

University of Theatre and Film Arts

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No One Escapes!

Social, sexual and transcendent frustration

in the European glove puppet theatre

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THESISES

Introduction

Studies of glove puppet theatres at fairgrounds – similarly to other forms of popular culture – in most of the cases remained descriptive instead of being analytical. Until recent decades research has often been driven by a kind of infatuated rhetoric, in particular in Eastern Europe, and the examination of the actual available material has been swept aside by the "purely ethnographic interest" and interpreted as "folklore", as frozen folk art, in the theatrical approach. Its research has become the agenda of folklore and collection, and its carnival potential has been neutralised.

My paper is an attempt at interpretation, throughout which, by using examples from Europe, I try to look at the glove puppet theatre as an element of a particular cultural system and not as an autonomous phenomenon. I examine its position taken vis-à-vis high culture, with special attention to the stages of its becoming a genre of children. Referring to various authors and presentations I review the "fossilisation" of the texts of glove puppet theatres and the reasons which might have led to stigmatising its smooth violence, feeling natural in the street context, and sometimes frivolous comedy as immoral and "damaging" in the pedagogical environment of children's theatre. I try to trace the changes in its ambivalent humour and ease, and its often offensive or paternalistic relation to women, as well as to the transcendent and earthly power.

I also examine how puppet theatre was looking for its niche, using the conflict between profane and saint, alien and kindred as its buoyancy, and how all this forms the basis of puppet traditions in Europe, mainly in the Italian peninsula, which serves as the springboard of the whole European puppet art in fairground performances. The other determining area is the English glove puppet theatre, as it is the accurate summary of the entertaining, but perhaps also the bravest, role the genre undertakes as social criticism. Also, the Russian *Petrushka* is a peculiar example of how the ruling power – in this case the Soviet regime – transformed, absorbed and dissolved urban culture and then popular forms of urban mass entertainment. The relation of the individual puppeteers and censorship is probably the most apparent in the case of the Portuguese *Dom Roberto* and the Hungarian *Vitéz László*, in the frames of the

euphemistically called "soft" fascism, and "the merriest barrack" enclosed by the iron curtain: when a totalitarian regime sneaks even behind the puppet theatre, where it forms, or rather deforms the screens and curtains and the playtime.

Pulcinella, swinging between the endpoints of the temper-scale, taking various shapes and living longer than anybody else, sweeps over the countries of Europe with irresistible energy – not leaving us out, either. My aim is to present the stages of her career of varying success in all cases through outstanding European contemporary authors. In order to hold together the structure of the material that strives for scattering owing to its playful nature and as the viewpoints of my analysis may be excellently demonstrated in relation to a performance still kept run in Hungary today in the Hungarian language, from time to time I will refer to the play of Pályi János entitled *Órajáték*, as a kind of guideline. Tradition and modernity, marionette and glove puppet, actor, animator, and the performer who keeps responding to the audience, improvises and plays on the European quality level, all go hand in hand in that performance. At the same time, the play is an emblematic example of squeezing formerly outdoors subversive genres into privacy, that is, between four walls, and of being pushed back in the well-groomed circumstances of the "safety" of mass art in permanent theatres.

In my paper, although naturally I rely on some works of theatre and dramatic theory of fundamental significance and unavoidable to refer to in research, both in respect of terminology and in the structure of analysis, I proceed with my research by highlighting the *practical* side of glove puppeting, as the most typical puppet technique at fairgrounds, corresponding to the specificities of the material. As a practising artist, I may not undertake to reveal such correlations that are way beyond my limited knowledge of social sciences, but I shall regard my experience as a performer as part of the research. This way, from the perspective of a different vantage point I may be able to shed light on such details that would have skipped the attention of a traditional researcher. This endeavour also parallels with the contemporary European tendencies: creative artists working with puppets, today usually entering this line of profession with a higher education diploma, as opposed to their early mostly illiterate predecessors, aspire to deliberately reconstruct the traditions, which from the knowledge of the phases of puppet preparation and technical skills ranges to the raising of contemporary trends into the context of theatre history.

When it comes to the roots of fairground glove puppet theatres and the early phase of their formation, the research is made somewhat difficult by the fact that this genre is built on improvisation and spontaneity, consequently, the written material we can rely on is scarce.

In the demarcated “arenas” of fairgrounds, the overworked spectators, numb with fatigue and possibly also with alcohol already, wanted nothing else but to laugh. No less was the undertaking of glove puppet theatres but to capture spectators and to keep them there too, talking over the noise, throwing punch lines at the proper pace and always feel which way the audience "progresses". Puppeteers’ troupes were always forced to hold their hands out for small change. Therefore, their play required a more profit-oriented way of presentation, and money required ruthlessly accurate and solid dramaturgy. The best improvisations survived the performance, and often the loosely woven series of scenes of such reflections became the script itself. Interestingly enough, it is just censorship that caused some of the text parts to survive at all: the ruling power started to show interest in puppeteers much earlier than the purely ethnographic approach of ethnographers and also for a different reason.

In the meantime, the world has turned full circle, the texts of contemporary glove puppet theatres have been published in print, while they also represent a different type of text quality: murderous aggressiveness has been socialised into impish vivacity. Hooligans have turned into puppet artists, and fairgrounds have become corporate events. But no matter the change in society and also in the audience of performances or its age, our existential frustrations remained almost the same and still provide themes for glove puppet theatres. All the well-known evergreens are here: family conflicts, wrath against the authorities, fear from punishment, remorse. And the eternal wish for idleness. As all lazy people, puppet heroes of fairground performances are also very busy. They have to get rid of bureaucrats or border guards, “Cucliferkó” or just “the silliest donkey”, death.

In the first big unit I will mainly try to draft a general portrait of the characters coming from under Pulcinella’s overcoat. One of the difficulties of the research is that the fundamental character of fairground glove puppets has crossed a set of language, religious and psychological boundaries, and no canonical texts or adequate historical comparative material are available for comparing the different versions. There is a consensus, however, about the Italian origin of all

European fairground puppet characters and that the various figures appeared in their local varieties, as we know them now, approximately at the beginning of the 19th century. In order to interpret the similarities in a wider dimension and to reconstruct the perhaps even more important slight variations it is indispensable to first study the character of Pulcinella.

In my essay I discuss sexual frustrations and roles of women. Here I analyse family bonding appearing in puppet plays as possibilities of transcendent and moral rise as well as the tragic comedies of a marriage turned into a sheer nightmare.

The performances' frivol, sometimes harsh humour yet bore the inheritance of the dramatized rituals performed to the non-coeducated audience of the early agricultural festivals, however these performances escalated in entertaining the urban crowds. The dominating motive was the one resulting in, by all means and in every case, drinking and fighting. This might have been particularly familiar to the urbane, subordinate classes. The frustrated and aggressive crowd that initially wanted to laugh and be amused could laugh at their own grotesque, miniature reflection, or as per their intelligence or the amount of alcohol consumed, one could have interpreted it as an exclamation mark, too. In the 19th century, the women's moral leading role in the society tried to redefine the role of the ones appearing in the glove puppet plays and preferred the pacifist behavioural pattern. The genre found its new audience in children, while their middle-class parents attempted to paraphrase and soften the continuous fight of male and female puppet figures to a moral fable. In today's puppet plays, instead of the passive wife figure, the female figures are energetic participants in the fight against the sexual frustrations repressed into the subconscious. Together they may be able to win.

In the following greater structural parts, in Chapter 7 and 8 I investigate social frustrations. The dark side of the glove puppet plays' humour is the xenophobia that lies within. Here I analyse the black characters of the glove puppet plays within the European and the Hungarian figures.

By the analysis of the riot against the state's repressive and authoritarian body, it becomes clear that both policemen and soldiers are helpless against the character mocking the hegemony. Glove puppets, just like clowns, exist in a more free space, not in a social structure. An illegal action resulted in execution by hanging and the glove puppet makes fun of its essential goal: deterrence.

Chapter 3 investigates the transcendent frustration. In this chapter, devil figures and death figures of the genre are analysed in detail.

The apotheosis was one of the most popular puppet play adaptations. For instance, the tale of Saint Anthony was played both in France and in Belgium in many different adaptations combining the 'effect set' of the ecclesiastical iconography and that of the baroque theatre, that is also the aesthetical characteristic of the glove puppet plays. The glove technique used the stage effects less spectacularly, moreover, by the 19th century, the concept of 'apotheosis' softened into a 'let's sing and dance and have fun' final play. Besides, the difficult lifting device of the baroque theatre can be imitated par excellence by the poorest marionette cart; devils and dragons are flown in the scene.

At the same time, the appearance of the devil in medieval nativity plays represents the dramaturgical function of tension elimination and source of making people laugh. From the point of view of the protagonist devils that are moved from above and can show somewhat more complicated movements may darken the mood, however the marionette technique that hides endless number of complication within itself, was not of real threat to the protagonist; it was rather the parabola function that dominated. In the dimension of the folding screen, the devil emerging from underground is physically a different dimension, too. Furthermore, it is meaningful in metaphysical sense as well.

While in case of Petruska, instead of the devil, or in the mask of a devil, a black, mangy dog bombs onto the stage; in Hamburg, a dog turns into the devil and drags Kasperl, who was left without Faust, out of the scene. Toby, however is a real, live dog that bites the puppet Punch's nose with way too real teeth. Polichinelle is lead to destruction by a tomcat who finicks through the folding screen. It was just a question of time and the devilish jaws of medieval iconography could attack the protagonist from the Jungian subconscious, where the protagonist is more and more vulnerable as time goes by. The crocodile, possibly manifested in England, took full control of the devil in the glove puppet plays, or at least it had the final word. Its figure meant the culmination of the lengthy chain of the diabolic animal figures. Only our Vitéz László did not capitulate and still keeps going on in his fight with Piszto.

When the high art sees the revolutionist acting with the clear energy of rebellion in the beautiful features of the fallen angel, the European glove puppet plays that are exiled way underneath literature as such, keep the devil figure as a clown, banished to the area of folklore. Meanwhile, it seems that today's satanic combats rather move the fights' scenes into the persons' inner world where the human being's biggest enemy is one's own dark side. The fight with jealousy, ill will, gloating is now introverted and individualised. Neither the intellectual nor the moral aspect of the fight is denied by the glove puppet theatre, even if the devil force is deployed in classical medieval costumes with horns and hooves and leaves us with the childish illusion of the fact that we can hit his head with a regular frying pan. Until it resurrects again and again.

The heroes of the glove puppet plays can hardly define the role of time. As oppose to their puppeteer, their existence is intemporal, out of timeexistence. On the horizon of temporality, meeting death is inevitable, however, at the same time a clinching moment in which the present existence can be revealed. Life cannot be understood without death, moreover, death strengthens the existence in the present. This can only be undersstood by those who are within the time, because for a carnival clown, time cannot be out of time, therefore death is a pure nonsense for himTitle characters of glove puppet plays can never die, as basically they are animated wooden puppets in endless synchronicity with death. The *danse macabre*, the equality before death, that is widely used from the 14th century in glove puppet plays, captures this duality between 'the passion of existence and the restlessness of not existing enough.'

Ariès or Gorer reach the point when they state that westerners today accept one's own death only technically: takes out a life insurance, but deep down inside feels immortal. Zombie heroes and spooky ghosts of the popular culture are just cheap parodies of this radical life affirmation. However, the triumvirate of the transcendent, the authority and the family that generates a continuous frustration makes glove puppet plays entertaining even for adults, because it points out that apparently we may have a little bit more leverage on our lives as we had as children, but in the meantime we became addicted to a higher authority. This is how our desire to escape from our own servility stays with us forever. This is why the attitude of the anti-hegemony figures who can kick death and the devil in the head can be particularly funny for all those adults who still keep the spirit of a child leaning towards anarchy.

In my doctoral thesis I examine the glove puppet theatre as part of a given cultural system and not as an autonomous phenomenon. I research its situation in relation to high culture; in particular, the stations of becoming a children's genre.

With the separate examination of the elements of the glove puppet plays, we can highlight non-related processes such as authority and the folding screen system.

I do researches on how the society and altogether with it, the change of the audiences and the change of the age groups of audiences influenced the sometimes offensive or paternalist attitude towards the transcendent and the earthly power and the attitude towards women.

I state that within dimension and time glove puppet plays show specific changes in relation to the definitive factors. (Political actualities, bigger social changes) Certain social paradigms may induce such changes that might replace the target audience, which might result in such tangible changes as the change of the marionette technique or the glove puppet.

I examine the specific, tangible elements of the genre: both the puppets and the folding screen systems as well as a little bit less exact part of it: the text. I often support my researches with details of a scene; due to lack of official translation often in the original language.

It is difficult to do elaborate researches on the initial phase, the roots, on the formative years, and the changes of the glove puppet plays because the genre is based on improvisation and spontaneity, therefore only a few transcriptions are available. Due to this, my research method and way is more intuitive and more free.