The puppet as teacher of acting

Training with puppets and objects not only provides student actors with an additional skill – how to give life to an inanimate object – but, to their surprise, brings them face to face with the fundamentals of acting. Performing with material, be it an articulated wooden figure, a teapot or a piece of paper, proves to be a valuable experience irrespective of whether actors will ever be required to animate puppets and objects in their professional career.

The following presentation is based on the responses and written reflections of acting students at the Institut del Teatre (Barcelona) who have undertaken a 45-hour course called Introduction to Puppet and Object Theatre. At this school I usually find myself teaching puppetry to actors who never thought that puppets could be of interest to them and, in fact, the majority of them later admit they came to the first class with negative preconceptions. My students are normally from the physical theatre strand but, I have also taught the text-based actors, most of whom aspire to work in traditional theatre, film and television.

Artur Rodríguez, a first-year student in 2001, triggered my interest in the puppet as a teacher of acting. He wrote that he had always been confused by Diderot’s Paradox of the Actor and had never understood how it was the spectator rather than the actor who should feel emotion nor how to convey emotions without feeling them himself. After taking puppetry classes, he realised it was possible. A puppet doesn’t have sentiments of its own yet through rhythm, gesture, breathing patterns and
spatial relationships can give the impression of having feelings, and despite not having ‘genuine’ emotions of its own will provoke strong feelings in the audience.

The introduction to Puppet and Object Theatre course begins with the most demanding task: how to give the impression that an inanimate thing is ‘alive’ and how to make a piece of wood, cloth, or paper appear to think and feel, without resorting to words. The actors handle different materials—dolls, sticks, cloth, paper and various types of puppets—culminating in two or three manipulators working together to animate a full-figure table-top puppet.

The second part of the course looks at everyday objects, building an understanding of the social language of objects and developing the ability to use and manipulate this language theatrically. The same object is explored first as an actor’s prop, then for its potential on stage as a sign or metaphor, and finally is used to represent a character. The object becomes a subject.

The work with objects begins by placing an everyday object in an empty space and discerning what it is already ‘telling’ before it is even touched, progresses to using objects in a realistic way (whereby the actor discovers that being natural yet clear is not as easy as it seems), and moves on to using objects in ways that differ from their normal social function (for example, a washing-up bowl might become a lake, or a hat).

Finally, each student creates a piece of object theatre with characters and narrative inspired by the object’s social and poetic qualities. As student Muniel Borgeois says: a lipstick puppet is not the same as a knife puppet.
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Projecting energy, directing focus and actor's presence

Puppetry work begins with a simple exercise. I ask someone to pick up an object, such as a shoe, in three different ways: firstly, so that we see only the actor (without hiding the shoe), next so that we see both the actor and the shoe, and lastly so that we see only the shoe (without hiding the actor). Once they have achieved clarity in this exercise, students find they can guide the audience to look at either the actor or the object by precisely placing their attention and regulating their energy.

Students learn to shift back and forth between having a vibrant physical presence as an actor and then neutralising their body in order to project energy through their hands and give presence to the object. Working with puppets and objects they develop the ability to concentrate awareness outside themselves, which not only strengthens a fundamental puppeteering skill – that of being able to listen to the puppet – but also helps actors be sensitive to their fellow performers – crucial for ensemble work – and to connect with the audience.

Training the ability to perceive a puppet's weight, rhythm, direction – which I call training 'external kinesethics' – makes actors more aware of their own bodies and kinetic possibilities, and ultimately results in performers who are able to communicate through any part of themselves, accurately focusing the audience's attention on their finger, a foot, a back, a head, or the whole body (so often we see actors on stage who are only present from the waist up). They also learn to consciously manipulate how they wear their shoes or the way their costume moves in order to add to their expression.

Working with the puppet

A common misconception is that puppeteers force puppets to do what they want. However, students soon learn to adapt to the puppet, discovering how it moves, giving it what it needs, becoming sensitive to when to let things evolve and when to give the next impulse. As student Mariina Naudin writes: 'We cannot impose our creation on a puppet'.

Play is the first stage of getting to know a puppet's possibilities and students engage in both epistemic play (what does this do?) and ludic play (what can I use it for?). They are surprised at how memories, images and ideas come flooding in as they handle different materials, and their end-of-course reflections unanimously confirm that puppets and objects have rekindled their imagination, creativity, playfulness, spontaneity and even a sense of lunacy.

After a period of personal discovery the students continue exploring the puppet through play but now with an observer, whose task it is to note down what interests or touches them. Student actors discover that all kinds of movements communicate, in particular stillness and abstract movement, which helps build their confidence in non-naturalistic performance. A further revelation comes when they have to repeat some of the moments that interested the observer and they discover that they cannot repeat the end result but must repeat the impulse that generated the result; simply repeating the result merely generates empty movement.

Watching someone else discover the puppet develops the sensitivities of a director and trains the actor to become more perceptive as to what 'works' (and doesn't work) theatrically. Acting students are often surprised to see how a tiny detail can make all the difference and soon realise that nothing on stage is insignificant. They also discover that what comes across to the audience might be quite different from what they intended. Working with puppets, actors understand that to be believable on stage they must create what can be 'read' as believable; intention must be shaped into form.

The power of movement

A puppet is an actor's magnifying glass: it is fascinating when it has a clear physical expression – especially when communicating without words – and is rather boring if it is too static, moves unceasingly or unspecifically, and if it relies only on speaking.

Working with puppets encourages the actor to strive for clarity of movement and to avoid general gestures. For example, a look is not
just a look, a 'peep', a 'stare' and a 'glance' are all different in timing and these differences must be clearly articulated for the audience to understand the puppet (or the actor). Actors expand their physical range by learning movement from puppets. Some of the funniest and most revealing classes are when puppets and actors teach each other movement. Whilst puppeteering the actor learns to identify where human movement is generated and is encouraged to use the puppet's whole body rather than moving only its arms and head; the actor learning puppet movement is initiated into a whole range of rhythms and gestures which come naturally to puppets but may never otherwise be discovered by humans.

Observing and learning from puppet movement builds trust that non-naturalistic and non-psychological performance styles interest and communicate, and the actor develops the confidence and skill necessary to perform, for example, Beckett's later works or the style of Robert Wilson.

Theatrical languages
Creating puppet and object theatre helps actors understand that there are multiple languages at work on stage. They learn to understand that proxemics—the use of space and physical relationships—can be as important as emotional and gestural work; they learn to control signs, symbols and metaphors; they learn to give space and focus to non-human elements such as light and sound, trusting that these can be as theatrically expressive as the human actor. The experience of performing puppet and object theatre produces a generous actor who is willing to be one element among all the others communicating on stage.
Actor’s ego and distance
Reflecting on his experience of working with puppets, student David Priego wrote of the ‘destruction of the actor’s ego’. In puppet theatre the audience’s attention is on the object rather than the actor; the audience isn’t interested in the performer but in the character.

One of the challenges for a student actor is to understand the concept of distance in acting. Working with puppets makes it clear that an actor does not become the character but is a performer animating a character. The real physical distance between performer and puppet trains the actor to understand and maintain a psychological distance from the character, and to avoid confusing personal emotions with the emotions of the character. As student Muriel Bourgeois remarked, ‘a puppet has a double life: its own and that which we give it’.

Working with puppets clarifies the difference between actor and role. The puppet is the physical embodiment of the role, on which both performer and spectator focus.

Actor and audience
A puppet always presupposes an audience – someone playing alone with an articulated figure is engaged in doll play not puppetry – and performing with puppets strengthens the actor’s ability to connect with the audience. Muriel Bourgeois thinks that even if actors were never to use puppets in performance it would be interesting to rehearse with puppets because they help make the actors aware of space, movement and the relationship with the audience.

Challenging preconceptions
What is theatre? What is a puppet? What is an actor? Perhaps the most important effect that puppet and object theatre training has on student actors is that it upends their preconceptions. What is more, the work often has repercussions on students’ perceptions beyond the theatre space, as these last three quotes from students testify:

‘Eating, walking in the street, showering, cooking... nowadays everything is different to the normality there was in September when I began. My world has changed itself into a huge work of art.’ (Gabriel Molina)

The thing I have learned above all is that whenever there is something to manipulate you are never alone – your imagination will always be with you.’ (Isaac Benillo)

‘The notes I made on puppetry classes are my most sincere and free.’ (Paula Iseealg)

The puppet as teacher of acting is not a new concept. Eminent theatre practitioners such as Gordon Craig, Meyerhold, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett and Yoshi Oida (among others) have referred to the qualities of puppets as examples for actors. My own teaching practice convinces me that working with puppets and objects during acting training brings the actor into contact with questions of presence, focus, ensemble, observation, complicity with the audience, playfulness, spontaneity, imagination, emotion, quality of movement, listening, precision, sincerity, abstraction, coordination, creativity, theatricality...

To conclude, I’d like to quote George Bernard Shaw, who wrote to Vittorio Podrecca of the Piccolo Theater:

I always hold up the wooden actors as instructive object lessons to our flesh-and-blood players. The wooden ones... move you as only the most experienced living actors can. What really affects us in the theatre is not the muscular activities of the performers, but the feelings they awaken in us by their aspect. For the imagination of the spectator plays a far greater part than the exertions of the actors.”