

### 3. THE PUPPETEERS AS SOLO PERFORMANCE „MAKERS”

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**Abstract:** *Certain syntagms such as **total actor** and **total show** have been increasingly used for some time. When it comes to the puppet theatre one might say that the corresponding term for the ideal actor, the total actor as he is called, is the solo puppeteer. There are a number of very good reasons that support the idea of promoting the solo puppet show: the many transformations the art of performing undergoes, the various expectations of the audience, the responsibility the artist assumes towards perfecting his professional activity. The work of some solo puppeteers has been closely observed despite their being un-contemporary but yet important figures in the field. I have contacted some of them personally and had the chance of discussing with them some of my most ardent questions.*

**Keywords:** *solo puppet show, total actor, preparing a show.*

#### **SERGEY OBRAZTSOV – from traditional puppetry to essentializing the stage forms**

Considered one of the greatest puppeteers of the 20th century, an actor and director of both musical and drama performances and a film producer at the same time, Sergey Vladimirovici Obraztsov, the founder of the Central Puppet Theatre of Moscow, imposed puppetry as an artistic form of expression within the Soviet Union. According to his confessions in *My Profession*<sup>131</sup>, his soloist activity can be divided into two periods: that of his becoming a soloist puppeteer based on his aesthetic principles he was to use throughout his career, namely his "family" performances, and that of his artistic maturity, when he defined and refined his artistic style in his professional shows.

Let us keep in mind that Obraztsov's impressive solos emerged in a time when puppetry was next to amateurship and was being transferred from the streets and into professional institutions. Obraztsov was very much like the *Petrushniks*, the itinerant players, a factotum that was both an actor and a puppet manipulator, the stage props maker and the screenwriter of his own performances. But unlike the old times artist, whose skills were mainly technical and focused on the manipulation of the various objects, Obraztsov's puppet took the role of both character and actor.

His main interest lay in the dramatic character, more specifically in the nature of man himself. He was a keen observer of the human nature and its weaknesses, which were a constant source of inspiration to his performances. He borrowed from Stanislavsky the latter's view on the stage performance and applied it to the puppet theatre in the relationship between characters, in their love or discords. As a consequence, a number of practitioners and theorists of the 1960's considered his performances to be deeply realistic, imitative<sup>132</sup>. If that were the case, it was more like imitating the human universe, actually transfiguring it.

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<sup>131</sup> S. V. Obraztsov, *My Profession*, translated by Mihail Gaur and F. Galea, Bucharest: Cartea Rusă Press, 1952

<sup>132</sup> Henryk Jurkowski, *Métamorphoses – La marionnette au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Institut International de la Marionnette, Charleville-Mézières, 2000, p. 44

In the 1930's, Obraztsov's observations on the hand puppet led him to abandon any costume in favour of the naked hand. Following the model of the well-known characters of the puppet theatre such as Punch, Guignol or Petrushka, the artist understood that essentializing was the key word in conceiving his characters that were to have a puppet head and the dressed human hand for a body. He drew the conclusion that a puppet's essentialized features are more appropriate for a naked hand than a reproduction of the human body. This simplified form is of great support to the stage representation of the puppet that would not mechanically render the human movements, but „concisely express their emotions”.

Speaking about the various situations in which a soloist performer may find himself, Sergey Obraztsov admits that they are linked to one another in that the first directions offered by the producer trigger in the actor an excitement regarding his future character and then a constant search for appropriate manipulating means.

Throughout his acting and directing career, the artist was very careful about controlling his stage manifestations and his inspiration would always follow his reasoning. His screenplay would come to life only after every detail was established. The whole process had different stages as the audience would usually differ from one performance to another. The most important of them was meeting the audience, the end of a road and the beginning of another of new searches for an appropriate adjustment of the personal emotion to that of the character.

By comparing the world of the drama actor or puppeteer that play on a stage with other fellow-actors, who have a director, a scenographer and all the necessary stage elements with that of the soloist performer, Obraztsov considers that the latter's mission is more difficult: „On stage, even the big role actors are supported by their stage partners, the lights, the props, while in the street the actor is basically by himself. His ten to fifteen minutes show is all to himself. Every second counts; the eyes of the entire audience are focused on him and his voice is the only thing that is heard around. There is no support for him, whether from a partner or from the usual stage elements”<sup>133</sup>.

### **YVES JOLY and the puppet theatre language innovations**

Apparently Yves Joly counts among the first artists in this domain that has different embodiments for his objects other than that of a human being. In 1942 he set up *Les marionettes Yves Joly*, a company he owned together with his wife, Dominique Gimet and Georges Tournaire. In 1949 he chose La Rose Rouge, a cabaret in Paris, to be the site for a series of very successful performances that although based on fairly simple plots inspired from the daily life and presented in an amusing manner relied on a metaphorical narration of events using the specifics of puppeteering. That is the case of soloist or collective performances such as *Bristol* (1946), *Les Mains seules* (1949), *Ivresse*

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<sup>133</sup> S. V. Obraztsov, op. cit., p. 265

(1950), *Jeux des cartes* (1952), *Ombrelles et Parapluies* (1954), *Tragédie de Papier* (1956). Joly reveals the meaning of the puppet theatre in the various forms, materials or the human hand movements, which he inspires with appropriate human behaviour, characteristics and interests.

Like Obraztsov, yet without observing a particular set of rules, Joly attempted at a very personal essentialized way of expression. He progressed on the road opened by the Russian puppeteer that focused on the basics of form and animated even geometrical figures in a cubistic manner. The characters of his *Paper Tragedy* are a sun-like face that has a triangle for a nose or a horn-like figure with two horizontal slits for the eyes on a circular, square or rectangular body; two more slits are operated for the puppeteer's hands<sup>134</sup>.

In 1946, the artist decided on giving up the screen and other decor in favour of a black background for a better highlight of the profile and shades of his animated objects. His *Bristol* and *Paper Tragedy* performances are both speechless, the character-figures emerge from a white shiny well-lighted piece of cardboard and come to life before the eyes of the audience.

Joly's audience was little aware of the „poetry of forms” of his acts as their attention is swept away by the artist's interpretative manner. They laughed at the shadows or the hand movements, they empathized with the characters of the „romances” or the „tragedies”. Joly was not very careful about the significance of his work as he relied more on the spontaneous character of this art, on his inventions. Apparently his performances were based mainly on inspiration revealed in a natural, easy and joyful manner.

The puppeteer is seen as an artist for art's sake that takes no effort as such and has no limits to his stage expressions. Such an image is very alluring but somewhat illusory. In 1957, during an interview with Régis Bergeron in his Parisian studio where he was preparing for his performance in Bucharest, Joly explained the hard times a puppeteer had to come through, a condition that determined the small number of members of a company and what is more, performing on one's own<sup>135</sup>. As a result, in the 1950's Joly's numbers were present in over 20 spot films. It appears that mid 20th century French puppetry was confronted with problems very similar to those of contemporary Romanian solo or state puppet theatre actors.

### **PHILIPPE GENTY – From the poetical expressiveness of the marionette to the „inner life of the material”**

Philippe Genty has long been highly appreciated for promoting the visual surrealistic performance that syncretically uses various means of expression belonging to equally various domains, drama, puppetry or the dance rendered in breathtaking poetical and dream-like images. Little is known about Genty's first job as an illustrator that he later abandons for that of a solo puppeteer in a

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<sup>134</sup> Jean-Louis Mignon, in *Encyclopédie mondiale des arts de la marionnette*, rédacteurs en chef: Henryk Jurkowski, puis Thier Foulc, Montpellier, Éditions l'Entretemps, 2009, p. 357

<sup>135</sup> Régis Bergeron, *With Yves Joly before leaving*, „Contemporanul”, February 1957, no. 8 (542), p. 5

„world of absolute freedom [...] and new experiments”<sup>136</sup>. He was attracted to cabaret shows and in the 1970' he made his first appearance on Parisian cabaret stages such as Olympia, Casino de Paris, Television or Théâtre de la Ville with short mime acts (*The Ostrich Ballet*, *The Gag*, *The Joke*). He became famous under the name of „Brassens<sup>137</sup> of the puppet theatre”. His impressive solo performances did not rely on intricate plots but rather on a series of very accomplished manipulating techniques of objects, traditional marionettes or invented puppets.

One of his most representative solo shows of that time is *Pierrot's Suicide* (1977), which is the best example of Genty's real interests that transgress the daily life and go into the unreal fears, emotions, secrets and contradictions of the unconscious inner self of the human nature. His melancholic Pierrot is animated in an atmosphere dominated by a strange song, which reminds us of the world of circus that makes him aware of his condition as a mere copy and slave of the one who gives him life and manipulates him. From perplexity to sadness and despair, the captive puppet understands that the strings make him powerless and incapable of any movement or act. This is a most convincing example of the puppet-puppeteer relationship. The manipulator is moved by Pierrot's sadness and abandons the strict rules he has observed so far, he touches the puppet, he tries to comfort and protect him, but the latter's wish is nothing but freedom and he stares at the ground dropping his arms in despair. This freedom would actually mean his death, but after he gets rid of his strings and disconnects himself from the hand, the mind and soul of his manipulator, the wooden puppet is left senseless on the small stage, while his maker slowly vanishes into the dark.

Like most of his stage performances, the above show relies basically on music and mime as the puppeteer considers the image “to imply a lot more than the spoken text and to be a better way to convey ideas and various levels of meanings. Words are restrictive, they orient us on a single path, and this I do not favour. [...] Words are opposed to the unconscious”<sup>138</sup>.

Starting with the 1980's, Genty becomes fully convinced that marionettes cannot render the intricacies of the human soul and promotes the object, exploring its capacity of material and artistic transfiguration. He ascertains the „inner life of the material”, the energy it generates and „its inexhaustible capacity to revive and rediscover itself”. At times, this energy may however come to dominate its manipulator and turn him away from his initial conception on the performance and its stage evolution. That was the case of *Désirs Parade* (1986), *Dérives* (1989) and *Ne m'oubliez pas* (1992) or of those particular performances that were based on various puppet/dummy confrontations, on numerous actors and lots of fabric to imagine a twisted dream-like world

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<sup>136</sup> Apud Ludmila Patlanjoglu, *Surrealism - a royal way*, interview with Philippe Genty, „Teatrul azi”, 1998, no. 3-4-5-6, p. 33

<sup>137</sup> Georges Brassens (1921-1981), French poet and singer-songwriter

<sup>138</sup> Apud Oltița Cîntic, *Spotlights on World Stages: Insights into the Contemporary Drama*: Iași, Cronica Press, p. 86



dominated by passions, obsessions and fears that are visually striking.

Genty's new accomplishments offer him other possibilities to exploit the objects, puppets, dummies, the dance or lighting, the acrobatic numbers, illusionism or stage effects to better reveal „the profound truth of the human being”<sup>139</sup>. In 2001, he produced *Le Concert incroyable* in Paris with a large number of actors in the unconventional space of the Great Gallery of Evolution of the National Museum of Natural History. In 1998, he used most spectacular and modern technologies in *Océans et utopies* during the opening anniversary of the Universal Exhibition of Lisbon; one of his actors gives the impression of falling 15 meters down in the dark.

Genty's artistic approaches bring him closer to the atmosphere of the shamanic ritual, where objects are invested with magical powers that entrance the audience and allure them into an irrational universe dominated by the image, **the inner world of Genty himself.**

### **ALAIN LECUCQ and the paper theatre**

Starting with the 1960's, Alain Lecucq, a puppeteer and actor, as well as a producer and festival director, the president of the French National Association of Marionettes and Adjacent Arts, and former president of the Publication Board within the Executive Committee of the International Union of Puppeteers UNIMA, is attracted to the paper theatre, being the first in France to bring this genre back to life in a personal manner, very appropriate to his times.

Although he did not favour the unbending Puritanism of his times, he produced a number of rather traditional solo performances that he called „didactical” and considered them a means to introduce the audience to this art. Such an example is *A Robinson* after Daniel Defoe's book that together with Geoffrey de Pennart's *The Sentimental Wolf* is among the few productions for children.

When asked about the way he conceives his stage performances, the artist confessed that he always started from the basics, from the content, from a piece of writing he „madly” fell in love with (a play or a novel he would then dramatize). Only second to this he considered the form or the means he would use in a very unrestrictive manner except for the material his characters were made of. This would explain his very different performances, whose characters were yet always made of paper.

As part of the puppet theatre manifestations, the paper theatre is a very „candid” genre with few accessible manipulating techniques of the cardboard bi-dimensional and rigid figures. The characters are mere illustrations of the narration, they have no stage evolution, they do not change their form, they are essentialized. This simplistic formula dominated by conventions is addressed to the audience, who would deliberately get deeply involved in the performance. Compared to the object theatre, the paper theatre has one big disadvantage: the figures (and even the decor) are not only bi-dimensional and rigid but also too

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<sup>139</sup> Philippe Genty, *La Compagnie Philippe Genty*, „Actualité de la scénographie”, Paris, 1987, n° 31, p. 98

realistic, having little in common with the nature of puppetry.

### **CARLES CAÑELLAS – follower of itinerant puppetry tradition**

A „dean” of the Catalan puppeteers and a true master of this art as he was considered by international critics, Carles Cañellas asserted that his whole creative activity was linked to the degrading situation all puppeteers and most other artists had to experience during Franco's dictatorial regime that in the mid 1970's forced the Spanish marionettists to perform almost illegally in the streets, schools and university centres for a living<sup>140</sup>.

He produced over fourteen performances most of which were solo shows addressed to large audiences alternating with small stage experimental productions. His most appreciated solo performance *Solo* (1997) was a getting-together of accomplished parts of productions no longer active. It had its roots in the old street theatre but no doubt mostly in the very popular 19th century solo parts of variety marionettists. In the past the repertoire of the itinerant troupes included such variety numbers; their main performance was always followed by string puppet numbers that would parodically present important figures from the opera, theatre or the circus. This tradition can still be encountered in the squares of big world tourist towns; the puppets sing, dance and impersonate various personalities such as Charlie Chaplin, Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson a.s.f. or representatives of certain player categories, the pianist, the guitar-player, they bring back to life Elizabethan scenes such as that of the skeleton that emerges from the coffin or simply play tricks that entertain the passers-by.

Playing his own part, that of an Entertainer, Carles Cañellas is alternately one of his puppet-characters or just their manipulator. The evolution of the play is based on the illusion that the puppets are independent and have their own life and free will if not dictate the manipulator's movements. This is visually reinforced by the manipulator's position behind or closely following the puppet. However, if things go wrong with the little wooden fellows, the puppeteer is forced to intervene for their own sakes, he casts out the spell, thus reminding his audience that he is in control above all convention.

There is one more aspect meant to keep the audience's interest high, namely that every effort to overcome a new obstacle reinforces a basic principle of the puppet theatre that the puppeteer calls „unstable stability”. Suspending this type of puppets by thin strings makes the audience anxious about their future destiny. Cañellas increases this feeling by having his puppets dance on ropes, climb stairs or rollerskate. They even do acrobatics with the props: they bring them on the stage, they haul them and turn them into different objects, which enhances this effect.

His manipulating skills, which make the marionette's movements look very natural are doubled by his ability to construct them in a particular manner that combines a number of styles and result from his thorough knowledge of the human movements. The simplified techniques he uses enable him to manipulate

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<sup>140</sup> Carles Cañellas, correspondence by e-mail

intuitively, and thus concentrate on his interpretation.

He designs his solo shows to be performed on stage as well as in the streets for all kinds of audience, with different versions for children, families, youngsters or adults; „they are very elastic, they can turn into whatever is needed, they can adapt to the audience's wishes. They are not in a fixed structure, their parts can be approached differently, they can be longer or shorter or they can be left out. These changes are operated beforehand or on the spot. They are part of the show's quintessence”<sup>141</sup>.

### **NEVILLE TRANTER – the evolution of puppet-puppeteer, manipulator-manipulated object relationship**

Neville Tranter was an artist of Australian origins settled in Holland and „the only founder, artistic force and constant factor”<sup>142</sup> of *The Stuffed Puppet Theatre*. He created a particular style in the solo puppet performance to the delight of his audience and the undeniable acknowledgement from theatre critics worldwide.

His puppet performances were closely linked to his experience as a drama actor. Tranter confronts his audience with his puppets, which he animates before their very eyes, establishing a variety of contacts between the characters embodied by them and himself as a character. Initially, he would write the screenplay of his performances as well as his characters' lines; he was also both a producer and a scenographer. At that time, he would use minimal décor in his productions, little music and lighting to support his interpretation and puppet manipulation. As he became more interested in the spectacular side of his performances, Tranter resorted to professional producers, playwrights and composers, but he remained the overall supervisor and only interpreter of his shows.

His use of human size wide mouth opening Muppet-type puppets should be approached from the viewpoint of his stage experience as a drama actor; his characters would have tirades and lengthy dialogues. That was the case of his transpositions of *Faust*, *Macbeth*, *Salomé* etc., where he would consequently use wide mouth opening systems. His productions, which were adult-only shows, were characterized by absurdity and excessively cruel and bitter humour. Despite this, they would not lack in poetry; they were poetical in their particular way.

According to the Polish theorist Henryk Jurkowski, to decipher Tranter's solo productions or his own screenplay shows means to understand the interdependence between the characters<sup>143</sup>, whose visual counterpart can be found in the puppet-manipulator subordination relationship. That is the case of *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1984), an approach to Marlowe's *Faust* from the viewpoint of the human weaknesses, *Manipulator* (1985) or *Underdog* (1985).

Some critics would not favour the Dutch puppeteer's productions, as they

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<sup>141</sup> Carles Cañellas, correspondence by e-mail

<sup>142</sup> [www.stuffedpuppet.nl](http://www.stuffedpuppet.nl)

<sup>143</sup> *Métamorphoses – La Marionnette au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, op. cit., p. 251

consider that their psychoanalytical background is rather a means of strongly affecting the feelings of his audience than of deeply understanding the human soul, and that his productions lack in dramatic effect and abound in schematic characters<sup>144</sup>. In my view, Neville Tranter deliberately shocks his audience, emphasizing the scary and the disgusting side of the human nature, yet giving his audience food for thought. His puppets are to him an appropriate means of pointing out man's incapacity to resist certain obsessions, fears or inner turmoil, which turn him and those around him into brutes. Humour is scarce but tense and painful. His performances are not intended to entertain or relax but rather „to haunt” the adult audience and mostly to attract them into a meditative, though at times depressing atmosphere. They are obviously not for everybody's heart, but they are impressive nonetheless.

In 1996, Neville Tranter took a step forward towards larger performances, yet keeping unaltered his previous aesthetic principles: *Molière*, 1998; *RE: Frankenstein*, 2000; *Schicklgruber, alias Adolf Hitler*, 2003; *Vampyr*, 2006 relying on playwrights, producers, composers and lighting and sound professionals that would use from classical to most modern techniques. Like his first solo productions, *Punch & Judy in Afghanistan* (2009), his most recent *Stuffed Puppet Theatre* performance in a traditional style has Tranter as both scriptwriter and producer.

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<sup>144</sup> *Métamorphoses – La Marionnette au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, op. cit., p. 251