story may have lots of different aspects, depending on which agents appear as manipulators or as puppets.

One of the fundamental issues of modern puppetry dramaturgy is the simultaneous presence of the manipulator and the object, the actors and the puppets, their relationship and interaction on stage. The person making the adaptation must decide who the animators are, what type of power they have over their puppets, whether they have control over the story or are parts of a story themselves, whether there is any communication between the mover and the moved and is so,

of what kind/in what way. Do the puppeteer and the puppet make up a character jointly or do they have different roles? What puppeteer-puppet relationship does the selected story suggest?

In the fourth chapter of my dissertation, I briefly describe the most frequent dramaturgical answers in the context of puppeteer-puppet relationship in the past fifteen years.

Three case studies

The second part of the dissertation contains the analysis of three productions, which were basically influenced by the chosen technique and the relationship between the mover and the moved.

The fifth chapter introduces the adaptation of *Amalia*, a contemporary fairy tale by Ildikó Boldizsár, using traditional motifs, speaking to children and adult audience at the same time. *Amalia* is a witch, and her function in the fairy tale is in contrast with her personality. The production of Mesebolt Puppet Theater uses this dualism in several ways: while puppets demonstrate the roles in the tale, puppeteers play an everyday love-triangle story. The production tells a tale for children and a sad, well-known story for adults at the same time.

The sixth chapter is an analysis of the puppet-version of *Csongor and Tünde*, by Mihály Vörösmarty. The production of National Theater underlines the motifs of the fairy tale and shows up the two levels of the original play: tale and reality, dream and wakefulness, body and soul can be present at the same time. The questions of life and death, mortality and immortality are pictured in a very plastic form of the puppets and their manipulators.

The seventh chapter gives an example of making a puppet-adaptation for young people. While puppet theatre for adults has a tradition in Hungary, puppet productions for 13-18 year old young people are extremely rare. There is no continuance between the puppet shows for children and adult audiences. A puppet production for this age group has to break through the wall of disapproval and prove that puppetry is not childish.

A good puppet production for young people has to serve the following requirements:

1. It's based on a story that touches the target group, speaks about young people's problems, feelings, everyday life,

2. Uses the puppets in a progressive way, demonstrating that contemporary puppetry is way more interesting, than they could imagine.

The chapter focuses on Budapest Puppet Theatre's production *Nothing*, based on the popular danish YA novel by Janne Teller.

Theory and practice

Theory of writing an adaptation for a puppet theatre is inseparable from practice, therefore three scrips are enclosed to the dissertation: *The Princess, Who Saw Everything, Amalia* and *Nothing*. They are milestones in my career as puppetry dramaturge: an adaptation of a folktale, a contemporary fairy tale and a novel for young adults.

The chosen texts can also demonstrate that by putting the relationship of the puppet and the manipulator in a dramaturgic system, the texts being produced will be tighter, more closely linked to the director's concept. The chosen puppetry technique impacts on the treatment of the text, the dramaturgy and the interpretation from the start so, ideally, the director, designer and the writer must cooperate closely from the moment the idea is born. One of the main merits of a puppetry script is to take into account and what is more to regard as the principal aspect the specifics of the chosen puppetry technique, and to integrate it already at the level of the dramaturgy.