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OBJECT THEATRE: THE CREATIVE EYE

مسرح الأشياء: العين الخلاقة

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Abstract

Imagination is the launch of creativity. Creativity is the core of any progress. In our society, we need to build advancement not only by developing children's education but also by freeing the soul of the grownups to let them create. The work and rhythm of modern society snatched away lots of our senses. We are becoming more and more realistic person who lives in a materialistic world. We do not have time to use our imagination. We even passively watch movies and theatre performances. Although we sometimes interact with the immersive show we are attending, we still remain the passive perceiver of the richly designed characters and scenes. How can we liberate the child in us? Is it too late to enliven our imagination? How can we stimulate the audience's imagination to let go of their inner creative potential? How can we create a language to invoke their fantasy? Although a perfect designed figurative puppet suggests a character on stage, a simple object puppet is capable of reflecting time, space, character and more. This paper suggests the use of Object Theatre to call back the imagination of an exhausted, uncreative member of a hectic society.

Keywords

Imagination; Objects; Puppets; Performing Objects; Creativity; Object Theatre.

المخلص

الخيال هو مصدر الإبداع. والإبداع هو جوهر أي تقدم. في مجتمعنا، نحن بحاجة إلى رفع شأننا ليس فقط من خلال تطوير تعليم الأطفال، ولكن أيضا عن طريق تحرير روح الكبار ليتمكنوا من الابتكار. إن أعباء الحياة اليوم وما فيها من العمل والإيقاع السريع للمجتمع الحديث انتزع الكثير من حواسنا. فلقد أصبحنا مع مرور الوقت ذلك الشخص الواقعي الذي يعيش في عالم مادي. وليس لدينا الوقت لاستخدام خيالنا. حتى الأفلام والعروض المسرحية نشاهدها ونلقاها بشكل سلبي. فبالرغم من أننا في بعض الأحيان نتفاعل مع العروض الغامرة، فإننا لا نزال ذلك المتفرج السلبي للمناظر وللشخصيات غنية التصميم والتفاصيل. فكيف يمكننا تحرير الطفل الذي بداخلنا؟ هل فات الأوان لإحياء خيالنا؟ كيف يمكن تحفيز خيال الجمهور وإطلاق إمكاناته الإبداعية الداخلية؟ كيف يمكننا خلق لغة لاستدعاء الخيال؟ على الرغم من أن الدمية التشخيصية المصممة باتقان تشير إلى شخصية ما على خشبة المسرح، فدمية الأشياء التي تتميز بالبساطة قادرة على أن تعكس الزمن والمكان والشخصية وأكثر من ذلك. تقترح هذه الورقة البحثية استخدام "مسرح الأشياء"، لاستدعاء وإعادة إحياء الخيال المرهق وغير الخلاق لأعضاء مجتمعنا المحموم.

الكلمات الدالة

الخيال؛ الأشياء؛ الدمى، الشيء المؤدى؛ الإبداع؛ مسرح الأشياء.

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1. Introduction:

“...Any weakness in the function of unreality will hamper the productive psyche. If we cannot imagine, we cannot foresee.”⁽¹⁾

Imagination is considered one of the essential characteristics of humankind to help it survive. One of the fundamentals of survival is invention. Inventions are mostly originally science fictions introduced by the fantasy of imaginers through different media such as comics, movies, literatures, and performing arts.

Young children are known to have a fruitful imagination. We can notice this while they are playing using a rod, placing it between both legs and galloping as if riding a horse. They also tend to imagine figures and funny creatures when seeing a crack in the ceiling or a shadow on the wall or even clouds in the sky. When they talk about it or get afraid of something they imagine, they are accused of lying or inventing things. Sometimes the mother tells her child: “This is only your imagination”, unintentionally suggesting that imagination is something minor. By the time they grow up, they gradually lose a great value of their creative soul. J.M. Barrie portrays this in his story ‘Peter Pan’ and confirms that we have to hold on to imagination and not lose it by growing up.

How can we, as adults, regain or rebuild this imagination? How can we stimulate the creativity of a grown up? Is there a way to recharge his inventive skills? How can we enliven his pureness and call back the emotions and naivety of his childhood? In theatre, audiences are engaged and transported to another realm through illusions created by special effects, costumes and sets, etc... Imagination is used to complete the picture, for example, when Shakespeare suggests ‘night’ by letting the actor sleep on the stage and through Metaphors used to express hidden meanings. We need to address the spectator’s imagination more and more. As the problem in our society is the lack of ingenuity and innovation, the aim of this paper is to free the inspiration of the grownups. Thus, we raise the question, how can we use Object Theatre to stimulate the imagination of the perceiver?

2. A Puppet Moment

We have noticed recently that there is a growing field of using puppets in theatrical performances. Although puppet performances are known to be directed towards children, nowadays adult puppetry productions are growing exceedingly. This can be found in several theatrical productions such as ‘The Lion King’, ‘Warhorse’, and the Metropolitan Opera House’s ‘Madame Butterfly’ where a puppet is playing her son’s role and is the actor’s partner on stage. That’s why Posner suggests “*with such a preponderance of puppets, we find ourselves in what we might call ‘a puppet moment’ a juncture when cultural attention has turned forcefully towards the manipulated theatrical object.*”⁽²⁾ But what is Object Theatre?

¹ Bachelard, Poetics of Spaces, p.VIII.

² Posner, Dasia N., The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance, p.2.

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What is a puppet, and what is the difference between a figurative puppet and an object puppet? Object Theatre is a genre which belongs to Post-Dramatic Theatre where the stage is transformed into a world of fantasy aiming the imagination of the audience using sound, experiences or even an object ⁽¹⁾. In Object Theatre any object can be transformed into a character (be humanized), hence transformed into a puppet. The puppet - can also be called a performing object - which is an animated object and could be a figurative puppet or an object puppet. The figurative puppet, is a designed puppet to depict a stage character such as a man, a horse or a woman, and the object puppet, is something in its raw state made with no intention to be used in a stage performance ⁽²⁾ which could be anything, a found or everyday object, such as a toothbrush, a cake, a garden tool, a handkerchief, a paper, a fork, a pipe or trousers, etc.. (see diagram) “A fork is not a puppet, but in Lasse Akerlund;s Macbeth, a fork plays Macduff.”⁽³⁾ Thus this is transforming objects and trash into something beautiful.

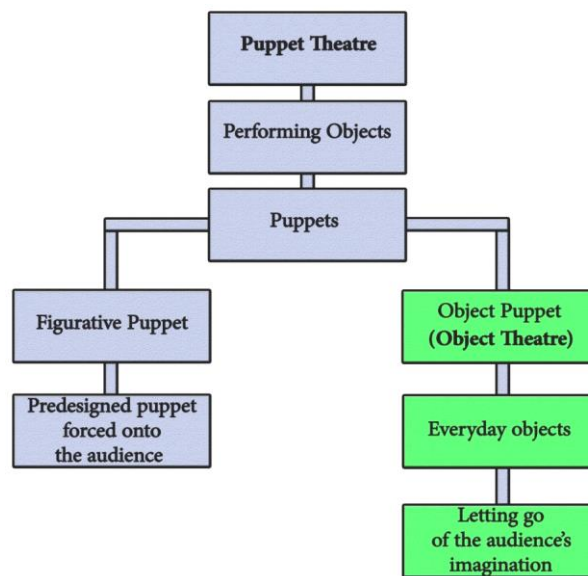


Figure 1/ The diagram shows the difference between the figurative puppet and the object puppet and their relation to the performing object and puppet theatre.

Diagram by the scholar

¹ Lehman, Hans-Thies, , Post-Dramatic Theatre, p.135

² Francis, Penny, Puppetry, p.18.

³ Blumenthal, Puppetry a World History, p.229.

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The performer manipulates the puppet; in addition, he uses his voice, body language and facial gestures to tell a story. Once the audience sees a glimpse of life in the puppet, he uses his imagination and completes the picture, after all, **“if the audience thinks something is a puppet, then it is a puppet.”**⁽¹⁾

3. Objects as Actors

Using Objects as a symbol or as a character can be noticed in lots of performances where an object is used to express more than a performer himself. We can notice this in lots of performances, for example, in Sophocles’ Electra, there is a pot that’s early on described as “a bronze-ribbed” artifact; as soon as she comes into physical touch with this object, Electra [...] imagines that the load of the vessel she holds in her fingers is her infant brother Orestes.⁽²⁾ Another example is to be seen in Sufi whirling (♣), as during that dance, the whirling Tanoura, the skirt used, gets folded repeatedly by the Dervish until it becomes so small that it resembles a baby in his arms. This baby is allegiance to Al Hussein. That piece of cloth is now transformed into a baby and the audience accepts it without any hesitation and could see beyond the function of the Tanoura and perceives it with another meaning.

4. Object Theatre (♥)

“From now on the object will replace the figurative puppet” Henryk Jurkowski.⁽³⁾

Craig replaced the real actor with the Uebermarionette because he was convinced that those made actors have no limits in expression and are flexible to the designer’s imagination unlike the real actor who has lots of imperfections. The same goes to the object puppet which has no limitations if compared to the figurative puppet. The object puppet has a language of its own. It can be a symbol to anything ranging from a lover to a city. In “Object Theatre” distances are relative. The table top could be the whole world; 2cm distance could indicate the distance between Alexandria and Cairo. Thus, in Object Theatre there are no limits in time and space.

In Object Theatre we see a real body (of the performer) performing with a fictional body (the object). The fictional body of the object has a physical reality which derives his soul from his partner (the performer). We use every day items everyday of our life, we benefit from them.

¹ Opal, Summer 2012, The Ontario Puppetry Association, p.7.

<https://www.google.com.eg/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&url=http://www.onpuppet.ca/OPAL/OPAL%2520Ssummer%25202012.pdf&ved=0ahUKEwiAyubHvMfVAhVKDxoKHXofAvoQFggoMAI&usg=AFQjCNGyZrhUUJV8pX6WrsajJZSZSxnW5Q>.

² Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performances in Greek Tragedy, p.20,21.

♣ ‘ Amer Eltouny’ Tanoura show I attended in the “Jesuit Cultural Center “, Alexandria, 2013.

♥ The founder of the notion of Thing Theatre is the poet and theoretician of puppetry, Dennis Silk. According to him, a thing is a product of nature (or Creation), while an object is a product of humans. He suggests that sometimes Thing Theatre is inaccurately called Object Theatre. (Francis, p.128).

³ Posner, Dassia N., The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance, p.18.

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In Object Theatre, these items transform into live creatures that live and talk. We discover their other world.



Figure 1/ An Object Theatre performance, presented by Theatre de la Pire Espece: “Ubu on the Table”, an adaptation of King Ubu. ⁽¹⁾

After the performance the object is still alive because we still see it as a character and still sympathize with it. Unlike the figurative puppet which is designed according to the vision of the artist, object puppet can lead the performer to react according to its form or function and iconology. It means that the performer listens first to the object to bring its life out of it. An object could be an icon. He gives it its role according to signs reflected from it. A fork, for example, can express starvation. The artist may also just present the object regardless of its characteristics and the purpose it was made for and transforms it into a fictional character. That is what Posner proposes, that objects can reveal meanings, awaken sentiments, help one to correlate and produces a cognitive state. ⁽¹⁾

The scholar has attended two workshops in WSD in Cardiff ^(*) the instructors offered her different kinds of objects. She had to choose one or more and transform them into a character. She had to oversee the iconic and functional meaning of the object and present it in a new way using facial and body gestures, sound and movements. In the beginning it was difficult for her to understand how to use her imagination and how to transform an object without any facial features into a live creature – character. It was uncomfortable, but after some time, she

¹ Posner, Dassia N., The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance, p.22.

* WSD, World Stage Design, Cardiff, Wales, 2013 , Master Classes – Workshops, *Trash - Hack Puppetry* by Chris Pirie, Thursday, 12. 9. 2013 , *The Performing Object* by Sean Myatt, Saturday, 14.9.2013.

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could figure out how to loosen her mind and body and she could move the object and make sounds transforming it into the character she wanted. After she finished and put the object on the floor, she still could feel it breathing, as if it is now lying there, resting for a while. She was still connected to it.



Figure 1 / *The Performing Object* workshop, by Sean Myatt, as seen in the photo, objects on the floor, waiting to be transformed into a live puppet character.

Photo by the scholar.

Being difficult and new for the scholar as an amateur, she cannot consider the whole experience to be something easy. Using an object as a character on stage can be very difficult, not only for the audience but also for the performer. An object has no eyes like the figurative character. Eyes are very important for an object to become alive. Adding eyes on anything transforms it to a live character, which is called “eye bombing”. In Object Theatre the object puppet doesn’t have to have eyes to be transformed into a convincing living character on stage. Ordinary objects are just transformed into live characters by the talented performer. That is why Francis suggests that to convince the audience that an object is alive, transforming it into a character, a puppet, is very difficult for most puppet operators than manipulating a direct figure with the shape of a human or an animal. ⁽¹⁾ This is because most of the time the figurative puppet is direct and obvious. The audience may accept a talkative horse or a talkative man. A puppet of a beautiful girl or princess is easily recognized than an everyday object which plays the same role such as a pipe talking or an iron flirting with a

¹ Francis, Penny, *Puppetry*, p.18.

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dress. The audience makes more effort to accept this love story. To perceive a none figurative object as a character is difficult, and requires effort and lots of imagination.



Figure 1 / Trash - Hack Puppetry Workshop, by Chris Pirie, the scholar while trying to manipulate an object to transform it into a walking monster.

5. Liberating the Spectator

Nowadays the audience can play a bigger role in the performance he attends. He can manipulate, control and choose some events in virtual reality shows and other immersive live events. That means that the spectator is now freed and can take part in the story he is watching. Why can't we apply this to live puppet theatre performances? Why cannot an audience collaborate in the theatrical process, too? Introducing a richly designed and detailed puppet in a show, may be over imposing it onto the audience. But if the puppet is simple, abstract and non-figurative (does not reflect the features and description of a character), it can stimulate the audience's imagination and let him use his own perspective, own design, and own point of view. The performer suggests a hammer to be an old man. This is only the first step, or a clue given to the audience who in return uses this clue and builds the details of the character. Now the character is more than one, because every audience perceives it differently than the other according to his potentials. The sky is the limit as they say.

But how can we get the spectator to use his imagination? How can he accept to see the talking hammer or the talking plastic bag? The experience is completely dependent on the spectator, his culture, notion, state of mind and his ability to imagine and use his creativity to indulge himself in the performance and develop a relationship with the object through the performer.

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That is to imagine the object talking although his features are sometimes not connected to the character. He must free himself from the burdens of everyday life, to let go of all inner constraints which hinder him from becoming young again. If he can do this, he will be able to get used to the process and let go of his imagination. According to the previous stated Francis confirms that the more infant-like an audience member-of any age-the more is he immersed by the puppet and the oscillation impact could be much less, and the other way around, the more refined the viewer, the harder it is to stay in the illusion, so oscillation among belief and unbelief is more frequently. ⁽¹⁾

6. Object Theatre and Synaesthesia

To stimulate one's imagination we must let him use it. This is possible if we minimize what we are offering him to see. As if we supply him with a white paper and let him express himself instead of giving him a paper already full of drawings. We use our imagination when we know that there is something hidden. Like in the ancient Egyptian era, when priests used to perform secret rituals in the sanctum, letting the rest for spectators' imagination. The same can be applied in Object Theatre. When the figure is simple or lacking details, the audience uses his imagination to complete it. Confirming the previously mentioned, Lehman says that **"The play with low density of signs aims to provoke the spectator's own imagination to become active on basis of little raw material to work with"** ⁽²⁾ The audience uses more imagination to deal with a hammer that is fighting with a nail. That means, the more the input is complicated, the more the perceiver uses his imagination. The more the object is indirect, the more the spectator uses his imagination to connect it with the character proposed. This phenomenon is called "Synaesthesia" ^(♥). Concerning Synaesthesia, Lehman states the following: **"The human sensory apparatus does not easily tolerate disconnectedness. When deprived of connections, it seeks out its own, becomes active, and its imagination goes wild."** ⁽³⁾ Synaesthesia forms the audience experience and helps him correlate and correspond to the signs he sees on stage. As when the spectator sees a talking hammer, he automatically uses his imagination to relate. Accordingly, Josephine confirms that **"Synaesthetic performance practice is always imaginative in form and usually interdisciplinary in execution"**. ⁽⁴⁾ That means that Synaesthesia is not only a part of the scenography, but it is also a part of the communication process.

¹ Francis, Penny, Puppetry, p.22.

² Lehman, Hans-Thies, , Post-Dramatic Theatre, p.90

♥ a condition, a perceptual phenomenon, in which someone experiences things through their senses in an unusual way, for example by experiencing a colour as a sound, or a number as a position in space.

³ Lehman, Hans-Thies, Post- Dramatic Theatre p.84.

⁴ Machon, Josephine, Immersive Theatres, p.105.

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7. Conclusion:

Synaesthesia is the tool we use in the Object Theatre communication process. As if reality is consisted of puzzle pieces. The parts which are missing are those which stimulate our imagination. We must imagine the missing parts. That is what happens when we see an object puppet. What are missing here are the clues which indicate the character features or any other information the object symbolizes. The more these clues are missing, the more the imagination will be stimulated. The perceiver fills in the gaps in the figure he sees.

Furthermore, using puppets, e.g. object puppets to address spectators in a performance, touches the child in us and revives its spirit. This is another aspect in the process. “The animated figure touches our collective memory of innocence, the simple acceptance of a fiction, such as normal children enjoy”.⁽¹⁾

Besides, each person of the audiences perceives differently than the other. He can now imagine the features of the character on stage and give it an identity. The object is now a source of inspiration for him. No more perfect detailed, ready designed characters. The spectator can now imagine the character according to his notion. He is free to receive whatever he wants and to interpret it according to his culture, beliefs and education, which is another act of liberating his creativity, as the already designed details in a figurative puppet may limit his imagination. Setting free the imagination of an adult can be a fruitful process if we just let him enjoy an Object Theatre performance.

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¹ Francis, Penny, Puppetry, p.22.

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