


Puppets, Presence, and Memory: The Training Methods and  
Workshop Techniques of Compagnie Philippe Genty,  
Stuffed Puppet, and Infish's *Three Good Wives*

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### **Declaration of Authorship**

I Alissa Marie Mello hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: 

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## Abstract of Thesis

This thesis interrogates memory made material in puppet performance, memory as a technique for performance practice and meaning making, and the puppet as a site of memory. I will focus on the work of the actor puppeteer; and ways in which memory is used, transferred to, and informs the readable performance score of puppets. This research is premised on, analyses, applies, and tests the efficacy of corporeal and object presence as demonstrated in the workshop practices of Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre, and in the development of a new work, *Three Good Wives*. As the workshop practices of these two companies have not been previously documented or analysed, this thesis opens with two main questions: What theories and techniques have these two companies developed in order to create their work? And, what do their workshop training practices contribute to the broader field of puppetry?

Employing both observational and practice based research methodologies, I document each company's history, describe and analyse their respective aesthetics, and examine the circumstances in which they, and other contemporary European puppet theatre makers, work. I participated in their workshops with the aim of directly experiencing their theories and techniques in practice. Based on these workshop experiences, coupled with interviews with the company founders and collaborators, I document and analyse their respective theories and techniques, and develop a working test to determine if these can be unbound from their individual aesthetic productions. My practice-based research involved the creation a new production, *Three Good Wives*.

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## Part 1

### Puppets, Presence, and Memory

#### Chapter 1

##### Toward a Theory about Puppetry Practice

Two male doctors in surgical scrubs attend to a female patient loosely covered in a sheet of slightly opaque plastic. One doctor lifts the sheet and smoke appears to billow out. The other doctor reaches in to what appears to be the woman's abdomen and extracts a burning building that he carefully lifts and sets on stage left.



The first doctor lowers the sheet of plastic and gestures

**Figure 1: *Boliloc* 2007. Performers: Alice Osborne, Christian Hecq, and Scott Koehler. Photography by Pascal Francois**

for the other doctor to step behind him as he begins to try to put out the fire using a bulb syringe. After several attempts, the first doctor walks around, turns a switch and the fire and smoke cease. (*Boliloc*. Created and Directed by Philippe Genty and Choreographer Mary Underwood. Rond Point. 14 June 2008)





**Figure 2: *Cuniculus* 2009.  
Performer: Neville Tranter.  
Photography unknown**

A mother and son sit together; the son gently holding the mother's hand. They turn their heads to look at each other, touch, and rub noses. The mother lowers her gaze and almost rests her head on the son's chest. The son looks out and says: 'Lupus says (pause) my ears will fall off'. The mother quickly raises her gaze to the son's face, then up to his ears. She raises her paw to her mouth and laughs. (*Cuniculus*. Created and Performed by Neville Tranter. Dir. Hans ManIntVeld. Huis ann de Werf. 10 September 2008)

Three women kneel upstage; behind them is a shadow screen on which a house appears. A loud crack is heard, the house splits apart and the woman in the centre reaches forward as if to stop the house from breaking. She sits back and insects appear on the screen behind her. She looks left then right following the movement of the bugs. She reaches forward to contain them first with her right hand then her left following them up the bodies of the other two actors. She brushes them off their arms and finally from off of herself but they keep coming seeming to contaminate her very being until she transforms into an insect like anxious creature attacking her companions. (*Three Good Wives*. Directed by Alissa Mello. Little Angel Theatre 16 – 28 March 2010)

Each of the above scenes represents a different way in which memory is the source of material and the foundation for puppetry. The first of these scenes is based on Philippe Genty's personal memory of a tragic event from his childhood used uncharacteristically as a moment of humour in *Boliloc* but that has recurred in a number of his productions. It is an example of memory transposition from one source to another. The second, from Stuffed Puppet Theatre's *Cuniculus*, draws on cultural memory – mother and son

archetypes – as well as personal memory, which underpin actor puppeteer Neville Tranter’s performance as both the son and the puppet mother of this moment of tenderness and amusement. Finally, the third scene is from *Three Good Wives*, which dramatizes a military wife’s anxiety at living in a constant state of waiting and not knowing about the whereabouts or wellbeing of their partner using movements from a childhood memory of one of the actor puppeteers.

This thesis is a practice-based research investigation of two leading contemporary European puppet theatre companies: Compagnie Philippe Genty, from France and Neville Tranter’s Stuffed Puppet Theatre, from the Netherlands. Puppets have been theorized in a number of ways, particularly through the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. As performing objects, they are most often imagined from the point of view of the spectator, or what I refer to as the audience participant.<sup>1</sup> From this position, puppets are often defined and brought to life by their visible elements; what Steve Tillis concisely argues in *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* are a puppet’s sign system: that they are a designed and constructed figure that uses movement, that in some but not all practice use speech, and that is understood to be not live (Tillis *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* 7). While these elements constitute the visible aesthetic principles of puppet theatre, my research project aims to understand and analyze the practice, theories and performance techniques that are hidden beneath the surface including puppet performance techniques that are initiated internally rather than externally, manufacturing presence in live theatre for live human and puppet performers, uses of memory in performance practice, and the puppet as a site(s) of memory.

In this thesis, I investigate current puppetry performance practices of three leading practitioner/creators, how memory is theorized and functions below the surface of their techniques as a mechanism in practice; and ways in which memory is transferred to and informs the readable performance score and presence of puppets. I am focusing on the performer training aspects with limited references to audience participant readership of this practice in the moment of performance. My theory is that puppets function as site(s) of memory and that their presence/illusion of agency is activated by the ‘real’ memories of both the actor puppeteers and audience participants. I investigate this as performance technique and as part of the dramaturgy of a production that uses performer memories, experiences of others, and cultural memory as part of the narrative, drawing on the techniques of verbatim theatre. My thesis focuses on the performance techniques

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I will refer to ‘audience participant’ rather than ‘audience’ or ‘spectator’ in order to point to the notion of an active rather than passive viewer.

developed by Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre that are used in their practices and have been developed into training techniques. My research begins with documentation and analysis of each company's workshop processes as a participant observer culminating in implementation of their workshop techniques and theories in the creation of a new work, *Three Good Wives*, as a way of researching and testing my theories and their methods about memory and the puppet as a site of memory.

As a puppet theatre director, performer, and scholar, my project originates from a desire to understand and document contemporary models of practice and workshop techniques. I am concerned with the lack of academic analysis and scholarly documentation and analysis of the artistic creation of contemporary puppetry, particularly the evolution of practice as it circulates through workshops that are taught and taken by performers and puppet theatre makers. In contemporary puppet theatre, workshops are a significant site of training that sit alongside institutional training at colleges and universities. Training at workshops is focused either on or around the needs of specific productions or artistic practices without consideration or analysis of the techniques, how they circulate within the broader context of performance training and influence artistic aesthetics as it travels with a particular performer as part of their personal knowledge base. Cariad Astles, course leader at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama – a leading institutional puppetry programme, writes in her article 'Puppetry Training for Contemporary Live Theatre,' there is a need for puppetry training that attends to both the puppet and the puppeteer (Astles 34) but 'little documented research has been undertaken into the benefits of specific training exercises for puppetry' (ibid., 33). This lack of documentation and research not only applies to the benefits of exercises for puppetry but also to techniques and theories being developed by puppetry artists as part of their creative practices in response to specific performance questions and problems that are encountered in interdisciplinary work. In her article, Astles is concerned with 'training which essentially focuses puppetry work which takes place *between* the energies of live performance and puppetry' (ibid., 34, italics in the original). This mode of performance that combines visible live human performers with puppet performers includes a range of visibility for the live human actor puppeteers who may be: visible but not active characters, visible character but who do not interact with the puppet (material or object) performers, or visible and interact with the puppet performers. These modes of performance and the training issues of interdisciplinary practice are not only present in puppetry but also in the work of numerous visual theatre practitioners and companies such as Robert Wilson, Complicite, Théâtre du Soleil, and Blind Summit and increasingly

in commercial theatre. Astles' contention about the lack of documented research, however, applies to all puppet theatre training techniques not merely this particular mode of performance.

The techniques taught in workshops not only provide tools that address the questions and challenges that arise in interdisciplinary theatre but they also provide insight into a particular artist's fundamental artistic concerns, and, crucially, as in the case of my two case study companies emerge from and are the building blocks of their practice. I am interested in looking beyond spectatorship, production analysis, or even rehearsal analysis, towards a deepening understanding of how these artists make their work, the performance issues each considers, and what theories and techniques they have developed that contribute to the wider field of contemporary puppet and performance training. In other words, using participant observation combined with my experience as a theatre maker, I aim to examine the fundamentals of each 'expert,' to use Susan Melrose's term, artists' practice and the principles that underpin their productions. This thesis documents, analyses, applies, and tests concepts of memory, sites of memory, and corporeal and object presence, as demonstrated in the workshop practices of Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre, and in the development of a new work that I created for puppet theatre.

What my research and analysis of these artists' workshop techniques show is that the manufacture of presence in both live and puppet performers, and the use of memory are fundamental elements in their very different approaches to puppetry practice. In all performance, memory may be used in numerous ways. There is a fundamental use of memory to remember the score of a performance including: text, blocking, emotion to be conveyed, and rhythms throughout a performance. In puppet performance, these elements are complicated by the addition of remembering the performance score for both the live human performers, whom I will also call the actor puppeteer, and the performing object (puppet, material, or object). While this fundamental use of memory is part of each company's performance practice, they both also use memory as a mechanism to create vocabularies used for performance scores and emotional mapping through which presence is manufactured and meaning is created, transferred, and read in live human and puppet performers. On the one hand, memory is used as a technique and mechanism for creating and reading the performance score, emotional underpinning and manufacture of meaning in performance. This use of personal memory, as a technique for generating performance vocabularies (movement, text, and emotion), is complicated by transference of memory vocabularies from one performer to another be it between live performers or from a live

performer to a puppet. Whose memory underpins the vocabulary when it is no longer performed by the originating body? On the other hand, memory is made materially present through the act of performing and being performed. The vocabularies acquire new memories and associations through processes of transference from performer to performer and the reading by audience participants. The use of memory as a generative technique makes it present, in the room, at the moment of creation and performance. It is memory made material in the present. Through memory and remembering, performers also generate and convey meaning that reads as intention, thought, agency and presence (in the sense of life). In the following three sections, I map the history of contemporary puppetry leading to the work of Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre, presence, and memory.

### **Puppets**

Puppets, as well as objects and materials, have been approached and theorised in numerous ways. In this thesis, I am focusing on their use in performance but also aim to shift the position from which analysis initiates meaning from the perspective of audience participant and production analysis to that of the practitioner. Despite a shift in position, it is important to understand the particular historical lineage and era of experimentation that leads to the developments in contemporary practice – particularly the co-present visible actor puppeteer among puppet performers – that will be investigated. Different scholars argue that this era begins at different points. According to Victoria Nelson, in *The Secret Life of Puppets*, it begins in the literary and philosophical discourses of the Romantics in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century who re-introduce notions about puppets – real and imagined – particularly in the work of Heinrich von Kleist, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Giacomo Leopardi (Nelson 60). Jurkowski, on the other hand, states that it begins with the Modernist movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He argues that ‘the modernist concept of art as the subjective creation of a human being opened the way to the belief that any such creation must be artificial, since it is “manufactured” by the human’. This fundamental concept, Henryk Jurkowski suggests in *A History of European Puppetry: The Twentieth Century*, sparked all experimentation in 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre, including puppet theatre (Jurkowski *A History of European Puppetry Vol. 2*). Whereas John Bell argues that ‘the course of modern theatre was changed when Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* brought the world of puppets, masks, and other performing objects onto the centre stage of western theatre’ (Bell

‘Puppets and Performing Objects in the Twentieth Century’ 29).<sup>2</sup> Noted professor of French and comparative literature David Ball agrees, writing that Jarry’s play, which opened and closed in Paris on 10 December 1896<sup>3</sup>, foreshadows ‘the assault against propriety, "naturalist" or "Aristotelian" theatre, and art in general that would be taken up by futurism, dada and a few other Modernist movements in the first quarter of the twentieth century’ (Ball 135).

Though Jurkowski, Bell, and Ball point to important historical shifts and moments, Nelson’s attribution dating to the Romantics particularly noting Heinrich Von Kleist is significant. Kleist’s essay, ‘On The Marionette Theatre’, written in 1810 is often used in puppetry scholarship to either demonstrate the advantages of a puppet performer (a perfect being because it is without consciousness) in comparison with a live human actor (an imperfect being because of consciousness) (Kleist 26; Francis 121; Segel 6) or, less frequently, as an exploration of ‘the possible contribution of “low” or “popular” culture to a re-animation of “high” art’ (Segel 14). G. A. Wells, however, argues that Kleist’s essay is mainly concerned ‘with the way in which conflict between different tendencies (or its absence) affects gracefulness of behaviour’ (Wells 90). Erich Heller would concur, but added that the essay is about humanity’s struggle ‘to transcend this “unhappy consciousness”—to use Hegel’s phrase...The human mind’s alienation from the supreme Intelligence’ (Heller 422). The puppet in Kleist’s essay is one among three metaphors used to argue his point (the other two are a young man at a bath and a constrained bear that instinctively defends itself in a fencing match), but it points to a paradox about puppets. Though Kleist frames the puppet as a perfect being he elides the fact that it is constructed and manipulated by less than perfect beings – live humans. The central paradox posed in his essay, though, predates the modernist notion of art’s artificiality.

Although *Ubu Roi* was significant to puppet theatre as well as modernist art and theatre in general, perhaps the more significant for puppetry is *Ubu sur la Butte (Ubu on the Slope)*, which premiered at Théâtre des Pantins in 1901. Although experimentation with and explorations of puppets and objects predate both *Ubu Roi* and this production in

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<sup>2</sup> For more about Jarry and puppets see *Segel’s Pinocchio’s Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automats and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama*; Roger Shattuck’s *The banquet years: The origins of the avant garde in France, 1885 to World War I: Alfred Jarry, Henri Rousseau, Erik Satie [and] Guillaume Apollinaire*; and Alastair Brotchie’s *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* as well as Jarry’s plays: *The Ubu Plays: Ubu Rex, Ubu Cockolded, Ubu Enchained*.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi* was performed by actors in full-body costumes who imitated puppets, whereas, earlier and later versions of the play were performed by actual puppets.

popular entertainments such as cabaret performances at venues such as Le Chat Noir in Paris beginning in 1881, ventriloquist performances, and clown,<sup>4</sup> *Ubu sur la Butte* is the beginning of reflexive puppetry in which we, the audience participant, is explicitly made aware of the puppet's artifice. The play begins with a prologue during which Guignol, a traditional French puppet character, and Le Directeur, a human character, negotiate terms for the performance (Jarry *Ubu: Collection Folio* 261-271). Experiments in puppetry continued into the early twentieth century at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich (Segel 36), the work of playwrights such as Maurice Bouchor, Michel de Ghelderode, Federico García Lorca, and Maurice Maeterlinck,<sup>5</sup> and the works and writings of Edward Gordon Craig as well as among some artists in early twentieth century visual and film art movements such as German Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism.

This era of experimentation initiated by artists from numerous disciplines was embraced by a number of artists working specifically in puppet theatre and led to significant developments within the form. Jurkowski writes that 'the theatrical ideas of our century,' referring to the twentieth century, in European puppet theatre are:

the visibility of the acting subject, demonstrating the artificial character of puppet theatre; the return to ritual forms of theatre; the playing with elements of drama, especially with time, space and characters which have undergone the process of animisation; and the extended meaning of the word 'puppetry' which now covers all kinds of impersonal presentation using, for example, objects or raw material. (Jurkowski *A History of European Puppetry Vol. 2* 452 – 453)

Three important ideas I would add to this list are:

- The conceptualization of puppetry as an artistic form of expression not merely a vocation,
- The use of co-presence as a mode of performance in which the actor puppeteer is not merely visible but simultaneously manipulating and acting with puppet,

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<sup>4</sup> In his essay "Text and Violence: Performance Practices of the Modernist Avant-Garde," Laurence Senelick suggests that English and American styles of clowning that dehumanize the human and use objects in unfamiliar ways were precursors and inspirations for much of the imagery and performance found in futurism, Dadaism, and surrealism (Senelick, Laurence. 'Text and Violence: Performance Practices of the Modernist Avant-Garde'. *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-garde: Performance and Textuality*. Ed. James M. Harding. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000: 29-36.).

<sup>5</sup> Although Maeterlinck subtitled several of his plays 'for marionettes,' some scholars suggest that this designation is referring to the characters and not the actors themselves (Jurkowski. "La marionette littéraire de Maeterlinck à Ghelderode." *Puck: L'Avante-garde et la Marionette* No. 1 (1988): 4 - 7; Vivier 'Histoire d'une âme'. Hanse, Joseph, et al. *Maurice Maeterlinck 1862 – 1962*. Brussels: La Renaissance du Livre, 1962.).

object, and material actors. What Didier Plassard argues is a fundamental shift in the relationship between actor puppeteer and puppet from ‘horizontal’ to ‘vertical’ (qtd in Piris 16-17),

- And a fundamental shift in the approach to developing puppet theatre, characters and manipulation from external to internal processes.

Jurkowski suggests that puppets as an ‘instrument of contemporary artistic expression’ emerged in the 1950’s and 1960’s (Jurkowski, *A History of European Puppetry Vol. 2* 245). However visual artists – such as Dadaists, Surrealists, Symbolists, UK based theatre artist Edward Gordon Craig in the numerous articles he published in his theatre magazines *The Mask* and *The Marionette*, and US-based puppet theatre artist Paul McPharlin (Howard 46) – were already practicing and writing about puppetry in this manner. Although visible and co-present live human performers working with puppets and objects were part of popular tradition like ventriloquism, in which, according to Steven Connor, in his book *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, the dummy is a regular feature of what he categorizes as ‘outdoor ventriloquial performance’ throughout the eighteenth century (Connor 250), it was a relatively unheard of mode of performance in puppet theatre until the mid twentieth century after which it became a more common global practice. The fundamental shift in approach from external to internal coincides to a certain extent with the emergence of co-presence and contemporary practitioners such as Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre, which will be investigated in the following three case studies.

Throughout the twentieth century, though, many companies in Europe and elsewhere<sup>6</sup> were experimenting with puppetry leading towards a theatre of objects and materials, and the performance mode of co-presence. There are three European puppet theatre companies and their artists who are crucial to these evolutions in practice:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a recent comprehensive history of puppetry in twentieth century Europe see Jurkowski’s *A History of European Puppetry Vol. 2, the Twentieth Century* as well as Didier Plassard’s *Surmarionnettes et mannequins*, Harold B. Segel’s *Pinocchio’s Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automats, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama*, Scott Cutler Shershow’s *Puppets and “Popular” Culture*.

<sup>7</sup> Also of importance, particularly to post World War II practitioners, is the Japanese puppet theatre form Bunraku in which a single puppet is manipulated by three actor puppeteers visibly accompanied by a narrator/chanter (tayu) who provides all of the voices and narration and a samisen player who provides musical accompaniment. While the notion of a visible actor puppeteer was not new in European puppetry, United States based scholar and puppet theatre practitioner Nancy L. Staub believes that contemporary artists who adopted visible manipulation ‘were making statements expressing frustration



- State Central Puppet Theatre in Moscow was founded by Sergei Obraztsov in 1931. Obraztsov explored the limits of glove puppetry and used exposed body parts as components of puppets or as puppets themselves in his cabaret puppet act.
- Les marionettes Yves Joly was founded by French cabaret performer Yves Joly after WWII. Like Obraztsov, he used the bare hand but he also used a wide range of objects and materials to both create and break illusions of life and stage.
- The Czechoslovakian company DRAK (<http://www.draktheatre.cz/history>), founded in 1958, revealed the creative process by exposing the manipulation by puppeteers who were also actors and narrators within the shows.

These three experiments in practice: the use of body parts as elements of puppet construction, objects and materials as actors, and combining live humans with and in a world among puppets lays the groundwork for Genty and Underwood's explorations of the live actor/puppeteer and materials, and Tranter's practice of co-presence as a primary mode of performance emerge in the 1980s. Their individual practices, theories, and techniques are documented and analyzed in Parts Two and Three respectively.

This era of experimentation also included evolutions in puppetry training and theoretical speculation about the nature of puppets and objects. Puppetry training has for much of its history followed an apprentice model where performers were either part of a family tradition or would apprentice themselves to a master.<sup>8</sup> This model of training began to shift with the (re)discovery of the form by modernist artists, many of whom were not specifically trained, and popularization across high and low art. Increasingly, training has shifted to master led workshops and institutions such as the Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy, Bialystok, Poland founded a puppetry department in 1975; École Nationale Supérieure des Arts de la Marionnette, Charleville-Mézières, France founded in 1987; and Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London, United

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with a lack of freedom of choice just as their fellow puppeteers were in Tokugawa, Japan. Seeing the puppeteers,' she writes, 'makes the metaphor of political manipulation or social oppression more obvious to the audience.' (Staub, Nancy L. 'Bunraku: A Contemporary Western Fascination'. *The Language of the Puppet*. Laurence R Kominz; Mark Levenson, eds. Vancouver, Washington: Pacific Puppetry Center Press (1990) 47 – 52). Today numerous practitioners use the term bunraku style to refer to multi-person manipulation. Additionally some artists such as Genty and Underwood draw on bunraku's building principles and often imitate the physical proportions when creating anthropomorphic puppets.

<sup>8</sup> This model of training continues to be practiced today to learn specific techniques such as Japanese Bunraku.

Kingdom founded as a Masters degree in 1992 followed by an undergraduate course in 1997. Workshops may be hours to weeks and are typically focused on either manipulation or building. Institutional programs typically include both aspects of training. Yet as Astles points out (and I noted in my introduction) most training does not incorporate techniques for negotiating different modes of performance such as co-presence or manipulation of different kinds of presences nor has there been any systematic documentation or study of puppetry training techniques. This despite the increased use of puppets, objects, and materials in performances across a broad spectrum of practice – experimental to commercial theatre – and the growing demands on human performers to be familiar with the forms.

Additionally, Tillis asserts that there is no sufficiently useful theory or descriptive vocabulary about performing or theatrical use of puppets. The first chapter of his treatise is devoted to an adept and insightful comparison of definitions and theories about puppets put forward by leading practitioners and theorist primarily from the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the aim of arriving at, what he calls, a workable if not complete definition. He concludes that puppets are ‘figures perceived by an audience to be objects that are given design, movement, and frequently, speech, in such a way that the audience imagines them to have life’ (Tillis *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* 28). This description forms the basic premise not only of a definition but also of the most commonly alluded to elements for how puppets, objects, and materials are used and communicate in performance. Though, as Tillis notes, it is only the beginning not the end of understanding puppets, objects, and materials in performance. Further and as I will show, these elements alone are not the only means to manufacture the illusion of life or presence.

### **Presence and the Manufactured Life of Puppets**

Conceptually, the very notion of presence let alone stage presence is elusive. One could argue that it, like objects themselves, will always elude our understanding. Whereas, in practice, it is something that most of us will say we know when we see it. Presence is generally assumed to be a property of living things— humans and animals—but what of the presence of material bodies such as puppets? On the one hand, presence is an indicator of life. On the other, it is that ‘something more’ that extends beyond mere physical existence to embody an ephemeral, untouchable, and intangible sense that seems to emanate from live bodies. What many religious belief systems captured in the notion of a thing’s soul. In performance terms though, stage or camera ‘presence’—or ‘it’, as

Joseph Roach succinctly describes it in his book of the same name—is what an audience wants to see. ‘It’ draws the audience participant into the events unfolding on stage and radiates in a way that reaches or touches each individual in the house. According to Joseph Chaikin ‘All of the history of the theatre refers to actors who possess this “presence”’ (Chaikin 20). In other words, presence in one sense or another, for many, is what makes an actor’s career. In puppet theatre though, presence is a quality manufactured by the actor puppeteer who makes puppets (materials and object) present but may or may not draw attention to him/herself. In other words, in some modes of performance the actor puppeteer consciously works to minimize their presence while activating that of a puppet. Yet, theoretically and practically, questions about exactly what ‘it’ is for either a live human or performing object, let alone how to possess or manufacture it continue to circulate.

Many puppet productions, wherever they may sit on an aesthetic continuum from naturalistic to abstract to surrealist or hyperrealist, work consciously to create presence in a puppet. In addition to the physical presence of the performing object, meaning a puppet, object, or raw material being there in the room, presence in puppetry is most often articulated as an illusion of life and/or agency in an anthropomorphised or zoomorphised performing object. Our notions of presence though are articulated through the human. In her recent book *Stage Presence*, Jane Goodall identifies three types of presence, analysed in relation to the histories of electricity and mesmerism. Though she does not explain exactly how to produce these, she does state how each presence type functions in performance. One form radiates from a performer; one draws an audience participant in; and, finally, one is a surface glitter or ‘razzle-dazzle’ that may or may not have more depth than a flash of sequins. For Goodall, presence for the stage actors, she notes with caution when making a differentiation, radiates (Goodall 43). Or, as Joseph Roach puts it: presence ‘is a certain quality, easy to perceive but hard to define, possessed by abnormally interesting people’ (Roach *It* 1). Both Roach and Goodall point to a number of attributes that we often associate with notions of presence, such as energy, sex appeal, and attitude. However, Roach, in contrast with the distinct types defined by Goodall, argues that:

‘It’ was captured by the metaphoric terms of *magnetism* and *radiance*, which, taken together, neatly express the opposite motions instigated by the contradictory forces of It: drawing towards the charismatic figure as attraction; radiating away from him or her as broadcast aura. (ibid., 7)

Magnetism, radiance and charisma are qualities typically associated with living organisms or electrical energy output. Roach’s notion of charisma is closely aligned with

Max Weber's concept of charisma, as theorised in *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Weber describes charisma thus: 'A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities' (Weber 329). Unlike Weber's charismatics—who were generally individuals in politics, the social sphere, and/or religion, in whom these qualities were assumed to be inherent—for live human actors, dancers, and other performers, 'it'/presence/charisma is often expressed and taught as an expansion of one's energy out beyond one's skin. It is about allowing one's energy to extend beyond the physical fingers, toes, eyes, and hearts to meet the back wall of a space or venue. In his book *Environmental Theater*, Richard Schechner sums up this quality as 'an actual, living relationship between the spaces of the body and the spaces the body moves through; that human living tissue does not abruptly stop at the skin' (Schechner 12). Similarly, Cormac Power uses the term 'auratic presence', which he defines as 'an abstract quality that can be attached to people, names, objects, or places which have more significance than appearance might suggest' (Power 47). This significance, he argues, may be the result of either celebrity/notoriety or 'constructed in the act of performance' (ibid., 49).

Presence, however, also implies the materiality of being present. David Richard Jones defines presence not only as an ephemeral 'it', but also as 'presentness (now-ness) and presence (here-ness), a present tense in both space and time' (Jones 8). Ephemeral or auratic presence in theatre is constructed in the here and now of performance through an actor's 'manipulation of space and materials, including his own body and posture, as well as the way in which the actor confronts his audience and engages their attention' (Power 49). In other words, we can, as Erika Fischer-Lichte notes, distinguish 'between the innate "sheer presence" of the actor's phenomenal body and the actor's active ability "to command both space and the audience's attention" through a "mastery of certain techniques and practices to which the spectators respond"' (Fischer-Lichte 96). But what, then, is presence relative to the non-human performing puppets, objects, and materials? Is it, as animists contend, inherent in all things? Is it manufactured and by whom?

Jiří Veltruský argues that this manufacturing of presence or life—which he calls 'vivification'—is a crucial element in puppet theatre:

[A] phenomenon akin to personification is crucial in puppetry: the spectators are induced to perceive the inanimate puppets as live beings acting on their own initiative. Perhaps the phenomenon could best be called vivification, in the sense of imbuing with life. (Veltruský 88)

The act of imbuing any performing object with life is, in puppet theatre scholarship, framed typically as a result of reading the symbolic gestures that function as the signs of life creating the illusion of breath, the uncanny, or both. Whereas for some practitioners with animistic beliefs, the notion of possessing a life essence is connected to having a soul and includes all matter not only live bodies but also puppets to vegetation, rocks, and soil (Nelson 20; Tylor). ‘Puppets,’ writes Kenneth Gross in his 1997 review of the Third International Festival of Puppet Theatre in New York, ‘link the theatre to the circus and carnival, but also to the sacred’ (Gross ‘Love Among The Puppets’) their life inextricably linked with ‘the dead, with the realm of the uncanny, the threshold realm of things unknown’ (Gross *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life* 23). Nelson argues that the connection between human simulacra and the notion of a soul dates to Late Antiquity (Nelson ix). She contends that this linkage and the associated transcendental forces were imbedded in ancient metaphysical theurgic belief structures and the automata that were featured elements of ancient religious practices (ibid.). During the Enlightenment and Age of Reason, these ancient mystical beliefs were, she contends, transformed and ‘slowly internalized to those areas of human perception labelled the “imagination” and the “unconscious”’ (ibid., 43).

Among puppeteers, one will broadly find two approaches – those who subscribe to animism, and those who create or manufacture the psychological character performing through the material object and imbue an object with a soul through their performance work. Whereas animists suggest that the presence of puppet performers is, like in their live human counterparts, an inherent quality, Veltruský and others suggest, the life of an object relies on multiple physical components i.e. its ‘sign system’ comprised of design, movement and rhythm, focus, and, sometimes voice. In *Making Puppets Come to Life: How to Learn and Teach Hand Puppets*, Larry Engler states that puppets best ‘create the illusion of life by using the movements exclusive to their construction’ (Engler and Fijan 16), rather than trying to imitate human action. In other words, movement and gesture function as signs rather than as imitations of life that aims to fool an audience participant into believing in an illusion. Tillis supports this position, adding that ‘[I]t is in response to the signs deployed by the puppet, signs that normally signify life, that the audience accords the puppet its spurious life’ (Tillis *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* 7). This position suggests that the audience participant is responding only to observable actions and gestures to grant life and presence to a puppet.

Sergei Obraztsov, in his memoir *My Profession* however, suggests the illusion of life in a puppet is a living dialogue between puppeteer and puppet, which he likens to the

human circulatory system in which emotion is ‘channelled’ through arteries from the puppeteer to the puppet actor (Obraztsov 264). Penny Francis agrees, arguing that ‘the perceived investment of the inanimate with anima’, is a process of transference between performer/manipulator and puppet/object. ‘The transference,’ she states, ‘is effected through the natural or manufactured ‘controls’ of the puppet, combined with specific performing skills, innate or acquired, directly and immediately applied (in ‘real-time’) to the thing animated’ (Francis 5).

Not all practitioners who work with puppets, objects, and materials seek to create an illusion of anthropomorphised or zoomorphised presence. For example, United States based performance and visual artist Stuart Sherman created tabletop events using everyday household objects. The objects were displayed, manipulated, and arranged according the artist’s idiosyncratic logic but without an attempt to imbue the objects with a soul or anthropomorphic presence (Howell 74; Schwarting). Whereas in his production *Symphonie Fantastique*, United States based puppet theatre director Basil Twist was not interested in representing life in the various materials manipulated in a water tank, and yet I have heard audience participants frame their reading of the performance as the material having had a kind of life or agency. As Jane Catherine Shaw, a director, puppeteer, and builder who has worked with Twist on numerous occasions, notes about this production:

Basil had very specific demands for how each object was moved, rhythms, timing etc. Regardless of his notions about his ability to present swirling cloth that had no ‘life,’ he did not simply put the cloth in a clear washing machine and ask us to watch it. There was intention in each of his choices, demands for how things moved, and when they would enter and exit. We (the audience participants) saw life because we saw intention and choice in the gestural movement of cloth—not random washing machine swishes! (Interview 26 June 2012)

In other words, audience participants attribute life to materials even though they are not anthropomorphised because of their perception of the presence of a thinking object.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas in puppetry scholarship, presence is often framed as either the imbuing of a soul through an unknown mechanism into a puppet or the perception of an inherent soul present in all things, ventriloquism proposes an alternative construction of presence. Connor argues that presence, in the sense of the life of the body, is produced by the voice (Connor 35). This he calls the ‘principle of the vocalic body’ (ibid.). Although voice may be a component of puppetry, it is not always used nor when used is the source of vocal production necessarily hidden or disguised. This question of the voice as a component of

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<sup>9</sup> This can also be seen among practitioners when backstage as seen in Joshua Malkin’s documentary film *Puppetry: Worlds of Imagination*.

presence will be further analyzed in Part Three on Stuffed Puppet Theatre and Part Four about *Three Good Wives*.

Regardless of whether an artist or audience participant subscribes to animist beliefs, transference, the vocalic body or would describe a puppet as ‘dead’ (Paska), as American puppet practitioner Roman Paska does, the presence of puppets in performance is manufactured in some fashion. This manufacturing of presence or what Tillis refers to as the ‘spurious life’ of a puppet (Tillis *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* 7), and I include objects and materials, occurs as a result of and response to intentional manipulation of the object by the actor puppeteer which is read by the audience participant to create meaning from what they are seeing. The unarticulated element in the above theories about a puppet’s presence is the underlying role of memory as an activator of presence. Memory, as I will argue in the case studies, is used by actor puppeteers to create and underpin their physical scores and symbolic gesture, and is used by audience participants as a filter through which to read a performance and create presence in puppets and meaning.

Actor puppeteers draw on what Richard Schechner would call ‘restored behavior’ (Schechner *Between Theater and Anthropology* pp. 35-36) that is behaviour that is symbolic, reflexive, and recognizable. Actor puppeteers then transfer this behaviour to their puppet, object, or material performer thus disrupting two notions about restored behaviour: 1) that it is ‘me behaving as if I am someone else’ (ibid., 37), and 2) that restored behaviour allows individuals and groups to re-become something they previously were (ibid., 38) because the behaviour is transferred to another object. However, the gestures devised and performed are underpinned by the actor puppeteer’s memory of what they are, what they mean, and how to manipulate a puppet, object, and material to perform them. Similarly, audience participants read the events on stage through their recognition of the restored behaviour based on their previous knowledge, memory, and/or experience with the behaviour or something similar to it. Stated in another way, presence or the signs that imbue puppets, objects, and materials with life emerge from and are understood through the memories of the actor puppeteers and the audience participants.

Audience participants read this work as an active viewer of events on stage, simultaneously witnessing and constructing meaning. Through their collaboration with and investment in the events they observe they, the audience participants, are part of the creative process. In *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, Ernest Cassirer argues that what differentiates humans from all other organisms is the acquisition and individual interpretation of ‘the symbolic system’ (Cassirer 24).

Like the French Romantics, Cassirer asserts that we do not live ‘in a merely physical universe’ but also ‘in a symbolic universe’ (ibid., 25). Each of us, he proposes, constructs reality in a ‘complicated process of thought’ (ibid., 24) that interrupts and delays the biological system of reception and response. At this instant of delay, we participate in an act of co-creation by reading and constructing meaning from images, sounds and texts, based on our individual experiences. Julian Crouch and Phelim McDermott, founders of Improbable Theatre Company,<sup>10</sup> refer to this space as ‘the gap... through which the audience imaginatively enter the show and become participants in the theatre event’ (Crouch and McDermott 'The Gap' 12). This idea not only counters calls from Romantic philosophy for a return to nature, but also usurps the notion of the passive audience, a notion which Baz Kershaw suggests ‘is a figment of the imagination, a practical impossibility’ (qtd. in Goodman and Gay 137). Kershaw maintains that the idea of a passive viewer was framed in theories of theatre semiotics and ‘arises because theatre semiotics are more often concerned with describing the structures of theatrical sign systems, rather than determining the meanings that the audience may construct through its use of the signs’ (Kershaw 52). I would go on to argue that not only does the construction of meaning occur, particularly in puppet and object theatre, but it is also an essential aspect of theatrical experience and meaning making.

In live human theatre, this participation takes place between two ontologically similar objects— two live humans. When watching puppet theatre, the level of participation asked of audience participants increases because the exchange takes place between two ontologically different performers. As performers and theatre makers working with puppets and objects, we are asking audience participants not only to suspend their disbelief and engage with a theatrical world, but also to accept the idea of the life or agency of non-living objects. As John Bell writes, puppet theatre ‘involves both performers and audience focusing on the dead matter’ (Bell *American Puppet Modernism* 5), and it is through the imagination of both that this dead matter<sup>11</sup> conveys the appearance or illusion of life and/or agency.

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<sup>10</sup> Improbable Theatre Company was co-founded in 1996 by artists Julian Crouch, Phelim McDermott, and Lee Simpson and producer Nick Sweeting. Their idiosyncratic work combines a wide range of materials, techniques, and styles grounded in improvisation. Productions include: *Sticky* (1998), *Theatre of Blood* (2005), *Satyagraha* (2007), and *The Devil and Mister Punch* (2011). For more information go to <http://www.improbable.co.uk/>

<sup>11</sup> The notion of puppets and objects being dead matter is merely one way of thinking about object and puppet performers. Others, such as Jane Catherine Shaw, would argue that ‘something can only be dead if it was once alive’. This in no way detracts from the



According to Bell, the relationship between puppeteer, puppet and audience participant functions like this:

performer → → → object ← ← ← spectators (ibid.)

This configuration and the ontological differences between performing puppets and audience participants necessitates that the audience participant be an active participant in constructing both the meaning of a production and the life of the puppet performers. As Crouch and McDermott note:

A puppet which looks like a figure, a piece of wood or some other material may move and behave onstage as if it were a living thing with thoughts, emotions and intentions. It is only through the conspiracy of the players and the audience to play together that this becomes possible. Only if the audience willingly dream and agree to put part of themselves into the puppet can magic happen. (Crouch and McDermott 'The Gap' 12)

Eileen Blumenthal suggests, similarly to Tillis, Gross and Nelson, that one appeal of puppet theatre is that the audience participant believes in two things - the life presence of a non-living object – simultaneously, requiring a kind of ‘metaphysical gymnastics’ (qtd. in Akalaitis et al.). This gymnastics asks audience participants to invest in, engage, and empathise with constructed rather than live human performers as a producer of meaning. Yet as Tina Bicât writes in *Puppets and Performing Objects: A Practical Guide*, and I agree, ‘this three-way exchange depends on the animator’ (Bicât 15) and their ability to physically, energetically, and emotionally perform signs of life.

In contemporary puppet theatre, numerous artists, including Neville Tranter, actively expose ontological difference. Although the mechanisms of exposure vary—especially in terms of the visibility or invisibility of puppeteers and, in some cases, puppet mechanisms—the collaborative co-creative act is necessary in order for a production to be successful for both the performers and the audience participants. Jurkowski has suggested that this co-creation is a mutual mental process. In his article ‘The Human among Things and Objects’, he writes that:

Animation and especially animisation of human simulacra can be considered a mental process... it is a mental process for the manipulator who intends to bring life to his simulacra and for the spectator who comes to the theatre in expectation of a fictional experience. (qtd. in Bartlau 25)

By ‘animasation,’ I understand Jurkowski to be referring to the notion of an actor puppeteer imbuing or transferring a soul into an inanimate object whether it be a puppet,

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audience participant perceiving life in a puppet or performing object (Interview 26 June 2012).

object, or raw material. The perception of a puppet (object or material) having a soul or presence is a response to performers performing and audience participants reading tangible, visible, and sonic actions on stage. The performer/theatre makers create and perform gestures that the audience participants read and interpret. As playwright and actress Lisa Kron points out in a video interview: ‘Theatre doesn’t exist on the page. It exists in that imaginative space between a performer and an audience’ (*Actors Words, Writers Voice*).

This imaginative space in puppet theatre presents an audience participant with a paradox: that of a living object or thing that is simultaneously clearly not an actually living thing—it is neither human nor animal—but which performs the signs of and embodies the notion or potentiality of life and/or agency. As Jena Osman states in her article ‘The Epic Theatre is the Puppet Theatre’:

While the puppet theatre has great powers of enchantment, it is impossible for the spectator to forget for long that s/he is agreeing to be put under a spell, that s/he is agreeing to grant humanity to an object. The pact is always in view, the device always laid bare. (qtd. in Schaffner and Kuoni 19)

This paradox is at the heart of the question: what do we, the audience participant, see when watching a puppet show? Otakar Zich, as paraphrased by Jurkowski, proposes that audience participants use two methods of seeing: 1) puppet as dead object, when it appears as comic or grotesque; or 2) as a ‘live thing, imbued with movement and speech’ (qtd. in Jurkowski *Aspects of Puppet Theatre: A Collection of Essays* 16). Steve Tillis, on the other hand, argues for a dual or, what he calls a ‘double-vision’, state ‘which postulates that an audience sees the puppet in two ways at one time: as a perceived object and as an imagined life’ (Tillis *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* 7). Thomas A. Green and W. J. Pepicello in turn suggest that:

in a performance where the puppeteer is characteristically visible to some extent, we [the audience participant] are presented not only with the index of human agency, but with the reality itself... the result of this juxtaposition of sign and reality is an oscillation between the two that heightens the aesthetic perception of the performance by making the performance a collaborative effort between performer and audience. (Green and Pepicello 158)

I disagree that this oscillation only occurs in performances where the puppeteer is visible. As Zich and Tillis both state, the audience participant is aware at some level that there is a puppeteer somewhere, even if that actor puppeteer is not visible. Rather, the answer lies somewhere between this oscillation of sign and reality, and depends on the individual audience participant’s perception and belief in and about what they are seeing.

When the actor puppeteer(s) is not visible as part of the theatrical frame, the

audience participant's entire focus is on a holistic stage world in which all visible players, even if of different styles, are ontologically similar. They are drawn into a world populated by performers different from themselves but consistent within its own logic, which may ease an audience participants' ability to suspend their disbelief and accept the events portrayed even though they are aware on some level that there is a live human(s) manufacturing the puppet, object and material stage reality. Contemporary practice particularly since the twentieth century also experiments with the exposure of the artifice and mechanisms of puppets, objects, and materials in performance. Osman argues that this laying bare of the devices in puppet theatre functions as a 'Brechtian cigar' (qtd. in Schaffner and Kuoni 19), distancing the audience participant from the performers and demanding 'that we become our own objects of inquiry' (ibid.). These theories, however, do not fully address what happens in practice. What happens '*in the act of performance*' (Power 49) both in rehearsal and on stage whereby a puppet's, object's, or material's presence is constructed? Is our experience of presence a more complicated energy flow and intangible dialogue between objects and recognition of the self than language can capture or is the presence of puppets, objects, and material in performance connected to something else?

### **Memory**

Puppeteers in practice and workshops often refer to breathing life into an object, or acting through its rods, strings, or directly manipulated material. These relatively typical approaches in puppet manipulation can be seen in a wide range of aesthetic practices not only that of the two case study companies for this thesis but also in the work of artists such as Gavin Glover (founder of Faulty Optic Theatre of Animation now PotatoRoom), Finn Caldwell (puppeteer with Blind Summit), and Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones (founders of Handspring Puppet Company) each of whom I have taken workshops. Similar to the way some dancers conceptualize their own extremities - arms, legs, fingers, toes- as expressive communicative objects, so to do some puppeteers refer to their performing partners as expressive independent objects. At the same time, an actor puppeteer performs through the puppet, object, or material and manufactures an illusion of presence. Francis refers to this as 'the convincing transference of a performer's energy to one or more...figures' (Francis 5). Like Tillis and others, she notes bringing a puppet to life occurs in concert with the movement, gestures, and vocalization, when used. However, she, like numerous practitioners and scholars, ephemeralizes the manufacture of life and presence as merely the product of belief, meaning their inherent animism, and

as unconscious. ‘Some of the most effective manipulation,’ she writes, ‘results from the puppeteer’s unconscious ability to project visual and spiritual imagination into the figure being operated’ (Francis 28). Though I do not entirely disagree with notions of animism or with Nelson’s argument that traces of our religious or metaphysical pasts may have been transposed to contemporary notions of imagination, I disagree with the notion that this work is somehow unconscious, and that what puppeteers are doing is merely projecting ‘visual and spiritual imagination.’

Effective manipulation, that which manufactures presence in a puppet, is a combination of the visible elements as articulated by Jurkowski, Francis, and Tillis — the design and construction of the object, and use of a puppet’s sign system (movement, voice, symbolic gesture) — and performance techniques that are below the surface and not visible per se. According to my research and analysis of Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre’s workshop practices, their invisible performance techniques emerge from an internal approach to puppetry practice and uses memory as an activator of presence.

If one only addresses each of these companies from the perspective of watching/witnessing their performances, their work, despite dramatic aesthetic differences, seems to decentre the human. Live humans are not necessarily the centre of attention but rather they often co-exist in a stage world populated by themselves, puppets, objects, and materials. For example in Genty and Underwood productions, although the live human performer is increasingly the focus (this will be elaborated on in Chapter Three), they inhabit a dreamscape environment populated by puppets, objects, and materials. In Tranter’s productions, the live human and puppet performers inhabit a world in which they are of ‘equal status’ (this will be elaborated on in Chapter Five). In other words, the live humans, puppets, objects, and materials are ranked on the same level within their particular stage worlds. This notion of relationships among different things aligns with object-oriented ontology in which one type of thing is not privileged over the other (Bogost 5; Harman). In other words, as Jane Bennett might say, their productions ‘violate an order that ranks humans incomparably higher than animals, vegetables, and minerals’ and create stage worlds in which ‘nonhuman matter also counts’ (Bennett).

Object-oriented ontology has been adopted by puppet theatre scholarship in recent years as a lens through which to rethink notions of puppet, object, and material performance. As can be seen in numerous contributions in the recently published

*Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*,<sup>12</sup> as well as at conferences and symposia such as *Objects, Environments, and Actants*<sup>13</sup> and the Puppetry and Material Performance working group,<sup>14</sup> it is being used as a means of reframing the idea of independent agency in inanimate, material performers and as a mechanism for reconsidering how puppets, objects, materials, environments, props, and live humans converge on stage. Although this provides a productive means for production analysis, it similar to Kleist's proposal, often elides the work of the actor puppeteer and only partially attends to the role of the audience participant. Further what my research of Genty, Underwood, and Tranter's performance practices, which are documented and analysed in Chapters Four and Six respectively, suggests is that despite the apparent decentring the human is in fact at the centre of their work through their uses of personal and cultural memory specifically archetypes, the live human performer's memory to generate material, and a reliance on the audience participants' memory through which they read the performance and create meaning.

Memory is a many faceted thing. Writ large it includes our accumulated historical and cultural recollection; writ small it is individual accumulation of experience and impressions; writ even smaller it is a fleeting moment of recognition, what Tranter calls 'the Aha moment' discussed further in Chapter Five. In puppetry, these fleeting moments of recognition are key. When we, the audience participants, see a puppet perform behaviour that resembles the people and animals we know from our everyday lives, we attribute our memories of our everyday experience to the puppet. Even the smallest of gestures has the capacity to elicit huge emotional response because we know, have a memory about, and a personal connection to the gesture. Each facet of memory though affects the other and in all cases it is highly subjective. Nelson argues that our notions about memory as an activity have changed significantly over the centuries with the introduction of externalized or outsourced memory, meaning that memory is kept not in one's own head but via the written word, the printing press, and now computers. Puppetry has long been a depository of social and cultural memory in religious and secular contexts (Jurkowski *A History of European Puppetry from its Origins to the End of the 19<sup>th</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> John Bell, Claudia Orenstein, and Dassia N. Posner edited this new publication released in 2014. It includes the writing of twenty-eight authors from academia and practice.

<sup>13</sup> This symposium was held at the Ballard Institute and Puppet Museum at the University of Connecticut on 29 – 30 March 2014. A list of presenters can be found here: <http://bimp.uconn.edu/2014/03/06/objects-environments-and-actants-symposium-at-uconn-march-29-30/>

<sup>14</sup> This working group, of which I am a founding member, was established at the American Society for Theatre Research Conference held 20 – 23 November 2014.

*Century*, Blumenthal, Mrázek, Nelson). The ‘net effect,’ of this outsourcing Nelson argues, ‘has been to separate...the memory function from its human host’ (Nelson 190). This separation of memory from its host, she writes, transforms it into a ‘vessel of art, an organizing principle that invests experience with highly charged meaning’ (ibid.). Yet memory is integral to the human experience and though some things can be outsourced, memory also includes the life experiences acquired by each individual as well as the mundane practices and systems of physical and virtual communication that Donald McNeill posits in *New Europe: Imagined Spaces* are the new frame of reference for European cultural identity. He categorises mundane practices as ‘popular competencies’, ‘embodied habits’ and ‘synchronised enactions’. ‘Popular competencies’ refers to knowing how to acquire things or attend to daily needs such as shopping, registering for libraries, and banking; ‘embodied habits’ include ways of walking, sitting, body language, and so on; and ‘synchronised enactions’ or temporal actions are knowing when to eat, what is acceptable noise, and so on (McNeill 40-41). French historian Pierre Nora refers to these embodied cultural memories as ‘true memory’ (Nora 13). Mundane embodied practices, particularly those that McNeill defines as synchronised enactions, are this basis for what in puppetry is performed as symbolic gesture. European puppet performances are recognisable as such not only because of their visible cultural makers (design, staging, scenographic sensibilities) but because they encode mundane practices and true memory of Europe as embodied memory and behaviour from the actor puppeteers through the puppets, objects, and material performers.

This embodied memory, including physical, emotional, and sensorial is what actors and audience participants engage explicitly and implicitly in performance. For the performer, though in very different ways, Genty, Underwood and Tranter have developed specific techniques and theories that actively and intentionally use an actor puppeteer’s own ‘real’ memories as part of their techniques to manufacture and negotiate presence in live human, puppet, object, and material performers. While the specific techniques used by each will be explored in their respective case studies in Parts Two and Three, the range of techniques using the performer’s memory includes physical memory re-enactment– in the form of gesture, timing, rhythm, and remembering physical scores of past events to create vocabularies for performance as well as remembering a performance score; emotionally– in the form of experienced emotion recalled either explicitly through specific pedagogical techniques or implicitly through association; and textually – in the form of using the memory stories of actor puppeteers as the text in productions. This content is brought to bear on them and consciously transferred to puppets, objects, and

materials through acting techniques in the moment of creating a character for and on stage. This memory content performed by the live human and object performers is then read through the filter of the audience participant's memory associations with any given gesture, rhythm, text, action, and gaze to form individual readings and the co-creation of a performing puppet's, object's, or material's presence as an independent object perceived to have agency. In other words, both the live human performer and the audience participant's memory activate, through co-creative processes, the illusion of life and presence in puppets, objects, and materials. In this sense, they – puppets, objects, and materials- are sites of memory that sit between the live human actor puppeteer who is investing and activating the object with their memory and the audience participant who is reading and creating meaning from the stage action performed by and with the object through the filter of their own memory.

In his article 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,' Nora writes that 'sites of memory' are where 'memory crystalizes' (Nora 7) and 'a sense of historical continuity persists' (ibid.). These sites, he argues, have emerged out of cultural necessity because 'there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory' (ibid.) such as collective cultural memory and oral traditions. Rather, Nora suggests, history has taken over and wiped out memory to the extent that we are left with what he calls a 'dictatorial memory – unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition' (ibid., 8) and that necessitates 'Lieux de mémoire.' The notion 'Sites of memory' is usually applied to places – cities, public spaces, location where significant events occurred, museums; objects - archives, bodies of literature, collections of folk song; and events- performances, national holidays, and festivals. Regardless of what is being contextualized as a site of memory, it is a mechanism and framing for understanding cultural memory, remembrance, the formation of histories and identity at the intersection of the personal and the public.

On one hand, puppets, objects, and materials, as I argue above, are literal sites or places where the real memories of actor puppeteers and audience participants converge to create presence and meaning in performance. On the other, as objects, they also embody the notion of sites of memory as articulated by Nora and other scholars. Each type of object, though in different ways, functions as a site of personal and public memory; a place where history, implicitly and explicitly, converge. Whereas objects and materials are pervasive things in human culture, numerous scholars and practitioners, such as Bil Baird, Eileen Blumenthal, Henryk Jurkowski, and Victoria Nelson, trace puppets of

various types in the European context to at least ancient Greece if not before, though there are few surviving artefacts. Puppets have been a more or less prominent feature of the cultural landscape for centuries moving in and out of favour, alternately framed as high and low, and in secular and religious contexts. Many objects, including puppets in or out of performance, are ‘haunted’ as described by Marvin Carlson. Performances, materiality, and gestures associated with puppets are ‘haunted by a sense of repetition and involve the whole range of human activity and its context’ (Carlson *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* 3). Puppets are haunted by previous experiences such as their previous performances in innocent childhood make believe and sinister representations found in fantasy literature and film. Their materiality, referring to the raw materials used in their construction and found objects, are familiar as the things themselves simultaneously embodying their original function or qualities and their new theatrical role. Symbolic gesture is communicative gesture that is familiar something we each have performed or seen ourselves and is haunted by this previous association(s).

This haunting may be bound to forgotten religious and metaphysical past (Nelson) as Nelson suggests or perhaps it is because of one’s altered perspective of familiar behaviour, actions, and rhythms. In his introduction to *Dreaming and Storytelling*, Bert O. States suggests that we are subject to ‘perceptual bondage’ meaning ‘we see what we are used to seeing-or rather, we *don’t* see what we are used to seeing’ (States 1). Puppets, objects, and materials in performance break our perceptual bondage by presenting a different way of seeing what we are used to-our own behaviour- because it is re-enacted by ontological others. In other words, it is the ontological distance between ourselves and puppet, object, and material performers that creates an imaginary space and nearness for empathic meaning making, which follows Graham Harman position, in his analysis of Martin Heidegger, that ‘true nearness requires distance’ (Harman 21). Though the work of Compagnie Philippe Genty actively works to merge and blur the audience participants’ perception of ontological difference, it is always revealed as such. Whereas in the work of Stuffed Puppet Theatre, there is a clear and obvious visible difference between the live human and puppet countered by his performance practice of creating equal status. Never the less, in both companies work the distance is present and known. The ontological distance between live humans and puppets is paradoxically the gap where puppets reveal the actor puppeteers’ and audience participants’ shared humanity and shows how constructed notions of humanity are. On the one hand, the distance between puppets and audience participants opens up the possibility to see our humanity differently, to engage with the simplest of actions – breathing, waking, walking, looking – and emotion through



a puppet or object. On the other hand, puppetry reduces human behaviour to symbolic gesture, a recognizable physical short hand, suggesting that our very behaviour is culturally constructed and reducible to a convention or system of gesture.

However, the meaning beneath the surface is grounded in human experience and memory as I will show in Part Four. Symbolic gesture, then, is a combination of subjective experience and memory, socio-cultural behaviour, and McNeill's mundane practices. As such symbolic gesture is produced through Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'mimetic faculty' that is our tendency to imitate as a means to creating symbolic form and our capacity to recognize and create meaning from similarity (Benjamin *Reflections* 333 - 336). The gestural language used by puppets is created through mimetic repetition of human gesture and behaviour transferred to puppet, object, and material performers. In this sense, puppets, objects, and materials are sites of memory re-enactment of twice behaved behaviour. Actor puppeteers discover symbolic gesture, movement, and rhythm through our re-performed memory whereas as audience participants recognize what they are seeing and create meaning from it through personal memories and associations. For example, in the second scene described at the beginning of this chapter, Tranter as actor puppeteer draws and mimics behaviour to create the moment between mother and son based on his personal and specific experience. We as audience participants 1) do not know his specific experience but 2) recognize the character archetypes and read the scene through our own memories of mother and child interaction despite the fact that the mother in this case is an anthropomorphised large rabbit. Further, in this scene it is not only the archetypes and interaction between the two characters that trigger memory but also those fleeting familiar moments such as the touch of noses that trigger memory. Therefore, as sites of memory, a puppet's presence is activated by the real memories of actor manipulators and audience participants. In performance, their presence, agency, and existence is activated by and in relation to their fellow live human actors and observers. Although as objects they may have an independent existence, in performance puppets, objects, and material are actants participating in actor-networks (Latour) in relationship with humans and other objects. By this I mean that in performance, puppets, objects, and material exist and engage in a social network (stage world) that is comprised of a variety of live human, object, and material actors such as actor-puppeteers, audience participants, puppets, objects, materials, technicians, and house staff and that a theatrical experience (the network itself) is shaped by the relations among all of these participants. While there are numerous ways to create and read meaning in puppet, object, and material theatre, the

real memories of the human actants as an activator of presence is an under explored element.

In Parts Two and Three, the case studies of Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre respectively, I will research, document, and analyse each company's workshop techniques and how they use memory- explicitly and implicitly- in their practice. Part Four, the case study about Infish's *Three Good Wives*, will use my theories about memory and an activator of presence, the puppet as a site of memory, and the techniques developed by Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Theatre as the basis of a new production. This production forms the practice based research component.

## Chapter 2

### **Methodology and Practical Considerations**

This research works through the practical theories and workshop techniques of two leading European puppet theatre companies and argues that actor puppeteers make use of both memory and sign systems as elements of a larger set of performance techniques in order to manufacture the presence of live humans, puppets, objects, and raw materials on stage. These techniques are particularly relevant in the performance mode of co-presence used not only by my case study companies but also in commercial, art, and experimental theatre productions globally in which performers are called upon to have an increasing number of performance skills and training. This syncretic practice<sup>15</sup>, emerging out of late modernity's culture of choice and synthesized in the individual actor puppeteer, shifts classical notions about training from one in which a performer is thought of as belonging to a particular school to one in which performers are expected to have or acquire a variety of techniques.

As neither of these companies' workshop practices have been documented or analysed in detail, this thesis considers two key questions:

- What theories and techniques have these two companies developed in order to create their work?
- What do their workshop training practices contribute to the broader field of puppetry?

To investigate these and related questions, I employ a practice-based research methodology that is descriptive, historical, and practical. This research will fill an historical information gap, further theoretical inquiry, and provide an alternative basis for informing the dialogue about the productions of the two companies examined. It contributes new scholarship about each expert's practice through the documentation and analysis of their theories and techniques as well as through the investigation in the practical component. I also hope it will support the process of distributing each

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<sup>15</sup> I am using the term syncretic in a similar manner to Christopher Balme's notion of syncretic theatre as framed in his book *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-colonial Drama*. Balme theorizes syncretic theatre that combines disparate performance forms; I am putting forth the proposition of syncretic practice that combines disparate performance techniques.

company's workshop theories and techniques more widely among artists who work with puppetry in puppet theatre, visual theatre, and experimental theatre.

In European contemporary puppet theatre practice, workshops are important means of acquiring training and skills, networking, and transference among artists. According to Schechner, workshops are used by artists for a number of reasons including: training, exploration of rehearsal and performance making processes, and:

to dig up materials from personal, historical, or other sources and then finding ways to express these in actions and interactions...What qualifies all the different activities to be called workshops is that they are used to 'open people up' to new experiences, helping them to recognize and develop their own possibilities. (Schechner *Performance Studies* 233)

In contemporary praxis, notions about the function of workshops vary widely. Schechner ranks workshops as an 'active phase of the performance process' (ibid.), which follows training (ibid., 261). Numerous other practitioners, however—such as Joseph Chaikin, Anna Halprin, Joan Littlewood, and Vsevolod Meyerhold—are famous for using workshops to develop and experiment with performance theories and techniques that may or may not evolve into training methodologies for performers or techniques used in the creation of performance pieces. One model for the study of artists' workshop practices can be found in the Routledge series about performance practitioners, which includes Libby Worth and Helen Poynor's study of the work of Anna Halprin (Worth and Poynor 2004), Nadine Holdsworth's study about the work of Joan Littlewood (Holdsworth 2006), and Jonathan Pitches' study of the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold (Pitches 2003).<sup>16</sup> Each monograph offers a detailed study of the life and work of the artist, accompanied by a section documenting their practice techniques. To a certain extent, I too use this analytical model: providing a history of each company and their respective founding artists, production analysis of a significant production, and document and analyse each company's practice. Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre's workshops are similar to many performance artists' including those studied in the Routledge series as they are experimental training grounds, which draw on techniques each artist has developed and uses in their creative practice. As a theatre artist myself, however, I am interested not only in their individual practices but also in the ways diverse practices in the same field inform, challenge, and transform each other.

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<sup>16</sup> Other practitioners represented in this series are Jacques Lecoq, Michael Chekhov, Eugenio Barba, Augusto Boal, Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo, Jacques Copeau, Robert Wilson, Jerzy Grotowski, Ariane Mnouchkine, Rudolf Laban, and Mary Wigman. This series represents a particular academic approach to documenting practice; there are also numerous books written by theatre and dance makers about their theories and practice.

Compagnie Philippe Genty, founded by Philippe Genty working in partnership with Mary Underwood, and Stuffed Puppet Theatre, founded by Neville Tranter, are widely known in puppet theatre circles and also among some in the academic community. Both are seminal companies featured regularly at international puppet and theatre festivals with significant bodies of criticism about individual productions, and recognition in two recent histories about the form: Eileen Blumenthal's *Puppetry: A World History* and Henryk Jurkowski *A History of European Puppetry Vol. 2, The Twentieth Century*, yet there is little documentation or analysis of how they create their works and the performance theories and techniques they have developed. Genty has written about his work in articles and his recently published book, *Paysages Intérieurs*, but he offers limited detail and analysis about his and his company's techniques or theories.

Though both Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre are grounded in puppetry, they differ aesthetically in design and their approach to performance practice. Genty and Underwood create Surrealist, dreamscapes using a variety of theatre disciplines and the real memories of their collaborative performers resulting in what Hans-Thies Lehmann would frame as post dramatic theatre (Lehmann) in that their work emerges from their performative aesthetic, is premised on visual rather than textual dramaturgy, and aims to create an effect in the audience participant. In contrast, Tranter creates text based psychological plays using techniques from his early acting training in Lee Strasberg's Method combined with a grotesque puppetry aesthetic. Despite their differences, however, both draw extensively on memory as a creative tool. In this thesis, I probe their precise workshop techniques, especially those that explicitly and implicitly use memory as each company has developed and employed it in the creation of their puppet shows. I am also intrigued to uncover how their respective techniques are similar or dissimilar.

To begin my research, I made three key assumptions about the companies, based on my knowledge of their productions and their training: 1) My first assumption was that each company teaches/trains techniques in workshops<sup>17</sup> that have emerged from their creative development practice; 2) My second assumption was that Compagnie Philippe Genty approaches the creative process primarily through design and the body; and 3) My third assumption was that Stuffed Puppet Theatre approaches the creative process primarily through character, text, and intention—in other words, the company takes an

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<sup>17</sup> Both Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre have been actively teaching workshops for many years: Genty and Underwood for more than twenty years; Tranter has been teaching avidly for just over six years, though he also taught less frequent workshops prior to this.

actor's approach. Assumptions 2 and 3 are based on my understanding of each artist's particular background and training, and how this is reflected in their productions. Upon completing fieldwork (by participating in workshops) with each company, and being an observer during the final rehearsal period, previews, and premiere of Stuffed Puppet Theatre's *Cuniculus*,<sup>18</sup> and finally conducting qualitative research with both companies, these assumptions generally proved to be accurate. What was not pre-empted however, was the discovery that each company shares a focus on the performer, either as live human actor or puppet, object, or material actor and the centrality of memory as a generative tool for performance, presence, and production vocabularies.

Compagnie Philippe Genty use the real memories of all collaborators and the dreams of some including themselves as the basis for stage imagery, text, and choreography. In their work, the use of the spoken word and physicalised memory make a performer more available to the directors of the company during what they (Genty and Underwood) define as a collaborative creative process. These techniques also, ultimately, make the performer more available to the audience spectator in performance. Tranter of Stuffed Puppet Theatre, however, draws on his actor training that incorporates such actor techniques as sense memory as well as his real memories of gesture, timing, and rhythm to enact symbolic gesture to manufacture what he refers to as 'equal status' between ontologically different performing bodies. Since Tranter has an extensive acting background, I understand 'equal status' as the status between acting partners rather than social or cultural status between characters, and which he may be re-interpreting to describe how he wishes the audience to perceive the relationship between puppet and live actor. To be clear, this perception is one that is separate and distinct from the relationship of *puppet character* to *actor character*. This complex relationship deserves fuller examination and will be discussed in Chapter Five. Still, while Tranter's approach blurs the lines, it does not erase the ontological differences between the live human actor and the puppet.

In *The Way of The Mask* anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss wrote:

one of the most pernicious notions bequeathed us by functionalism, and which still keeps so many ethnologists under its rule, is that of isolated tribes, enclosed within themselves, each living on its own account a peculiar experience of an aesthetic, mythical, or ritual order. Thus, it is not recognized that before the colonial era ... these populations, being more numerous, were also elbow to elbow. With few exceptions nothing that happened in one was unknown to its neighbours, and the modalities according to which each explained and represented the universe to itself

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<sup>18</sup> Compagnie Philippe Genty did not have a rehearsal period during the period I was conducting research that could be included.

were elaborated in an unceasing and vigorous dialogue. (Levi-Strauss 144-45)

Similarly, the puppetry community is constantly cross-pollinating, sharing techniques, tools, methods, and materials in what has long been a history of boundary/border-crossing and is increasingly global, facilitated by the ease of international travel not only on continental Europe but also through exchanges at festivals around the world and on the internet (Blumenthal 29 – 34). Travel, cultural navigation, and appropriation have been features in puppet theatre since at least the Middle Ages. John McCormick and Bennie Pratasik state that by ‘the early nineteenth century, travelling marionette theatres were an established feature of everyday life in much of Europe, and the main form of theatrical entertainment for many people’ (McCormick and Pratasik 1). McCormick and Pratasik go on to suggest that puppet theatre was a key entertainment in urban centres, and argue that before and during the nineteenth century puppet theatre performers, and therefore techniques and genres, engaged in extensive border crossing and developed across national lines. This border crossing and exchange has only been made easier for many companies in Europe because of the extensive transportation and communications networks, which are used for both commercial and leisure purposes in the European Union.

This culture of exchange can be interpreted positively and negatively. Companies and artists with the budgets, funding, or performance bookings to do so, travel throughout the European Union to see, create, train, and perform work. On the one hand, this mobility and border crossing allows for the proliferation and development of performance and construction techniques through direct and secondary contact among artists. Techniques are seen, shared, discussed, and developed as part of a living practice. The places of exchange include institutions – theatres and schools – that present workshops and performances as well as theatre festival networks. The relative ease of travel and cross border employment possibilities, coupled with the large number of cultural city centre and regional festivals creates an extensive touring network over a relatively small land mass.

In *Reading the Material Theatre*, Ric Knowles argues that international festivals ‘are first and foremost marketplaces’ (Knowles 181). Generally, these festival marketplaces ‘were founded in the wake of the second World War...[and]... served to shore up cultural fragments’ (Europa) resulting from the post-war climate that led to the strengthening of national borders and Cold War divisions. As a cultural reflection of the early development of the European Union, both regional and international festivals in

Europe often seek to construct cultural and community links across national and sometimes international borders. This cultural bridge building was also present in the world of puppet theatre. In the late 1950s, UNIMA (Union International de la Marionette) was particularly focused on rebuilding relationships among puppetry companies and artists throughout Europe that had been disrupted by the Second World War by holding international congresses and festivals as a means to bridge national borders and bring artists together. In the Twenty-first century, puppetry festivals continue to be meeting places for artists and serve a wide range of purposes. These purposes include functioning as marketplaces- the most important of which continues to be the World Festival of Puppetry (Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes) in Charleville-Mézières; genre specific festivals, and student festivals as well as the emergence of festivals dedicated to increasing public awareness that often include professional activities such as workshops, symposia, and public lectures such as the Bristol Puppetry Festival (founded in 2009), Manipulate (founded in 2008), and the Copenhagen Puppet Theatre Festival (founded in 2004).

Within the wider discipline of theatre studies, a growing number of scholars are investigating the impact of festivals on the creative product and to a lesser degree the creative process. The emergent term ‘festivalization’ often has negative connotations. It is used to argue that theatre productions that are made for and marketed to festival circuits and their audiences become flat and decontextualised. Knowles suggests that the aesthetic demands made, implicitly or explicitly, by presenting institutions and festival producers have increasingly affected the creative process. Whether main stage or fringe, festivals have evolved into cultural, tourist marketplaces and highly desirable platforms on which to present work. On the one hand, these marketplaces create temporary communities whose only unifying interest is theatre. On the other hand, for the companies they are lucrative performance opportunities, vehicles for introducing work to new audiences and producers, and places for the exchange of intellectual capital. Knowles also points out that government and corporate sponsorships led to festivals functioning as cultural signifiers in which:

the capitol/capital pun is operative: the festivals increasingly function as National showplaces, in which the ‘culture’ of nations, often with financial support from national governments and within the context of various organizational and diplomatic interventions from their foreign offices and embassies, is on display. (Knowles 181)



In other words, cultural institutions and international festivals use creative capital as well as their creative capitol (in the American English sense) to build and display national identity as cultural product.

In puppetry, touring, itinerant companies, and festivals date back to at least the Middle Ages. According to Jurkowski, these include religious and folk festivals that have long been an integral feature of puppet performance and development.<sup>19</sup> While their social functions have changed, questions remain about how they work and what impact they have on puppet practice in the contemporary context. How have current festival circuits impacted or influenced contemporary puppetry workshop and rehearsal practices? Although the term ‘festivalization’ was not yet in parlance in the 1950s, similar issues to those theorised by Knowles were beginning to surface in discourse about the emerging European puppet festival scene.

UNIMA’s first organised week of puppetry after the Second World War, took place in 1957. It included a congress of puppet practitioners and a festival of performances. The performing companies presented work from sixteen countries. At this congress, there was a call to strengthen international relations ‘while fully respecting the peculiarity of national traditions, to create a truly contemporary puppet theatre which would serve the ideas of humanity, international co-operation, and peace’ (Niculescu 50). In his essay ‘Tradition and the Present Day’, published in UNIMA’s *The Puppet Theatre of the Modern World. An International Presentation in Word and Picture*, Jan Malik turns his attention to what he sees as the positive and negatives of international festivals. Two positives that he notes about festivals are: countries previously thought to have little or no history of puppetry can turn out to be very richly endowed, and festivals are a marketplace that allow audiences to see more variety than would likely be possible in any other way. The negative effect, according to Malik, is:

that at these grand reviews of puppetry certain theatres perform not typical examples of their everyday work, but special productions devised for these great occasions. These performances are aimed, almost invariably, at a festival public and jury—*i.e.*, at an adult or international public—whereas at home they play exclusively, or overwhelmingly, to child audiences. (Malik 13)

Malik goes on to suggest that by creating these productions the companies are not only disregarding ‘the old truth that the greatest international effect is produced by art which

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<sup>19</sup> For a history of this see Jurkowski’s chapters on the origins and history of puppetry through the Middle Ages in *A History of European Puppetry from its Origins to the End of the 19th Century* (1996).

manifests its national traits' (ibid.), but that they are denying 'their national stylistic note and are all too ready to adapt themselves to 'fashionable' trends' (ibid.).

This argument is countered by Maria Signorelli in her essay 'The Vitality of a Tradition' in which she argues that 'essential elements of national traditions' will leave a trace regardless of shifts, influences and new trends (Signorelli 31). Further, traces of cultural identity may be evident not only in the production but also in the reception of a performance. According to McCormick and Pratasik, as early as the nineteenth century the impact of puppetry as an indicator or reflection of cultural identity can be deduced from audience expectations and reactions. For example,

in Sicily, the *pupi*<sup>20</sup> audience was one where real piety was to the fore. The characters frequently proclaim their pledge to defend the Roman Catholic Apostolic church and...spectators perceived the performance itself as an act of faith affirming their religious beliefs. In mid-nineteenth century Lyon, on the other hand, shared values were, if anything, anti-clerical and often anti-governmental. (McCormick and Pratasik 78-79)

Other indicators at this time may also have included seating segregation based on gender and age, and venue location that affected which classes and social groups could attend a given performance. Because of his concerns about the potential homogeneity or flattening of puppet theatre, Malik suggests that festivals do not necessarily foster a community that inspires, but rather one that is 'frequently an inducement to limitation' (Malik 13). Further, he states that because of 'guest performances in foreign countries' there is a tendency in programming to choose productions with little or no dramatic text or worse, in Malik's view, that utilise pre-recorded or phonetically learned translations performed without comprehension.

Malik's concerns about the erasure of national identity are similar to Knowles' argument that festivalization may flatten and decontextualise theatre productions. Though not always stated directly within puppetry discourse, there are also questions around funding and how it influences decisions by the producers who determine whose work is invited to perform at the festivals and whose work is left out. Despite these concerns, festivals—particularly in continental Europe—are an important income source for some puppet companies. Both Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre have benefitted from the ease facilitated by the formation of the European Union and the growth of contemporary puppet and theatre festivals, at which they have been very successful. At this stage in their careers, both companies are highly valued for their box office draw and are desirable to festival bookers; some festival venues even co-produce

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<sup>20</sup> *Pupi* is the Italian term for puppet.

the production development of their works. In addition, others often emulate both companies and their ideas have become part of the meme that is contemporary European puppet theatre. In the case of Tranter, he is also hired as a director or consultant to work with other artists and companies such as DudaPaiva Company (based in The Netherlands), Point Zero (a Belgian based theatre company), and Die Freitagsakademie (a chamber opera company based in Switzerland), and each has been left with an easily discernible aesthetic trace. Despite the arguments that much of the work being created for festivals looks the same, I would argue that the growing number, diversity of festival interests and importance of puppet festivals are indicators of the opposite because festivals rely on both local and travelling audience participants. This growth also demonstrates growth and increased interest in the field, particularly with regard to work created for adult audiences, throughout Europe.

### **Parallel Development**

Although Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre are aesthetically very different, certain commonalities between the two companies emerged. As I mentioned previously, an assumption upon starting this project was that puppetry was both at the heart of each company's work and at the core of their creative process. A central concern of puppetry is the object as a performing object, though not necessarily the object/puppet as an actor. During the workshops with each company, I learned that although puppetry is a key element in their productions, the concern of their creative process and practice in both cases is activating presence of the actor, which can be a live human, puppet, object, or material. Logically, each company's workshops included puppet manipulation techniques. Genty and Underwood also taught live human actor skills such as movement development, acting, and voice in tandem with sharing their process for the creative development of a Compagnie Philippe Genty production. Many of the puppetry techniques used by both companies—all of which are documented and analysed in Parts Two and Three—are not in fact innovative. However, as Worth and Poynor note when describing Halprin's Movement Rituals I-IV:

While the movements themselves are not unusual ... specific qualities ... arise in the method of teaching, [such as] the flow from one movement to another, intention and suggested application. (Worth and Poynor 55)

Similarly, while some exercises and techniques developed by Genty, Underwood, and Tranter build on previous theatre training and manipulation techniques their *method of teaching* illuminate each company's and each artist's specific concerns about

performance and puppetry. This will be elaborated in Parts Two and Three respectively. The unanticipated commonalities are their specific concerns, theories and workshop practices that focus on performer presence and memory.

When planning my thesis and determining which companies to research for this project, one criteria was knowledge about the background theatrical or puppetry training of a selected group of artists, and my hypothesis that this would be the basis of each artist's work. I identified artists from two companies who would have different approaches and therefore, I assumed, different techniques and source inspirations. Neville Tranter's company, Stuffed Puppet Theatre, was chosen explicitly because I knew that he approached his work from an actor's perspective, and I therefore assumed that he would employ actors' techniques in his workshops. Philippe Genty and Mary Underwood's company, Compagnie Philippe Genty was chosen because of their grounding in visual design and dance, respectively.

Upon selecting my subjects for study, the project proceeded through two modes of research: qualitative research by way of historiography, and performative research via experiential, practice based methods. It is important to note that in choosing to work in this way I traverse methodological territories, which are up for theoretical debate. Within the field itself, there is often slippage when referring variously to practice-based, practice-as, or practice-led research. Although I refer to my research as practice based, I am following a definition presented by Carole Gray in her essay, 'Inquiry through practice: developing appropriate research strategies', in which she defines *practice-led* research as:

firstly, research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominately methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners... (Gray 3)

My research is instigated by a lack of scholarly attention to contemporary puppet theatre practice from within the practice itself. Much of the current research, including that by practitioners', is premised on productions from the point of view of the outside observer. My proposal is to shift the focus of observation, documentation, and theorizing from outside to within the practice itself and investigate how artists' theorize their work, what performance issues they are trying to address, and the techniques they devise to address the performance issues through actual study and encounters with an artists' theories and techniques. To conduct research in, about, and through practice, I position myself within the work as a participant observer engaging with others—the artists whose work I am studying, other participants in rehearsals and workshops, and the performers cast for my

own production in numerous dual roles: student/researcher, colleague/researcher, performer/theatre maker, and director/researcher.

In their introduction to *Anthropologists in the Field*, Lynne Hume and Jane Mulcock argue that successful participant observation ‘requires a self-conscious balance between intimacy with, and distance from, the individuals we are seeking to better understand’ (Hume and Mulcock xi). In my own experience, however, the practice-based methodology often conflated the dual roles I was working to negotiate throughout my research. This conflation led to challenges in maintaining what Margaret Mead describes as the ‘balance between empathic involvement and disciplined detachment’ (Mead 246), which was often blurred during the intimacy of being a student of the artists whose workshop practices I was studying, and throughout the intimate process that is theatre making. However, it is in negotiating this challenge that insight and understanding emerge.

Additionally, I must grapple with the dilemma of how discursive text can transmit intangible ways of knowing: in what ways does negotiating the apparent gaps between analytic discourse and experiential, embodied knowledge contribute to our understanding and use of performance techniques and tools? I believe this question can be partially answered by drawing on Richard Dawkins work and, in particular, his usage of the term ‘meme’:

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body, via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process, which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. (Dawkins 192)

Brad Haseman writes in ‘Rupture and Recognition: Identifying the Performative Research Paradigm’ that performative research is a ‘multi –method led by practice’ (Haseman 151). In this thesis, the theories, tools, and techniques that I documented during my participant observation are contextualized through critical analysis and reflection. The culmination of the accumulation of knowledge—both qualitative and experiential—is reflected in a rehearsal process and performance artefact which draws upon everything I absorbed throughout the study, as well as explicit use of the theories and techniques developed by Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre during the rehearsal process for *Three Good Wives*. Writing about the entire process here is a reflective documentation and interpretation of the practical component.

When planning my research, it was clear that when archival research could be conducted, the availability of rehearsal periods and workshops, and the needs of my own production schedule would overlap rather than occur in a sequential manner. This necessitated a methodology that would account for overlapping data acquisition. The research conducted in the practice phase, therefore, relies on a methodology highlighted by Melissa Trimingham referred to as a "hermeneutic–interpretive" spiral model' (Trimingham 56). This model she argues accounts for the orderly planning necessary in research and the dis-orderliness of the creative process. The model, developed by Gestalt thinker Kurt Lewin, proposes that:

to understand the interrelation between the parts and properties of a situation, the possibility of their coexistence, and its possible effects upon its various parts..., it is necessary to analyze the situation. But this analysis must be a "gestalt-theoretical" one...mean[ing] that a change of one of its parts implies a change of the other parts. (Lewin and Lewin 17)

This spiral, according to Trimingham, 'indicates that as one part of understanding changes, the whole changes too' (Trimingham 56). Using this methodology allowed for the research conducted during production development and rehearsals to evolve as assumptions were verified or disputed, and new information and theories emerged directly from the research itself. This balance between the orderliness of research and the dis-orderliness or messiness of the creative process will be elaborated on in Part Four.

My project not only draws upon data from participant observation within each artists' practice but also includes archival research and anecdotal observation and opinions such as: reading reviews, conducting interviews with past and present collaborators, and reading the limited critical and academic writings about the selected companies' performance techniques, as well as observation of live performances, electronic recordings of past productions, and wherever possible recordings of rehearsal processes and previous workshop training courses. Leading on from the initial phase of archival investigation, I participated in company workshops and, in the case of Stuffed Puppet Theatre, I also attended rehearsals for a new show. During the workshops, I created a detailed documentation of each company's workshop theories as they were revealed in their teaching practice and their techniques based on personal engagement with those techniques. Subsequent to my workshop experiences, I reflected on and analysed each company's workshop practices. Both the documentation and analysis of each artist's theories and techniques can be found in their respective case studies. I then explored, adapted, and innovated upon specific techniques from each company and theories about the puppet as a site of memory activated by the actor puppeteer's real

memory, by utilising them as training and process techniques in rehearsal for an original puppetry production, *Three Good Wives*, that I directed and produced at the conclusion of my work with the two companies. This is discussed and analysed in detail in the final case study Part Four: Inkfish's *Three Good Wives*.

One challenge of documenting and translating theatre and performance techniques, as with other modes of artistic translation, is the need to identify, understand, and document the tools and techniques, as well as the nuances, intentions, and idiosyncrasies that lie behind, and are part of, the techniques and theories that are transmitted through the immediacy of being in the room together during a workshop experience. While I found documenting the steps of exercises and techniques to be a relatively straightforward task, documenting the experience and the underlying theories informing the techniques was more difficult. As an active participant in the workshops, documentation in the moment was a logistical issue. If time allowed, written documentation and notation occurred, though often in abbreviated form. Most of the time, journaling occurred after a day's work and thus the documentation lost some of the immediacy of the moment. Compagnie Philippe Genty uses video extensively to document their workshop exercises and production rehearsals. Though not typically made available to workshop participants, I was given permission to view this video material from the workshop. I was aware however that (re)experiencing workshop through video is a mediated experience. Although viewing allowed for a certain amount of reflection after the fact, I was not allowed to copy and submit examples of it for the purposes of this thesis because of the sensitive and personal nature of the work by the performers. Video documentation was not permitted during the workshop with Tranter because it was viewed as a potential disruption to other attendees. Both companies allowed still photography but I often chose not to situate myself outside of the experience by viewing it through the lens of a camera, and therefore I recorded very few events with photography. Consequently, the dominant apparatus for recording the workshops was my own senses. Thus, the documentation takes the form of a revelation of the workshop experiences because the information is filtered through my experience as a theatre performer and maker, and thought process before translating it into text.

Walter Benjamin states in his essay 'The Task of the Translator': '... any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information' (Benjamin *Illuminations* 69). Although in translating from experience to page there is a loss of immediacy and of the ephemeral nature of the way information is imparted by Genty, Underwood, and Tranter, perhaps there is yet something gained

through the process of filtering experience and transcribing it into the written word that raises the documentation above mere transmission of information. In his essay ‘The Misery and the Splendor of Translation’, José Ortega y Gasset states that it is in our effort to attain and execute the impossible that one ‘creates innumerable realities... This wedding of reality with the demon of what is impossible supplies the universe with the only growth it is capable of’ (Gasset 99).

My attempt at the impossible manifests in two ways: first is translating Genty, Underwood and Tranter’s workshop theories and practice from experience to page; second is our verbatim dramatization of military wives. My negotiation of the translation from experience to page is partially revealed in my decision to include anecdotal comments and unedited impressions from my workshop notes throughout my analyses. Whereas in *Three Good Wives* neither the cast nor I subjectively know what the life of a military wife is, our negotiation is revealed in the triangulation of verbatim text and experience, personal and cultural memory, and the materiality of the puppet. The growth in both negotiations is the revelation of a fundamental shift in puppet theatre performance practice from external to internal processes in which memory is made material through mimetic and energetic externalization of memory.

In addition to these challenges of translation from experience to page, I also encountered language issues. Genty and Underwood’s workshop was taught in both French and English, though French was the dominant language. This was especially true in the case of describing an exercise, in which both practical and metaphoric terminology was used. Tranter’s workshop was conducted in English. Language usage during the rehearsals for *Cuniculus* that I participated in was more complicated. The production text was English, but the language of discussion about the work, and all interaction between the creative team, was Dutch. While I speak some French and have the ability to read and do my own translations, there were moments in the Genty/Underwood workshop where the poetic or metaphoric language was challenging. I do not, however, speak Dutch, and had to either infer meaning from context or ask during interviews with Tranter and his collaborators.

The paradox of wearing two hats while attending a workshop or rehearsal, or when conducting rehearsals can be an advantage and, sometimes, simultaneously a disadvantage. Not only do these dual roles blur as I mentioned above, but occasionally these roles seem to also be at odds. Being present during the moment of creation, or learning manipulation techniques and experiencing the focused discussions that inevitably occur about the work, is, at least in my experience, an experiential process— an action.



Descriptive language is somehow an incomplete translation. When the discussion fluidly engages with the *doing*, one gains an immediate understanding in the body of ‘how to’. Yet doing and documenting workshop practices captures a moment of a particular artist’s creative and problem solving technique. Inevitably there is a metamorphosis over time as the artist continues to evolve their process.

If an artist does not perfect a new vision in his process of doing, he acts mechanically and repeats some old model fixed like a blueprint in his mind... There are occasions when the grasp of the dominant idea grows faint, and then the artist is moved unconsciously to fill in until his thought grows strong again. The real work of an artist is to build up an experience that is coherent in perception while moving with constant change in its development. (Dewey 52-53)

Perhaps it is my awareness of this metamorphosis and build up of experience as part of creative practice that leads to a certain amount of discomfort with documentation, which seems to somehow fix a practice in a moment. However, once documented it opens opportunities, as in my own practice component for this research, for theories and techniques to evolve in ways not necessarily imaged by the originating artist experts. In other words, it is not surprising that there are changes that occur in the reproduction of techniques when they are used by other artists in new contexts.

As mentioned, a part of the research in phase one was purely qualitative, involving the study of reviews and other company documentation, conducting interviews with collaborators, participating in or viewing video and analysis of rehearsals processes, and production analysis. Reviews and production analysis can offer much to the researcher, yet they tell only one side of the story— told from the point of view of the spectator at the moment of performance. Still, this brings up interesting material for consideration, including ideas about the act of viewing and spectating. As Susan Melrose points out, the practitioner is at times also a spectator, but their spectating may be during the making process, which audience participants rarely if ever have access to and is for an entirely different purpose. An expert performance-maker’s spectating is, as Melrose writes, one aspect of the making process and is done with

performance production in mind, with the imperatives vital to performance-making in mind, and these are implicated in the actions that follow. [It] is a creative, inventive intervention, at a particular stage in the making, and these particulars colour the viewing. (Melrose)

Although my primary role throughout my research was as a participant observer and researcher, my position as a spectator and participant was always also as a practitioner engaged in the creative process and my viewing coloured by the internal performance processes of practice as well as what would become the final production presented on

stage. Regardless of how informed or analytic they are, reviews and production analysis are made from the position of the observer focusing on the effects of the final production. It very rarely integrates knowledge or consideration of the techniques from within the practice that an artist uses to create the very thing being discussed and analysed. While this type of critical analysis is an important part of any dialogue, what has been lacking from the conversation about contemporary puppet theatre practice in the last few decades is an analysis of what artists are doing and theorizing to create their work, from the perspective of a participant observer who then endeavours to further research the techniques through practical application. An argument for shifting the point of view from which analysis takes place is demonstrated by this thesis. Each of the case study company's, Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre, productions seem to de-centre the live human performer. They are one type of performer among a crowd of puppet, object, and material performers. However, my research of their techniques shows that although viewing the productions appears to de-centre the live human, the live human performer is, in fact, in the centre of the performance process through both companies use of memory. Though I recognize that my level of participant observation is limited, meaning for example I have not performed with or for either company, this thesis aims to achieve a deeper kind of integration from inside the work itself.

To conduct archival research, I was able to secure a four-week residency at Institut International de la Marionnette in Charleville-Mézières, France to review company dossiers and other relevant literature, and to view all of the video documentation for each company held by the institute. This included video of workshops that each company had conducted at the institute. The dossiers are company-specific files maintained by the institute. These files include reviews, articles, curriculum vitae, technical specifications for productions, applications, photographs, and company brochures and promotional materials. This archive proved to be useful in compiling company histories and for viewing past productions. I augmented the Institut's research materials with direct access to Compagnie Philippe Genty's vast private archive of video documentation of rehearsals and performances. Of these, I was given access to a limited number of rehearsal videos, and viewed edited sections of rehearsals for *Ne m'oublie pas*, *Dérives*, and *La Fin des Terres*. Although both companies' rehearsal techniques and directorial practices are outside the scope of the current research, my observations while attending rehearsals for Tranter's 2009 production *Cuniculus* and viewing video of several of Compagnie Philippe Genty's productions clearly demonstrated that the techniques each teach in

workshops emerge from, and are in fact the same as, the techniques that each use in their own creative processes.

I further supplemented this historiography by conducting interviews, both formal and informal, with Genty, Underwood, and Tranter, as well as with artists, performers, and creative collaborators who have worked, or who currently work with them. I also shared observations with some of the people who attended their respective workshops with me. Often it was possible to conduct only one interview with collaborating artists. These interviews typically lasted an average of two hours, though there were a few exceptions that allowed for longer or multiple interviews.

The performative phase of the research consisted of my participation in a workshop by each company, and experimentation with specific techniques, approaches, and theories that were used in practice and expanded upon while creating a new production, *Three Good Wives*—the culmination of my research. I used a selection of workshop techniques from both companies, individually and in combination, to explore their limits and to propose new ways in which they could be employed as methods for creative process, to manufacture presence, and to push the boundaries of the puppet as a site of memory and memory as the tool to activate the presence of puppets, objects, and materials. Although each company has developed techniques that are both learnable and transferable, specific questions about what techniques they employ, their underlying principles, and how their techniques might be codified for exploration in practice by others could only be properly formulated after conducting field research and taking workshops with each company.

In Chapter Seven, I discuss the specific challenges I faced during the production: timing of activities necessary to devise a professional production and their overlap with the research process, the audition and selection process and criteria, and the planning and incorporation of each company's respective techniques in rehearsal. Numerous variables conflated not only within my own approach and practice but also in that of the performers', who each brought in their own individual experiences, techniques, and theatre practice. Long before heading into the studio, I found that the techniques and theories I was learning in the workshops about presence and memory were overtly and covertly affecting my work, specifically in the way in which I was conceiving of the research production. In the following two parts, I map the puppet history leading to the work of Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre, and theorize presence and puppets as a site of memory activated by the real memories of the actor puppeteers and audience participants. These issues will be investigated through practice in Part Four.

## Part 2

### Case Study: Compagnie Philippe Genty

#### Chapter 3



**Figure 3: *La Fin des Terres* 2005. Performers: Amanda Barter, Nancy Rusek, Nikola Krizkova, Sebastien Lenthéric, Pierrick Malebranche, Simon T. Rann, Pierre-Henry Noé. Photography by Pascal François.**

#### **Introduction**

French director and puppeteer Philippe Genty and English choreographer and puppeteer Mary Underwood founded Compagnie Philippe Genty in 1968. Originally a puppet theatre company, today it is considered one of the foremost European companies working in what is often referred to as visual theatre. Their work can also be described as and has been marketed as interdisciplinary or dance theatre. The company has two aesthetic phases. Their early work included cabaret, family entertainment, and children's television programming. Their work, for which they are most recognized today, integrates live performers, puppetry, and raw materials and uses a variety of performance techniques such as puppetry, acting, dance, magic, and clown. Working collaboratively, these disciplines are mixed with a self-styled Surrealist sensibility, which will be elaborated on further in this section, to create non-linear, fantastical productions. To create these productions and in response to working with performers who have diverse experiences, they have devised collaborative training and production techniques that emerged directly from their rehearsal process. These techniques include a rapid method for teaching puppetry manipulation that draws on established puppetry training combined with their individual artistic concerns, and performer training using dreams, memory, the body, and the performer as/with raw material(s).

Despite the company's seminal work in Europe and international renown, there is a paucity of scholarly writings regarding their productions and even less, I would venture to say none, regarding their practice. To a great extent, the academic community has ignored the company. Genty is included in the *Encyclopédie Mondiale des Arts de la Marionnette* published in 2009 and is cited in many other entries, whereas Underwood has no mention at all. The company also has a brief mention in the *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: Volume 1: Europe*. Both Blumenthal and Jurkowski include the company in their histories of puppetry. Jurkowski, as I will discuss further in the chapter, situates Genty at the forefront of contemporary puppetry in part because of his work with materials. Yet Jurkowski's mention about the company, though significant, is limited offering little analysis of either their productions or their practice. One of the few articles written with a more thorough production analysis is 'The Genty Effect: Philippe Genty's Influence and Puppetry at the London International Mime Festival' by Joseph Seelig, Director of the London International Mime Festival. Perhaps the most significant contribution to date is Genty's own biography *Paysages intérieurs* published in 2013. This book provides extensive personal and historical data about the company as well as their development from Genty's perspective with limited critical analysis, and a brief section about his own practice.

This case study begins to address this lack of scholarly attention and aims to shift the analysis from merely looking at artistic output (meaning their productions) to including the theories and techniques that underpin their practice. I will focus on the company practice including theories and techniques they have developed and investigate them unbound from their personal aesthetic, thus as a contribution to the wider field of puppet theatre. Further, I will show that their work, which is typically associated with Philippe Genty, is in fact the result of their life long collaboration that draws equally from both of their artistic concerns. It includes two chapters. In this first (Chapter Three), I document each artist's personal history, the history of the company, analyze an early production within the context of contemporary visual theatre, define what I understand Genty and Underwood to mean by surrealist as well as what specifically they draw on from surrealist visual art techniques, and articulate their goals relative to audience reception as it is performed in the context of Compagnie Philippe Genty's work. In the second (Chapter Four), I document and analyse their performance techniques for puppet manipulation and the actor/performer as they were taught and experienced by myself during their four-week workshop in 2009. These two chapters will show that not only have Genty and Underwood created a unique form of puppet/visual theatre but will also

show that they have developed performance theories and a pedagogical practice that includes puppet manipulation and performer skill training using memory as a means for performer presence, puppet presence, and the manipulation of multiple presences on stage.

## **Histories**

Genty's personal history, or at least the basic story, has been often told. It has been written about in a number of articles and books, as well as discussed by Genty during interviews, workshops, in his recently published book, and in personal communications during this research. It is not only his personal history but also part of the mythmaking and marketing about the company and its artistic goals. Underwood's personal history is notably less publicised and accessible. However, what my research shows is that her training and experience are an equally significant contribution to the formation of the company aesthetic and practice. In other words, it is in fact both of their histories and artistic concerns that constitute the Compagnie Philippe Genty aesthetics, creative output, and technical innovation.

Genty experienced two traumatic events in his youth: his father died in a skiing accident when he was six; and Genty watched while his family home in the Savoy Mountains was burned down by Nazis.<sup>21</sup> At the age of thirteen, Genty was given his first puppet. Considered to be an asocial child, he used the puppet as intermediary to communicate with others and to make people laugh. He was expelled from numerous boarding schools in France. Eventually, he moved to Paris where he graduated with a graphic arts degree in 1957 from the Paris School of Graphic Arts.<sup>22</sup> In the early 1960s, Genty and a friend, Serge George—who was replaced in Japan by Michiko Tagawa and then joined by Yves Brunier in Panama (Genty 1967)—decided to go on a world tour but needed a way to support the project, so they decided to make a puppet show to pay their way. To raise additional money, they convinced UNESCO<sup>23</sup> to fund their making a film about puppets around the world. Dubbed *L'Expédition Alexandre*, Genty and a

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<sup>21</sup> Burning houses often appear in Compagnie Philippe Genty productions.

<sup>22</sup> Events 30 May 2011: 'Puppet Odyssey of Philippe Genty has come to Chekhov Festival'

[http://moscow.ru/en/government/lifein\\_moscow/news/index.php?ppp=111&id4=1002493](http://moscow.ru/en/government/lifein_moscow/news/index.php?ppp=111&id4=1002493)  
. Accessed 7 September 2012

<sup>23</sup> Though contacted for further information from their archives, UNESCO has not been responsive. In addition to acknowledgment of UNESCO funding anecdotally and in marketing brochures, this film is listed in the UNESCO Film Catalogue published by UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in Paris 1992.

companion travelled for four years by car to forty-seven countries, performing with a string marionette named Alexandre and filming numerous local puppet theatre works. This material was used to create a documentary film, *Blue like an Orange*, which was screened in Paris in 1967<sup>24</sup> (Jurkowski *A History of European Puppetry Vol. 2, the Twentieth Century*; Seelig; Temporal).<sup>25</sup>

Underwood began her study of classical dance at the age of nine in a small village in the United Kingdom. She initially followed the Royal Academy of Dance technique, followed by Cecchetti; she passed examinations in both techniques (email communication: 16 March 2010). In addition, she studied modern dance, tap dance, jazz, character, and folk dance— including Scottish country-dance, square dancing, and ballroom. When her skill outgrew the small village where she lived and studied, Underwood attended the Bristol School of Dancing<sup>26</sup> for two years after which, in the mid-1950s, she moved to London where she took classes with the Harlequin Ballet Company<sup>27</sup> and studied contemporary dance with Hilde Holger.<sup>28</sup>

In her biography on [www.hildeholger.com](http://www.hildeholger.com), Holger is described as ‘an exponent of expressionist dance’ (Horvitz). Her career began at a young age in Vienna where she was born to a Jewish family and started her first companies, the Hilde Holger Tanzgruppe and a children’s dance group. In 1926, Holger founded The New School for Movement Arts. During the Nazi occupation of Austria beginning in 1938, her work was forbidden. The following year Holger escaped to India, where she once again took up her work in dance and arts, largely as a teacher. While there, she married and had a family. In 1948, the family moved to England to escape the growing sectarian violence. According to Horvitz, each change of location also marked shifts in Holger’s career:

If in Vienna she was best known as a dancer and choreographer, and in India she achieved prominence as a teacher, in London she acquired a reputation

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<sup>24</sup> The 1992 UNESCO Video Catalogue dates the film in 1966 but does not indicate if this is the production or screening date. Jurkowski, Seelig and Temporal state the film was screened in 1967.

<sup>25</sup> Genty’s detailed personal account of his early history and the UNESCO tour can be found in *Paysages intérieurs* on pp. 7 – 68.

<sup>26</sup> For more information about The Bristol School of Dancing please visit their website at <http://www.thebristolschoolofdancing.co.uk/about.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Jon Gregory founded Harlequin Ballet Company in 1959. A brief history of his career can be found in Gregor Koenig, 'Obituary: Jon Gregory', *The Independent* 31 October 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Hilde Holger established her School for Contemporary Dance in London between 1948 and 1951. A brief history of her career can be found on a website dedicated to her work, [www.hildeholger.com](http://www.hildeholger.com), additional information can also be found in *Die Kraft des Tanzes, Hilde Holger* by Denny Hirschbach and Rick Takvorian, and in her obituary 'Hilde Holder' in *The Independent* 9 October 2001.

as a pedagogue, movement therapist, and mentor for many aspiring artists and dancers. (ibid.)

As seen in the documentary film *One Day at Hilde's Class*, which includes footage of class work and performances, Holger's work was informed by nature and innovative uses of objects, mask, costume, and materials (Nonaka). According to Horvitz:

Her vision of dance was one of total theatre, embracing radical design and movement. A dancer, she contended, must be a technician, an artist and a full human being. No movement could be important if it wasn't guided by thought and emotion. (Horvitz)

Early in her career, Underwood 'decided classical dance was not for me' (email communication: 16 March 2010). She moved to London and began an exploration of contemporary dance practice particularly with Holger.<sup>29</sup> At nineteen however, Underwood was 'very disappointed with London' (ibid.) and embarked on a period where she toured throughout Europe with a number of different companies and started a company of her own with another dancer<sup>30</sup> from the Rambert Ballet School.

It was while touring that Underwood first encountered Genty. Her first meeting and subsequent decision to stay with Genty can best be explained in her own words:

I was in Barcelona rehearsing a group in a revue, when two young French puppeteers turned up to perform in that revue. Something clicked between Philippe and myself, but unfortunately I left four days later to return to Monte Carlo. About six months later I was returning to England, before going to Mexico. I decided to send a telegram to Philippe saying I was passing through Paris, and had a couple of hours to spare before I caught my train to England..... Again on a spur of the moment I didn't catch that train and have been with him ever since. He convinced me that he had better things for me than just dancing!

In a less detailed biography, written for Institut International de la Marionnette, Underwood states that she discovered 'Philippe Genty [in 1967] totally tangled up trying to coordinate some movements' and that she 'provides a few suggestions and becomes

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<sup>29</sup> In the same communication where she details her history, Underwood also proudly notes: 'One of her [Hilde Holger's] students at that time was Lindsay Kemp. I performed in a show while I was a student there and Lindsay did the choreography, I very often wonder if it was his first pieces of choreography?' Kemp is a British born dancer, mime, actor and choreographer known also for his work with music legends David Bowie and Kate Bush (Gallagher, *Lindsay Kemp Is on the Phone: Scenes from His Life from Genet to Bowie*.

[http://dangerousminds.net/comments/lindsay\\_kemp\\_is\\_on\\_the\\_phone\\_scenes\\_from\\_his\\_life\\_from\\_genet\\_to\\_bowie](http://dangerousminds.net/comments/lindsay_kemp_is_on_the_phone_scenes_from_his_life_from_genet_to_bowie). Accessed: 18 July 2012.)

<sup>30</sup> Underwood withheld the name of this dancer because, as she wrote in the same email communication, 'things just did not work out.'



involved in working on the architecture of the body' (Underwood).<sup>31</sup> Underwood's conception of the architecture of the body is informed by the dance practice she learned with Holger. Although her early contributions to the Genty aesthetic appear to be limited, her explorations of the body in relationship with objects and materials is central to their work beginning with *Désirs Parade*.

This rehearsal was for a new cabaret piece that Genty and his then performing partner were developing with two puppet ostriches. During the rehearsal, Genty asked Underwood

to execute different dance movements, then some he would transpose with his ostrich puppet. He and his partner just could not agree with the timing, I mentioned that perhaps it would be good to count. They both looked at me with a dazed look. Philippe said: I will make another ostrich and you come in the middle of us and count! That was my first step to puppetry.<sup>32</sup> (ibid.)

While Underwood suggests this was her first step into puppetry, it was informed by her training with Holger that included work with masks, objects, and materials as well as Holger's conception of a 'total theatre.' Between 1967 and 1968, the three continued to develop and perform short cabaret pieces.

Compagnie Philippe Genty was founded in Paris in 1968. There are two distinct periods reflected in the work created by the company. In the first period (1968 – 1985), the company created variety sketches or short cabaret pieces that were performed in both small and large venues, either individually or in combination as full evening performances, an object theatre piece, and two children's television shows. The first of these sketches was *The Ostrich Ballet* (Genty *Paysages intérieurs* 74). This originally two person ballet was expanded and franchised as a independent cabaret piece and was a featured scene in two evening-length productions: *Facéties* (1974-1979), which included Genty's later famous short *Le Pierrot* (1976) and *Rond Comme un Cube* (1980-1985). Their object theatre piece, *Sigmund Follies* was developed and performed from 1983 to 1984. *Facéties* and *Rond Comme un Cube* were evening length productions of short variety pieces that included a mix of entertaining shorts and more abstract or Surrealist shorts. These productions were popular theatre in the sense that they were easily accessible, relatively light entertainment. *Sigmund Follies*, on the other hand, was aimed at a more adult audience and had a more structured narrative throughout the piece. Their

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<sup>31</sup> For Genty's version of how they met, see Genty 2013 p. 74.

<sup>32</sup> In her 2009 biography for the Institut International de la Marionnette, Underwood writes that her first puppetry experience occurred as she ran 'faster than the police as Philippe Genty was organizing a gigantic street puppet demonstration with fine art students during the revolution in Paris.'

work at this time was not only accessible to a wide range of audiences; it was also very successful financially. Seelig, writes: ‘*The Ostrich Ballet* became so successful as a franchised cabaret act that it paid for the company's early development and for the purchase of a large studio space in the centre of Paris’ (Seelig 41). But it was not their only success; both *Facéties* and *Rond Comme un Cube* toured extensively and were critical and financial successes. During this same creative period, the company developed two children’s television shows: *Gertrude & Barnabé* (1971-1972), in which Genty performed with the actor Jean-Pierre Dutour and a short series, *Les Onyx*, (1974 - 1975), which employed six puppeteers.

During this first phase of the company’s work, Genty points to two events that would lead to their second creative phase. First is his well known experience of performing *Le Pierrot* to a group of children with autism during which one child who had been previously unresponsive cried. The second is his discovery of dreams as a source for visual vocabularies and images. I would add however that the shift in their practice is also the result of two additional events: the opportunities to explore alternative creative practices afforded by the financial stability and touring opportunities resulting from the success of their family and cabaret productions, and a shift in the working relationship between Genty and Underwood. Not only did the stability allow them to purchase a studio in Paris, along with their extensive touring it put them in a position to experience and explore a range of theatre techniques. As Genty writes throughout *Payasages intérieurs* between the years 1967 – 1980 not only did they often learn from encounters with puppeteers and other types of performers but they also, particularly Underwood, took time to pursue new techniques such as their trips to Bali in 1974 – 1975 and again in 1978 to study mask dance. During a personal interview, Underwood stated that they also spent time around this same time period living in commune with fifteen other artists investigating different approaches to creative processes though she was not able to articulate what approaches they investigated.<sup>33</sup> During this same period, there is a significant shift in the working relationship between Genty and Underwood. Underwood shifts from being a performing partner to being a creative collaborator. It began while they were rehearsing an early version of *Baby Rose*, a puppet head with a fabric body, in 1970. As Underwood told me, they were ‘stuck on the manipulation’ of a puppet that took the form of a head attached to fishnet. ‘During the tea break, I took the puppet... put my feet in the fishnet took the head and start to dance with it. Philippe decided why not use

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<sup>33</sup> Genty does not include this period of experimentation in his book but suggested during the same interview with Underwood that they spent more time eating than working.

body movements with the puppets' (email communication: 16 March 2010). As a result of Underwood's playful experimentation, at least according to Underwood, Genty decided that he,

wanted the manipulators to be seen with the puppet or objects. The problem was very often our manipulators were excellent, because of Philippe's training, but unfortunately sometimes I could not go too far with the movements as very often their bodies were not trained corporal wise... It was then that we made the decision to venture out and employ dancers who were ready not to dance, and actors who were ready not to speak! (ibid.)

These events — collaborating with Underwood, having visible performers working with puppets and objects, and their investigations of performance practice—were combined with the use of memory (both theirs and the performers') and dream analysis (again theirs and those of their performer collaborators) to generate a new aesthetic in puppet theatre as well as new theories and practices for their productions. The convergence and implementation of these ideas mark what I define as the second phase of their work: the large scale, highly theatrical visual productions that the company is renowned for today.

These productions make use of a wide range of performance disciplines, techniques and types of performers. They produce rich visual dreamscapes that, according to Genty and Underwood, aspire to access each audience participant's unconscious, resulting in individual experience and meaning making. However, the theatrical magic created by the company is not just the product of Genty's creative output as Seelig implies in his 2009 article. Rather, it is the product of the unique artistic collaboration between Genty and Underwood and their individual artistic interests in the visual and corporeal respectively. This combination of skills, and their interest in the performer-live human, puppet, and material-as a collaborator in the creative process, led to their development of techniques that manipulate multiple presences. Their techniques include traditional puppetry manipulation as well as using an actor as source material for text and movement, use of personal memory—physical and spoken, and investigations of raw materials in conjunction with dream analysis.

Though their productions and the techniques they use to create them have evolved since their first production of this type, many of the stage elements mentioned above are present in *Désirs Parade*, created in 1985 and restaged in 1989-1990.<sup>34</sup> This production also marks the transition between the two phases of the company's work. The structure of

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<sup>34</sup> The sources for these dates are various materials in Genty and Underwood's personal archive and *Paysages intérieurs*. Some are only generally accurate due to the extended development times, particularly for their early productions. For example, the world tour for *Désirs Parade* continued through until at least 1993.

*Désirs Parade*—one scene performed in three sections as interludes between three other disconnected scenes—is reminiscent of the musical revue/short cabaret family entertainment pieces of the company’s earlier work. However, many of the elements that will come to define the company’s work are visible. One scene of the production, available on Youtube,<sup>35</sup> demonstrates Genty and Underwood’s early use of corporeal and puppet co-presence, illusion, mirroring and multiplication, and raw materials: a live human female actor/dancer with craft paper, followed by a female puppet with live human actor/manipulators and plastic. This is described in more detail in the next section *Appearances and Disappearances*.

While *Désirs Parade* marks their transition away from family entertainment and cabaret style work, it is their second production, *Dérives* (1989), that Genty states ‘was really the first... the foundation... piece where I was setting more the style of the company’. The shift that occurred between these two productions was not in the aesthetics and techniques employed, but rather it was a structural shift from cabaret’s disconnected scene structure to a cohesively, though still non-linear, single visual narrative. This shift was followed by the increasing emphasis given to the live human actor’s role within the narrative, as can be seen in their more recent productions *La Fin des Terres* (2005),<sup>36</sup> *Boliloc* (2008/2009),<sup>37</sup> and *Voyageurs Immobiles* (1995/2010).<sup>38</sup> As their productions have evolved, so have the training techniques that they have developed to focus increasingly on performance and acting skills of the live human actor puppeteer.

### **Appearances and Disappearances**

As the company’s work has evolved, certain elements, concepts, uses of different performance disciplines, and visual imagery have become central to their work and repeat in numerous productions. Many of these are evident in their first work, *Désirs Parade*,

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<sup>35</sup> The video clip can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TklU7b83174> (titled *PHILIPPE GENTY / Désirs parade / exact 3*) as well as five unofficial extracts from this production.

<sup>36</sup> Youtube.com: *Philippe Genty – Lands End 1/3 (Official)* at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyIcT\\_V\\_TG8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyIcT_V_TG8)

<sup>37</sup> Youtube.com: *BOLILOC Compagnie Philippe Genty* at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxGW\\_kG6js4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxGW_kG6js4)

<sup>38</sup> In addition to restaging *Voyageurs Immobiles* (for video clips visit [youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com): Philippe Genty - Voyageurs Immobiles (Official 1/3) at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYMIpOIi6Y>), Genty directed an object theatre piece, *La Pelle du Large*, in 2011. This project was initiated during the 2009 workshop that I participated in. The originators are Hernan Bonet, Antoine Malfettes, and Yoanelle Stratman; it is reminiscent of their 1983 production *Zigmund Follies*. This show was subsequently developed with two other casts for English and Spanish speaking audiences.

which also marks the transition between two phases of the company's aesthetics. Although *Désirs Parade* retains visible traces of their earlier productions, it points to their future aesthetic and practice. The show is structured in three independent scenes, punctuated by three interludes. The interludes form a single story line, performed in three sections, which could be read as the through line. By sectioning the interlude story into three parts, Genty intentionally disrupts the scene's linear narrative. The structure of the production is:

Interlude 1: A man enters from left stage, attached to ropes that lead off into the wings. He is trying to reach a pair of scissors that are hanging in the space. Eventually he reaches them and adds the scissors to his collection.

Scene 1, Part A: A nude live woman appears and circles a pool of light in which a small brown package appears. She unties the package, which grows into a mound of craft paper that engulfs her. The paper then reappears again as a small package.<sup>39</sup>

Scene 1, Part B: A live human man enters to discover the paper package. He begins to open it; small bits of plastic emerge, leading to a gigantic pile of what appear to be random pieces. Buried in and partially made from the plastic and craft paper is a three-quarter-scale female puppet. The puppet undergoes a number of symbolic transformations into archetypal females and an insect-like creature.<sup>40</sup>

Interlude 2: This is a continuation of Interlude 1, in which the man attached to the ropes interacts with an unattached woman.

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<sup>39</sup> A video of this scene can be found on Youtube: *PHILIPPE GENTY / Désirs parade / extract 2* at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkj5cmxVdRE>

<sup>40</sup> Three extracts of this scene can be found on Youtube: *PHILIPPE GENTY / Désirs parade / extract 3* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TklU7b83l74>, *PHILIPPE GENTY / Désirs parade / extract 4* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqMwMVITvhI>, and *PHILIPPE GENTY / Désirs parade / extract 5* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6VVvVHUvBg>

Scene 2: ‘Baby rose’ (this is an evolution of the scene begun in 1970 previously mentioned)— the central image is a mask with a fabric body. The scene begins with an illusion of headless men and the revelation of material as a handkerchief and ‘bottomless’ chest that the live performer disappears into and the puppet then appears out of in a blast of smoke. At first, ‘baby rose’ is a full-bodied male puppet that performs an

air/swimming dance. Eventually, the puppet becomes entangled with the handkerchief material and discovers its manipulators, who rip its body apart but eventually become part of its newly formed



**Figure 4: *Désirs Parade* 1986. Rights Reserved: Compagnie Philippe Genty.**

fabric body, which evolves from a single one-headed character into two three-headed characters. The man returns to find his handkerchief ‘blowing’ in the wind.

Interlude 3: The Man with ropes ‘climbs’ a ladder that is lying horizontally along the floor creating an alternant perspective. The ladder is then raised upright (vertically) to become the Statue of Liberty. While doing this, the man releases his ropes, only to have his ladder taken out from under him, leaving him to hang from a rope attached to Liberty’s torch.<sup>41</sup>

Scene 3: A man with a deck chair and water spray gear enters the stage. The water and chair are clearly intended to reference the sea. This dance section is a good example of Genty’s concept of ‘distanciation’, a term created by Genty that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. It is also the only section in this production that uses spoken text. The chair/ water spray dance is followed by a dance with a puppet mermaid under the sea, which is suggested by the audio of crashing waves. The live actor then becomes a puppet and does a dance with the deck chair. The puppet man is knocked out and the chair comes to life; the mermaid

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<sup>41</sup> A video of this scene can be found at: *PHILIPPE GENTY / Désirs parade / extract 6* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqvfs5OQF4>

puppet returns to revive the puppet man whose head blows up into a rock looking object. Then we transition back to live performers, including the man and the mermaid, who are eventually joined by a third male live performer. The mermaid and one man exit, leaving the other man on stage to play with the remaining deck chair. Then a giant 'man' enters with a giant deck chair for a dance with the chair and two performers. The rock then blows up into the moon, the water guy returns to take the chair, and the two live human performers play a hat game. At a certain moment in their game, these two performers discover the moon behind them and start to literally bounce off it, on it, and finally disappear behind it. And we are in space. Another actor appears and has been attached to an invisible hydraulic lift, allowing him to hang in mid air. The scene ends with a re-enactment of the moon landing. In Genty's version, the planting of the flag 'punctures' and deflates the moon.

What is lacking in a structural description or even the viewing of a performance on video is the immediacy of a live experience, including sounds not captured on recordings, smells, and the co-presence of an audience participant in the moment the performance unfolds on stage. Through detailed description, however, one can approach an understanding of the live experience. For example, Scene 1, Part A is a sensuous display of a live human body in relation to raw materials and sound. The music begins and slowly an overhead round spotlight fades up to reveal a small tied up paper package. From stage right a person's lower legs come into view. The performer walks along the outside edge of the circle of light and enters fully into the light on stage left side to reveal that it is a nude female (this is one of the few instances where the company has used a nude live human on stage). The performer continues a spiralling walk toward the package. She kneels on stage right of it, next to a rope that holds it together. The performer is visibly looking away from the object and yet is drawn to it as she reaches for the rope with her right hand. She wraps the rope around her hand until she must move toward and behind the package. She unwinds the rope from around her hand and then runs her hand down the length of it in a sensual and tactile gesture, leading to frantic untying of the package. Again, looking away from the package of craft paper, she gently reaches toward it—first one hand then the next—to press the top of the package, take the rope in both hands, and pull it up along her body and away from the craft paper. She ecstatically presses the rope into her face before throwing it to stage right, out of the light, and then embraces the craft paper. The performer places the craft paper on the stage in

front of her and partially unfolds it. She stretches up and then dives into the paper, spreading it on the floor. She then clutches it and pulls it back, to kneel with the paper surrounding her. We can only see the top half of her body at this point. She alternately spreads the craft paper out and clutches it to her body as if it were the body of a lover.<sup>42</sup> The performer begins to wrap and bury herself in the craft paper. The craft paper begins to move violently and then, after a moment, it gets progressively smaller until it becomes a package, like the original tied up package, which replaces the paper on the upstage edge of the light.

Like their earlier productions, the puppet is a central figure in *Désirs Parade*. But we also begin to see most, if not all, of the elements that will come to define the company's work. These elements include:

- their use of illusion— especially appearances, disappearances, and transformations of objects and bodies facilitated by lighting and trap doors in the stage floor;
- surrealist imagery and the juxtaposition of realistic and pop cultural references with the absurd used to interrupt audience expectations
- use of raw materials, particularly rope, craft paper and plastic; use of different scales of the same objects and performers;
- mirroring and multiplication of images and performers in different scales;
- a move away from using black theatre;
- blow-up billowy landscapes;
- and a marked increase in their exploration and use of the visible live human performer and co-presence meaning the visible live human performer with, not behind, puppets and raw materials.

The theatrical magic created by the company is not just the product of Genty's creative output. Rather, as can be seen in the description above by the increased presence and importance of dance and movement in the work and as I will demonstrate in the analysis of their training techniques, it is the product of the unique artistic collaboration between Genty and Underwood. This combination of their skills—visual and corporeal respectively—led to their developing a range of performance techniques in order to achieve their artistic goals. It is the use of these visual and corporeal practices, in conjunction with Genty's interest in and use of dream analysis that forms the core of Compagnie Philippe Genty's productions.

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<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, this relationship between live human actor and raw material (craft paper) was repeated by one of the participants at the workshop that I attended but who did not know this piece.



### Searching for a New Visual Language

As I suggest in the opening of this chapter, the work of Compagnie Philippe Genty for which they are most widely recognized, is not easily classified. Because of their early work, they are often considered puppet theatre however they have also been defined as visual, interdisciplinary, and dance theatre. Bonnie Marranca writes in the introduction to her book *Theatre of Images* that, beginning in the 1960s and early 1970s, theatre was breaking with traditional text based forms and developing new expressive forms. In this new theatre, Marranca maintains:

Collaborative creation became the rule. Value came increasingly to be placed on performance with the result that the new theatre never became a literary theatre, but one dominated by images— visual and aural. (Marranca et al. ix)

Image, Marranca suggests, replaces the supremacy of language, both on the stage and as the form through which artists critique reality (ibid., x). Marranca is referring specifically to American performance makers such as Richard Foreman, Lee Breuer, and Robert Wilson. Similar shifts in the theatrical landscape were and are still being experimented with in Europe by artists and companies such as Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal, The People Show, Tadeusz Kantor, Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil, Alfred Radok, Josef Svoboda's Laterna Magika, and most recently by artists and companies such as James Thiérrée, Complicite, and Improbable.

Penny Francis, however, takes issue with framing puppetry as 'visual theatre', arguing that:

the theatre mainstream has adopted puppetry as a genre suited to a 'visual theatre', although the label poses problems, seeming to exclude as it does the sound and music components so intrinsic to puppet theatre. (Francis 98)

Francis however also does not account for the many text-based puppet theatre productions. Although, Francis prefers Antonin Artaud's term 'total theatre', not everybody shares her understanding of what the term 'visual theatre' encompasses. Marranca's definition merely states that visual theatre is one dominated by visual and aural elements. It does not exclude text, music, or other types of sound elements. On their website, an interactive companion to their book, *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, Ken Jordan and Randall Packer write that Robert Wilson's

concept of visual theatre set movement and staged events free in time and space... Large scale works such as *Einstein on the Beach* and *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud* were biographical sketches of the mind, generating for the spectator an 'intuitive' experience drawn from suggestive actions,

slow-motion, and repetitive, non-sensical texts. Unlike the linear flow of time in traditional theatre, Wilson's music-visual interface frees the spectator, allowing the mind to freely explore and participate. (Jordan and Packer)

This notion of visual theatre is also in alignment with Artaud's concept of 'total spectacle' in which a theatre spectacle is 'addressed to the entire organism... an intensive mobilization of objects, gestures, and signs, used in a new spirit' (Artaud 86). Like Artaud and Wilson, Genty and Underwood seek to engage the audience in the theatrical meaning making and use a variety of techniques and disciplines to create dreamscapes that provide a gateway for them, the audience participant, to do so.

The visual landscape is central to each Genty and Underwood production which, according to Genty (Genty), begins with the development of a storyboard of images based on their personal dream analysis, meaning that the analysis is done by themselves – Genty, Underwood and collaborating performers not by a professional, which determines the visual language of a show. The rehearsal phase, though, is a collaborative process<sup>43</sup> between Genty, Underwood, and the performers cast for each particular production. During this phase, actors and their memories are the raw materials used to create the text and movement vocabularies that support the visual elements and final soundscape.<sup>44</sup> In other words, although dreams are the premise for the visual imagery, memory—physical, textual, and emotional—is the premise for creating performer—live human, puppet, object, and material—presence and building the movement and text vocabularies from which Genty and Underwood select elements for use in a show. Though specific images and vocabularies change from one production to the next,<sup>45</sup> the goal of their artistic process is to explore visual language 'a language where the "scene" is the place of the unconscious. A language that shows the conflict of man against himself' (ibid.). This visual language, which is central to their work today, is, according to Genty and Underwood, used as a means to 'tap into the subconscious' of the audience participant.

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<sup>43</sup> Though work by Compagnie Philippe Genty is the product of the auteur/directors Genty and Underwood, during the rehearsal phase there are similarities with devising practices. In her practical and theoretical handbook about devising, Alison Oddey states devising must include a collaborative process that integrates various views and experiences, leading to the creation of an artistic product (Oddey 3).

<sup>44</sup> The music used during rehearsal is evocative, inspirational and in rhythm, but the final soundscape is not used in rehearsal until the final weeks.

<sup>45</sup> There are particular images that recur in their work, such as a face within a field of raw material, performers dressed in trench coats and hats, expanses of stretchy fabric creating a billowing landscape for live human and puppet performers, live humans transforming into material objects such as craft paper forms or silhouette cut outs, plastic air-filled balloons that fill the entire stage, and tiny houses, to name a few.

Their rich visual productions aspire to access each audience participant's unconscious resulting in individual experience and meaning making. This is achieved through their use of non-linear, non-narrative performance structures and surreal, absurd imagery. Genty explains that:

To reach the unconscious of the spectator, I am using a lot of illusion, magic, and I am not using magic for the sake of magic but more to crumble this rational, the logic and to open a little gate. When something is happening which cannot be explained or which is, eh 'how will this happen?' then the spectator is ready to accept more to go into any other space. So he opens a little gate, which is this vast territory of the subconscious and we are linking his [the audience spectator's] to another area of the psyche and then we can go into a sort of a development or progression. Not in a narrative a usual narrative way but more in a sort of dreamlike progression where things are linked to each other through association rather than a narration. (Lucas)

Thusly they strive to inspire individual experience and meaning making.

Genty's use of the terms unconscious and subconscious are problematic, and he often uses the words interchangeably. His understanding of the terms is basically Freudian and connected to the Surrealist's interest in the unconscious mind as a creative resource. During the workshop that I attended in 2009, and during interviews, Genty often referred to using and arriving at Surrealist imagery in his work as way of visually disarming the audience participant in order to activate their subconscious or interrupt their perceptual bondage (States 1). Genty stated during the workshop that he began using Freudian psychology and dream analysis techniques to address personal issues he experienced while touring in Australia. He also developed a passion for and began his own inquiries into the works of Carl Jung, Bruno Bettelheim, Melanie Klein, Wilhelm Reich, Georg Groddeck and Jacques Lacan (*Genty Paysages intérieurs* 103). In relation to his and the company's creative practices, he more consistently refers to 'the unconscious mind' as a major source for visuals that emerge from internal conflict. When discussing goals for audience participant reception, Genty frequently uses both terms: unconscious and subconscious. My understanding of what Genty means is that one intention of the company's work is to interrupt or disrupt the audience participant's logical/rational/intellectual mind through the impact of irrational or incongruous imagery. Thus, as Australian theatre producer Rob Brookman<sup>46</sup> puts it in the documentary film *Three knocks on the door: the magic of Philippe Genty*, this imagery creates 'a sense of dislocation to make the audience work intellectually and emotionally' (qtd. in Lucas) at a

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<sup>46</sup> Rob Brookman, became the Chief Executive Officer/Producer at the State Theatre Company South Australia in 2012, and produced the 'Stowaways' tour in Australia in 1995-96, as the then Executive Producer at the Adelaide Festival Centre Trust.

level below everyday consciousness. The sense of dislocation is achieved through two techniques: surrealist imagery and non-narrative structures. Their use of startling/Surrealistic imagery is intended to subvert notions of normal and shock the audience participant into a different way of seeing. Whereas the associative and dream-like, rather than logical, narrative structures leave room for the audience participant to co-create the meaning. But what do Genty and Underwood mean by Surrealist imagery? Are they merely adopting visual elements or are they referring to a more tangible and methodological influence on their work and practice? If so, are they developing a theatrical form that is approaching Surrealist theatre?



**Figure 5: *Voyageurs Immobiles*. Performers: Margorie Currenti, Lakko Okino, Amador Artiga, Simon T. Rann, Pierrik Malebranche. Photography by Pascal François**

Traces of Surrealism emerge early in Genty's career. For example, he titled his 1967 documentary film about puppetry around the world *Blue like an Orange*, possibly in reference to the 1929 poem by Paul Eluard, one of the founders of the Surrealist movement. Surrealism, with the exception of the work of Antonin Artaud,<sup>47</sup> is most often associated with the visual (painting, sculpture, graphic and photographic), cinematic, and literary arts (Hopkins Introduction). Many of these images are well-recognised parts of contemporary culture in the often-replicated works and images of Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, and Man Ray, to name just a few. Live performance is less recognised and discussed as part of the output of Surrealism. J.H. Matthews argues in his 1974 examination of plays from the Dada and Surrealist movements that when considering theatre from the perspective of Dada or Surrealism, there is little commonality among the

<sup>47</sup> In his examination of Dada and Surrealist plays, Matthews states that of all those artists linked with Surrealism, Artaud 'is without a doubt the one generally associated most readily with the stage'. (Matthews 133) Though Artaud's theories have had 'immense influence' on theatre in the twentieth century, Matthews notes that the relationship between Surrealist ideology and Artaud's ideas about theatre as expressed in *Theatre of Cruelty* is not always clear. He goes on to note that some scholars, such as Henri Béhar, argue that Artaud's principles develop directly from Surrealism, whereas Eric Sellin states that Artaud's Surrealist period ended in 1927 (ibid.).

various writers considered or professed to be part of each movement. There are, however, common values such as ‘dissatisfaction with tradition and hence an impulse to explore new means of expression in all areas of creative endeavour’ (Matthews 2), iconoclasm (ibid., 5), as well as ‘scepticism about the unity of character in theatrical presentations’ (ibid., 8). Genty and Underwood’s lifelong practice reflects similar values as demonstrated in their explorations of new performance techniques and methodologies as well as their dissatisfaction with traditional puppet and material theatre production forms. In a sense, they were the iconoclasts of puppet theatre emerging in the late 1970’s.

Surrealist plays, Matthews writes, constituted ‘a frontal attack upon the very idea of dramatic communication’ (ibid., 10) and tended toward an ‘impulse to divert the theatre from dramatic to poetic ends’ (ibid., 106). However, Annette S. Levitt argues, in the introduction to her book *The Genres and Genders of Surrealism*, ‘[W]hat happened in the arts of Surrealism—most dramatically perhaps in its theatre—shatters the conventions not only of the arts themselves but of the audience’s safe distance from... the performance arena’ (Levitt 3). Genty and Underwood’s work is about communication and an attempt to unlock the subconscious of the audience participant, entertainment, and achieving a poetic rather than a dramatic or literary theatre. By the 1970s when Genty and Underwood were making their work, the once avant-garde techniques of Surrealism had been incorporated into a number of art forms and the mainstream including visual arts and film, as well as advertising. The techniques were easily understood and appreciated yet had not yet been popularly used in puppet theatre. Genty and Underwood explicitly incorporate techniques such as automatic writing, use of dreams as source material, and extreme/absurd imagery into their highly skilled theatrical production practice.

According to David Hopkins, Surrealism also had ‘a restorative mission’ and was ‘attempting to create a new mythology and put modern man and woman back in touch with the forces of the unconscious’ (Hopkins Introduction). The artist’s task ‘was to move beyond aesthetic pleasure and to affect people’s lives; to make them see and experience things differently (ibid., 3). Indeed, Rubin also argues that:

It is not surprising that in creating an art that would ‘return to man,’ they [both Dadaists and Surrealists] should have developed an anthropomorphic form-language capable of evoking both physiological and psychological inwardness. (Rubin 40)

To accomplish this, the artist André Breton notes that dreams and free association:

constitute almost the entirety of Surrealism’s raw materials. We only amplified the *ends* toward which these dreams and associations were being collected; yes, still interpretation, but above all *liberation* from constraints—

logical, moral, and otherwise—with an eye toward recuperating of the mind’s original powers. (Breton 20)

Early techniques included automatic writing and hypnotic slumber (ibid., 61) used initially as a means to create texts ostensibly drawn from the unconscious or trancelike states (ibid., 62). Automatic writing or ‘automatism’ was predicated on the conviction that the speed of writing is equivalent to the speed of thought: ‘[W]riting rapidly with no preconceived subject in mind’ (Hopkins 67). The visual version, automatic drawing, was developed later in the movement by André Masson (ibid., 72). Unlike automatism, which was ostensibly generated from the artist’s subconscious experience through speedwriting, dream paintings looked to dreams as a window to the subconscious.<sup>48</sup>

Genty and Underwood developed techniques drawn from Surrealist investigation such as premising their work on dream imagery and developing a performative type of automatism as part of their creative process with their technique called ping-pong, which will be discussed in more detail further in the case study, and what they refer to as a ‘Surrealist sensibility’, meaning their use of shocking, fantastic and outlandish visuals to shock the audience participant and persuade ‘the imagination to surrender before the enticing images of the marvellous’ (Matthews 104). Like the Surrealists, Genty and Underwood seek to create an ‘experientially transforming poetics/aesthetics’ (Hopkins 67) and create a theatrical experience that taps into the audience participant’s subconscious to allow them to ‘see’ differently. Unlike the Surrealists, Genty and Underwood’s work is not often considered cerebral but rather accessible on many levels due in part to their use of high and low art and humour.

Their use of various performance forms means that the performers hired for a production often have a variety of training and experience but not necessarily in all of the disciplines they will be called upon to use in a production. To familiarise performers with the core techniques used by the company and to develop the proficiencies of their performers in each area, Genty and Underwood developed a system of training that includes puppet manipulation, work with raw materials, acting, dance, and vocal techniques. Their puppetry manipulation training, which builds on traditional manipulation techniques, focuses on the puppet’s gaze, timing, movement, and mimetic gesture, and is specifically designed to train non-puppeteers quickly. Most of their

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<sup>48</sup> The notion that this technique generates material from the subconscious could be called into question. Franz Brentano argues that consciousness equates to intentionality. Therefore once text is documented from mind to paper it is an intentional act is therefore conscious (qtd. in Lyotard 43).

training for the actor working with raw materials and actor/dancer performance techniques originate in their creative practice as either improvisation structures for developing material to be used in production or as techniques to build the skills of cast members, which have been codified and integrated as part of their pedagogy. Other techniques for actors and dancers draw from their personal knowledge of performance techniques developed by Jacques Lecoq and Holger, as well as explicit references to, and their own transformation of, the performance theories of Strasberg. The resulting training is designed to engage performers with their personal aesthetic, address performer weaknesses, address performer phobias (such as actors who believe that they cannot create or contribute to choreographed movement, and dancers who believe that they cannot deliver text on stage), and identify future company members. Their project methodology, also taught as a component of their workshops, further trains performers and prospective company members in their creative method. These techniques are documented and analysed in the next chapter.

During the four-week workshop in 2009 that I participated in, Genty and Underwood were casting a revival of their 1995 production *Voyageurs Immobile*, which, Underwood informed me, was initially inspired by a visit to a packaging expo. Our training focused on the body/actor presence/performance, memory as a tool to generate text and movement, puppet manipulation, and work with raw materials. The training uses two teaching methods: technique classes and application of these techniques using Genty and Underwood's project development method. Although one can point to certain techniques that are clearly evidenced in their productions, particularly their work with raw materials, there is less explicit evidence of other techniques such as: actor presence and performance, uses of memory as generators of text and movement, and dreams as source material. If one is familiar with their particular workshop training, these techniques are more easily identified in their productions.

Genty and Underwood's production method begins with developing a storyboard. In interviews I conducted with Scott Koehler, a company member, and Genty himself, both stated that the storyboard is used to construct the puppet elements and to select the raw materials that will be brought into the rehearsal room for improvisations. However, Koehler went on to add that the storyboard is not usually shared with the performing company. According to Underwood, this is because Genty and Underwood want to begin a rehearsal period with what Underwood calls, an 'open frame', allowing the rehearsal process and performers themselves to influence, effect, and determine the final production. In the workshop, this is defined as phase 1 of their method in which

participants are tasked with defining their own visual narrative and storyboard. From this, they determine what raw materials they will use and build puppets for rehearsal with a cast.

Their rehearsal process has 4 distinct phases: 1) *Éloignement/dispersion*: uncensored brain storming including using their theatre game ping-pong, a visual form of automatism, and improvisation; 2) *Crossing*: brings together the initial storyboard with the material developed in phase 1; 3) *Rewriting*: revising the storyboard in response to the outcomes discovered in phases 1 and 2; 4) *Evaluation*: an informal presentation or work-in-progress to determine if the phases should be re-implemented to continue development. In addition, Genty and Underwood use an unstated technique in their practice and during workshops. During both, they video what happens in the room with performers for later examination by Genty and Underwood (in the workshop with was done with their assistant; it is unclear whether any company member participates in this process in the creation of their shows). This review process is used to select specific visual moments, movement, and text to be incorporated as vocabulary for the workshop exercise or production. In other words, Genty and Underwood state that they are interested in a collaborative development process in which the performers actively participate in the creation of text and movement material. Yet, in their productions, performers are not necessarily collaborators in the final choices of what visual images, puppets, or raw material are used, nor in the editing/directing of how text and movement are used. Rather, the performers are, to a certain extent, themselves raw material. Still, I suggest—and I believe that they would agree—Genty and Underwood’s choices are affected by the interplay between the performers and the storyboard. The final product however is very much about ‘what is going on in Genty’s [and, I propose, Underwood’s] head’ (qtd. in Lucas) as Brookman suggests.

Although their company has been in existence since 1968 and is considered a seminal contributor in puppet and visual theatre, there has yet to be an inquiry into their practical contributions to the field. The following case study documents and analyzes their practice as experienced by myself through archival and historical research; interviews with Genty, Underwood and past and current company members; and my participant observation of their workshop in 2009.



## Chapter 4

### **Fieldwork Investigation and Analysis of Techniques**

This chapter documents and analyzes the theories and techniques that Genty and Underwood have developed and I experienced in during their workshop at IIM in 2009. It is divided into two sections. The first section, *Metaphors and Manipulation*, is an analysis of and detailed description of the exercises and techniques that draw on traditional and known puppetry and object techniques. The second section, *Material, Memory, the Body, and Performer Training*, is an analysis of and detailed description of their exercises and techniques that focus on the body, use of the live the performer as raw material, their use of raw materials in relation to the performer, and memory.

I approached Compagnie Philippe Genty fraught with my own anxieties about refusal or lack of interest in my project. I had been told that Genty was notoriously difficult by a number of puppeteers, some of whom had worked or engaged with the company, while others, I suspect, based their opinions on second or even third-hand information. My first contact was in the form of an email inquiry sent on 12 December 2007 addressed to Madame Doukali, listed on the website as the company contact. Five days later I received a warm and generous reply from ‘Phil’, indicating that he would be interested in an exchange and inviting me to their home in Brittany where Genty and Underwood house the majority of their personal archives. Simultaneously, I was pursuing interviews with previous company members to begin a dialogue about the company’s work. Since this introduction, I have visited the Genty/Underwood home twice for periods of research in their personal archive, which includes performance and rehearsal video, and engaged in many conversations formal and informal about their work and practice. Rather than being ‘difficult’, I found both Genty and Underwood to be supportive and active partners in my research.

Genty writes, at the beginning of his chapter ‘Tool Box’, that his notes that follow could, if given time, lead to a theory of performance creation lacking this, he offers ‘some clues in this treasure hunt other fools might like to pursue’ (Genty *Paysages intérieurs* 275). In this instance, I am the fool. As a practitioner, however, I am not interested in merely replicating what Genty and Underwood do but rather in discerning their fundamental principles that contribute to the broader field of performer training and creative practice. While puppetry continues to be an integral part of their visual stage language, central to their creative practice in their second aesthetic period are the use of

dreams, performer memory, collaboration and notions of presence, authenticity, and the believability of the performer or object. Over the years, they have developed theories, techniques, and training practices to both quickly train puppetry manipulation and to further their investigations toward a new visual language.

During my first meeting with them, I asked about the structure of their workshops and how they related it to their creative practice. They both simply said that the structure was designed to teach their particular approach to dance/movement, puppet and object manipulation, and acting. While on the surface this is accurate, the actual experience is significantly different and more complex. In addition to being a way to disseminate their techniques and approach all of which emerge from their creative practice, their workshops, since the 1997 production *Dédale*,<sup>49</sup> are also their means to identify and train new performers, and to begin the early stages of finding a production's physical and textual vocabularies. As a result, many participants in their workshops are seeking employment with the company, which adds a layer of competitive tension that is needed in order to prove oneself and stand out among the participants. The workshop is broken up into four categories of training:

- 1) Puppet and object manipulation;
- 2) The live human actor in relation to raw materials such as craft paper, plastic, beans, pasta, rope, clay, and so on;
- 3) Dance/movement and acting;
- 4) Project methodology.

The descriptions and instructions are extracted from the notes I made while taking and observing the workshop. Many of these notes have been edited for clarity; however, some have not in an effort to convey the moment as it was experienced to the page.

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<sup>49</sup> *Dédale* was commissioned by and created for the 1997 Avignon Festival (excerpts of this production can be found in a television news piece on Youtube: Sortir: Philippe Genty à Avignon [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plvhhyp\\_6IQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plvhhyp_6IQ); a review including a description of the stage adaptation performed in 1999 at Charleston's Spoleto Festival USA can be found by Porter Anderson, *Review Genty's Dedale Loving the Labyrinth*, 1999, CNN.com, Available: [http://articles.cnn.com/1999-06-02/entertainment/9906\\_02\\_spoletogenty.review\\_1\\_labyrinth-door-icarus?\\_s=PM:SHOWBIZ](http://articles.cnn.com/1999-06-02/entertainment/9906_02_spoletogenty.review_1_labyrinth-door-icarus?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ), 9 August 2012). It was, according to Genty, a difficult process on many levels. As a result of problems with the casting, it was the last production for which they held auditions. Now the company only hires individuals they have identified, vetted, and developed relationships with over one or more workshop periods. This process affords the opportunity to not only get to know potential company members but also to train them in their techniques and approaches to acting, movement and puppet manipulation.

My role as a participant observer changed during the course of the workshop. I began as a full participant but was later limited to observing and participating in exercises for which I could be seated due to an injury. During the project phase, I participated as an ‘outside eye’ for three different workshop groups, giving me a unique vantage point to observe how Genty and Underwood engaged with different groups, depending on their interest in individual participants as potential future company members. Throughout the workshop, we—the participants and the company—engaged in numerous informal conversations about puppetry and manipulation techniques, discussed what we were learning and our reflections on and about the techniques, and worked both collaboratively and independently on those techniques. The macro structure of this workshop has been used for a number of years:

- Week one: introduction to basic techniques, objects and materials;
- Weeks two and three: a focus on puppetry and actor training techniques, beginning work on presentation;
- Week four: some training continues but the primary focus of the participants’ shifts to work on the final presentation projects.

Embedded within the structure of the workshop, and explicitly in the instructions for the collaborative project, Genty and Underwood train attendees in their company’s creative method. This method was described in Chapter Three in relation to their own practice. Their method taught in the workshop context has some variations. Their production methodology is introduced during week two of a four-week workshop. The workshop participants propose and vote on project concepts, which may be based on work with puppets, object theatre, raw materials, or movement. The casts of each project is self selected, meaning participants chose which project they want to work on unless a cast is preselected by the concept originator. During the project development phase, the techniques learned throughout the workshop are put to practical use.

What was not made explicit to the participants is the work that Genty, Underwood and their assistant, Nancy Rusek, do after hours. In discussing this with Rusek, I was informed that, each evening, the three discuss each group and make aesthetic and directorial decisions about the directions they will focus on in order to guide a particular group towards a final presentation piece. In their own creative practice, this work is facilitated by a video recording of each day’s rehearsal, which is reviewed throughout the rehearsal period for material such as text fragments or stories, movement gestures and phrases, or images to be tried out and used in a final production. This use of video is

replicated in the workshop, though the participants are not aware of how the material is used.

Each day, with the exception of the final week, begins with a group warm up which also includes explorations of techniques to open the body such as massage and qigong and we are introduced to general exercises that develop key performance skills such as ‘distanciation’, fixed point, impulse and voice. For example, this is one exercise with two stages used during warm up to teach distanciation:

### **Stage One**

One of the techniques used to develop this skill is to play with different parts of the body as an initiator or ‘motor’/brain that leads the movement and interaction between the body part and the performer. In other words, explore and engage with different body parts as separate entities from your body, as if they had a life of their own. Genty suggests that you allow the body part to surprise you.

### **Stage Two**

Continue as in Stage One with a body part as initiator and add finding a character or quality for that particular body part. After a character is established, find an opposing character or quality for another body part. Play with these two opposing characters/qualities together and in relation to each other—one then the other—in dialogue.

Many of the warm-up techniques were drawn from dance and the Feldenkrais Method, a technique often used by contemporary dance practitioners.<sup>50</sup>

The days are usually split between working on actor/dancer techniques and puppetry manipulation. Most exercises are taught in phases over several days and it is not uncommon to work on two or more different actor/dancer techniques in a single day. Exercises are described by Genty and Underwood in metaphoric language, combined with essential instructions. I have tried to integrate both aspects of these instructions in the descriptions below, as this method was consistently used throughout the workshop with the implicit understanding that the metaphorical description informs one’s understanding

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<sup>50</sup> The Feldenkrais Method was developed by and named after its founder, Moshe Feldenkrais (1904 -1984). Information about the technique can be found online at <http://www.feldenkrais.com/>, most recently accessed on 29 June 2011 as well as Feldenkrais’ book *Awareness Through Movement*, as well as the numerous books and journals that can be found about Feldenkrais technique.

of the more pedestrian instructions. I include my notes and, in some instances, my responses to, impressions of, and thoughts about, the function of an exercise within the construct of their training and creative process. I write both descriptively, from the perspective of my notes, and in the style of Genty's direct instructions.

## Section One

### Metaphors and Manipulation

Puppets and objects in Genty and Underwood's work today are used in conjunction with visible live human performers as a visual metaphor and a means to realising their dream imagery. Early in the company's work, puppets were the visual focus and puppeteers were usually hidden. This was especially true of their work created between 1968 and 1985. During an interview in *Three Knocks on the Door*, Genty states this was due to his inability to communicate as a child. He says:

As I was close to disintegration in my childhood, I had to find ways of communicating because I could not communicate directly. I started by communicating through objects and through puppets. (qtd. in Lucas)

Over the years, however, his tools for communication, and therefore the work of the company shifted, as 'puppets were replaced by human beings' (ibid.) as the dominate visible performers on stage. This shift from puppets to live human performers also affected the creative techniques that Genty and Underwood develop and use. While they still use and teach puppet manipulation, the emphasis is on the live human performer's performance, and the actor as a collaborative partner in creating text and movement. Regardless of the type of puppet object—whether anatomically human, abstract, fantasy, or raw material—or its function in a show, the object or material itself must be believable and, as in most European and North American work, must convey presence and aliveness on stage. Genty and Underwood suggested in interviews that they believe that all material has some kind of inherent life presence or energy.<sup>51</sup> More recently, Genty wrote that: 'The magic of the marionette is based on the fact that during a show a spectator believes in the life of a figure that he knows it lacks' (Genty *Paysages intérieurs* 276). This belief in the life of a puppet is, he suggests, a hidden desire in the spectator that is awakened by

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<sup>51</sup> On a panel in 1992 at the Jim Henson International Puppet Festival in New York, Genty stated that the specific quality of puppetry over other things is animism and that we (puppeteers) keep this notion in our psyche. JoAnne Akalaitis, Eileen Blumenthal, Philippe Genty, Josef Krofta, Henryk Jurkowski, Michael R. Malkin, and Betty L. Corwin, *Contemporary Puppet Theatre: Innovations and Impact*, Video recording (vid); Beta (bta); Videocassette (vca), New York, 1992.

a manipulator's ability to animate and grant or transfer a soul to a performing object (ibid., 276-277). Their puppet and object manipulation training, however, focuses on the mechanical skills required to create the illusion of life and/or presence in a constructed or material performer and it draws on known manipulation techniques such as focus, rhythm, and symbolic gesture. During the workshop, Genty and Underwood encapsulate their approach to training in six points: concentration, impasse, conviction, dissociation, 'distanciation', and fixed point. In his new book, Genty only articulates three points: dissociation, 'distanciation', and fixed point (ibid., 277 – 280). These allow Genty and Underwood to teach puppet and object manipulation—often to performers with no prior puppetry training—quickly. It also affords them an opportunity to observe who among the possible candidates has innate ability or seem to be in alignment with their stylistic preferences.

Dissociation refers to the complicated negotiation of presence when one is a physically visible puppeteer. The challenge for the visible puppeteer is to not become a double of the puppet or material one is manipulating or through one's performance to be a distraction from the puppet's performance. The level of difficulty increases when a live human performer is both a manipulator of and character performing with an object and/or material. 'Distanciation', Genty's term, is described as an actor's ability to simultaneously 'embody his own character and that of a puppet's' (ibid., 279). In the workshop training, it also implied a state in which one is both one's self and outside one's self, a separate body. This state and the subsequent training suggest that distanciation is both an actor maintaining a dual presence on stage as the performer and not the performer, and also the split between the manipulator as a performing presence and an object as a performing presence, despite it being physically connected to or a part of the manipulator's body. Distanciation is taught by working with puppets and through specific warm-up exercises where a body part is treated and interacted with as if it were a distinct character. Fixed point is a fundamental puppetry technique taught by many. On the one hand, Genty writes that it is manipulation of a puppet or object character that 'obeys its intrinsic logic'<sup>52</sup> (ibid., 280). On the other, he also taught that it is as the ability to locate and maintain a fixed point in space with an object, typically the point where an object leads from and initiates action. In other words, it is the central point from which all locomotive movement, pivots, or rotations initiate. A fixed point also establishes the

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<sup>52</sup> This notion of manipulation that emanates from the intrinsic logic of the performing object can be seen in a number of puppetry training such as Stephen Mottram's workshop *The Logic of Movement* using string and multi-person puppets, and Gavin Glover's workshop on table top puppets, both of which I took in 2008.

illusion of gravity. For example, imagine a puppet character with a fixed point located in its head moving horizontally from one point in space to another. There should be no change in the level of the head in relation to the playing area unless the puppet is intentionally raising up or lowering. Any change in level will be read by an audience participant as an action such as going uphill or sinking into the earth. During the training, there are two additional elements not listed in their six-point approach, but which they included in their exercises: timing and impulse. Timing and impulse are used as a means of creating believability; they create the illusion that a puppet or object is thinking through the timing of symbolic gestures.

The puppet manipulation training is comprised of five main exercises: Biographical Portraits, Baby Rose, our first meeting with ‘The Señoritas,’ extended exercises with The Señoritas and extended exercises with Albert. Biographical Portraits is an object theatre exercise that has very little actual exploration of object theatre techniques. Rather as Rusek noted, the exercise is more about the individual performing the portrait than it is about the subject of the portrait or teaching object theatre techniques. This exercise addresses none of Genty’s six points directly, but is a way for Genty and Underwood to begin to get to know each individual participant taking a workshop and for them to start to identify future company members. Baby Rose is an exercise with a puppet head similar to one created for *Désirs Parade* to train fixed point, impulse, and rhythm. The majority of their manipulation training is conducted with The Señoritas and a small table top puppet named Albert. The Señoritas are a set of six large female puppets built at a workshop in Seville specifically for use during workshop trainings. They are reminiscent of the female puppet in Scene 2 of *Désirs Parade* described in Chapter Three. Albert is a table top puppet.

Each day, the group works with both the table top puppet and the Señoritas to explore different manipulation techniques. Genty leads the manipulation sessions with the Señoritas; Underwood takes the sessions with Albert. The two different styles of puppet use two different techniques of manipulation: The Señoritas use single-person manipulation from a head control, whereas Albert is a multi-person manipulation puppet, often referred to as Bunraku<sup>53</sup> in the workshop. Both use a single multi-stage exercise model described below. Additionally, in the later stages of their puppet manipulation, both Genty and Underwood use structured improvisation and focus on what a puppeteer

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<sup>53</sup> This reference to Bunraku seems, as in many training courses, to refer to multi-person, hands-on manipulation. Genty encountered this form of puppetry during his world tour but there is no reference of him nor has he discussed having formally studied the technique.

must do to manufacture presence and believability in the puppet from a spectator's point of view. However, it is the differences in the teaching approaches of Genty and Underwood that are more important. Genty, who studied as a graphic designer, focuses on the visual picture created in the spatial relationships between puppets, puppets and puppeteers, and puppet body parts (recall his note above regarding directions of focus and movement). Underwood, who studied dance, focuses on the movement of the puppet replicating live human movement,<sup>54</sup> body relationships, and the unspoken listening between puppeteers and puppets. Additionally, Underwood is concerned with how these physical relationships aid or hinder the live bodies manipulating the puppet and the perception of believable presence in the puppet by audience participants. These differences do not manifest simply because they are training a different type of manipulation; rather they reflect differences between Genty and Underwood as artists. Genty is primarily concerned with spatial relationships, the visual picture, and timing, whereas Underwood is focused on mimetic gestures and physicality as the means to manufacturing presence in puppets.

### **Biographical Portraits: an Object Theatre exercise**

Working in pairs, each pair finds a space to meet to interview each other for forty-five minutes. During the interview one should learn about your interviewee's life, personality, and interests. Genty suggests that we avoid questions that are clichéd in nature and suggests that each person describe a memory. With the interview in mind, we come back to the studio, which has piles of objects and materials around the room. As a group, we are given fifteen minutes to choose materials and construct a story about our interviewee. Genty asks that we focus on using the materials in a metaphoric way and states that we should:

- Use speech
- State the name of the person that the story is about
- Use/consider rhythm and timing

The interviewee can be used as an object in one's telling. The presentations should be approximately three minutes in length.

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<sup>54</sup> This mapping to human movement is true for most of the exercise except for a later stage when transformation is introduced, at which point the puppet transforms from something anthropomorphic into an insect. The puppet moves on all fours like a 'spider'.



## **Baby Rose**

This exercise is performed by one manipulator and one live human actor. It uses a simple hand-held head to perform a realistic double take. The exercise develops fixed-point, meaning it develops a physical awareness of maintaining spatial positioning while an object moves in space, an understanding of gestural timing to show mood or feeling, and the uses of impulse to show decision making. The steps are:

- The manipulator with the puppet head stands up stage, slightly to the right of centre, with the puppet looking forward;
- The other performer walks down stage of the puppet, beginning at stage right and proceeding towards stage left;

As the live performer passes in front of the puppet, the puppet notices the passing performer with a slight turn of the head, turns to face front again, then turns again with a different impulse and timing to indicate that it ‘sees’ the passing performer (the double-take). Finally, with a new impulse, the puppet ‘decides’ to follow the live performer.

## **The Señoritas**

Genty has said that there are two ways that a puppet relates to the audience participant: 1) the audience sees the object, it is animated and becomes a symbol of something; and 2) the puppet or object starts to take on life. Then, Genty states, the object ‘is in charge of a soul’ (Akalaitis et al.). The group of six puppets referred to collectively as The Señoritas are also individual characters: Matilda, Manuela, Nina, Sarah, Soledad, and Marlene.



**Figure 6: Señorita puppets pictured with workshop participants Amador Artiga and Charles Essombe. Photograph: Alissa Mello.**

Each is designed and costumed to embody a particular personality, which in part dictates its quality of movement. The puppets may be operated by a single person, a pair, or a trio of manipulators, but for most of the stages of the exercises they are operated by a single actor puppeteer. They have a simple construction that includes a head, torso and arms, with the main control at the back of the head and a stabilising rod in the back. There are no actual legs, but each puppet is costumed in a long dress that, if manipulated correctly, creates the illusion of the character having legs.

Prior to our first meeting with The Señoritas, Genty explains some general manipulation ‘dos and don’ts’. These include:

- The puppet is always on the down-stage side of the puppeteer;
- One should always look for the most elegant way to change hands when one needs to shift sides; for instance, it is best to do this while moving;
- A puppet must always have either its face or body facing the direction of travel, meaning: 1) a puppet can look, turn and move (both face and body turned in the movement trajectory); 2) its head can face away from the direction of travel and the body must face in the direction in which it is travelling; or 3) the head faces in the direction of travel and the body faces away. The one thing that cannot occur is that both the body *and* head of a puppet face front while it is travelling to the side;
- Remember the fixed point, particularly when moving the head;
- And finally, head control should be in the direction of the gaze but not necessarily in vertical alignment with it.

Using The Señoritas as examples, Genty then offers some brief additional points about his particular style of design and manipulation. He tells us that in order to make a puppet appear to be in control, the puppet always leads. For example, if both puppet and puppeteer are sitting, the puppet always rises first, followed by the puppeteer. In other words, agency and presence is conveyed by the illusion of the puppet appearing to lead. Genty next demonstrates the best method to use with this style of puppet when bringing them to a seated position. After these pointers, he tells us that after his encounter with Bunraku,<sup>55</sup> he began to use the Bunraku design convention of making the puppet’s heads proportionally smaller, whereas the European tradition is to make heads proportionately larger. Genty also notes that he prefers to construct hands that are larger in relative scale

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<sup>55</sup> His discovery happened during his four year world tour *Expédition Alexandre* (1961-1964), when he was meeting and filming puppets and puppeteers for his film *Blue like an Orange*.

by dramatically extending their finger length; the palms remain relatively delicate. Genty's dos and don'ts, and his manipulation demonstration, show a concern with establishing and maintaining the puppet's presence through the illusion of the agency of the object. Despite the puppeteer's visibility, at this stage all focus is on the puppet. This focus is both literal: with one's gaze, and figurative: in establishing who initiates movement and gestures.

### **First Meeting**

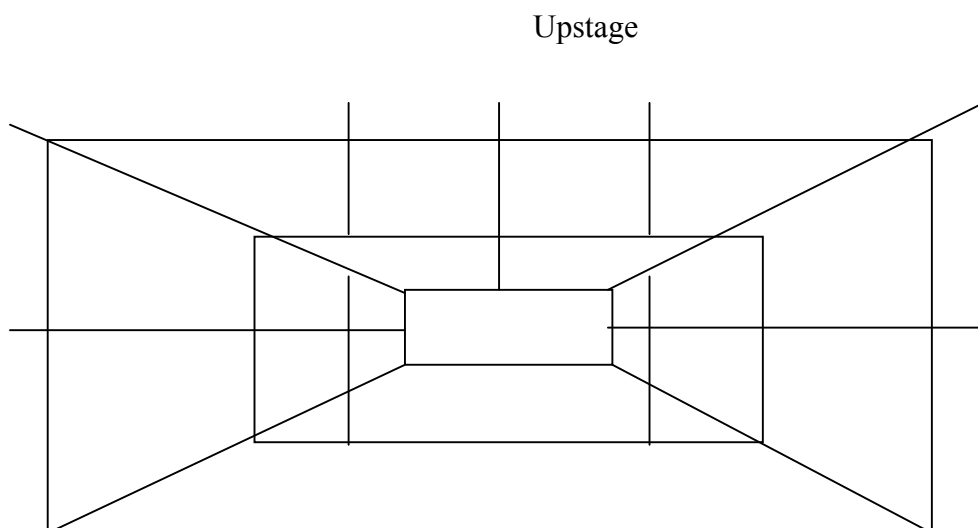
This exercise is performed in groups of twelve, divided into six manipulators and six observers. The room is organised with the six Señoritas on one side of the room. Of the twelve participants, six go to meet the puppet opposite them, while the other six sit across from them to observe and give the puppets—not the manipulator—feedback about what they see. The meeting is conducted with both the manipulator and the puppet seated. Genty states it is intended as an opportunity for the manipulator to get to know the puppet, to begin to understand its character, and the peculiarities of its gaze. In other words, we need to learn the relationships between head rod positioning and focus, what qualities the character seems to emanate based on design and costume, and how its arms and hands move. After a period of getting to know each other, the puppet and manipulator stand (the puppet always initiates and rises first) and walk toward the observer. Then both sit. At this moment the puppet is handed over to the observer, who becomes the manipulator and begins a similar process of getting to know the puppet. Meanwhile, another person moves to sit across from the pair and act as observer. After this exercise, we are split into two working groups. Each day for the next two weeks each group will work with Genty and The Señoritas and Underwood with Albert to learn and refine manipulation and puppet improvisation skills.

To hone a puppeteer's understanding of manipulation and manufacture of presence, Genty designed a three stage series of exercises premised on an exercise he attributes to Jacques Lecoq.<sup>56</sup> The goal of the exercise is to teach the performers how to visually balance a stage space and to help the performers gain awareness of when and how a space is in or out of balance. Additional skills developed are: how to transfer a puppet from one hand to another in motion, how to relate a visible puppeteer's body to a puppet body in order to keep the puppet in the forefront, how to use impulse and gaze to create the illusion that a puppet has lead agency and presence on stage, and what,

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<sup>56</sup> Genty stated that this exercise is from Lecoq training. I have not, however, been able to verify this as the exercise is not described in any of the books or articles that I have found about Lecoq's training methods.

according to Genty, are acceptable and not acceptable movements for a puppet of this type to maintain illusion that the puppet is a ‘living’ presence. Using the Señorita puppets adds a level of complexity to an exercises originally developed for live human actors but it fast tracks developing the key spatial and manipulation skills that are so important to Genty. Movement and possible entrance and exit places are delineated by a line pattern on the floor:



**Figure 7: Stage layout for first stage exercise series with The Señorita puppets from my notes.**

One can only enter or exit where the lines extend off stage, and the lines within the playing area are the only pathways or axes that puppets can travel along.

### **Stage One**

All six puppets are used during the exercise; they enter one at a time. To start, one puppet enters the space and renders the stage visually unbalanced. This character asks a third to join on stage in order to balance the stage, the second to enter asks the first to unbalance the stage again, the first asks the second to balance, then the second asks another puppet on to the stage, and the cycle begins again until all puppets are on stage. The ‘asking’ is done with non-verbal gestures. This exercise has added complexity when using puppets because, in addition to unbalancing and balancing the stage, one must also be aware of what is happening with the puppet. There were five core manipulation issues that Genty most often mentioned:

- Puppeteers must focus on the puppet at all times (meaning that puppeteers should be looking directly at the puppet). When a puppeteer breaks their focus on the

puppet, audience participants' attention shifts from the puppet to the puppeteer and the illusion of the puppet as a lead presence is broken;

- A puppeteer's body must be upstage of the puppet;
- Know when and how to change hands;
- Know how a puppeteer/puppet should turn to allow the puppet to remain in the down stage position;
- A puppet should only gesture with its upstage hand. By doing this, a puppeteer's arm will not cross in front of a puppet's body, thus ensuring its visibility.

These five constraints are applied in addition to his technique for creating the illusion of agency by having the puppet always move first.

### **Stage Two**

The second stage uses the same playing area as Stage One. Genty adds scraps of paper, referred to as memories, scattering them about the playing area to introduce a dramatic element. This stage has four levels of improvisation and escalating levels of relationship between puppet and manipulator. The basic structure is: a puppet enters, finds a 'memory', responds to that memory, and exits. All six puppets may inhabit the space at the same time, but they act independently until the third of three 'levels':

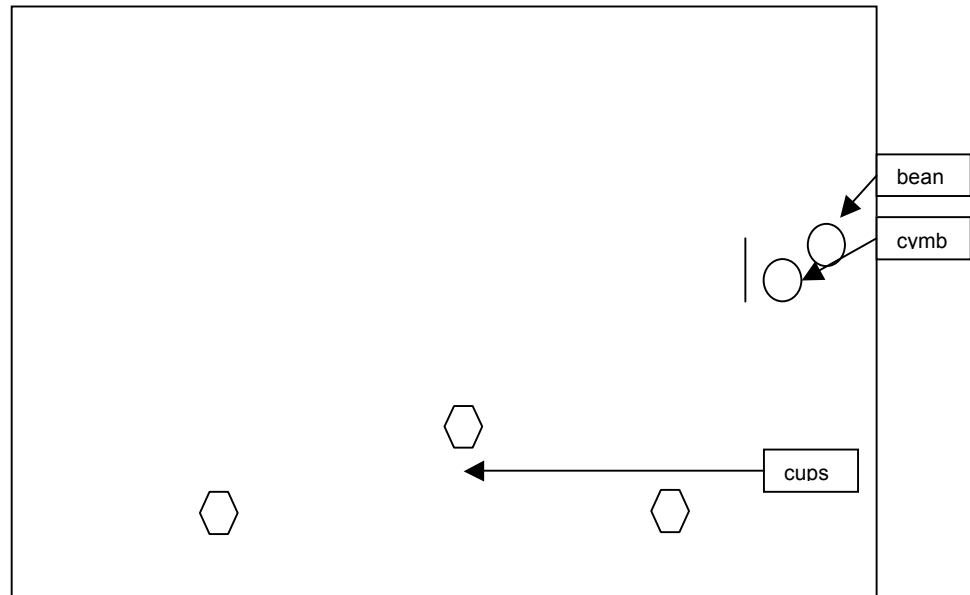
- Level One: perform only the outlined actions.
- Level Two: the puppet can interact with and respond to its manipulator but the manipulator does not respond to the puppet.
- Level Three: imagine the scraps of paper are letters on the ground, perhaps a 'break up' letter?
- Level Four: adds interaction between the puppet and its manipulator.

During the improvisation, it should become clear whom the letter is for. In Level Four, the manipulator is also a character involved in the action as it unfolds during the improvisation. Each level is allowed a six-minutes.

### **Stage Three**

Stage Three is a structured improvisation. Each improvisation is six minutes long and is performed with three puppet characters. The lines are removed from the playing area and the stage set up is as shown below:

Upstage



**Figure 8: Stage layout for Stage Four of puppet manipulation exercises with The Señoritas taken from my notes.**

The improvisation structure is: one character enters, goes to pick up a bean, which represents poison, at stage left, and puts it in one of the tea cups. This character then goes to the cymbal and calls in two characters to join for tea. These characters do not know that there is a poisoned cup. The rest of the improvisation leads to one character at the poisoned cup. This character dies.

Although the lines have been removed from the floor and we are working with a situational improvisation, Genty's primary concerns about and techniques to maintain the puppet's presence remain at the forefront. According to Genty, presence, in a puppet, is created through three things: the illusion of agency in the puppet; the spatial relationships between puppets, and puppet and puppeteer; and the focus or concentration of the puppeteer on the puppet. The illusion of agency is created, Genty and Underwood teach, as a result of the puppet appearing to initiate all action. This is a common method particularly in work where the actor puppeteer is visible regardless of whether or not they are a character in the scene with the puppet. Genty emphasizes that the puppet must always appear to move first meaning for example that if the puppet needs to sit it sits and then the actor puppeteer follows. Tranter's Exercise 1, which will be discussed in the next case study, is designed to teach this illusion whereas Genty and Underwood teach the concept and then guide the actor puppeteer through feedback toward integrating the illusion into their manipulation practice. Spatially, during the workshop, Genty positions the actor puppeteer behind the puppet though this is not maintained in their own work

rather it is used as a mechanism for building skills particularly in performers with less puppetry training. I notice that throughout the workshop if a performer arrived with puppetry skills, Genty was less likely to enforce this spatial relationship between puppet and actor puppeteer. Spatial relationships between puppets was dictated by the puppets own dimensions and the actor puppeteer had learn and remember what for example was the arm length and where that puppet would need to be relative to another that it was going to touch. Finally, the presence of a puppet, according to Genty and Underwood, is a fragile state that can be easily disrupted by wavering focus and lack of concentration. The notion of focus and concentration, again a technique used and taught by many practitioners, is itself tenuous. The challenge for the actor puppeteer is to focus and concentrate on the puppet without falling into either a dead stare or upstaging the puppet by their own acting usually resulting in distracting facial expression. For Genty and Underwood the combination of these techniques results is a puppet that is not only alive and present because of how it is manipulated, but also because of the sustained attention and focus of the actor puppeteer.<sup>57</sup>

### **Albert**

Underwood's manipulation sessions use a puppet called Albert, a table top puppet designed by Genty that is referred to as Bunraku. This puppet's body is modelled on a bean; the arms and legs are proportionally long and the head is proportionally small, with an open, naive expression. These proportions are used to allow the puppet to transform from its human-like form into the insect-like form in later stages of the exercise.

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<sup>57</sup> These three elements are common to many manipulation techniques, including those of Gavin Glover, Neville Tranter, Finn Caldwell, and Handspring Puppet Theatre, to name a few. What is not overtly included is breath. In part, this is a because of the puppet construction and single operator. Yet, it is interesting to note that Genty does position breath as necessary in manufacturing presence in a puppet or object.



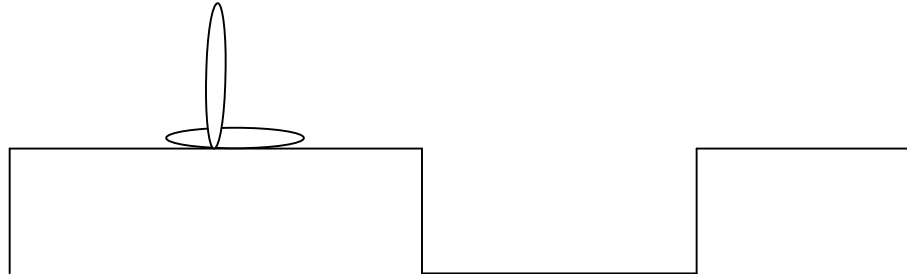
**Figure 9: ‘Albert’ with workshop participants: Erin Orr, Amador Artiga and Antoine Malfettes. Photograph: Alissa Mello.**

For the exercise, we are instructed to follow a particular pattern of action that will build in stages. The repetition of set action and ongoing feedback sessions develop participants’ proficiency in multi-person manipulation i.e. working as a group and navigating multiple bodies while manipulating the puppet. Underwood’s focus in the beginning stage is on the replication of realistic human movement and throughout each stage of the exercise we focus on maintaining the puppet’s fixed point, physical alignment, and impulse while performing various actions such as standing up, kneeling, walking, running, and jumping. Unlike the manipulation training with The Señoritas, breath is also used as a component of creating the illusion of presence and agency. The actual manipulation instructions given by Underwood focus on quite typical aspects of puppetry: weight, limb coordination, listening to each other as manipulators, focus, and rhythm, to name a few of the elements. To do this, Underwood asks us to break down each action with our own body, explaining that: ‘if you [the puppeteer] cannot do it, then the puppet cannot do it’. We break down an action by first doing the action ourselves and paying close attention to the sequence of movement of each body part and shift in weight, similar to the attention paid to movement when doing Feldenkrais exercises, for example. This gives us the basic information we need to begin to understand and translate any action with a puppet. One significant manipulation difference stands out; Genty and Underwood say that in this style of manipulation it is the feet that lead. This is counter to multi-person manipulation techniques, including traditional and non-traditional Bunraku, that I have encountered, which lead from the head of the puppet that is operated by the master or lead puppeteer. Underwood’s overall approach, while also not new, is grounded in her interest in the body and her training as a dancer. Unlike Genty, she often refers to the Feldenkrais and



Alexander<sup>58</sup> techniques as tools for unlocking one's own body and for discovering the most structurally efficient ways of moving, which are then applied to puppets.

The playing area for the puppet is made from two tables with a space between them:



**Figure 10: Table arrangement for manipulation training. Diagram represents two tables, one stage right and one stage left, with a gap between them. The ovals represent the puppet's placement at the start of the exercise when lying down and standing.**

The tables are covered with black drapes to partially conceal the puppeteers and to provide a neutral space that belongs to the puppet. The exercise is taught in four stages, each stage building on the previous action sequence. The four stages are:

### **Stage One**

The first stage focuses on working with Albert's fixed point in order to create the illusion of realistic, anthropomorphic movement. With Albert, in all of the stages, we worked on a single sequence. In Stage One, it is broken down into two sections:

- Moving Albert from lying on his side to standing;
- From lying on his side, to standing, Albert moves to noticing/seeing the puppeteers behind him (his manipulators), the audience, and then deciding to go for a walk to the other side of the table.

### **Stage Two**

During this stage, we concentrate on movement impulse as a means of showing puppet initiation while continuing to work on listening and focus between manipulators. The impulse of the puppet is staged as a reaction to his almost stepping over the table's edge into the void between the two tables.

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<sup>58</sup> A complete guide, developed by Alexander practitioner Robert Rickover, can be found at <http://www.alexandertechnique.com/> (Accessed 8 September 2012).

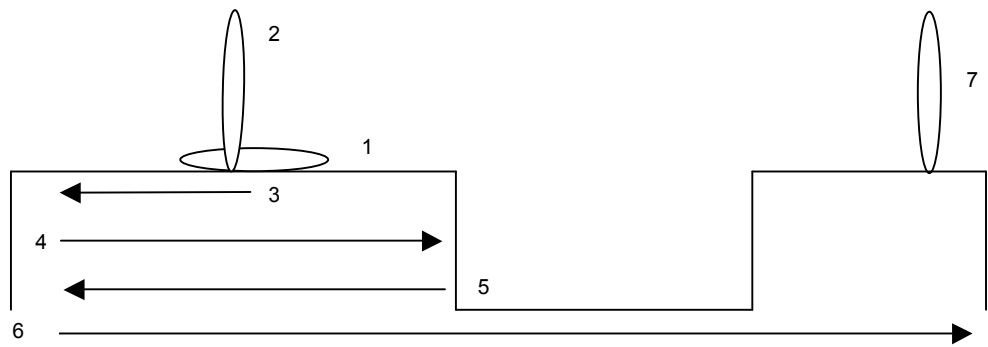
This action is complicated because we then change/swap which body part we are manipulating without disrupting or breaking the movement of the character. Thus, the manipulators seamlessly change which body part they are controlling, meaning that if one is controlling the head they shift to the feet, whoever is controlling the arms shifts to the head, and whoever is controlling the feet shifts to the arms.

### **Stage Three**

This stage brings together the manipulation training with Movement Contamination, an exercise that was used to develop movement and character ticks at the beginning of the workshop and that will be discussed in detail in the section on performer training. It is a series of actions in seven steps:

1. Puppet starts reclining. He wakes up;
2. Puppet stands, sees the world, his manipulators, and decides to walk;
3. Puppet walks and turns with body facing out to the audience;
4. Puppet walks to edge of the table and almost slips off. Impulse: go and see what puppet almost fell into;
5. Puppet walks back to other side of the table, turns, and decides to jump to other table [during this walk the puppeteers should change which body parts they are manipulating. The body control puppeteers swap first. At no time should the head or feet be without a manipulator];
6. Puppet runs and jumps to the other table;
7. On the other side, allow movement contamination explored by actor puppeteers during the first week actor/movement training to come into the puppet and transform Albert from an anthropomorphized to an insectoid creature: on all fours (hands and feet) with elbow and knee joints pointed upwards.

Table set up with action and directional indicators for each of the steps above:



**Figure 11: Table set up and initial puppet placement as in Figure 10. The numbers correspond to the list of actions above, while the arrows indicate direction of movement.**

After step 7, if time permits, one person uses one of their fingers to mimic a fly to function as a focal point for the puppet and guide him/it on a chase. ‘The spider’ quality of movement continues to respect human opposition (right arm moves with left leg, and left arm moves with right leg). I noted during the workshop however that the movement has very little to do with the way a real spider moves. It is rather an abstract idea of an insect or insect-like quality of movement that Underwood is asking to be performed. This general notion of a spider like movement contrasts sharply with her rigour for the anthropomorphic movement based on the human body.

#### **Stage Four**

Repeat the steps from Stage Three with the following two additions:

- The puppet misses the third jump and has to climb up the side of the table before changing into a spider;
- After changing into a spider, the puppet begins to climb everywhere—over things and people—and the actor puppeteers swap which body part they are manipulating at this stage as well. Almost everyone in the group is involved in this play.

Both Genty and Underwood use their six-point approach to puppet manipulation—concentration, impasse, conviction, association, distanciation, and fixed point—at the forefront of their teaching and as a means to train performers new to puppet manipulation. Although their individual approaches to puppet manipulation uniquely reflect their early

training and interests in puppet objects as performing partners on stage, their techniques are not substantially different from many other workshops taught in Europe and the US.<sup>59</sup> Both, however, are concerned with the manufacture of presence in the puppet, particularly as it relates to and exists in the same stage space with live human performers. Additionally, Genty has stated that a role of the manipulator is to impart a soul to the performing puppet yet he does not train specific techniques for doing so. Rather, they both focus on the specific physical actions that an actor puppeteer must master in order to manufacture the illusion of presence and agency in a puppet and seem to expect that in practice their live human performance techniques, that are discussed below, insinuate themselves as mechanisms for imparting a soul/presence to a puppet of material.

## Section Two

### Material, Memory, the Body, and Performer Training

In his foreword to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Jochen Schulte-Sasse states that '[T]he predominant feature of modernist or aestheticist art is that it calls attention to its own material' (Bürger xxxv). One could elaborate and argue that theatre practice is, on one level, an experiment in the use of materials—human, natural, and manufactured; physical, aural, and visual. In her introduction to *Theatre Materials: What is Theatre Made of?* Eleanor Margolies writes that:

The understanding of materials encompasses their physical structure and chemical composition, methods of fabrication, sources and sustainability, social history and potential use—to say nothing of their poetic and emotional associations. Theatre artists have to draw on material knowledge from all of these areas. (Margolies 8)

These considerations about materials are essential in puppet design and construction. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, puppetry in Europe and North America was dominated by traditional forms, or what Jurkowski might refer to as classic values of puppet theatre (Jurkowski, *A History of European Puppetry Vol. 2*, 248) particularly string marionettes, hand puppets, rod puppets as well as the emerging work of Jim Henson who was developing the Muppet style hand and rod. Materials, from this perspective, were considered in terms of their contribution—functional, emotional, symbolic, and visual—to a final constructed performing object. Jurkowski writes that throughout the 1960s and 1970s puppetry artists grounded in the fine arts, Genty and Underwood in particular, were

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<sup>59</sup> I am speaking from personal experience of taking workshops with artists from both places, none of whom had trained with Genty and Underwood.

also developing a theatre of materials (ibid., 370-371) and he suggests that Genty and Underwood's work in this vein are their fundamental contribution to the field of puppetry (ibid., 477). Underwood told me that their experiments with raw materials began in 1979 when they were working on a new sketch, *Dormeur*:

For this piece, we used a black... jersey material, which covered the whole stage. At the beginning of the piece, you find one of our actors, sleeping, his head... resting on a huge pillow and the black material was his sheet. He has a nightmare; the black material starts moving and he finds himself a prisoner in this mass of material. After that I was playing with some fishnet, which Philippe wanted to use for another piece, but we were... I don't know why, but I took a head of a marionette (the one we use for our workshops 'baby rose'), wrapped myself in the fishnet with the head and started dancing with it. That made a click with Philippe. From then on raw materials became very important in our creations. (Email communication: 21 August 2012)

The use of raw materials in Genty and Underwood's work is not only an element of puppetry design; it is also used to create visual landscapes, as metaphoric partners for the live human performers, and a means of creating special effects.<sup>60</sup>

Their stages are filled with inflated, semi-opaque plastic as seen in *Dérives* and *Fins de Terre*, coloured and textured fabrics and/or lycra as seen in *Ne m'oubliez pas* and *Boliloc*, and craft paper as seen in *Désirs Parade* and *Voyageurs Immobile*. Plastics and fabric are used to create dreamlike semi-transparent environments and alien landscapes as well as puppet's bodies. Humans are engulfed in craft paper, pressed tightly against their bodies, taking on the performer's shape only to be ripped away, revealing that the live body has disappeared. Ropes create webs that ensnare bodies, and live human bodies transform into flat cutouts, only to be carried away under another performer's arm like a newspaper or satchel. Huge mounds of wet clay provide a dirty, heavy yet sensuous playground. (This scene is from a rehearsal experiment for *Ne m'oubliez pas*, but the material was cut from the production because of the mess it created on the stage and the

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<sup>60</sup> Genty and Underwood are not the only puppetry artists exploring materials in this manner nor are they necessarily the first practitioners. Jurkowski argues that the theatre of materials develop out of the theatre of objects most notably by cabaret artist Yves Joly, a video of his *Les Parapluies Animes* can be seen here: [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x663cp\\_les-parapluies-animes-yves-joly\\_creation](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x663cp_les-parapluies-animes-yves-joly_creation) and theatre artist George Lafay. Josef Krofta of DRAK puppet theatre also had similar interests in materials. According to US puppeteer Jane Catherine Shaw: 'in 1989 when he came to the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, GA one workshop we did with him concerned improvisation with materials. He was concerned that all of the details and associations with the materials be a part of our thinking as we developed our little piece' (Interview 26 June 2012).

difficulties it would create when touring.) Genty and Underwood's work explores the intrinsic qualities of materials and experiments with materials in relation to the live human actor. 'The material', Genty stated during the workshop (7 July 2009), 'cannot exist without you'. In other words, raw materials function and manufacture presence both through the performer's mechanical skills of manipulation and the relationship between the material and the live human actor. As such, Genty seems to suggest that raw materials exist as a performing partner on stage when they are imbued with presence through the live human actor's attentive investment in them.

This use of raw materials differs from that seen in works by the Improbable artists, Julian Crouch and Phelim McDermott, and Bread and Puppet artist and founder Peter Schumann. These artists rely on the ephemeral theatrical qualities of the material itself (Svich; Brecht 85; Schumann 'What, at the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?' 59-61; Schumann 'The Radicality of the Puppet Theatre' 81-82) and, in the case of Improbable, the live human performer's ability to allow the material to speak without being overpowered by the performer's presence (Crouch and McDermott). Genty and Underwood, in contrast, rely on the relationships between people, memory, and materials to bring material to life on stage. For the audience participant, the presence and effect of raw materials on stage is a result of and directly related to what the performers bring to the interaction.

Though raw materials are the most visibly and frequently used as scenic elements in Compagnie Philippe Genty productions, during their workshops the training focuses on developing an understanding of material itself in relation to the live human performer. Genty explains that this relationship should be a dialogue; the material can contaminate one's interior space, lead a situation, and so on, but the performer needs to pay attention to the details of a particular material: its sound, texture, smell, taste, weight, and such. Genty asks that one try to move deeper into a material rather than remain on its surface. He stresses the need to 'be careful of creating a situation [a narrative] in advance as it can block one's relationship and dialogue with the material' (stated during the workshop: 7 July 2009). This 'dialogue with the material' between live humans and raw material is the bridge that links two categories of their training: puppetry manipulation and actor/dancer techniques. It has elements of both their mechanical manufacturing of presence in puppetry and their use of memory and the actor/dancer as both a performer and an

object.<sup>61</sup> Despite the centrality of materials in their work, there are only two workshop exercises that directly address Genty and Underwood's approach.

The first exercise's primary intention is to shift a performer's approach to and relationship with raw materials and develop awareness of multi-sensual details. It was also developed as a means to open up the idea that creation begins with sensual experience and instinct, followed by analysis. (*'Ouvrir la porte par les senses et après analyze'* — Philippe Genty.) The challenge, Genty suggests, is to be simultaneously distanced from and contaminated by the materiality of the thing. This exercise is introduced to the group while we are seated around a large table in a room adjacent to the studio. On the chalk board Genty lists twelve qualities: *fragile* (fragile), *sensuel* (sensual), *séduisant* (alluring), *cassant* (brittle), *doux* (soft), *collant* (tacky, gummy), *attachant* (attaching), *crispant* (crispy), *envahissant* (invading/invasive), *fuyant* (fleeing/receding), *désagréable* (disagreeable/unpleasant), and *irritant* (irritating/annoying). He then describes the exercise, explaining that we are going to an ocean where there are islands of various everyday materials. Our goal is to experience these materials in a new way. To accomplish this, we will limit our senses to those of touch, taste, smell, and hearing. Genty asks that we focus on the experience in the moment and cut out analysis. Moving toward distancing, Genty reminds us that the material exists independently of one's self and suggests that we let the material—its sound, weight, taste, texture—contaminate us. He also warns us not try to control the material, but rather allow the material to be what it is and perhaps control you. This exercise has three 'stages' that are completed over the course of two days.

### **Stage One**

Each participant is blindfolded and led, one at a time, into a darkened studio. We are each brought to a specific place where we 'discover' a material and explore its attributes—sound, touch, smell—for twenty minutes.

### **Stage Two**

Performed individually, with the group witnessing. Each participant is given two minutes to re-enact a moment/memory/sensation that struck us without wearing a blindfold. Genty equated this phase to Stanislavski's<sup>62</sup> sense memory exercise,

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<sup>61</sup> During production development, the actor/dancer also becomes a resource and is used as if they were 'raw material' for creating new text and movement vocabularies.

<sup>62</sup> The Sense Memory exercise is a component of both Stanislavsky's system and Strasberg's Method. During the workshop, Genty generally referred to Strasberg as his

only it is about immediate rather than distant memory, and based on reactions to material sensation rather than reconstructing the conditions of a distant emotional experience.

### **Stage Three**

Two-minute raw material improvisation in which each participant is given the option of either using the same material they worked with on the previous day or changing materials. In addition, Genty gives each person a sentence, phrase, or opposing words to use as inspiration during their improvisation— for example: ‘between softness and frenzy – the body in pieces’. These suggestions are intended to be evocative and to either lead a person down a particular road that Genty is interested in or to assist the participant in breaking what Genty has identified as a personal cliché. This exercise is performed without preparation.

Genty maintains that their interest, from a performer’s point of view, is to find a new way of relating with raw materials. Although we have already begun working with ‘distanciation’, Genty says that this exercise is in fact the ‘first step’ and that the challenge is to be both distanced from and contaminated by each of a material’s qualities, allowing each quality to elicit the recall of personal memories. The raw material in this case functions as an object of attention, as well as a stimulus and conduit for the performance of personal memory. For the performer, feelings of vulnerability are minimised because, at least at this stage, one does not reveal emotional content but rather focuses on the object and the experience, allowing memories to emerge as a result of the context and qualities of the raw material. Each function supports the other and, through the focus on the object, draw in the attention of the audience participant.

The second exercise, *Étreinte* (embrace, hug) combines their use of memory with raw materials. This exercise is introduced later in the workshop, after the completion of two weeks of working with memory as a generator of performance material. This exercise is performed in three stages and in groups of eight, with two lines of four facing each other on either side of the space.

### **Stage One**

One side thinks of a memory and takes about thirty seconds to be with that memory in your consciousness, allowing it to fill your being. Once the memory is

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source. It was unclear in this instance if he was specifically referring to Stanislavski’s or if this was a slip of the tongue.



established, approach the person opposite and hug them. The hugee should remain neutral and neither react nor respond to the emotion or gesture.

### **Stage Two**

Repeat Stage One, only now the receiver/hugee may respond.

### **Stage Three**

Before moving to Stage Three, Genty suggests that memory can be used to nourish or fill a situation played on stage and that material can become a symbolic representation of that interaction. Memory can create a strong impression in a performer, but there is a risk that it is not fully expressed and that for a spectator there is nothing.

Repeat as in Stage Two, with an added element: a large sheet of craft paper, which will function as a representative object. In other words, the material will emotionally symbolise/be a physical representation of the memory during the exchange between hugger and hugee. At the start, each hugger has a large piece of craft paper on the ground in front of them. Find a situation/memory and use that as an impulse to take up the material. At the same time listen to the material. Approach the other and hug them.

Genty notes that the craft paper ‘is a formidable and dynamic material’. It is not a vestment but a partner in expressing the sensibility of the memory. The displacement of the craft paper when one goes to the other is important. He further suggests that we ‘think of a rupture’ resulting from the material presence.

Although it uses a raw material – large sheets of craft paper - in stage three, this exercise could also be categorized as part of actor training that incorporates memory. Memory in this exercise initiates the action and is at the core of the exchange between performers, but the specific memory is not revealed through either literal physical representation as in Memograms or Rituals, or textually, meaning a memory is shared through speech, both of which will be analyzed in the following section on Memory. Unlike the first exercise where the focus is specifically on materiality, the focus during *Étreinte* is on a performer’s communication skills. The raw material functions primarily as a tool, which indeed aligns with how raw materials are used in certain productions, such as in *Voyageurs Immobiles* in which craft paper is a conduit for representing loss and disappearance. The craft paper is a representation of and means for communicating memory and the sensations it arouses in and between the live human performers; it is not

a metaphor for these memories or emotions. In other words, the material becomes a *representative object* that takes on the initiator's memory and embodies the exchange and is an active symbolic object in the sense that the material's qualities, particularly its sound and texture, affect the exchange and, as several workshop participants noted, the memory itself.

Despite the centrality of raw materials in Genty and Underwood productions, during the workshop, our engagement with material-based techniques was relatively limited. Most of our training was either focused on their puppet manipulation techniques, or their distinctive actor and movement training, which will be discussed in the following section.

### **Memory**

As previously noted, over the course of the company's existence there has been a shift in the use and number of puppets in Genty and Underwood's productions. This shift, from puppet(s) to live human performer(s) as the central communicating figure, is also reflected in their workshop training. At the workshop that I participated in, acting and movement training dominated. I believe this is where Genty and Underwood make a significant contribution to training techniques for puppet/visual theatre. The techniques evolved out of their creative development practice and were developed to generate movement and text vocabulary for productions as well as being tools for addressing particular performance concerns, such as:

- Developing a performer's voice;
- Breaking down a performer's inhibitions about creating choreography;
- Facilitating a performer's expressive possibilities;
- Manufacturing the live human performer's presence;
- Exploring how to extend performances of the same production;
- And developing collaboration techniques that make the performer an active partner in creating movement and text.

As workshops became an integral part of their production development processes, their production techniques were informally codified and used in their training. I am classing their dance/movement and acting training under a single category because the boundaries between these techniques overlap and intertwine.

Whereas dream analysis is a central component of creating the visual storyboard, memory is a key component in their dance/movement and actor techniques and training. The live human performer's memory is, according to Genty, used as a resource for

creating movement and text vocabularies, as well as achieving an accessible and ‘authentic performance’. During the workshop, Genty stated that their use of memory is based on and, I would add, is a transposition of, Strasberg’s Sense Memory exercise (also referred to as Affective Memory). In Strasberg’s Method training, the aim of this exercise is to facilitate an actor’s internal work in order to create an authentic, repeatable emotional memory reserve that an actor can draw on while performing a character in the context of a play (Hirsch 210 - 12). The situation of the actor and the character are not necessarily in parallel. Genty and Underwood use the premise of the exercise, the actor’s memory, to generate movement and text that become part of the character’s vocabulary and resultant production. Genty and Underwood believe that, by using the actor’s memory as a source of movement and text, the emotion, which is an intrinsic part of the associated memory, will emerge organically in the physical or vocal repetition. They have developed three exercises, in addition to *Étreinte* previously discussed, in which memory is the starting point for movement and text: *Memograms*; and *Rituals*, both for developing movement; and *The Fugitive*, for developing text and training an actor’s voice.

Like Strasberg’s Affective Memory exercise, Genty and Underwood use memory as a mechanism for sustainable performance. Whereas the Method technique is specifically designed to identify and use emotions in performance, Genty and Underwood believe that the emotion inevitably emerges organically and will underpin a performance when either doing (as in using memory for movement) or speaking an event. Strasberg, Genty, and Underwood believe that using a performer’s memory contributes to creating authentic performance and, Genty would add, that it supports present or connected performance over long periods of time. In practice, however, Genty and Underwood’s notion is complicated—or at least it was during the workshop I participated in—because one of their techniques is to transpose material from one performer to another. If a movement or text is performed by an actor who is not the source of the memory (or memories) only the words and the gestures are left therefore the notion that the memory supports the performance is nullified. Understood in this way, memory is merely a catalyst for generating a physical and textual library of material from which Genty and Underwood pick and choose elements that can be used in a production. What my practical research will show in Chapter Seven is that, although movement or text loses its connection to the originating memory when it is transposed to a different performer, the transposed movement or text will likely call up certain memory(ies) of the receiving performer. Though memory is a central component in Genty and Underwood’s conceptualisation of each of these exercises, it is often only used in one phase of each.

## **Memograms**

According to Underwood, Memograms were developed to free actors who were not entirely comfortable with the idea of improvising dance or making choreography by eliciting movement that emerges from their childhood memories. The term Memogram, a play on the words memory and telegram, was coined by Genty and Underwood to emphasise that these movement sequences are developed from memories for the purpose of communication on stage. Further, they are movements that one has already performed, in the past, and that one knows. This exercise has five stages, but only the first sequence of movement is developed from memory. The other stages involve movement inspired by music, movement taken from other performers (transposed memory), and movement altered in response to audio or visual stimuli. The stages are:

### **Stage One**

We are asked to recall three different childhood memories and remember the gestures/physical actions of the event. We work on one memory at a time. The three memories are:

1. A travelling movement;
2. A moment when we destroyed a toy or something that we loved, though perhaps the destruction was also pleasurable;
3. A childhood game we played.

The moments are given to us one at a time, after the previous gesture sequence is 'in' our bodies. Between each memory and to indicate that we have internalised our physical memory, we move to one side of the room until everyone has completed the exercise.

Once we have established the three different movement sequences, we are asked to put them in an order of our choosing. We are then given fifteen minutes to memorise this sequence. We are asked to remember this material for the following day's work.

### **Stage Two**

We are asked to develop a movement phrase of sixteen counts, inspired by a piece of music.<sup>63</sup> Next we are asked to create a second phrase of the same length, but

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<sup>63</sup> There were a number of individuals in the workshop without any previous physical training. This stage was more difficult for each of them because of its similarity to choreography.

which contrasts with the first. In other words if the first sequence is fluid, make the second jerky or staccato; if the first is circular, make the second angular. The Memograms and phrases are then combined into a single movement sequence: memogram, phrase, memogram, phrase, memogram. Once these are in our bodies we perform them individually. As each movement sequence is performed, the viewers are asked to note anything that strikes them as interesting. After everyone has performed their movement sequence, we each select four gestures that appeal to us and note these for the next stage.

### **Stage Three**

This stage introduces techniques to transform our movement sequence. First, each person is asked to do their entire sequence in half time, 50% slower than their own normal speed, followed by a repetition at normal speed. This, Genty and Underwood explain, is an opportunity to find different colours in the movement sequences. After taking a few moments to get our own sequences into our bodies, we perform our sequence in groups of four. One person is selected to start and the others follow that individual's movement sequence in real time. Once their movement phrase is complete, and within the context of performing, a new person comes forward with their movement sequence until all four sequences have been performed and followed. Each person's cycle is performed twice at the two different speeds. Genty notes that we should try to be aware of when a movement makes it difficult for the chorus to follow, such as when someone turns to face up stage, and try to work the movement as a chorus. In other words, like the Fugitive exercise, which will be discussed later in this chapter, the four performers should dance as a single body rather than as one leader and a group of followers.

### **Stage Four**

This stage makes use of other people's gestures or phrases that we have each noted; it begins a process of transposition of memory and movement from one person to another. We are instructed to combine and replace our own sequence of Memogram and movement phases with the gestures we selected in stage two. To do this, we pick two of our own movement sequences, plus three from our notes. We can put these in any order that we want and then perform in groups, dancing each cycle twice as in Stage Three.

### **Stage Five**

This stage is intended to further explore the possibilities of a movement sequence through transposition and alteration of rhythms. We will use two means to explore these possibilities. Genty discusses a Bauhaus proposition that suggests that from a single point one can find a line of movement. He then draws a spiral, a zigzag, and an extended sequence of right angles, to create a pattern. These lines of movement, Genty says, can be used to find: a rhythm, a floor patten, a sensibility, and so on. Underwood presents a set of abstract drawings largely composed of lines (such as: straight, jagged, spiralling, wavy, dashed) with varying degrees of density on the page, acquired from an architect in Australia, that we will be working with.

The drawings are scattered on the floor. Working in pairs, each pair is to pick a drawing that they want to work with. They are to look at and discuss the drawing together, find a section or piece of the drawing (not the entire drawing), and consider how it can be incorporated into or transpose the sequence they developed in Stage Four. In other words, allow the drawing section to have an effect on the line, rhythm, and/or use of space of your movement sequence.

Underwood again asks that we consider the public when presenting. In other words, we should be mindful that there is an audience. The sequences will be presented in pairs. If one of the pair finishes before the other, that person is to wait on stage until the other's sequence is completed. Each pair shows their drawing to the camera before starting. After the presentation, each person discusses what she or he chose from the drawing, and what kind of impact it had on their work. Genty is interested in developing an internal response to architectural uses of space in theatre. As he states: 'The idea is to have the graphics, the line, the architecture come from the inside— that this dynamic comes from the inside and comes out.'

### **Ritual**

The Rituals exercise initiates with a different aspect of memory: the physical re-enactment of an everyday movement sequence meaning natural and non-virtuosic performer-based movement emerging from memory.<sup>64</sup> The movement sequences may draw on private or professional activities, but should reflect something one has done

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<sup>64</sup> This exercise is similar to others I have done in training with Richard Schechner and Anne Bogart that emerge from American avant-garde techniques and contemporary dance.

oneself. This exercise, in addition to finding movement vocabulary, is also used to develop memorisation skills and—to a certain extent—to connect memory with action in a way that will reinforce or connect a performer to movement, even when that movement is abstracted from its original sequence. At stage three of this exercise, it is combined with our dance phrase developed using the Memogram technique. The stages are:

### **Stage One**

We are to choose three everyday movement sequences, referred to as ‘rituals’, and perform them precisely. This is not mime, but actually doing the activity even though one does not have the objects or space. Genty and Underwood suggest we consider both everyday and professional gestures.

Everyday gesture suggestions:

- *bricoler (réparer un objet, un moteur)*/ tinker (repair an object, a motor)
- *gestes signes des sourds-muets*/ perform sign language
- *cuisiner (éplucher, doser, mélanger, découper, répartir, assaisonner)*/ cook (peel, proportion, mix, cut, distribute, season)
- *jardiner*/ garden
- *faire la vaisselle*/ wash glasses
- *preparer une patisserie*/ make pastry
- *tracer un plan sur un tableau*/ draw a map on a table
- *ranger*/ arrange
- *tricoter*/ knit
- *broder*/ embroider
- *décorer un arbre noel*/ decorate a Christmas tree
- *preparer un cadeau*/ wrap a gift
- *maquiller*/ put on make up
- *pêcher*/ fish
- *nettoyer*/ clean
- *laver une vitre*/ clean a window

Professional gesture suggestions:

- *menuisier*/ carpenter
- barman
- *marin*/ sailor

- magician
- *serveur/* waiter
- *instituteur/* teacher
- *caissiere/* cashier
- *coiffeur/* hair dresser
- *hostess de l'air/* airline hostess
- *postier/* postal person
- *boulangier/* baker
- *manquilleuse/* make-up artist
- sculptor
- *géomètre/* surveyor
- architect
- pilot
- *tricoteuse/* knitter

### **Stage Two**

Genty and Underwood select either entire ritual sequences or moments from a particular ritual sequence that they like for each person. We are then asked to spend ten minutes transposing our new movements into a new ritual, using architecture, rupture, direction, rhythm, and quality of movement. They also suggest playing with the 'floor plan', without actually moving within the space, in order to find a signification with which to develop the 'architecture' of the actions. By floor plan and architecture, I understand them to mean that we consider moving a gesture's location in space. For example, if a gesture takes place near your right hip and is horizontal, it can be moved to occur near the left shoulder and be performed vertically. We are to note how these changes affect a gesture and our relation to it.

The whole group is separated into three smaller groups of five. Standing in a circle, each participant teaches their ritual to the rest of the group in the following manner: the starting person does their ritual once, and then repeats their ritual with the entire group following in time or moving almost simultaneously. The person positioned to the starting person's right repeats the first ritual, adds their ritual sequence, and then repeats both the first and their own ritual together with the group. This manner of adding is repeated through all five rituals. Each time, the sequence is repeated from the top of the starting person's ritual. Finally,



each person in each group does the entire sequence, or what they remember of it, alone for the group.

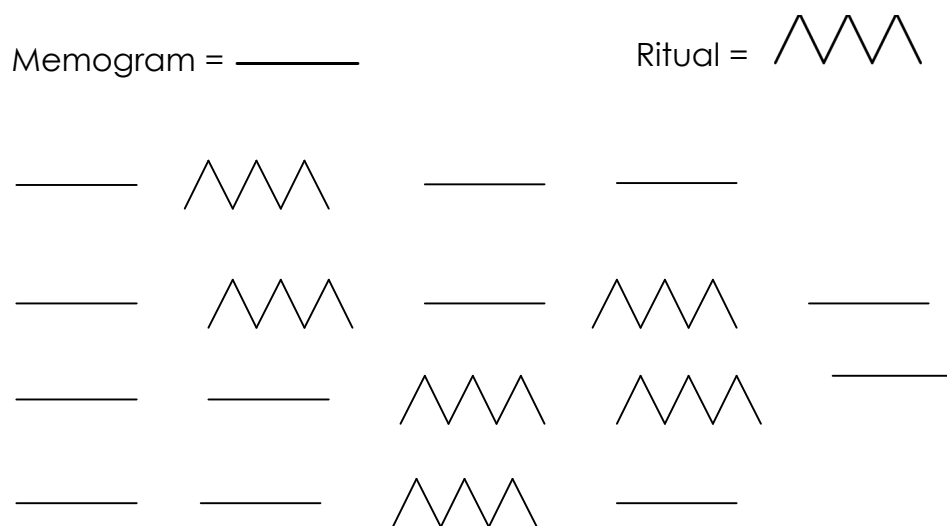
### Memograms combined with Rituals

#### Memograms Stage Six/ Rituals Stage Three

At this point in the training, Memograms and Rituals are combined. The ritual groups of five individuals are broken down into a two groups of two and three people, who will work with an architectural drawing. Each group will select one drawing and work with it in a manner similar to Memogram Stage Five. Genty outlines three decisions that each group will have to address when creating their new movement sequence:

- After looking at the drawing, decide if you are going to mix your movement phrases or do your own, and time them to come together at ritual moments;
- The ritual phrase can either be done as the full sequence, or broken down into sections. Either way it/they will occur in the middle (see below for phasing possibilities);
- One can also use just a section of the ritual phrase.

Genty outlines four possible choreography models using lines rather than the A, B, C sequence points more commonly used in dance. The key is:



**Figure 12: Genty's diagram of four choreographic models from my notes.**

We are given thirty minutes to develop our complete phrase. The entire movement sequence is to be repeated twice in performance.

According to Underwood and Rusek, the purpose of this stage of the exercise is to develop collaborative skills, listening among performers, and architectural uses of space in the body and with multiple bodies. Underwood believes that it opens choreographic and movement possibilities for dancer and non-dancer alike because the development and results are a collective rather than an individual effort. Underwood also suggested that this exercise could continue with additional stages that further mix and fragment the Memogram and Ritual phrases. Despite degrees of mixing, fragmentation, and transposition, Underwood states that there are essentially two key things that they, Genty and herself, are interested in. These are:

- That the movement is generated by and from the performer's own body;
- That, even though the movements are transposed and abstracted, the memory or a trace of the memory remains connected to the movement. This, they argue, helps performers sustain and fill the action. Their use of memory as a catalyst is specifically designed to keep a performance alive and in the moment rather than becoming mechanical and dead, particularly during the extensive touring over an extended period of time.

Additionally, the technique seems to be a useful tool that enables Underwood to find a rich palette of raw movement material to draw on when choreographing their productions.

Marranca suggests that the use of non-virtuosic, meaning pedestrian or everyday, movement in visual theatre is 'an inheritance from the new dance' (Marranca et al. xiii). Underwood, as discussed in Chapter Three, trained with Hilde Holger in the UK. It was during this period, between the 1950s and the mid-1960s, that she was exposed to the new dance movement in the UK and engaged with masks, objects, and innovative ways of moving. While all cast members contribute to the development of movement vocabularies that are individually derived from memory, dancer's contributions often include both virtuosic and pedestrian quality movements. These dancerly movements are, like the non-virtuosic vocabularies, transferred to cast members who are untrained dancers and are transformed during improvisation(s) in response to music, tempo, or images. This is further augmented in production through the directorial editing processes that culminate in what is finally presented on stage.

## **The Fugitive**

In The Fugitive, a four-stage group exercise, memory is introduced in the second stage to develop text and train a performer's voice for use in performance. Stage One is used to establish the group movement pattern like a school of fish with the entire group's focus on the centre of the wall above the observers'—the non-working participants, Genty, Underwood, and Rusek—heads. In other words, throughout the exercise our bodies must always face in the direction of travel but our visual focus should be on a single point, toward the audience and slightly above centre, except when facing upstage at which point we look directly upstage. In Stage Two, performers use their memory of a personal story and their voice. Throughout the exercise the performer whispers their story until they feel a need or desire to tell the story to the observing non-working participants. When this need arises, a performer begins to increase their vocal volume and physically push through the group, while the group works to block their passage forward.

This actor's exercise is introduced in stages that are built up over the course of two days. The first stage of the exercise is designed to develop physical distancing, while the later stages also develop a performer's vocal projection and conviction. Ideally, the exercise is done in a group of eight people. Genty also says that the exercise is about listening to each other. The idea is for the bodies to move in concert and as a single unit with a single mind; there should be no single identifiable leader. This is similar to certain contemporary dance exercises that ask a group of performer to move as if they are flocking like birds in flight. 'The fugitive' is the speaker who breaks free in stage three from / through the group to tell their story. The stages are:

### **Stage One**

The group focuses on moving together in the space and maintaining the body alignment and focus on a single point, as instructed.

### **Stage Two**

Repeat Stage One and add whispering a forceful memory. By force, Genty and Underwood mean a memory that is powerful, still has an effect, and which has remained with the individual over time.

### **Stage Three**

Repeat Stage Two and add needing to tell your story to the audience. When you are ready to share, increase your vocal volume, the rest of the group should respond by forming a wall to prevent you, the speaker, from physically moving

forward. The speaker must fight her/his way to the front vocally and physically with conviction in order to break through the group and stand before the audience to tell their memory. But, at this stage, the speaker's face should remain neutral. If the speaker's conviction—this is not necessarily equivalent to volume—begins to waver, the group approaches, increasing their own volume, to swallow the speaker back into the group. The purpose of the exercise is to develop vocal conviction and energy in performance.

#### **Stage Four**

Repeat the exercises in Stage Three, but this time the body and face do not have to remain neutral.

Genty stated that, in addition to developing vocal skills, this exercise creates an emotional distancing through the performer's repeated telling of the same story, combined with physical effort. If, he suggests, an actor is focused only on communicating the story, the emotion emerges naturally, will rise to the surface, and will be read by the audience participant. Genty indicated during the workshop that this method of allowing emotion to emerge rather than directly working to access it communicates performative authenticity to the audience participant. This approach to emotion in performance is, however, in opposition to that of Strasberg's Affective Memory. Strasberg's exercise, also uses memory, and is recitation of an event—story telling. Genty indicates that he is trying to create a state of distancing in which there is space for emotion to emerge, whereas in Affective Memory, performers are not distanced but rather are speaking through emotion. These stories or fragments of stories have been used in production for their audio and emotional qualities, rather than for the specific content. As Marranca proposes, language in visual theatre is minimised 'in favour of aural, visual, and verbal imagery that calls for alternative modes of perception on the part of the audience' (Marranca et al. x). Language itself becomes a medium to express sentiment and convey rhythm that is not necessarily integral to the meaning of the words spoken. Genty indicated during an interview (30 January 2008) that the language used in the productions is meaningless. While some may understand the words spoken during a show, the text is not usually translated.<sup>65</sup> From my own observations of numerous Compagnie Philippe Genty productions, it is apparent that Genty and Underwood's interests are in the rhythms

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<sup>65</sup> This is not true of their recent object theatre production *La Pelle du Large*, which was conceived in French with a French speaking cast but later stage with English and Spanish speaking language and content specific casts to target those audiences.

language creates and the meaning conveyed beyond the literal comprehension of the text, or what I refer to as sonic poetry. In other words, for Genty and Underwood, language and text are used for the sensibility (or sensibilities) conveyed through the rhythms and sentiments that arise in the performer during the act of speaking, rather than being used to literally convey the meaning of the words. Usually each performer speaks in their native language, which remains un-translated in performance, thus creating a further potential gap between the performer's words and the audience participant's understanding of the performance.

### **Performer Training**

In addition to techniques in puppet, object, and material manipulation, movement, and acting, their training also includes techniques for freeing the actor/dancer from inhibitions, enhancing a performer's spatial awareness, improving their improvisation skills, improving vocal abilities, and teaching performers to be available and in the moment. These exercises are: *Movement Contamination*, *Chairs*, *Moucherie* (The Fly) and three vocal exercises. Genty and Underwood told me during the workshop that each of these was developed to address specific needs of their performers. As I noted in the previous chapter, they typically hire performers from a variety of performer disciplines such as acting, clown, dance, etc., which may lead to training differences and/or performers lacking the breadth of skills they require for a production. With the exception of *Movement Contamination*, none of these exercises are typically used within the context of a production to generate movement or text.

### **Movement Contamination**

This exercise was designed to find new movement within one's body, to break habits, and to shift notions of one's own physicality. It is a responsive exercise in that it asks performers to physically replicate material chemical reactions. Unlike the previously discussed actor/dancer techniques and the following three exercises, this exercise is explicitly applied to puppet manipulation. When Albert transforms from anthropomorphic to insect, Underwood suggests we recall this exercise experience. Movement Contamination is taught during the first week of the workshop in groups of four. It has four stages performed over the course of two days:

### **Stage One**

In groups of four, we are each provided with a set of materials to experiment with. Three groups have the same set of materials: a container, water, coloured syrup, oil, alka seltzer, and effervescent vitamin c; the fourth has a different set that includes a pan, water, an egg, and a hot plate. Each group spends ten minutes playing with the materials and observing what happens to materials as they interact.

### **Stage Two**

Our observations of the material interactions form the raw material that we use to physicalise what we observe. This is done by allowing the qualities of the interactions we have observed to contaminate our bodies. The physicalisation is performed in groups of four, though not necessarily with the same four individuals with whom we made the observations. This stage of physicalisation takes the form of a durational improvisation. The duration, however, is determined by the interaction of the individuals. It is not given a time limit, though on average they were about ten minutes per group.

### **Stage Three**

In this stage, we continue to work with the physicalisation of our observation of the chemical reactions that occur between the materials. In addition, we are contaminated by, and listening and responding to, the energies produced in the group that we are working with during the performance of this stage of the exercise. (This notion of ‘listening to’ the others one is performing with overlaps with the multi-person manipulation training introduced later in the workshop.)

In groups of four, participants walk in a large circle, making three complete revolutions. In the first revolution, walk normally; in the second, slowly allow your observation of the chemical reaction in the first stage to emerge in different parts of your body. Genty suggests that the build occurs in phases, based on quarter segments of your circular path. In the third revolution, allow the body to shift back to normal by gradually subsiding your chemical contamination.

Genty notes after the exercise that ‘one thing that is important for actors is to not be afraid of being silly’. Part of what makes this exercise function as a mechanism for losing inhibitions is that one is not responsible for one’s actions. Rather they are a reaction and response to the observations of chemical interactions. This notion of freeing the

performer by displacing responsibility will re-occur in the Actor exercise called *Moucherie*, described later.

#### **Stage Four**

The final stage of this exercise is performed by a larger group: in our case, groups of eight. Genty also introduces the idea of a director, who is selected from the observing group to offer commentary on what they see.<sup>66</sup> The group starts standing and facing upstage. The director claps and the group turn together to the left. As a group, and being aware of staying in a line, they walk forward naturally and stand on a predetermined mark. Starting on stage right, each person states their name and utters a sentence, made up in the moment. After each person completes their spoken turn, they turn to the person on their left, which is the indicator for this next person to speak. Meanwhile, the preceding participant returns to face front. After the final person has spoken, the entire group turns to face upstage together and walks to the starting place in a line upstage.

The stage is repeated using the chemical contamination as a small tick that invades one's body during the entire course of the exercise.

#### **Moucherie: The Fly**

This exercise is performed in pairs in which one person (the speaker/whisperer) speaks quietly into the ear of the other (the listener/doer) from a maximum of ten centimetres away. The speaker/whisperer gives action instructions to the listener/doer. The listener/doer performs all the instructions and actions demanded of them by the speaker/whisperer without thought or judgement. The speaker/whisperer must stay with the listener/doer at all times. The speaker/whisperer cannot touch the listener/doer. In this way the listener/doer is freed from responsibility for their actions as they are merely following instructions. This method of freeing a performer to simply act is similar to a 'German technique known by the French term of the *siffleuse*, the whistler. Each actor is allocated a prompter who moves behind him or her, speaking the lines half a line before the actor as a conscious prompt' (Hodge *Actor Training* 138). Both exercises – *Moucherie* and *siffleuse* - are designed to free an actor from the lines/actions while giving them space to explore those same lines/actions in the moment. This similarity between

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<sup>66</sup> This observation and critical feedback technique will be used throughout the workshop. It is a way the company has developed to train cast members to be able to peer-manage their performances when on tour with the company.

techniques is an example of unspoken dissemination of techniques (a meme), neither Genty nor Underwood referenced this German technique, as well as exemplary of the ongoing need in training to devise techniques to free an actor to perform in the moment.<sup>67</sup> Two pairs perform during a round of the exercise. Underwood notes, and Genty concurs, that it is very important to follow the directions in the exercise carefully and precisely. This exercise is, like the Movement Contamination exercise described above, a lesson in performing without responsibility for one's actions. It frees the performer to simply do, without analysis or editing of their actions in the moment of performance; it also enhances a sense of distancing between a performer's private self and acting self on stage. There are two stages of this exercise:

### **Stage One**

The speaker/whisperer tells the listener/doer what actions and gestures to make. While watching, I noted that the exercise causes a curious internal focus on the part of the performer who is trying to listen and is thus cut off from the audience and environment, whereas the speaker/whisperer is externally focused on what is happening around them in the space. I also noted that Genty and Underwood's comments shift at this point, from focusing on the exercise to suggesting that we become more aware of the audience participants; they are thus including performance aspects as an element of the exercises. Genty also proposes that at this stage of the exercise we check or observe which are the most essential gestures for communication. He notes that only certain movements, meaning gestures, can be used, though these are never really defined, discussed, or made explicit.

### **Stage Two**

This stage continues with the instructions used during Stage One but with the addition of voice and sound to the palette of possible action instructions and responses. At this stage, the exercise is focused on listening and reacting in the moment. It should not, however, devolve into mere talking. In other words, remember to continue the physical instructions as the central element, but also include some verbal instructions.

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<sup>67</sup> This technique is also remarkably similar to Brian Astbury's technique of 'underreading' as described in his book *Trusting the Actor* (2011).



Genty states that what is interesting about this exercise is that we will see totally unexpected and Surrealistic, meaning absurd or shocking, relations and situations emerge. It can be a window into creating images and accidental encounters that are potentially useful in the work. Genty also suggests that we notice the differences between the choices and situations that emerge through different pairs, and the way that individual players change as the exercise evolves.

### **Chairs**

Was designed by Genty to develop spatial and dramatic rhythm skills in the actor, to improve one's innate sensibilities about action and timing, improvisational awareness, and creating endings. It is a structured improvisation that uses eight folding chairs and eight players. Four players each begin with a chair on either side—stage right (st rt) and stage left (st lft)—of the studio or stage space.

#### **Stage One**

This stage focuses on developing a sense of dramatic rhythm on stage and between players. The players:

- Can only walk in straight lines from st rt to st lft or st lft to st rt;
- Must focus on either a distant point or on the spot where they are going to go and stop;
- Should use various rhythms.

During this exercise, the chair is a chair, not a representation of or metaphor for something else. Remember that the chair can do various things such as open, close, be dragged, and be carried. Each group has three minutes.

#### **Stage Two**

Continue all of the instructions in Stage One and add the following elements:

- Use diagonals, and up stage to down stage lines, but still always moving in straight lines. Respect the axes of both the object's and one's own movement;
- Find rhythmic dialogues between players;
- The chair has its own personality and its own axis in space;
- Listen to what is happening around you in the space;
- Do not try to be neutral. As a player, have a state and an intention, but also respond to what is happening;

- Consider/ be aware of the architecture of the space both your body and the chair(s).

The duration of this second round is increased to six minutes.

### **Stage Three**

Again, continue following the instructions through Stage Two with the following addition:

- As a group, determine the final picture before the exercise begins.

During the improvisation, someone will give a one-minute warning and at that moment the group should find their way organically to the final predetermined picture. This round is six minutes long.

### **Vocal Exercises**

This is a series of exercises that Genty developed because they often work with dancers and puppeteers who lack vocal training. He also indicated that while French actors are often good physically, they are weaker vocally than performers from other countries. Each exercise uses walking as the movement base and is started without any other physical or vocal warm up. The exercises are described below in the order they were introduced during the workshop.

#### **Exercise One**

1. Performers walk in the space with a focused regard. When you pass someone, say 'Hello! Have a good day' with conviction. After a group rhythm is established, Genty starts and stops the group to disrupt the group rhythm;
2. Continue with the instructions above but while moving find voids and empty spaces. Move through these spaces;
3. Continue working phases 1 and 2 and add walking on your toes and whispering at all times (there were no instructions regarding what to whisper, the participants make the choice);
4. Genty adds external awareness of a 'director', himself, who will conduct the group's speed and volume using a stick. He instructs the class that as the stick raises and lowers above the floor it

dictates timing and volume. As the stick rises, the group walks progressively faster and speaks progressively louder; as it lowers, the group should decelerate and lower their volume.

### **Exercise Two**

This exercise is done in pairs. Start a dialogue using nonsense sounds (gibberish, not words) and try to find a harmony between the two participants. When one speaker stops, the other picks up the same sound and continues the conversation. Genty suggests that there are four centres in the body for sound: head = metal, heart = fire, abdomen = wood, pelvis = earth and that speaking from these different centres colours vocal quality and tone.

Next, we work in the same pairs: one using movement, the other using voice. When the gesture stops, the voice stops and the pair switch roles. Remembering to work with rhythm and rupture. Followed by, the voice leading and gesture following.

### **Exercise Three**

The final vocal exercise is the creation of a human orchestra. The group is divided into two groups, and one from each is assigned the role of orchestra conductor; the rest are the orchestra. The conductor uses her/his hands and entire body to fulfil their task. Genty gives examples of some basic signals: hand up to increase volume, fingers together and swipe to stop, hand down to lower volume, and pointing to select individual ‘instruments’. People can be clustered for group sounds, like an instrument section, and can be used individually, as if a solo instrument. If the leader is not getting the desired sound from an instrument, then they must change their body to reflect their intention until the instrument achieves the sound the conductor wants. The goal is to arrive at a pleasing orchestra that produces a cohesive piece.

### **Conclusion**

In Genty and Underwood’s work there are two areas of creative development: that which is used by themselves when creating the storyboards for the visual elements, and that which is used in workshop and rehearsal to generate text and movement vocabulary in collaboration with the performers. In their production development they draw on Surrealist ideas—including automatism and use of dreams to generate visual images—to create the work. They also share the Surrealist objective of creating a nonlinear narrative that taps into the subconscious, for interpretation by the audience participant. Their

works, particularly those developed after 1985, exemplify contemporary visual theatre, as defined by Marranca, in their use of multiple techniques, hierarchy of visual versus textual elements, and use of sound and structures.

In their workshops and rehearsals, they draw on a range of theories and techniques, depending on the type of training taking place. Their puppetry training relies on traditional puppet manipulation and focuses on the mechanics: movement, mimetic gesture, and timing. Whereas their live human performer training, including work with raw materials, focuses on memory as a generative source for movement and text vocabularies and the manufacture of presence as well as actor support for maintaining presentness in long running productions. Though they do not have specific training for co-presence as a performance mode, as in Neville Tranter's practice as will be analyzed in Part Three, co-presence between live human and puppet performers is often used as a performance mode in their productions and the later stages of exercises such as *The Señoritas*, and between live human and raw material performers in *Étreint*. Rather, there is an implicit expectation that all of the types of training – live human and puppet techniques and theories – will inform each of the types of performance they employ including co-presence. In other words, they anticipate that live performer training will cross over and inform puppet, object, and material manipulation. What lies beneath the surface of their techniques is personal memory as a mechanism for creating and transmitting meaning on stage and memory made material through embodiment by the live human, puppet, and material performer.

Teaching their creative process serves several functions. For the workshop hosts, it provided a means to show supporters the outcome of the skills taught and it also provided a means of documentation for publicity for the host institution. For the workshop participants, it offered insight into how Genty and Underwood work in their company. In practice, however, Genty and Underwood are largely responsible for the visual components and solely responsible for the directorial choices. The performer is a collaborative partner in the sense that they are the source of the movement and text material used in a production. But the extent of any further collaborative function or participation in each of these phases was not clear in the workshop I attended, nor was I able to either get a clear verbal response, or glean how this might occur in rehearsal from their archive of rehearsal video.

What questions do these methods raise? Genty and Underwood propose that in using material based in memory and generated by performers they are helping performers sustain and keep alive material over extended periods of time. Yet the actor generated

material may be transformed beyond recognition or transposed to another performer. Once material is abstracted in either of these ways does it retain its ability to sustain a particular performer? Does it retain traces of the source memory or does it trigger new memory associations? Additionally, when asked if they ever use actor-generated material for puppets, they maintain that they do not because, as I understand it, puppets do not have memory associations. However, if memory based material – text and movement vocabularies - can be transposed from one live human performer to another, why can it not be transposed to a puppet or object? How might explicit use of memory-based vocabularies activate the presence of not only the live human performer but also puppets and raw materials? Further, if the goal is to train (sometimes) inexperienced actor/dancers in puppetry manipulation, could this kind of transposition not facilitate training and potentially sustain the performance as well? These questions and their practical applications will also be considered in Part Four, the practical component and conclusion of this thesis.

## Part 3

### *Case Study: Stuffed Puppet Theatre*

#### Chapter 5



**Figure 13:** *Cuniculus* 2009. Performer: Neville Tranter. Photographer unknown.

#### **Introduction**

Neville Tranter founded Stuffed Puppet Theatre in 1978. The company was initially based in Australia but moved soon after its founding to The Netherlands where Tranter has been based for over thirty years. Throughout most of his career, Tranter has created text based plays performed by himself as a solo performer with a cast of puppet characters as well as pursued projects as a director, consultant/advisor to younger artists, and more recently teaching workshops. Tranter's work resists the commonly held perception that contemporary puppet theatre is a non-text based, visual form of theatre production. Rather, Tranter uses puppetry and visual theatre techniques to create and inform the narratives of complex, multi-character, text-based plays. While his plays are contemporary examples of a strand of puppet theatre that is based on text-based plays, his performance techniques, like *Genty* and *Underwood*, combines tradition puppet theatre techniques with contemporary acting and puppet theatre techniques that he has developed.

Additionally, his productions manifest or make material Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of multi-vocality or heteroglossia (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*; Holquist) in that Tranter simultaneously speaks as the director, actor, narrator, and character. This notion is explored throughout the following two chapters as I analyze his production and workshop practices.

By necessity, he uses co-presence, which he calls 'equal status' between live human and puppet actors, as a performance technique. While puppetry and visual elements are a strong presence in his work, Tranter's approach to theatre making and performance is that of an actor, specifically rooted in his early training in Method acting techniques. Each of Tranter's decisions about story, characters, dialogue, and design emerge from an actor's process of character analysis and development. Grounded in his actor training, Tranter has developed specific combinations of actor and puppet manipulation training that focus on creating the illusion of presence in a puppet character and performing co-presence when a live human and puppet actor are performing together with each other in the same stage world.

Similar to Compagnie Philippe Genty, Stuffed Puppet Theatre and Tranter have, until very recently, been largely ignored by the academic community despite their evident reputation and influence on contemporary puppetry practice as seen in the work of such companies as: DudaPaiva Company, Ulrike Quade Company, and Point Zero. Tranter, like Genty, is included in the *Encyclopédie Mondiale des Arts de la Marionnette* and is cited in many other entries. Both Blumenthal and Jurkowski include the company in their histories of puppetry. Jurkowski writes that Tranter 'developed a unique style of solo theatre using puppets' (Jurkowski *A History of European Puppetry Vol. 2*, 458). Yet Jurkowski's mention offers little analysis of his productions and no analysis of his practice. Emerging scholars Dr. Paul Piris and Dawn Brandes<sup>68</sup> are, like myself, investigating Stuffed Puppet Theatre but neither of their works is published.

In his practice-based doctoral thesis *The Rise of Manipulating: The Puppet as a Figure of the Other*, Piris argues that manipulating (what I call co-presence) combines acting and puppetry while simultaneously differing from each because it positions a live human actor and a puppet in a dialogic relationship of self to other. He suggests a new definition of the ontology of the puppet premised on a reversal of the Sartrean notion of alterity as 'not an Other but an image of an absent Other' (Piris 119) while acknowledging the visible aesthetic principles- a designed constructed object, movement,

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<sup>68</sup> Brandes' research was presented at Objects, Environments, and Actants a symposium at the University of Connecticut's Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry on 29 March 2014.

and in some cases voice. His analysis of Tranter's work, which is based on close production analysis of *Cuniculus*, an interview with Tranter, and a video of the same production, frames Tranter's construction of the puppet as an Other through the dramatic narrative and as an irreal Other of himself through gaze and speech. Though practice-based it is premised on observation and discussion about what he perceives as Tranter's practice rather than direct experience of it. Brandes', similar to myself, is approaching Tranter's work via production and practice analysis. She has taken his training workshop and does a close reading of his 1984 production *The Seven Deadly Sins* through the Satrean notion of the Look and Tranter's use of gaze that enacts subject formation.<sup>69</sup> This emerging interest speaks to the scholarly dearth of inquiry and need for research into not only these companies', Stuffed Puppet Theatre and Compagnie Philippe Genty, but also of other contemporary puppet theatre practitioners.

Tranter is not the only contemporary puppet theatre maker who emphasises text in their work. Two of the more internationally prominent companies who share this textual emphasis are Ronnie Burkett's Theatre of Marionettes, based in Canada and formed in 1986, and Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones' Handspring Puppet Company, based in South Africa and founded in 1981. Burkett, like Tranter, creates complex, multi-character, text-based plays, which he performs solo.<sup>70</sup> In performance, Burkett is a visible character, often a narrator, and the puppeteer manipulating and providing the voices for the puppet characters. However, the live human and puppet characters rarely, if ever, interact. Handspring Puppet Company is most widely known because of their role in creating and directing the puppets for *War Horse*, originally produced by The Royal National Theatre in London and subsequently staged on Broadway, with road companies touring the

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<sup>69</sup> There is also a recent article by Marion Chénétier and Neville Tranter titled 'Le Théâtre de la Peur, de la Crauté et de la Douleur,' in the 2014 issue of Puck published by Institut International de le Marionette. I was unable to secure a copy prior to submission of this thesis but suggest that this increase in interest and new publication again speaks to the need for more research about this company.

<sup>70</sup> For more information about productions by Theatre of Marionettes visit <http://www.johnlambert.ca/english/ronnie/ronnie.htm>. Like Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre there is a paucity of scholarly writings about Ronnie Burkett and Theatre of Marionettes. Often mentioned and cited as a seminal Canadian puppet artist, there is little substantial analysis except for a doctoral thesis by Janne Cleveland, *Getting in the Car to Weirdsville: Taking a Trip with Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes*. Diss. Carleton University, 2008; and Cleveland's essay "Mourning Lost 'Others' in Ronnie Burkett's *Happy*" in the 2012 anthology *Selves and Subjectivities: Reflections on Canadian Arts and Culture* edited by Manijeh Mannani and Veronica Thompson pp. 39 - 68



world.<sup>71</sup> In their performances, although the puppeteer is often visible, and puppet and live human characters interact, the live human manipulators rarely interact as independent characters with the puppet they are manipulating. Compagnie Philippe Genty on the other hand uses co-presence among live human manipulators and puppet performers, theirs however is typically without dialogue and their techniques are grounded in visual and movement vocabularies not an actor's process.

In this case study, I will show that Tranter has developed puppet performance theories and techniques founded on the visible construction of what Connor calls 'the vocalic body' (Connor 35), and actor training techniques using personal and cultural memory, such as The Method as developed by Lee Strasberg but also including elements from other methods and archetypes, that lead to co-presence or what he calls 'equal status' among live human and puppet characters on stage. This case study, like the previous one on Compagnie Philippe Genty, has two chapters. In this first (Chapter Five), I document his personal history, the history of the company, analyze two scenes from an early production, and define what I mean by an 'actor's puppeteer' relative to his practice. In the second (Chapter Six), I document and analyse Tranter's performer techniques for puppet manipulation and his theory 'equal status' as they were taught and experienced by myself during his one-week workshop in 2008.

## History

*Je suis un marionnettiste, mais je suis d'abord un acteur.* [I am a puppeteer, but I am an actor first – my translation] —*Neville Tranter* (Tranter and Birmant 40)

Like numerous other puppeteers including Mary Underwood, Tranter's path to puppetry was from another discipline, in his case acting. Tranter trained as an actor while at Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education (DDIAE), now the University of Southern Queensland, in Toowoomba, Australia in the early 1970s. His teacher was Robert Gist, an actor and director from the United States, who developed a four-year actor-training programme that, according to Tranter, was modelled after Lee Strasberg's Method, which Gist had studied in New York City. While at university, Tranter saw a performance by Bill and Barbara Turnbull's company Bilbar Puppet Theatre, a touring puppet theatre

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<sup>71</sup> Handspring Puppet Company production history includes seminal adaptations of extant plays such as *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997) and *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992) and original plays, such as *Ouroboros* (2011) and *Tall Horse* (2004) For a complete list of their productions with information about each and photographs, visit their website at <http://www.handspringpuppet.co.za/handspring-productions/> and see Jane Taylor's 2009 book *Handspring Puppet Company*

company that performed children's shows throughout Queensland, Australia during the 1970s and 1980s. Tranter explained to me during an informal interview that while watching one of their performances he was inspired by the possibilities of what one could do with puppets and he began an apprenticeship with the Turnbull's in 1976 – 1977 (cf. Tranter and Birmant 40).

The 1970s were a significant decade for puppet theatre in Australia. Peter J. Wilson and Geoffrey Milne note in their book, *The Space Between: The Art of Puppetry and Visual Theatre in Australia*, it was not until the 1930s that local companies began to appear (Wilson and Milne 1). Wilson and Milne argue that the growth and development of the form in the 1970s was a direct result of touring companies in the 1950s and 1960s, specifically 'a succession of international visitors [who] exposed Australians to new forms of puppetry' (ibid., 39), beginning with The Hogarth Puppets tour from England in 1952, The Black Theatre of Prague tour in 1964 (ibid.), and later Albrecht Roser's tour in 1975 (Clarke 27). This exposure led to changes in the types of puppets used in Australian productions and a move towards experimentation and abstraction. They write: 'Out went the marionettes and diminutive representations of realistic theatre— together with the Punch and Judy show' (Wilson and Milne 1) in came 'an investigation of the darker recesses of the human psyche' (ibid.). These aesthetic shifts were not limited to individual companies; they included changes at established institutions such as the Marionette Theatre of Australia in Sydney, which was at that time the oldest permanent puppet company in the country.

During his internship, Barbara Turnbull encouraged the young Tranter to develop his own artistic voice and approach to puppetry. Tranter, who considers himself as much a storyteller as an actor, claims that he first fully realised the possibilities of puppetry as a tool for story telling while working on a children's show, *The Frog Prince*. As he stated in an interview with Julie Birmant in 2000, it was during this production that he 'had really found a personal language' (Tranter and Birmant 40).<sup>72</sup> I understand Tranter to mean that he not only realised the possibilities in puppetry that initially inspired his desire to learn the form but that he also began to understand the ways that puppetry encompasses many strands of theatricality—text, sound, and visuals—producing multiple ways of experiencing meaning-making for the audience participant, and that as a practical

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72 The original quote in French is '*j'ai réellement trouvé un langage personnel*'. The translation is mine.

tool it would allow him to sustainably<sup>73</sup> realise his developing artistic vision: to make multi-character, solo performed puppet plays for adult audiences.

The first show that Tranter created for an adult audience was a cabaret performed in a restaurant. To appeal to an adult audience, Tranter billed it as an ‘X-Rated’ show. The production, according to Tranter, took a typical cabaret or variety show structure with a number of short skits using a number of different styles of puppets. Tranter stated during an interview that this performance taught him the importance of grabbing the audience participants’ attention from the start by drawing them into the narrative. This technique, which will be discussed in the next chapter, he has refined and continues to use today. Significantly for Tranter, this show was invited to the now defunct 1978 Festival of Fools in Amsterdam.<sup>74</sup> Tranter agreed to bring his show to Europe, however, as part of his commitment to make theatre his means of earning a livelihood, he only purchased a one-way ticket with the intention of earning the money to purchase his return ticket to Australia by performing in Europe. While there, however, he came to the conclusion that Amsterdam was a better place to pursue the development of what Catherine Bédarida described in her 2005 *Le Monde* review as ‘a style destined for adults’<sup>75</sup> (Bédarida). So he decided to stay. The decision was likely the combination of several personal, Australia was fairly socially conservative at this time, and professional reasons, Amsterdam had a more established puppet theatre and arts community, more funding, and more venue interest than could be found in Australia at that time. Although puppetry was undergoing tremendous shifts and growth in 1978, opportunities in Australia were limited to urban centres and there were only a handful of active companies. Furthermore, it was not until 1979 that Australia Council’s Theatre Board ‘was granting useful sums to puppetry companies and individuals’ (Wilson and Milne 71). However, by this point, Tranter had made his decision to remain in Amsterdam and build his company and career in Europe.

Unlike Compagnie Philippe Genty’s post-dramatic non-narrative dreamscapes, Tranter’s productions are linear text-based plays that draw on an Aristotelian model of plot, character, diction, and thought (Aristotle 12), with traces of cabaret aesthetics from his early career that persist in his designs and some would argue a certain level of camp. The exceptions to this rule are his first solo piece, (title unknown), created for restaurant

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<sup>73</sup> By sustainably, I am referring to Tranter achieving a financial sustainable model for creating self-produced original theatre.

<sup>74</sup> The International Festival of Fools in Amsterdam was created by Friends Roadshow and took place annually from 1975 to 1984. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Festival\\_of\\_Fools](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Festival_of_Fools).

<sup>75</sup> The quote in French reads: ‘pour développer un style destiné aux adultes’. The translation is mine.

audiences in Australia and performed in the 1978 Festival of Fools, and *Studies in Fantasy* (1982) his first production invited to the World Festival of Puppetry at Charleville-Mézière. Both used short cabaret style skits. His plays, particularly his original productions, focus on dramas of the human spirit: love, betrayal, and power.

Tranter conceives, develops, constructs and performs all of the shows as a solo actor and puppeteer. His body of work includes both original productions such as *Manipulator* and *Underdog* (1985), *Schickelgruber alias Adolf Hitler* (2002), *Vampyr* (2006), and *Cuniculus* (2009); and adaptations such as his version of Faust titled *Seven Deadly Sins* (1984) and Shakespeare's *Macbeth!* (1990). Though Tranter performs plays in a traditional sense; the theatrical experience is distinctive because he is the solo performer of many characters among an ontologically varied cast of different 'performers'. This process of performing multiple characters has led Tranter to his theory of 'Equal Status' among all performers. Additionally, his approach to each character, whether it be a character performed by a live human or puppet, is rooted in his Method acting training: each is driven by its own psycho-physical reality within the play. I refer to this as an actor's approach to puppet theatre. In the development and rehearsal periods of a project, he collaborates with a creative team including writers, directors, composers, and lighting designers to bring a performance to the stage. For the most part, this creative team has been working together for a number of years, with the exception in recent years of the director. After the death of his long time collaborator, Luk van Meerbeke, Tranter has collaborated with three different directors, each of whom have little or no experience directing puppet theatre, on *Schickelgruber alias Adolf Hitler* (2002), *Vampyr* (2006), and *Cuniculus* (2009). After these, he began directing his own work and using an assistant director, Tim Velraeds, to take notes and stand in for him when he needs to see a scene from the outside. Tranter stated in an informal interview that his period of working with different directors was as a way to learn new skills and different approaches to acting and the creative process. His choice of non-puppet theatre directors is a way of focusing on the characters and their development within a play rather than their physical reality as puppets.

Regardless of the source of the material – adaptation or original play script, Tranter's personal artistic vision often results in plays that intentionally have both a narrative and meta-narrative. The narratives typically grapple with emotional and psychological issues tending to the darker sides of human consciousness and behaviour, whereas the underlying meta-narrative explores questions of liveness, in the sense of being alive and having agency, and presence between actor/manipulators and puppets. In

other words, in all of his productions there is a moment(s) either spoken or physical during which he directly questions the audience participant's experience of the puppet as an independent presence and reminds them it is only a puppet while he simultaneously continues to treat it/them as fellow actors. Tranter has suggested that this conscious undermining of the puppet as an independent actor reinforces rather than shatters equal status among ontologically different performing bodies.

### **Presence and Power**

While it is not practical to describe an entire production here, it is useful to illustrate what a Stuffed Puppet Theatre production is like. I will use Tranter's companion productions *Manipulator/Underdog*, created in 1985 (the same year as Compagnie Philippe Genty's production *Désirs Parade* that marked their artistic shift to a new aesthetic and practice), to analyze text versus visual storytelling, his manufacture of equal status among actors – puppet and live human, and his use of explicitly undermining the audience participant's empathy with the puppet character as a means of affirming their roles and presence on stage. Tranter developed these shows to explicitly explore dualities of dominance and power as well as the audience participant's perception of who is in control—the live human actor or the puppet. In *Manipulator*, the live actor is ostensibly the dominant player, whereas in *Underdog* the puppets seemingly dominate.

While both productions are useful to analyze Tranter's work, I have chosen two scenes in *Manipulator* that most clearly demonstrate his performance techniques and coding of presence and power. The manufacture of presence and undermining of the audience participant's perception of the illusion of life in a puppet are explicit in the opening scene between Tranter's character and the puppet Nick the Nose. In contrast, the final scene between Tranter's character and Florissa demonstrates the breakdown of power relations between puppeteer and puppet, and calls into question who is manipulating whom. I have elected to use description, the play script, and video in order to focus clearly on Tranter's use of puppetry, language, and stage direction as a means to subvert the illusion of life in the puppet.

*Manipulator* is a cabaret performance in which an egotistical performer, The Puppeteer, barely tolerates his audience and despises his fellow puppet performers. Over the course of the show, we learn that the live actor is both dependent on and controlled by the puppet performers. The live actor spends much of the performance abusing and degrading his fellow puppet performers but gradually loses control, of both them and himself. As the violence escalates, Tranter's character intentionally kills one of the puppet

characters, The Magic Peking Duck, and then accidentally kills his invisible technician, MacEnnis. To gain audience sympathy, Tranter's character begins to stage his suicide but at the crucial last moment MacEnnis rematerializes in the form of a sound cue. The performance circles back at the end to question the illusion of puppetry, who is in control, and the power relations between live actors and performing objects.

In addition to power dynamics between characters, the show explores meta-theatrical notions about the illusion and perception of life in a puppet and its presence. As with all of Tranter's puppet characters, the puppets here are deliberately not realistic in their appearance. Their design has a grotesque, cartoonish quality. The cast includes talking animals, incomplete bodies, bodies that come apart and, in the case of MacEnnis, a character that is referenced and re-acted to, but never seen, no visible body at all. Each of these aspects intentionally undermines the perception and illusion of life in the puppet yet we, the audience participants, nonetheless often empathise with the puppet. We are also made very aware of the puppetness, as Tillis defines constructed objects made for performance (Tillis *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* 35), of the puppets, in contrast to Tranter's live presence on stage. Throughout his shows, Tranter deconstructs the notion of the life of an object. He visibly and verbally points out that the puppets are neither real nor alive, and shows technical aspects of manipulation while simultaneously performing coded signs of life through rhythm, gaze, voice, and his relationship to them as fellow performers on stage. In his workshops, Tranter refers to symbolic gesture as 'coding', and it is through this coding that he is able to reveal the psychological intentions of his fellow puppet performers.

Tranter's character, The Puppeteer (TP), is dressed in a black suit, a burgundy shirt, and large bow tie. Nick the Nose is a hand puppet with a football-shaped head (which has been deliberately constructed in a rather messy way), with red mop hair, and a green visor. The puppet is wearing a green jacket with its hands tucked into its pockets, and yellow pants. During the

introduction, TP asks the audience: 'Do you believe in illusions?' During the following scene, he then explains that he will show the audience the illusion of the puppet by using a member of the



**Figure 14: *Manipulator* 1985. Performer: Neville Tranter. Photographer unknown.**

audience as an assistant. After confronting the audience with the possibility of being chosen to come on stage, TP goes off stage left and brings on Nick the Nose, accompanied by lively entrance music. Nick the Nose (NN) is on TP's right hand.

TP: (walking on stage) Madame und herren, ladies and gentlemen, mesdames and monsieurs. Applause please for my guest (gestures to NN), your colleague.

NN: (Looks at the audience in three directions.)

TP: (Waves to cut the music; looks at NN.) Oh I'm terribly sorry, what was your name again?

NN: (Still looking at the audience; shakes head on each syllable.) Nick. Nick the Nose.

TP: (Looks at audience, points at puppet, and laughs. As he speaks he pats his hair and looks at the audience cynically.) What an original name. (Looks back to NN.) Where does that come from?

NN: (Turns to face TP for the first time and shows him his large, phallic nose.)

TP: (Startles back slightly away from NN.) and Nick

NN: Yes

TP: Tell me, do you enjoy being here?

NN: (Turning away to face audience.) No.

TP: (Looks toward audience, rolls eyes, and smiles.) Well why are you here then?

NN: (Looks to TP.) For the money. (Both look at each other.)

(The following sequence is a very quick back and forth between the two voices.)

TP: (Uncomfortable laugh, looks away.) Eh Nick.

NN: Yes.

TP: You.

NN: Yes.

TP: Do not believe. (Both look down.)

NN: Umhummm.

TP: In the illusion of the puppet.

NN: (Looks up at audience.)

TP: (Looks at NN.)

NN: (Looks at TP.)

TP: (Head pulls back away from NN.)

NN: Indeed.

TP: (Small double-take to audience, mostly with his eyes.)

NN: (Looks back to audience.) No.

TP: (Seems to indicate with gesture of his head 'about time').

NN: No.

TP: (Quickly, after looking at audience.) So when I work a puppet (NN looks at TP and follows his moving left hand) where do you look? (TP points to his own face; NN follows hand to look at TP's face. There is a pause. TP continues to gesture to his own face.)



NN: Oh. I look at you of course.

TP: (Gesturing to both himself and NN) And why do you look at me?

NN: (Looks back and forth between TP's face and his left hand; TP makes a gesture to indicate payment by rubbing tips of fingers together; NN looks out to audience.) Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah... yeah. (TP looks at NN.) Now what you do with your puppets is umm, is (looks from TP to audience) emm... clever.

TP: (Looks to audience.) Thank you. (Sarcastic tone: no kidding.<sup>76</sup>)

NN: It even (looks at TP) has a certain (looks to audience) charm (tilts head to right) to it.

TP: (Mimics head tilt but to left, brings hand to chest slightly mock humbled.) Thank you.

NN: What I find really interesting in your (NN looks to TP) performances...

TP: (Looks to audience) Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes... (looks back to NN).

NN: (Looks to audience) ... is the content.

TP: (Looks to audience, raises left hand) Uhuh (low voice). The in out.

NN: There is none. (Looks at TP.)

TP: (Reacts: head moves back, looks to audience.) You know I think it's fantastic that you're so critical. Shall we now play a scene with a puppet?

NN: As long as I don't have to play the puppet.

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<sup>76</sup> These are reading notes to the actor that mean the line is read sarcastically and the subtext is no kidding.

Next, Tranter ups the ante by playing the story of David and Goliath with Nick the Nose cast in the role of the doubting audience/Goliath, and with his other, white-gloved, hand with an egg for a head as David. During the scene, Nick the Nose comes to believe in the intentions of the egg puppet and begins to react to its actions while simultaneously declaring his [remember NN is a puppet himself] knowledge that David is only a hand with an egg on one finger. In the tension between the three characters, Tranter has created the illusion of life in two puppets and has the audience investing in a puppet, Nick the Nose, who thinks and believes in its own illusion of life. This scene ends with David dismembering Nick the Nose—his legs, hair, and finally his nose—and yet the character, now firmly established in the audience’s mind, continues to react to what is happening until he, Nick the Nose, is pulled off stage by TP.<sup>77</sup>

In the final scene of the show, after TP has feigned a suicide bid, and once more shoots in the off stage direction at MacEnnis, a pink bag is tossed on stage by an invisible hand. TP digs in the bag with his right hand, while simultaneously singing his own musical accompaniment, since MacEnnis has stopped participating. He extracts a yellow frog hand puppet named Florissa; she has a blond wig, blue hair ribbons, and is holding a red fake flower. At first, all we see of the puppet is its back, as Tranter has his arm and hand pointed down. TP looks at the puppet and adjusts its hand rod between his thighs. TP forcefully jerks the hand rod and slowly the frog raises its gaze up to the audience. It pauses looking forward, shifts its gaze to house right, and then back to centre of house. After this moment of connecting with the audience participants, she finally sees TP and does a double take.

Florissa: (Sniffs at the flower, then sends it toward TP) Smell it. (Looks away and then back, pushing the flower under TP’s nose again.) Smell it.

TP: (Smells the flower.)

Florissa: (Looks down.) What do you smell? (Looks at TP.)

TP: Nothing... it’s fake.

Florissa: (Rolls head up and to the right side.) Hummm... and yet his smell is still

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<sup>77</sup> This scene is available on Youtube: *Neville Tranter Manipulator Nick the Nose*  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3sMNaJ8K2c>

on it.

TP: His smell?

Florissa: Frank's smell. (She smells the flower again.)

TP: Who's Frank?

Florissa: Frank is... (she looks up and at TP) ... was my friend (she looks away and stage right, clutching the flower to her 'chest'. Pause. Turns back to TP and hits him on the chest with the flower.) You know something? You remind me of Frank.

TP: (Looks up from flower to Florissa, audibly snorts/exhales) Don't be ridiculous; what have I got to do with Frank?

Florissa: (Looks and moves away.) You cause me pain.

TP: (Goes towards Florissa.) I haven't caused you any pain.

Florissa: (Looks up at audience.) No, not yet. (Looks at TP.) But I have seen you in action tonight. (She hits TP with a flower.)

TP: (Turns face to audience and laughs.) You silly person, so what?

Florissa: I am not a person, I am a frog.

TP: A frog? (Turns to audience and laughs.)

Florissa: What's so funny?

TP: Well frogs are mostly green.

Florissa: And they like to be kissed.

TP: Listen, frog.

Florissa: My name is Florissa.<sup>78</sup>

Throughout the rest of the scene, TP invests in the character he is manipulating and slowly loses the advantage to the puppet. In other words, the power dynamics shift and in the end it is Florissa, the puppet frog, who is dominant in the scene.<sup>79</sup>

As can be determined by both the text and performance, each of these plays and the referenced scenes explicitly explore power relationships between characters. Additionally, the play, as are most of his original plays, is specifically written to be performed by a live human and puppet characters. Throughout these two scenes are both implicit and explicit references to being a puppet and their puppetness. These references are similar to Genty's early cabaret piece *Pierrot*, discussed in the previous case study, that discovers its own strings and puppetness on stage and chooses to cut its strings thus severing its connection to an actor puppeteer and bringing about its own 'death'. There is, however, a deeper performance dynamic at work too – the 'equal status' among ontologically different performer types. His performance theory and the techniques that he has developed to manifest it will be analysed in detail in Chapter Six, but it is clear in the video examples that both live human and each of the puppet performers are fully invested actors playing characters within the same theatrical frame. This equality among actors or co-presence, regardless of their role in a given play, lends credibility to a play's content and the illusion of its being populated by multiple characters despite the obvious reality that one man performs each character.<sup>80</sup>

Thematically, *Manipulator* is about The Puppeteer's struggle with the life of objects. The character tells us at the beginning of the show that he will demonstrate 'the illusion' of puppetry, yet his illusions resist their own puppet- or thing-ness. Their life has been present whether The Puppeteer likes it or not— even when TP is physically or emotionally attempting to dismember the puppet. According to Tranter, in order for these

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<sup>78</sup> Youtube video clip: *Neville Tranter Manipulator Florissa the Frog*:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZXmN6PNGwA&list=UUKjvVsrySaNfAsFhnlfwc6Q&index=2&feature=plcp>

<sup>79</sup> The end of this scene can be found on Youtube at: *Neville Tranter Manipulator Florissa the Frog* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZXmN6PNGwA>.

<sup>80</sup> Examples of this can also be seen in *Frankenstein* (2000; *Frankenstein Cornerman meets the Doctor* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcyCC927cto&list=UUKjvVsrySaNfAsFhnlfwc6Q&index=9&feature=plcp>) and *Cuniculus* (2009; *Cuniculus: Sissy the Rabbit's Revenge* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbBG0gbfsmM&list=UUKjvVsrySaNfAsFhnlfwc6Q&index=8&feature=plcp>)

role reversals to be compelling and elicit empathy, we, the audience participants, must first believe that there are two performers of ‘equal status’ on stage. Stated in another way, before the characters can elicit an empathic response from the audience participant, we first must believe the **two actors** on stage are of equal status and that we do not automatically discount the puppet because it is an object that simulates life through the performance of the puppeteer; rather we invest equally in both types of actors as well as the roles they are enacting.

Most of Tranter’s puppets are Muppet-style glove puppets with large mouths and eyes. Their arms, bodies, and legs hang loosely and are manipulated, when possible, by direct contact manipulation, meaning hands on the puppet (Muppets typically use rods for arm control). They tend to be small in comparison with Tranter. Though in some shows, this model is varied by having the puppet’s bodies supported by a single pole on wheels, which allows for characters of equal or greater size than Tranter, but the mouth is still controlled as would be a glove puppet. Unlike most Muppet performances, designed primarily for television and film, the puppeteer is visible<sup>81</sup> and the source of vocal production obvious. There are similarities between Tranter’s performance with puppets and ventriloquism though Tranter resists the comparison and consciously works against the notion that he is a ventriloquist. However, he is, like ventriloquists, a single live human actor voicing a puppet on stage while in dialogue with it and creating a ‘vocalic body’ (Connor 35).

According Connor, where puppetry relies on the visible and tangible performing object, the history of ventriloquism is largely premised on vocal production, from the oracles of ancient Greece and Rome (ibid., 47-50) to the disembodied voices of early nineteenth century ‘polyphonists’ (ibid., 296) and mediums. ‘The ventriloquial voice,’ Connor writes, ‘was its own property, and could furnish from itself its own world of objects and persons’ (ibid., 327). This is not to say that visual elements were entirely absent but rather that they were not, as Connor states, prevalent. This began to shift in the 1830s with the increasingly popular displays of automata (ibid., 335) and as I note in Chapter Two, the use of speaking juvenile figures (dummies) by the end of the nineteenth century, which was due in part to the growth and developments in music hall and vaudeville entertainment (ibid., 398).

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<sup>81</sup> Jim Henson Productions has produced two live comedy shows under the Henson Alternative banner in which the puppeteers are visible. *Puppet Up!*, originally titled *Jim Henson's Puppet Improv*, was developed in 2006. See [http://henson-alternative.wikia.com/wiki/Puppet\\_Up!\\_-\\_Uncensored\\_and\\_Stuffed\\_and\\_Unstrung](http://henson-alternative.wikia.com/wiki/Puppet_Up!_-_Uncensored_and_Stuffed_and_Unstrung) developed in 2009/2010 [http://henson-alternative.wikia.com/wiki/Stuffed\\_and\\_Unstrung](http://henson-alternative.wikia.com/wiki/Stuffed_and_Unstrung).

Ventriloquism, performed with or without an object, is premised on a vocal-physical trick: the illusion of a voice coming from a place, object, or thing where no ‘thing’ exists to produce said voice. In other words, Connor theorizes the ‘vocalic body’ as a performance mode in which vocal production itself produces a body or as I read it the character. When performed with an object—the dummy—the dividing line between ventriloquism and puppetry is far less clear-cut. The traditional ventriloquist’s dummy is developed as a character with a distinct life and presence, which is often cast as the alter ego of the live human actor. However, in ventriloquism, the voice is the primary indicator of life, with or without an accompanying ‘surrogate body’ to produce it. It is this illusion that Tranter resists, while actively creating another. Although his puppets are speaking actors, he does not disguise the source of a puppet character’s voice. His lips clearly move. For Tranter, while voice and vocal correspondence between a particular voice and puppet is important, it is only one element of a character manifested in the physical object. Yet because Tranter is the only actor puppeteer on stage acting and manipulating the puppets, the movement and gesture possibilities for the puppets in particular are often limited. If Tranter and a puppet are performing a scene, there are possibilities for head, mouth and arm movements, and speech. If however, Tranter is acting a scene with two puppets, the movements are limited to the heads and mouths of the puppets. This limitation puts the burden of character formation of the puppets in the voice. Although Tranter’s primary concern is that the audience participant accept the illusion of life, and that a puppet actor is a being of equal status to the puppeteer, without ever wondering: ‘How is that done? I can barely see his lips move’, a vocalic body is an essential element of the puppet actors that populate his plays. This aspect of his practice ultimately posed interesting challenges for my practical component and will be discussed in further detail in Part Four.

### **An ‘Actor’s’ Puppeteer**

In the broadest sense, all puppeteers are actors. Yet, with the increase in interdisciplinary work and the emergence of co-presence as a performance mode, significant gaps emerge relative to the acting skills of puppeteers, meaning individuals who have been trained to perform through something – a puppet, object, or material – and their ability to perform onstage as themselves with other live human performers. This gap, as I noted in Chapter Two and articulated by Francis, is often revealed in casting choices made by contemporary directors who elect to hire performers with training in fields other than puppetry such as actors, dancers, clowns, etc. These they will then train whatever

puppetry skills are need for a given production. As I noted in Chapter Four, while Genty and Underwood do not explicitly train co-presence there is, as I observed during the workshop, an implicit expectation of cross over between their various modes of training. Tranter's practice directly addresses issues of puppet manipulation and acting while a live human actor is co-present and performing with puppets. He uses visual theatre elements and those elements most often associated with puppetry in his work underpinned by Method acting principles as formulated by Lee Strasberg in order to create the psychological and physical realities of each character—puppet and live human—on stage. This approach is what I am defining as an actor's puppeteer. While I think there are other puppeteers and performers who use a similar approach, Tranter has developed a pedagogy that has the potential to be used for wider performer training.

Tranter's approach, as I mentioned previously, emerges from his early actor training in Lee Strasberg's approach to The Method. The Method, a methodology that evolved from Stanislavski's actor training, is not, as Steve Vineberg notes in *Method Actors: Three Generations of an American Acting Style*, a single training practice nor is there consensus among teachers about what it is. Rather, The Method is a spectrum of training most closely associated with Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner and Lee Strasberg (Vineberg xi).<sup>82</sup> David Krasner frames the fundamental differences between these three key teachers

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<sup>82</sup> The essential principles of 'The Method' usually include:

- 1) All words, actions and relationships must be justified. Though spontaneous in performance, motivations are thought out during rehearsals to ensure maximum motivation.
- 2) Motivation is based on character objectives, actions, and intensions, which are found in a character's super-objective or spine.
- 3) The super-objective must have urgency through the creation of obstacles and emerges from relaxation, concentration and creative selection.
- 4) The objective is supported by a character's subtext.
- 5) Subtext emerges from the given circumstances of the play— location, time period, class, social context, and so on.
- 6) Actors behave as if living in the situation of the play and use imagination and particularisation of choices that will enhance text and discover ideas behind the words.
- 7) Actors should use truthful behaviour on stage; feelings are never indicated.
- 8) In order to achieve truth, actors should work moment-to-moment, on impulse.
- 9) 'Rehearsals require *improvising* on the dramatic text' to free the actor from

thus: ‘Strasberg’s emphasis [is] on the psychological,<sup>83</sup> Adler’s on the sociological, and Meisner’s on the behavioural’ (Krasner ‘Strasberg, Adler and Meisner: Method Acting’ 144).<sup>84</sup>

In his 1987 book *A Dream of Passion*, Strasberg states his concern as being to develop a method to training an actor’s ability to consistently express believable experience and emotion on the stage (Strasberg 6, 35), and their ‘expressiveness and embodiment of a character’ (ibid., 62). Strasberg writes that Stanislavski’s emotional memory and the problem of capturing a fleeting moment for use by an actor ‘was the task I was to devote myself to in establishing the Method’ (ibid., 60). This task centres around two key exercises using personal memory: Sense Memory and Affective Memory.<sup>85</sup> Quoting Strasberg from a class in 1980, Lorrie Hull writes that Strasberg refined Stanislavski’s definitions ‘explaining that “affective memory has sense and emotional memory whereas sense memory may not have emotional memory but deals with objects and other specific stimuli”’ (Hull 82). Based on my personal experience with Method training, the Sense Memory exercise is recalling an event through the five senses; remembering with as much detail what was seen, touched, smelled, heard, and tasted. It trains the actor’s ability to recall sensation on stage whereas Affective Memory is recalling/reliving a dramatic or traumatic event through sense memory with the aim of triggering the emotion associated with the event. The actor may then note the result and, ideally, identify the sense or moment that triggered the desired emotion for use when that particular emotion may be needed for use by a character. Although these are not the only

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word dependency (Krasner ‘Strasberg, Adler and Meisner: Method Acting’ 145).

10) Actor personalises a role through use of self/emotional life, own psychology/imaginative reality, life experiences (Krasner ‘Strasberg, Adler and Meisner: Method Acting’ 145; Vineberg 6-7).

<sup>83</sup> Lorrie Hull, former faculty member at the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute in Los Angeles and author of one of the few comprehensive practical guides for teaching Strasberg’s Method, minimizes the impact of the psychological, and argues that the aim of the technique is to develop ‘evenness’ in the work of an actor throughout their career (Hull 2).

<sup>84</sup> Both Adler and Meisner wrote about their approaches to acting: Stella Adler and Howard Kissel edited *Stella Adler: The Art of Acting*; Stella Adler and Barry Paris co-wrote *Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov*; and Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. There are also numerous books and articles by other authors about their respective practices.

<sup>85</sup> While these two exercises are often referred as Affective and Sense Memory, The Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute frames the exercise as Affective Memory (Sense and Emotional) suggesting they are the same exercise with two different purposes. <http://www.methodactingstrasberg.com/history>



components of The Method, Strasberg 'would have it that creative processes are matters of psychology and past experience' (Krasner *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future* 15) by which I understand him to mean one's mental and emotional makeup coupled with their experience. Thus working with each individual's memory, the Method 'trains the actor to respond quickly and fully to all stimuli in an effort to create reality in acting and spontaneity in all types of performance' (ibid., 10). Strasberg's focus on believable consistent performance expressiveness does not mean that he did not concern himself with the physical life of a character, but rather that he believed that this particular area of training needed to be developed further than he understood it to have been in Stanislavski's 'system'.<sup>86</sup>

Strasberg's emphasis on psychological performance found through memory is the starting point for Tranter's own practice. Although his visual landscape is a cabaret aesthetic that uses grotesque anthropomorphized and in some shows zoomorphized puppets, the characters are realistic psychological subjects whose inner lives are found through Tranter's employment of Method techniques. Further, although according to Strasberg The Method is concerned with the task of acting not making a play, Tranter has, I propose, used what Strasberg defines as:

the fundamental nature of the actor's problem: the actor's ability to create organically and convincingly, mentally, physically, and emotionally, the given reality demanded by the character in the play; and to express this in the most vivid and dynamic way possible (Strasberg 105)

as a guide not only for how he works as an actor and develops the inner lives all of the puppet characters in his plays, but also as a method to construct his character-driven plays.

Tranter's process, he told me, begins with writing. He typically starts with a narrative concept and a list of possible characters with their accompanying archetypes. At this stage, Tranter also begins to develop the inner, psychological character development before beginning to write the play. Though I was not present for this stage of a production, in the course of conversations (14–16 March and 17–21 November 2008) Tranter suggested that, for him, each play's narrative and character has an effect on the development of the other. This period of text-based development is necessary for Tranter to understand who each character is in relation to a narrative. This is important for both

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<sup>86</sup> Stanislavski, particularly in his later works such as *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, and *Creating a Role*, simultaneously approaches a character from the inside and outside. He was, as his later teachings show, concerned with the development and presentation of both the psychological inner life and the physical manifestations of this life of a character on stage.

his roles: as the production designer and builder, and as the future performer. Even as the designer-builder, Tranter said that he must know who each character is ‘inside’ in order for him to design and construct it and ultimately to find the physical life and voice of each character. Once the characters and narrative have been defined, the dialogue is developed either by Tranter, a hired playwright, or both. At this stage, the ontological difference among performers has little effect on the development of the psychological aspects of characters. These differences may, however, be incorporated in the play text as a mechanism to deconstruct the differences between performers, meaning an explicit reference to the ontological difference as a means to disrupt the audience participant’s perception of life of the puppet. Additionally, Tranter will usually only perform three characters together in any single scene thus limiting the active number of characters in any given scene.<sup>87</sup> But how do Tranter’s processes reflect the concerns of actor training?

Tranter reported that, early on in his work with puppets, he discovered that puppets were in fact better actors than he. Though I think that this assertion is debateable, I would suggest that he was alluding to the fact that puppet performers can only be and do that which they were designed and constructed to be, though their character traits may change. In this way, puppets are what Tranter would call ‘totally honest and innocent’ or, as Heinrich von Kleist suggests in his essay ‘On the Marionette Theatre’, they are an ideal performing object because they lack self-consciousness (Kleist 26).<sup>88</sup> Unlike live human actors, objects cannot, for example, be distracted, have a bad day, or feel out of sorts—though these are all possibilities for the puppeteer, which in turn affects a puppet’s performance. Further, as constructed mechanical objects, they can and, as most puppeteers know, *will* break, lose a string, throw a rod, or get stuck in the middle of a show. But, ultimately, puppets do not have thoughts or emotions that impede performance. Nor are puppets necessarily constrained or limited by the laws of physics in

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<sup>87</sup> In Tranter’s rehearsal process, the practicalities of performing with many puppet actors—when and where a character enters, is left to rest, or is moved throughout a show; their placement for easy entry and exit of a manipulator’s hand; and any construction issues, as well as additional physical moments that can further deconstruct the audience participant’s perception of life in the puppet—must be reconciled and are developed.

<sup>88</sup> Kleist’s essay is often used in puppet theatre scholarship and sometimes among puppeteers to argue for the puppet as an ideal performing object without reference consideration of the essays core issues. G. A. Wells argues that Kleist’s essay is mainly concerned ‘with the way in which conflict between different tendencies (or its absence) affects gracefulness of behaviour’ (Wells 90). Erich Heller would concur, but added that the essay is about humanity’s struggle ‘to transcend this “unhappy consciousness”—to use Hegel’s phrase...The human mind’s alienation from the supreme Intelligence’ (Heller 422). The puppet in Kleist’s essay is merely one among three metaphors used to argue this point (the other two are a young man at the bath and a constrained bear that instinctively defends itself in a fencing match).

the same ways that the live human performer is. When designed, constructed, and manipulated well, puppets are what they are and function as unwaveringly focused objects in a symbiotic relationship with the puppeteer and audience participant to create a canvas on which an emotional and physical life can be projected. Throughout his career, Tranter has taken on the challenge of negotiating how to perform with puppet characters on stage and achieve ‘equal status’ with them in the eyes of the audience participant. But what does ‘equal status’ between ontologically different performers—a live actor and constructed performer—mean? And how is an illusion of equal status achieved?

Equal status is about equal performing partners and presences on stage, regardless of the performer’s ontology. It is not about a character’s social status or inter-character relationship within a particular narrative. The key to answering the question about how to create the illusion of equal status between ontologically different performing partners lies, I believe, in Tranter’s understanding about creating a character for the stage: that each character—whether played by a live actor or a puppet—is a fully developed psychological subject. In other words, each character, live or constructed, has a full inner life that can be consistently represented and performed on stage. With Method training, this is accomplished through controlled and conscious use of the emotional sense memory of a performer. Puppets, however, do not have any emotional life, let alone sense memory. They can only symbolically suggest emotion, intention, thought, and so on through symbolic coding, using gestures, tempo, lighting, and sound. However, when a puppet’s symbolic coding is underpinned by an actor’s process and performed as such traces of sense memory transfer to the puppet and are part of the co-creative space where audience participants imaginatively complete the inner life of a puppet character. Tranter’s techniques for creating and transferring this presence are documented and analyzed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6

### **Fieldwork Investigation and Analysis of Techniques**

After meeting Tranter in Germany 14–16 March 2008 and exchanging several emails, the company and I agreed that I would engage in two periods of participant observation: attending the final three weeks of rehearsals in Amsterdam, the preview performances in Utrecht, and the premiere at the FiDeNa festival in Gelsenkirchen, Germany for a new production titled *Cuniculus* between 27 August – 18 September and participating in his five-day puppetry workshop, ‘The Power of the Puppet’, at Odsherred Teaterskole in Denmark, 17–21 November 2008. During these same periods, I conducted formal and informal interviews with Tranter and several of his collaborators. This fieldwork is paired with archival research at Institut International de la Marionnette, which houses unique company archives that include critical writings, reviews, as well as workshop and performance video.

The rehearsals for *Cuniculus* were my first engagement with the company. Rehearsals were conducted at a studio in central Amsterdam in the heart of the red light district. Tranter indicated during informal conversation that he preferred not to have an outside eye present in the early stages of development because of the subject matter, which I infer to mean the vulnerabilities it might expose for himself (the actor) while building the psychological aspects of each character relative to the play’s content that addresses issues of sexuality, difference, and becoming, as well as the fragility of working with a new director. This, unfortunately, limited my access to his actor’s process at a crucial stage of development. As with many artists, there is a relationship between what Tranter teaches and what he does in rehearsal and I found that many of the questions that arose during rehearsal about his theories concerning equal status were subsequently clarified after taking his workshop.

At the workshop, participants were not primarily other puppeteers, but were mostly actors, television performers, and teachers, who use puppetry in their work and were interested in learning more. The workshop focused on key areas of bringing a puppet to life, manufacturing co-presence or equal status, and acting. His training however is within the framework of a puppet’s ontology, or what Tillis identifies as the basic elements of a puppet: a ‘designed figure, the movement and speech given to that figure’ (Tillis *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* 7). His training in the workshop, however, does not include Method acting training or the

psychological underpinning that is, as I argued in the previous chapter, key to his own practice. This gap between his practice and his training will be addressed in Part 4 and a focus of experimentation in combining techniques developed by Genty, Underwood, and Tranter. During the workshop, Tranter uses only one puppet shared among every participant. The character's name is Zeno, created for his 1993 production *Nightclub*.<sup>89</sup>



**Figure 15: *Nightclub* 1993. Performer: Neville Tranter. Photographer unknown.**

Like many of Tranter's puppets, he is a large, full-bodied glove puppet. He is supported and manipulated by inserting a hand through a hole in his back up into his head to operate his moving mouth, similar to a Muppet. His arms and hands, however, are operated hands on, without rods, and his legs, unless working with multiple puppeteers, hang free. Specifics about Tranter's design aesthetics will be analyzed toward the end of this chapter.

Teaching workshops is a relatively recent addition to Tranter's activities, which also include directing and painting. He began teaching regularly in 2003. In his workshop,

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<sup>89</sup> *The Nightclub*, written by Luk van Meerbeke, is a multi level show about an aging ventriloquist's dummy (Zeno) and his younger, new human assistant Anthony (Tranter). The show travels from vaudeville to disco to a postmodern nightclub where Anthony and Zeno are making the most recent appearance. It is a tale of facing obsolescence, temptation, and power.

‘The Power of the Puppet’, many of the techniques that he uses, particularly those pertaining to technical issues, are not in fact original. Rather, the workshop is a combination of well-known hand puppet techniques, such as lip-synch,<sup>90</sup> using the wrist to guide the puppeteer’s energy through the puppet being manipulated, using one’s hand properly in a mouth or Muppet-style puppet to control the focus and impulse allowing the puppet to appear to initiate action, as well as other methods that he has discovered or that have emerged over the course of his theatre-making and performing career.

His theory about creating equal status between himself and a puppet, and underpinning his work as what I defined in the previous chapter as an actor’s puppeteer, however, have evolved into a unique performance technique. The physical aspects of his technique are demonstrated and used by both puppet and live actor performer through Tranter’s use of gaze, rhythm, and gesture choices that emerge out of the character. It is this point of departure and theory of performance particular to Tranter’s work that comprises his workshop training and techniques. All of the techniques are, to a large extent, second nature to Tranter. By this, I mean that Tranter seems to instinctively know how to use these techniques in any given performance situation without needing to work to find the precise gaze, movement, rhythm, or gesture. Despite his apparent ease using these techniques, they are crucial to what he does in the studio while rehearsing a production and how he ultimately works on stage. Tranter’s path to creating fully developed, equal status puppet characters in production begins with an extensive, text-based process to determine who the characters are, their history, psychology and what archetype they fulfil in a production’s narrative. He has, however, also developed a number of more generally applicable techniques and approaches that he teaches in workshop.

The workshop I attended was one of Tranter’s five-day affairs. Tranter had previously indicated to me during an informal conversation that this was, in his opinion, the best and most effective length of workshop that he taught for research purposes. The workshop at Odsherred Teaterskole, the Danish Development Centre for Performing Arts, is located about two hours west of Copenhagen in Zealand. The school is situated in the grounds of a functioning psychiatric hospital. It uses two buildings that contain residency rooms, rehearsal studios, a restaurant/bar, and a theatre. It is a very isolated location,

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<sup>90</sup> This is a technique in which a performer moves the mouth of puppet while speaking, thus creating the illusion that the puppet is producing sound. Tranter said that he is heavily influenced by the techniques used by Jim Henson. Lip synch is a common practice in muppet style manipulation as well as with many other styles whether or not the puppeteer is visible to the audience participants.

which allows for highly concentrated work. With the exception of me and one other attendee, the twelve workshop participants were teachers, directors, and actors, who had little or no experience of using puppets in performance. Each day of the workshop included a combination of doing exercises to develop skills, discussion, and watching video of Tranter's previous productions. The videos functioned both as an introduction of Tranter's artistic practice to the workshop participants and as a demonstration of how the techniques that we are learning could be put into practice. Rather than present a day-by-day description of the workshop activities and explorations, I have chosen to analyse the core ideas behind the techniques that Tranter teaches thematically. I will explore both the pedagogic aims of the exercises and the theoretical context in which they have been developed. The core techniques, not necessarily in the documented order, that we investigated and learned are: presence and co-presence/equal status including splitting the performing self into multiple characters, gaze, and action/re-action; physical acting techniques focusing on gesture and rhythm; and voice. Toward the end of his workshop, Tranter introduced one exercise using multiple puppeteers. Although this exercise was informative, it was not integral to his training to manufacture co-presence/equal status rather it was designed to joyously bring the participants together through the act of puppet manipulation. Though, the focus of this research is on Tranter's workshop techniques, I will also briefly discuss Tranter's theories about design as they were included in discussion at the workshop as an aspect of his techniques and are relevant to his own practice and theory of equal status.

### **Presence and Co-Presence/Equal Status**

According to Tranter, and similar in theory to Genty and Underwood, in order to manufacture the appearance of presence in the puppet, it should be manipulated so that it not only appears to have agency but it also seems to self-initiate, lead, and direct all of its own actions. In his practice, Tranter uses both the physical manipulation and an actor's process to develop a character's psychological self. In his workshop training, however, he focuses on the physical aspects of puppet manipulation. In order to create this illusion and perform both the physical and psychological aspects, the live human performer needs to effectively split their performance. The notion of an actor being 'split' on stage is not new. As Allen Speight writes in *Hegel, Literature, and The Problem of Agency*:

The comic actor who can, like Rameau, take up any role is essentially... a split self: he is part *Schauspieler* (actor), performing the role of whatever mask he plays with at the moment, and part *Zuschauer* (spectator), keeping

an eye on how that performance is coming off and what he should take up next. (Speight 83)

Richard Schechner, on the other hand, has suggested that the performing body is in a dual state: simultaneously ‘not me, not not me’ (Schechner *Between Theater & Anthropology* 112), a ‘double negative relationship’ that ‘shows how restored behaviour is simultaneously private and social’ (ibid.).<sup>91</sup> In *Building a Character*, Stanislavski suggests that the work of an actor lies in their ability to split their attention and perform two functions simultaneously:

One half of an actor's soul is absorbed by his super-objective, by the through line of action, the subtext, his inner images, the elements which go to make up his inner creative state. But the other half of it continues to operate on a psycho-technique... An actor is split in two parts when he is acting... [As] Tommaso Salvini put it: “An actor lives, weeps, laughs on stage, but as he weeps and laughs he observes his own tears and mirth. It is this double existence, this balance between life and acting that makes for art”. (Stanislavski *Building a Character* 173)

Tranter pushes the limits of the actor’s ability to be consciously aware of and make use of being a split performer. In his more recent work, he simultaneously performs up to three characters on stage in dialogue with each other, while all the time being conscious of himself as the performer of three different characters. This is a skill that Tranter has developed throughout his career. In early productions such as *Studies in Fantasy* (1982) and *Seven Deadly Sins* (1984), Tranter’s live human stage character was often subservient to puppet characters in the context of the narrative. Simultaneously, Tranter, the actor, is literally in the service of the puppets as their manipulator. In other words, I am making a distinction between a character in a play and the actor who is performing the character, both the puppet’s and his own. In these earlier productions, Tranter’s live human character’s interaction with the more dominant puppet characters was minimised through his subservient character status (though not his presence as an actor). With his 1985 companion productions *Manipulator* and *Underdog*, Tranter began to explicitly explore the shifting positions of power and dominance between puppet and live human characters, but his status and presence as a live human actor working with puppet actors was also beginning to change. In *Manipulator*, Tranter begins as the dominant character, but his position changes to being subjugated by the very characters he professes to control; in *Underdog*, Tranter’s character is controlled by a cruel puppet father figure and a series of

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<sup>91</sup> Schechner defines restored behaviour as that which has been deconstructed and reconstructed of its actuality through a process of editing and rehearsal (Schechner *Between Theater and Anthropology* 33).



other characters that he is forced to contend with in a sort of circus courtroom. These complicated character dynamics could not be achieved if the actor manipulator is perceived as unequal in the eyes of the audience participants. In order to perform two (and in some cases three) characters simultaneously, a live human actor working with puppets must be able to split their performance not only between themselves as a character and themselves as the performer, Speight's actor/spectator or Schechner's dual 'not me/not not me', but also between themselves as one character and themselves as one or two puppet actors and characters that have different performance demands because of their ontological difference. In the workshop, Tranter uses progressive exercises to develop the performer's ability to 'spilt' their self in performance with a puppet. We began working with an exercise that focuses on techniques to perform a fully present puppet character and worked towards the ability to simultaneously perform two characters—the actor's self as a character and a puppet as a character—with the two appearing to have equal status as actors on stage.

The first exercise Tranter teaches in his workshop begins to shape a puppeteer's ability to convincingly portray a puppet as an independent character that appears to have its own agency. The puppeteer is present but not yet a character in active relationship with the puppet character. In other words, the puppet is intended to be read as the lead and only character in the scene; the puppeteer is a secondary independent presence but not an active character. They are not co-present as equal status actors. As Tranter does not have a specific name for the exercise, I will refer to it as Exercise 1. The instructions seem to be prescriptive, however, within the confines of the execution by a performer there is, in my experience, a wide range of possibility in rhythm and execution that has the potential to create a diverse range of characters. This exercise also makes use of a puppet's gaze to connect with the audience participant, develop a puppeteer's awareness of directing a puppet's focus and, as Tranter puts it, grab the attention of the audience participant. Focus or gaze, movement, and action/reaction are the key indicators to manufacture the illusion that the puppet is in control and an independent presence.

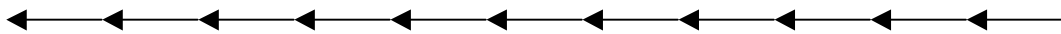
A puppeteer starts either up stage left (if being manipulated by a right-hander) or up stage right (if by a left-hander) with their back to the audience. The puppet Zeno, is cradled in the actor puppeteer's arms, meaning that one's hand is inserted into his head for the manipulation and the other arm supports his legs from underneath similar to cradling a baby or small child. One's outside arm, when facing upstage, should be the one controlling Zeno's head. Zeno appears to initiate the movement leading with his head:

- Slowly, Zeno looks over the inside shoulder, in relation to the stage, of the puppeteer. The puppet's gaze should first focus toward the centre of the audience. The puppet reacts to 'seeing' the audience participants by opening its mouth. Tranter notes that the tempo of this reaction will suggest different emotional states to the audience participant. Generally quick and big will be read as funny, while slow and small will be read as fearful or questioning.
- The puppeteer's body must move easily as needed with Zeno so that the direction of the puppet's focus is maintained. As Zeno reaches to see and take in the audience, the puppeteer begins to walk slowly to the opposite side of the stage in a straight horizontal line. Simultaneously, Zeno's head and focus slowly reach toward the centre of the audience until both Zeno and puppeteer reach centre stage.
- On reaching centre stage, Zeno should reach his full extension forward and the puppeteer's body should be facing to the side to allow for this maximum extension of the puppet. Tranter notes that the puppeteer's movement should be relaxed and in relation to what the puppet is doing, in other words the movement should follow a logical physical path and be easy, which may be against the momentum of action. The puppeteer's action must also coordinate in time so that the moment one's arm is fully out-stretched and one's body has shifted to the side one is centre stage. In other words, the puppeteer's arm movement forward and walk continue to move Zeno's head toward the audience until the puppeteer's body is centre stage, the arm is fully extended, and one's body is facing sideways to the audience. Once this position is established, the puppeteer is fully extended and Zeno's focus is still for a moment, the puppeteer does a full body turn. The puppet should, to use a dance term, spot. This means that the puppet's focus starts in one place, turns quickly, and at the completion of the turn, return to the exact same location in space and focus on the audience at the location as in the start of turn.
- After the turn, the puppeteer continues to slowly walk to the opposite side of the stage, maintaining Zeno's focus at centre audience. Just before reaching the other side of the stage, Zeno and the puppeteer pause, and Zeno shakes his head. This moment breaks the puppet's contact with audience. Zeno turns his head in the direction of off-stage, and leaves.
- There are two variations that Tranter indicated:

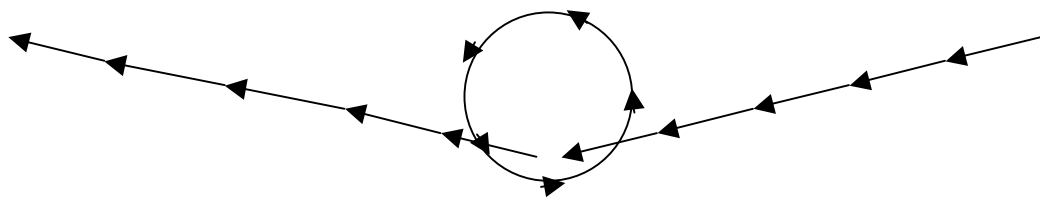
1. Variation 1: is to engage the mouth during the entire cross from one side of the stage to the other. For example, the mouth may slowly open beginning with a slight opening at the initial moment of Zeno 'seeing' the audience participant and continuing to open throughout the entire cross.
2. Variation 2: engages the puppet's body differently. Rather than Zeno attaining a full reach forward upon reaching the centre stage point, Zeno and the puppeteer pause directly prior, before full stretch forward, and then complete the action while stand still at centre stage. This variation is a bit like a full-bodied double take.

The floor patterns executed by the manipulator and the puppet for this exercise are, according to Tranter, very important. Tranter stated that, while on stage, he manipulates a puppet in 90° and 180° spatial relationships to the audience to maximize visibility of the puppet for all audience participants the majority of time in performance. This is partially accommodated through careful placement and awareness of the manipulator's and puppet's floor plan.

Puppeteer (direction for a right-handed puppeteer):



Puppet:



**Figure 16: Drawing of floor pattern for both puppeteer and puppet taken from my notes.**

What this exercise teaches is, in fact, a common practice in contemporary puppet theatre performance in which puppeteers are visible to the audience participants, but are not necessarily engaged in the story or events as dramatic characters themselves. Throughout the exercise, the puppeteer's attention is focused only on the puppet character, while the puppet makes visual contact with the audience participants, reacts to

that contact, crosses the stage, turns, and finally leaves. The most important elements are: gaze or the illusion of a puppet 'seeing', which the audience participants generally understand when a puppet reacts to what it sees; movement initiation, as a means to establish agency; and the physical demands on the puppeteer to establish directional focus of the puppet's such as – ability to establish a line of focus, change, and return to a previous focus, and how to break focus. To effectively accomplish these techniques, a puppeteer's body should, according to Tranter, ideally be relaxed with their focus fixed on the performing puppet. Even the subtlest moments of tension in a puppeteer's action or wandering of a puppeteer's gaze draws attention to the puppeteer and away from the performing puppet.

Tranter teaches that, in order for an audience participant to invest in and want to read or 'go with' a puppet, a puppeteer must establish a connection between the puppet and the audience. Establishing this connection and communication between the puppet and the audience participant happens at what Tranter refers to as the 'wow' or 'ah ha' moment. This is the moment when the audience and puppet character first see each other. Throughout the workshop, Tranter emphasises the gaze as a key component of this engagement. Once this psycho-physical connection has been made, the audience participant, Tranter teaches, begins to invest in the puppet as a character. He argues that this dialogue between performer and audience participant is the most crucial element of theatre, regardless of whether the performer is a puppet or a live actor. With a puppet performer, however, if this element is missing, Tranter believes that the audience participant is less likely to invest because the performer is obviously not real. In short, it is through the gaze that the audience participant establishes empathy with a puppet character.

The use and function of a puppet or object's gaze is important in a number of puppet traditions and techniques. For example, in his book *Phenomenology of a puppet theatre: contemplations on the art of Javanese wayang kulit*, Jan Mrázek explains how the eyes in a shadow puppet are carved last and are considered the most important element for creating the feeling that the puppet has life (Mrázek 30). However, what makes a 'good' eye is not clearly defined. It has something to do with proportion and the quality of carving but, in the end, it is an ephemeral quality that one will know when one sees it. A key to this 'knowing' is that the eye appears to see and, Mrázek concludes, this is what renders the eyes so essential to the life of a puppet (ibid., 42).

In other practices, the idea of a puppet seeing is not necessarily a question of the eye. In his workshop, 'The Logic of Movement: A Masterclass' taught at the Manipulate

Festival in Dundee, Scotland in 2008, Stephen Mottram teaches that it is not the eye that a puppeteer should necessarily be concerned with but rather where the object's nose is pointing. As he demonstrates, even something as simple as a foam ball can be made to 'see' another object if a correct combination of information is presented to an audience participant. Further, a puppet's gaze is often used as a way of directing the audience participants' gaze to what is occurring on stage. Tranter, on the other hand, employs the gaze to establish three elements: an empathic connection between performer and audience participants, a puppet character's presence, and to direct an audience participant's gaze towards a given point.

In order for this moment to happen, a puppet must be visible and easily within each audience member's gaze. In the workshop, we begin developing this sensitivity with the first exercise described above, when the puppet looks over the puppeteer's shoulder towards the centre of the audience. Even in performance, Tranter will typically place a puppet's initial gaze to the centre of the house in order to make this moment visible to the maximum number of audience participants. Once this communication is achieved, focus can be used for more than just communication or establishing empathy between puppet and audience. According to Tranter, everything that a puppet does is done through its eyes, and we, the audience participant, will experience the puppet most directly through its gaze. When a puppet looks it is truly discovering something—it cannot be distracted. An object's gaze, once set upon its object, does not waver.

Once a physical and intellectual understanding about how to create the illusion of presence and agency in a puppet is achieved, the next step is to learn how to interact and perform with this puppet as an equal presence and character on stage. For Tranter, the first step towards establishing this mode of performance relationship is to use the principles of action and reaction. The challenge of believability between ontologically different performers is in shaping the audience participant's perception of thought, internal process, and autonomous agency in the puppet. Audience participants, as Tillis argues, recognise and never forget that, when watching a puppet or object, they are watching a constructed performing object that has no ability to think. Therefore the illusion of thought must be established; one means of producing this illusion is to break down a puppet's behaviour into clear movements of action and re-action.<sup>92</sup> This includes

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<sup>92</sup> This notion is not unique to Tranter. Numerous puppeteers use this technique for creating the illusion of a puppet thinking, as found in workshops by Philippe Genty and Mary Underwood, Finn Caldwell, Gavin Glover, Stephen Mottram, and Chris Pirie, as well as in 'how to' books, such as Larry Engler and Carol Fijan's 1996 *Making Puppets Come Alive: How to Learn and Teach Hand Puppetry*.

not only how the puppeteer engages with the puppet, but also how the puppet engages with the actor puppeteer. While there are numerous subtleties of timing, rhythm, and focus that must be mastered in order to perform multiple characters— including oneself— on stage, there are two fundamental elements that Tranter focuses on in the workshop: clearly breaking each moment and gesture into logical sequences; and establishing that both the puppet and the actor puppeteer treat and interact with each other as responsive characters. In performance, a live human actor's behaviour must also be broken down into components, thus bringing the live human's performance of thought into parity with the puppet performers'.

This exercise, which Tranter calls 'Yes/No', builds on the work of Exercise 1. It is Tranter's key exercise to begin to split the live performer between her(him)self and a puppet thus establishing two equal status characters on stage. Tranter posits that the easiest dramatic moment that allows the audience participant to see two independent characters is when they are in conflict. The structure of this exercise is, like Exercise 1, seemingly simple. Two characters, a live performer and a puppet, sit eye-to-eye. Tranter believes that having the characters eye-to-eye suggests to the audience participant that the characters are equal social status. For most participants in order to position the puppet's head at an equal height as the puppeteer's, Zeno, the puppet, sat on a live performer's knee so that their eye-lines would be on the same vertical and horizontal planes in relation to each other and the audience participant view. The exercise starts when both characters look at the audience participants. Next, the characters make eye contact with each other. The dialogue begins when one shakes its head 'yes,' the other replies 'no'. In other words, the dialogue is conducted entirely through an action and reaction. Most often the scene continues until there is agreement. In other words, one character appears to change the other's mind.

Though not explicitly articulated, action/re-action is a primary behavioural component of the silent dialogue in the Yes/No exercise above. Nuances in timing of response, location of gaze, perception of body size, and action-reaction supply all the information that the audience participant needs to co-construct a narrative based solely on the behaviour of indicating 'Yes' or 'No'. Interestingly as we discovered when talking about what happens during the exercise later in the day, most of us did not make explicit decisions about the dramatic course of the exercise or which character was dominant. When watching some perform the exercise there appeared to be clear relationships and a dialogue being played out. This was most often true for those whose re-action was in the moment and to what was happening on stage rather than a predetermined or arbitrary

response. It is also a function of the live human's focus on the puppet and treating the object as a responsive character.

In discussion about the exercise, Tranter reiterates that the easiest performance moment to teach, that allows an audience participant to perceive the presence of two characters, is when the two characters—live actor and puppet—are in conflict. While the impetus of creating the illusion of the puppet's agency is clearly important to the performance of the exercise, in my experience of both doing and watching others do it, the exercise is most effective when a performer does not predetermine which character starts or whether the starting point is 'yes' or 'no'. If a sequence is predetermined, then the puppeteer falls into a problem that often occurs during improvisation: not listening and reacting to the other performer.<sup>93</sup> Paradoxically, of course, in this case the other performer is an object, a puppet, being manipulated by the actor puppeteer. Yet the puppeteer must, throughout the exercise, maintain a high level awareness of their split as a performer. They are not only engaged in a non-verbal improvisation but must also be acutely aware of the physical demands to perform clearly directed focus and gesture, both their own and the puppet's, as well react to the puppet's actions within the puppet's ontology. For example, if the puppeteer touches the puppet, the puppet must react in some way. If it does not, a piece of the illusion of that character's independent presence is dissipated in the audience participant's reading of the scene.

Although Tranter is an actor first and foremost, he is acutely conscious of the fact that puppetry has a strong visual component. This is evidenced, I would suggest, in part in his use of a puppet's sign system of gesture and rhythm as well as design and voice, which will be analyzed below, to visually convey narrative information. However, his approach to each of these elements is that of an actor's process and is guided by the inner psychological life of each specific character. In other words, gesture, rhythm, and design are means of expressing something essential about the character, who they are, and how they see the world— not simply because an element looks good on stage.

### **Acting as and with Puppets**

Though his own practice is method based and premised on defining and performing the psychological subject-hood of each character he portrays on stage – himself as a character and his fellow puppet actors, his workshop training focus on the physical aspects of acting as and with puppets. Tillis, like numerous other practitioners and scholars, argues

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<sup>93</sup> This exercise will be analysed further in Chapter Seven as it was used in the practice component. This will include some video recordings.

that movement, including going from one place to another and symbolic gesture, is a defining characteristic of puppetry. As I argued in Chapter One, symbolic gesture is deeply connected to the memory of both the actor puppeteer(s) who is articulating the symbolic gesture and the audience participant reading meaning from what they are experiencing. While movement is an integral component of the way puppets create readable meaning on stage, it is not merely physical action. Motion and gesture, whether that of a puppet, live human or material performer will always have rhythm – meaning elements of tempo, pace, and relative timing. When writing about dance in *The Poetics*, Aristotle states that ‘rhythm alone... imitates character, emotion, and action...’ (Aristotle 1; Gerould 45). In puppetry, rhythm—of gesture, action, or an entire scene—is often used in a similar manner to communicate or represent meaning on stage. Rather than teaching specific gestures or body language and rhythms associated with particular emotional intent, characteristics, or expressions, Tranter explores these as they emerge from a particular character type within a specific situation. This work is introduced in a series of scene building exercises. The first begins with two puppeteers and Zeno, the puppet. The puppeteers select a very short section from a fairytale and then perform that moment using only gesture to convey who each character is, where they are located, and enough of the story so that the audience participants can identify which fairytale they are watching. No language or sound can be used to enhance the physical actions. Each pair has ten minutes to decide what fairy tale moment they will enact and to determine how they will work together, meaning who will manipulate what.

Tranter used each performance of this exercise as a premise to discuss what needs to be considered when using symbolic gesture to convey meaning. The key ideas and questions that emerged can be categorized as relevant to scene structure, the construction of meaning using symbolic gesture, and elements that dictate how a symbolic gesture is read. Whether or not one’s work is text or visually based, puppetry, Tranter argues, demands thinking in images. In order for the form to be successful at communicating, one must understand basic narrative structures and how to show clear relationships, intentions, and desires using image and symbolic gesture.<sup>94</sup> It is important, he contends to not only establish clear beginnings and ends of a scene, particularly when playing with duality of a puppet as a living character and constructed performing object, but to also consider the dynamics of each scene and production as well as the logistics. Consider, he suggests, using contrasting energies on stage with a scene and from one scene to the next.

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<sup>94</sup> In his own production work, Tranter makes clear decisions of what he shows using gesture, image, text, music, and lighting. But I would suggest that in order to make a choice between methods of showing one must understand how each function.



However one must be aware of how any given dynamic or shift in dynamics effects the construction and reading of meaning. Scene development in puppetry though is also reliant on the practical logistics: where a puppet and/or puppeteer is, where they will need to go spatially, and where they need to end. These aspects can also be a good way to start the choreography of a production. Scene structure is the framework but in puppetry, it is important to ask one's self 'what moments do I have to convey and how can I clearly establish these visually or gesturally?'<sup>95</sup>

To communicate, Tranter says, actions need to be clearly constructed. The physical movements, their qualities, and the order in which actions/symbolic gesture are performed inform the audience participant about the location, situation, and character. One must be aware of the information one wants them to read and be able to step back from the doing in order to read how different qualities and order effect meaning construction. For example, shaking can be read as cold, fear, age, or anger; it is the context and order that help the audience participant construct a particular meaning. If these are not considered, one may, Tranter warns, tell a different story than the one intended. When developing a scene, begin by determining what the physical indicators are that establish character and location. How, Tranter asks rhetorically, does one convey information about character such as gender, age, class, economic status, and state of mind using only gesture? How does an audience participant know where a scene is taking place? If there is more than one actor puppeteer as in our performance of this exercise, consider the alternate ways of showing location using nothing but the three bodies. Further, a puppet's ontology demands that it demonstrate what it is doing. Simple actions and gestures that live actors take for granted<sup>96</sup> must be broken down into bites or beats.<sup>97</sup> Meaning that puppets, in order to have a believable illusion of life or presence, must react to each moment. Tranter states that it is the re-action, not the action that is read by the audience participant as thinking, seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, or touching. For example, in an exchange between characters, if one touches another, the one touched

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<sup>95</sup> This question in Tranter's own work is considered in relation to other elements he uses to convey narrative information such as sound, lighting or text.

<sup>96</sup> This notion of breaking puppet action into beats as necessary for an audience participant to read what is happening on stage is shared and taught by many puppeteers including Compagnie Philippe Genty, Gavin Glover, Stephen Mottram. Tranter, at least in my understanding, is concerned with how this break down necessarily affects the entire understanding of character and interaction on stage not merely the moment to moment. Further this manner of break down action and re-action effects the performance of all performing partners including the live human, thus changing expectations of live human behaviour one stage and bringing it in parallel with one's puppet performing partners.

<sup>97</sup> There are similarities to Mary Underwood's awareness and use of the live human performer's body in relation to manipulation.

must see or respond to the hand that touches it. This, Tranter believes, is particularly true in live actor and puppet interaction.

Tranter stated at one moment during the workshop in response to a scene: ‘If you show the right codes to the audience, they will accept the representational language’ of puppet theatre. Coding is a key word for Tranter. By this, I understand him to typically be referring to symbolic gesture; however, at this moment Tranter noted the effects of response time, physical indicators, and breath as additional factors affecting the reading of symbolically coded narratives. In puppetry, Tranter says, there is a delayed response between actor puppeteer and puppet, and between the events on stage and the audience participant’s reading of those events. Take time to fulfil this action – reaction not only between performers on stage but also among audience participants. If this is cut short or truncated, the audience participant may not know what is being conveyed in the narrative. In other words, the physical score must be clearly articulated with breath and pauses as well as action – reaction in a manner that will give the audience participant the time to read or interpret what is happening on stage. Additionally, the puppeteer’s breath can be used to initiate or create stimulus for action and intention. While developing these aspects, Tranter notes, it is important to remain cognizant of how the design aspects and physical relationships among actors – live human and puppet – effect the interpretation of events. For example, two physical indicators of status and power differences between characters are height relationships between characters and size.<sup>98</sup> These indicators effect how any given scenario will be read. However, within his own work scenic structures, symbolic gesture, and design are not constructed in a vacuum. They are premised on public memory, the character’s archetype, personal memory, and using Method acting techniques as well as the relative spatial positions between live human and puppet performers that may also convey character information, such as status or power positions between characters, to the audience participant.

This first scene-based exercise with the accompanying key ideas and questions forms the premise of each of the subsequent exercises. Although rhythm is not specifically articulated as a component of gesture, it plays a role in the audience participant’s reading of the scene. In the next acting exercise however, we—puppeteers and puppets—are to work as equal status characters and specifically incorporate rhythm as a mean to creating readable movement and gesture. Working in pairs with Zeno as in the previous exercise, each group is to tell/perform a moment from a fairy tale using

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<sup>98</sup> For an excellent list of physical relationships that relay meaning in story telling see the appendix of Keith Johnstone’s *Impro for Storytellers: Theatresports and the Art of Making Things Happen*.

rhythm and incorporating each of the previous techniques that we have been working on such as gesture, order, and action-re-action as tools to construct the scene. Rhythm, however, should be the dominant feature. Tranter intentionally leaves the interpretation of what he means by and how to use rhythm vague. This allows each team to interpret and determine what this means for them. In the performance of each pair's scene, rhythm was interpreted very differently for example rhythm was used by some pairs as a way to sequence events, whereas others used rhythm as way to identify characters.

After focusing individually on movement and gesture, Tranter uses two final exercises, one performed individually with a puppet the other performed in pairs, to develop the various skill sets and theories he has introduced. The first of these, performed individually with the puppet, Tranter calls 'Entrance & Exit'. It returns us to focusing on developing a puppet character alone; the puppeteer is not an equal character on stage. Using only gesture and rhythm, we are to choose a character, enter the stage area, do something that tells the audience participant something about who this character is—in terms of its gender, age, class, and such, establish where they are located, and exit. In an aside, Tranter told me that this was the first time that he tried this exercise in a workshop. It, however, was clearly in the same vein as the other exercises and in alignment with his techniques and overall teaching methodology. During the exercise, I found myself reflecting about how these moments of entering and exiting were particularly important in his productions. For example when a puppet character enters the stage, Tranter often takes a moment to communicate something essential about that character to the audience participants. Key thoughts from Tranter that emerged in response to this exercise included:

- As noted previously, it is important to split up the physical information that one uses to introduce a character logically and clearly.<sup>99</sup> One must remember that the order of the physical information determines how audience participants read meaning and construct character from the physical information. The need for clarity and mindfulness of order increases when there are fewer other elements such as dialogue on stage that give the audience participant this information.
- In response to one performance of the exercise that lacked clarity or intention, Tranter noted that a way to be clear through a puppet's gaze is for a puppet's eyes to follow a line or pathway for the entire time that it is on stage. This intentional focus of a puppet will direct an audience participant's gaze to what the puppet sees and reacts to, what it is doing, and where it is going in the space. In other

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<sup>99</sup> This can be likened to bits or beats as used in acting terminology.

words, a puppet's gaze is indicative of its thoughts and movement in space. If the gaze is clear, clarity of action will follow for the audience participant.

Looking forward to the next exercise, Tranter says: 'Voice, with a puppet, is also positional and movement in space'.

This exercise was performed by two actor puppeteers and Zeno, and incorporated voice. At this point in the workshop, we bringing together all of the techniques we have been working on to create more fully developed improvised scenes. We were only given a topic— death—and asked to consider each of the elements that we have been building throughout the workshop: text, rhythm, gesture, focus, and so on, as means to construct a scene. As these exercises progress it became clear that the core of what we have been working towards was to develop the ability as actor puppeteers to have well articulated, clear control of the puppet allowing us to manipulate the audience participant's reading of a scene so that, despite the ontological differences between performers, they believe/accept that all are equal presences on stage.

Because of the limits of the types of information that can be conveyed by using movement and gesture, one of the challenges of performing puppet theatre is constructing these elements in such a way that they convey particular and intended meanings or potential readings by the audience participants. For example, if a puppet enters a space shaking, what does that mean? Is the character cold? Elderly? Afraid? And how do we, as audience participants, know the difference? In Tranter's work, as in his workshop, each decision about gesture and rhythm is carefully considered, and, in Tranter's case, is a well learned technique after his many years of constructing movement and symbolic gesture. In his practice, these decisions are determined from the point of view of a character underpinned by psychological subject-hood. Yet through symbolic gestures, movement, and rhythm we, the audience participant, are provided with physical information about a character's attributes: such as gender, age, worldview, class, intellectual abilities, and sensibility.

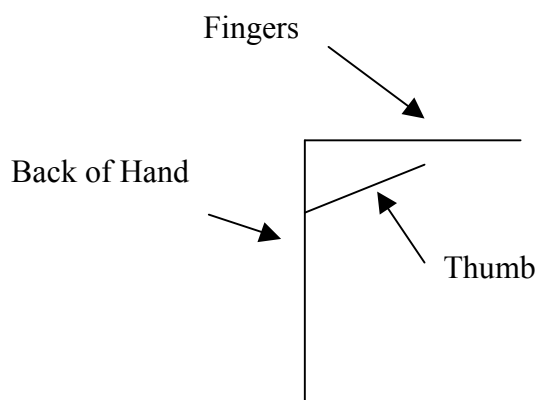
### **Voice**

The techniques Tranter uses to teach lip synchronization are traditional techniques passed down though various puppet training courses and workshops,<sup>100</sup> as well as in at least one

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<sup>100</sup> Practitioners from a wider variety of aesthetics use lip synchronization such as puppeteers working with Muppets, Green Ginger, and Duda Paiva. While numerous puppetry workshops seem to include lip synch and it is a fairly well known technique,

how to book, Larry Engler and Carol Fijan's *Making Puppets Come Alive: How to Learn and Teach Hand Puppetry*, which includes a section on lip synch with exercises (Engler and Fijan 144-51). There are two primary things that a puppeteer needs to learn: the mechanics of moving the mouth and how to use it in connection with their speech. In hand and mouth forms of puppetry, the puppeteer's hand manipulates a puppet from inside the head with the fingers and thumb in a triangular configuration:



**Figure 17: Diagram of hand and finger positioning for a working mouth puppet from my notes.**

The head of a puppet sits on top of the fingers and often the nose of the puppet will line up with the puppeteer's middle finger. Between the fingers and thumb, is the mouth. While the type of puppet will generally determine how best to use the fingers and thumb in relation to each other, when working with Tranter's style of puppet, the puppeteer primarily uses the thumb, moving downwards to open and upwards to close, to move a puppet's mouth to speak. This allows the eyes to remain steady. The voice of a puppet is thrown forward in different degrees, depending on the vocal emphasis, through the wrist of the puppeteer.

The action of opening and closing a puppet's mouth coordinates with both the breath and sound to be made. The mouth opens slightly before the moment of sound production, and closes slightly after. This subtle coordination and rhythm will often determine whether or not the audience participants will accept a voice to be that of the puppet. Further, within his own work, Tranter does not throw a puppet's voice; he does

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when speaking separately with Tranter and Terry Lee, founder of Green Ginger, they often mentioned the lack of lip synch skills in participants who have taken their various workshops. I have also found this to be the case. For example, when I was working at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in the puppetry strand though the students' were aware of the technique they had no training or exposure to it.

not use ventriloquism, disguise, or hide the movements of his own mouth. He believes that these conventions are unnecessary and in fact detract from the content of a production. As Tranter said during the workshop, when one sees a ventriloquist one always asks: “How do they do it?” whereas if the actor’s mouth is visibly moving, the audience participant knows how it is done, forgets about the mechanics, and engages with the character and story completely. As theatre critic Miriam Seidel noted in her review of *The Nightclub* in 1997: ‘No ventriloquism here: instead, we in the audience raced to keep up with the illusion as he shifted rapid-fire among multiple voices’ (Seidel). Tranter however does not merely show his lips moving as the vocal source for the puppet characters, he also employs design and physical techniques to assist this illusion of the voice coming from a puppet. Tranter constructs the mouths of his puppets so that they are larger than his own,<sup>101</sup> uses gaze as an indicator of who is speaking meaning that the speaker is often looking toward the audience participants whereas the listener is looking toward the speaker, and he integrates gesture as a companion to his use of language.

During his workshop, Tranter teaches an individual exercise with Zeno to begin developing the basics of lip synchronization (lip synch). Tranter demonstrates and discusses basic techniques – how the hand functions inside the puppet’s head and how to ‘throw’ the voice through the wrist for energy. For the exercise, the actor puppeteer and Zeno are seated. The puppeteer should have Zeno either count or say the alphabet. Tranter has us start working using a precise formula of movement and voice: start posed, move the puppet’s gaze, say word/number, change gaze, say next word/number. This sequence repeats for the entire exercise. Tranter suggests two variations that employ gesture either 1) look, gesture, text; or 2) look, text, gesture.

Additionally, regarding the quality of vocal production, Tranter suggests:

- That to create a different voice than one’s own, simply go either slightly higher or slightly lower than one’s own register; and
- That the body of the puppet should reflect the resonance of the voice, meaning that if a word is spoken with a big voice then consider expanding the body and looking up; if small then consider contracting the body and shifting the gaze down.

Once these basic skills have been explored and developed using the exercise above, dramatic text is integrated as an additional tool to reveal character and the circumstances

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<sup>101</sup> A proportionally large mouth is also used in Muppet construction because it reads well on television and was incorporated in the design of the puppets for the stage musical spoof of the television show *Sesame Street*, *Avenue Q*.

of a scene. This exercise is performed individually with Zeno, using a single line of text that can be spoken by either or each of the performers. The choice should be predicated on the circumstances of the scene. We worked this exercise twice, first using text one: ‘I know who you are and I saw what you did’, and then using text two: ‘If you are not there to help me, who will?’ This final exercise is used to solidify the lip synchronization skills within the context of a simple dramatic exercise. Tranter reminds us that rules of action—reaction, focus, and establishing character with gesture and rhythm—do not change just because text has been added.

For Tranter’s own practice, voice, and lip synch are important components of his plays and aesthetic. Though he resists comparisons with ventriloquism by not disguising the source of the vocal production, his work, like that of ventriloquists, locates voice as a means of manufacturing presence in a puppet body. The dominance of voice as representative of character can most poignantly be seen in *Cuniculus*. In this show, Tranter first associates a particular voice with a particular physical character at the top of the show but by the end of the play enacts scenes where only the voice is activated. The puppet is physically present but not manipulated. By stripping away the physical life of the object and what Tillis and others define as the ontological sign systems of a puppet, Tranter performs, as I theorized above, what Connor theorizes as the ‘vocalic body’ (Connor 35) in which vocal production itself produces a body or as I read it character.

### **Puppet Design**

Tranter’s puppet actors are generally human simulacra, although occasionally they are animals with human characteristics, as in *Manipulator* and *Cuniculus*, which is populated with rabbits. His design aesthetic uses grotesque, cabaret, and drag elements combined with ‘Muppet’ style construction techniques; they are far from being either realistic or naturalistic. Rather they form a grotesque body, which, as Mikhail Bakhtin wrote, ‘is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body’ (Bakhtin *Rabelais and His World* 37). Tranter’s puppet acting partners are



**Figure 18: *Schicklegruber alias Adolf Hitler* 2002. Performer: Neville Tranter. Photography by Mathias Friedrich**

always in a state of becoming through the memory of the actor puppeteer manifesting the actor's presence in the moment on stage as well as through the memories of the audience participants who are creating meaning from what they are witnessing. On one level, the extremity of the design subverts the audience participant's engagement with the puppet actor because they are, with the exception of Tranter himself, clearly puppets. Yet it is arguably this very subversion that gives an audience participant permission suspend their disbelief, accept a puppet actor as having independent agency, and empathise with its character. This empathy is, I suggest, directly related to how puppets work for, with, and on, the audience participants. As Allen Weiss suggests in his essay, *The Inner Puppet*, included in the 2008 exhibition catalogue, *The Puppet Show*:

[A]s a quintessentially human figure, the puppet—whether commercial, folkloric, voodoo, rag, stick, or finger—permits the widest range of psychological projections and identification. Its uncanniness stems precisely from its ontological equivocations. (qtd in Schaffner and Kuoni 21)

In other words, a puppet is a canvas that conveys coded, character-based information on to which the audience participant projects her or his own memory of experience to complete the life of the puppet. For Tranter, the canvas begins in his understanding of who the character is as an archetype relative to the entire play script and psychologically, both aspects of which are subsequently expressed in each character's design.

While Stanislavski's *Building a Character* is largely pre-occupied with external or physical techniques used to create and present a character, he notes early on in discussion with a fictional interlocutor, Tortsov, that if an actor does not

... find a form of characterization which corresponds to the image, you probably cannot convey to others its inner, living spirit. "Yes," agreed Tortsov, "without an external form neither your inner characterization nor the spirit of your image will reach the public. The external characterization explains and illustrates and thereby conveys to your spectators the inner pattern of your part." (Stanislavski *Building a Character* 5)

But, as is evident from the exchange quoted above, the external is a direct reflection of the inner characterisation and one must understand this before creating the external form. When asked how to do this, Tortsov replies 'especially among talented actors, the physical materialization of a character to be created emerges of its own accord once the right inner values have been established' (ibid.). While Tranter uses certain construction techniques for all of his puppet characters, in his own productions the execution of these techniques for each individual puppet are employed as a direct response to who a character is within that particular narrative.



In the workshop, Tranter explains the conceptual design and construction techniques that he uses. While other puppet practitioners have used the techniques themselves, his particular expression of these techniques results in his own aesthetic. The basic facial features of each his puppet's mask are constructed in balanced opposition,



**Figure 19: *Schicklegruber alias Adolf Hitler* 2002.  
Performer: Neville Tranter. Photography by  
Mathias Friedrich.**

creating tension and the possibility of visible emotional range and 'expression'. For example, he may design a puppet's eye region with both eyebrows angled downwards to suggest sadness, but he will curve the mouth upwards to suggest happiness. In each of his puppets, the eyes are constructed to convey contrasting emotions, through the line of the eye and the location of the pupil. In addition,

Tranter generally uses a reflective paste gem for the pupil of a puppet's eye so that it will catch the light on stage; it is also large in proportion to the rest of the features and therefore visible in large houses. The technical styles of abstraction and scaling of features are similar to those used by Jim Henson. Tranter credits Henson with teaching him a great deal through his watching of *The Muppet Show*. These techniques were succinctly outlined by Rick Lyon when talking during an interview panel about design features and the challenges of scaling a production from a small to a large venue using a character from *Avenue Q*. Lyon states that a puppet is an abstraction. In design, for example, a character's 'eye [might be] the size of the bottom third of an actor's whole face' (Lyon *Puppetry and Theatre*). Indeed, 'because it is abstracted, because the colour is brighter... because it is a reduction, a simplification' (ibid.), a puppet is more visible than a human face and, I would suggest, presents a greater opportunity for imaginative reading by the audience participants because they are compelled to complete the picture.

By constructing the mask or face in this way, Tranter creates the opportunity for the puppet to be read with multiple complex emotions when it is manipulated in different lights, at different angles, and at different tempos. As Petr Bogatyrev notes:

A puppet's stylized face is also a mask that changes its facial expressions depending on the movements of the puppet's entire figure, on how it is directed by the puppeteer, and on its words... The more schematized a

puppet's face is, the more possibilities it has to participate in different situations. (Bogatyrev and Hahn 57)

Because of the puppet's design, its movement in space relative to lighting creates shadows, and the character's body language or gestures are suggestive of feelings; these emotional 'changes' are perceived by the audience participant. By controlling timing and rhythm of movement, a puppeteer expands this opportunity for the audience participant to read or, as Tranter would say: 'to go with', every expression of an emotion.

### **Conclusion**

Tranter's approach to puppetry weaves together acting and traditional puppetry techniques. The work begins with his notion of creating equal status acting partners and the techniques required to accomplish this parity of presence between ontologically different performers in the eye of the audience participant. This illusion is created through establishing the notion of life in a puppet through the following techniques: developing the psychological subject-hood of each character, splitting the self, precise timing, gaze, action/reaction, and voice modulation, as well as modification of the live human actor's behaviour relative to their puppet acting partner. He then uses puppetry techniques and exercises that focus on the development of and interaction between ontologically different characters. Underpinning these techniques are a number of levels, expressions, and use of memory and the puppet as a site of personal and public memory. Tranter incorporates personal memory through Method techniques to identify and consistently use personal emotional content performed by himself and his puppet acting partners. Personal memory is combined with public cultural memory as archetypes to frame each character in his plays. These two expressions of memory form the foundation of character and dictate the puppet's performance score as expressed through their sign system: movement (including actions, gaze, and symbolic gesture), constructed object, and voice. The characters—both human and puppet—are constructed according to an understanding of individual intentions, motivations, desires, and archetypes from which emerge the design, gestures, and rhythms that communicate meaning. Construction, however, is filtered through the memories of the actor puppeteer and the audience participants' reading of the performance. Though he is ultimately the only doer on stage—manipulating and providing the voices for all the puppet characters as well as himself—from the point of view of the audience participant we witness a world and experience a play performed by numerous equal status, acting partners.

## Part 4

### Case study: *Three Good Wives*

#### Chapter 7



**Figure 20: *Three Good Wives* (rehearsal photograph) 2010. Performers: Anna-Maria Nabirye, Elisa Gallo Rosso, Marianna Vogt. Photography by Michael Kelly.**

#### **Toward a Practice of Presence and Memory in Puppet Theatre**

Despite their aesthetic differences, central concerns in the workshop training of both Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre were performance skills and the manufacture of stage presence for both the live human and puppet actor. While their productions that create stage worlds in which all performing objects have equal status suggest a decentering of the human, their practical concerns, performance theories, and workshop techniques demonstrate a radical shift in the field of puppet theatre training from an external object oriented approach to an internal memory based practice. My research shows that though Genty, Underwood, and Tranter use the visible aesthetic principles of puppetry (Tillis *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* 7) and draw on traditional manipulation techniques as tools, the foundations of their performance practices are grounded in individual and cultural memory, and human psychology. Key aspects of their training include acting and

performance skills, puppet manipulation, and the manufacture and sustained communication of presence. Underpinning each of these aspects are four ways in which memory is made material through the act of performance: 1) remembering performance scores, 2) memory as a mechanism to create performance vocabularies, often referred to as symbolic gesture or coding when for puppets, content, and emotional mapping, 3) memory as an activator of presence, and 4) puppets as sites of memory in the sense that they are symbolic elements of cultural memory, places where memory is crystallized, and the site where memory is transferred to create meaning. My hypothesis is that memory is called upon as a mechanism to create or manufacture presence. In other words, performance presence – live human and puppet – emerges through the externalization of memory.

The performance problem of externalizing an actor's inner truth is not new. Stanislavski recognized that the production of inner truth was not enough; the actor needs a technique to externalize those truths. His technique is referred to as the method of physical action. By truth, Stanislavski is referring to 'scenic truth which the actor must make use of in his moments of creativeness' that manifest as the actors' sensations and physical actions (Stanislavski *An Actor Prepares* 141). The method of physical action is, as Jean Benedetti writes in the introduction to his book *Stanislavski and the Actor: The Method of Physical Action*, 'the foundation on which the entire emotional, mental, and philosophical superstructure of the ultimate performance is built' (Benedetti xv). For the actor, it is a means of exploring a play and situations based on what one would do rather than reflexive analysis (ibid.) supported by the emotional truth of a character. For many live human actors, the reflexive work of developing a character precedes the physical. Puppetry, as I noted in Part One, is often theorized as and tends, even among puppeteers, to be approached from external elements: physical design, manipulation of the object, rhythms used for movements, and symbolic gestures. The physical aspects are what define character and narrative. This external approach is evident in a range of aesthetic practice including Joly, Obraztsov, and Schumann whose works draw on cultural archetypes and sign systems. It is clever, engineered, and charming but not psychologically deep. Productions by contemporary practitioners, particularly after the mid-twentieth century, such as DRAK, Compagnie Philippe Genty, and Stuffed Puppet Theatre however suggest a shift from external to internal processes. Based on my research of the theories and techniques of Genty, Underwood, and Tranter, this shift in production aesthetics from external to internal also extends to their performance practices that use memory and actor generated material.

In the performance practices of Genty and Underwood, their use of internal techniques for the puppet is implicit. As I discuss in Part Two, they state that memory is not a technique for use with puppets because puppets have no memory yet an analysis of actor puppeteers working within their techniques suggests that the techniques for live human actors, puppets, and materials blur and influence each other – particularly puppet and material manipulation. Further, Genty and Underwood do in fact incorporate memory without calling it as such through their use of mimesis and their expectations about manufacturing presence in puppets, objects, and materials. Tranter on the other hand explicitly uses memory in his own practice but does not directly teach all of the techniques he uses in his workshop. For all three, internal memory is present yet just below the surface of their puppet performance training and is externalized through visible puppet manipulation techniques.

While Genty, Underwood, and Tranter’s theories and techniques that are taught in workshops emerge from and serve their own particular creative practices’, Hodge argues that, ultimately, the intention of training for a performer is to ‘prepare the actor for work’<sup>102</sup> (Hodge *Twentieth Century Actor Training* 2). For Genty and Underwood, their training was designed specifically for identifying and teaching prospective company members in their particular methods and as a means of income, whereas for Tranter, teaching workshops is a way to refine his own practice<sup>103</sup> and as a means of income. For all three whether intended or not, their training becomes part of each individual workshop participant’s syncretic practice but is not necessarily explicitly invoked to address performance challenges rather their techniques operate just under the surface. Training with masters or expert practitioners such as Genty, Underwood, and Tranter is not necessarily a means to either emulate their work and aesthetics or a pathway to working with them as was and continues to be the case with many who participate in Genty and Underwood’s workshops as I discuss in Part Two, but rather it may also be a means to understanding fundamental principles underlying contemporary puppetry practice that may or may not be known at some level. My findings about Genty, Underwood, and Tranter’s performance practices are that they have woven external, visible puppetry

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<sup>102</sup> There are many reasons why one might embark on training such as to expand one’s horizons, improve physical or mental abilities, training training’s sake or to understand a practice from a different vantage point. In this instance, however, I understand Hodge to be thinking of training in relationship to an individual who is a professional in the given discipline.

<sup>103</sup> This is based on my own observation of and ongoing conversations with him about his work and training over the past five years. In this time, I have witnessed his artistic practice and training evolve in response to each other.

aesthetics and techniques with internal live human actor techniques and shifted the psychosomatic relationship between actor puppeteer and puppet. Their combined theories and techniques suggest that puppet performance practice makes Schechner's notion 'not me, not not me' material and tangible in that puppets are not the actor puppeteer(s) manipulating them. As objects, they are sites of memory in the sense that they are monuments to cultural pasts and the receiving site of personal memory. In performance, puppets are made present in the moment of performance, in the sense of appearing to have agency and life, by making temporary use of the actor puppeteer's internal memories and corresponding emotion.

As practical research, *Three Good Wives* aimed to bring these internal techniques to the forefront and in direct communication with traditional puppetry techniques. In other words, it aimed to raise and explicitly investigate each company's theories and techniques that are below the surface of their visible production practices unbound from the original aesthetic practices from which they emerged to produce a training resource for the broader puppet theatre community and better understand the relationships and general principles among memory, presence, and visible puppetry techniques. This test was carried out under the conditions for which training is typically undertaken: building the skills required to perform. Even as I embarked on this research, I was aware that, as a 'test', the variables are vast. Cast performers, collaborators, and myself all have varying degrees of theatrical training and experience, which I recognise as a condition of theatre making. We all walk into the rehearsal studio with prior knowledge and experiences; nobody is a blank sheet.

This case study is divided into two sections. Section One includes my history as a theatre maker and production issues that arose during the project that fall outside of the research but which had an impact on decisions and outcomes of the research. Section Two explores memory made material in relation to the production dramaturgy and investigates the theories and training techniques developed by Genty, Underwood, and Tranter that use memory as a resource for production vocabulary, memory as an activator of presence, and the puppet as sites and a site of memory. A video recording of the full production *Three Good Wives* (DVD 1) and excerpted sections of rehearsal video (DVD 2) accompany and support this thesis. These DVDs are referenced throughout this section; when viewing excerpted material on DVD 2, note that the DVD will automatically return to the menu at the end of each clip.

## Section One

### My Background

I am a United States (US) based director and performer. I began my performance career as a modern dancer, working primarily with We Dance/Los Angeles Modern Dance and Ballet under artistic director, Naomi Goldberg-Haas, for over ten years. My introduction to puppetry was circumstantial and occurred through connections from this dance company. My puppetry training took place on the job, as is often the case with puppeteers in both the US and Europe, while performing with several New York based companies. I began directing, while continuing to work on other projects, to create my own work. As I began making my own work in puppet theatre, I learned that training opportunities in the US, particularly those that explore non-commercial experimental approaches, were rare and that documentation about contemporary practice either in the US or Europe was limited. My directorial process is based on my experience as a performer and from observing other directors not on formal training. Generally, my process is intuitive, and I often work with performers selected from a group of actors with whom I have worked on past productions.<sup>104</sup>

Regardless of how I arrived at my directorial practice, my life and creative experiences, as with any artist, influence (one could even argue that they dictate) my practice. On the one hand, this is what makes any artist unique; on the other it affords both opportunities and obstacles. For example, this research project represents an opportunity based on my own desire and quest to understand contemporary practice, realizing that this research had not been done and seeking a framework with which to both conduct the research and document it for myself and other practitioners. Further opportunities not only exist in my own struggle to translate from practice to page but also with my own experiences of and efforts to understand Genty, Underwood, and Tranter's performance theories and techniques from their perspective and in a manner that is useful beyond my own practice. Paradoxically this later opportunity is also an obstacle as it will, as I noted in Chapter Two, always be incomplete and transformed as a result of translation and idiosyncratic interpretation. Yet it is this very transformation that presents openings for evolution and growth in practice and theory. Through my own interpretation of their combined theories and techniques emerges a fundamental shift in puppetry practice from internal to external processes leading to my practice component and

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<sup>104</sup> Samples of some of my previous productions can be found on Youtube: *The Nose*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWTc4tmrdYs> and *The Brain, An Experiment in Puppet Theater*: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJbKct24\\_DE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJbKct24_DE).

attempts to articulate the invisible mechanism (memory), I perceive in their puppet performance techniques today.

To balance the obstacles inherent in my limitations and habits of practice, I have consciously situated my practice component outside of my typical way of working meaning within academia and in a new geographical location. Although I produced the show under the auspices of my New York company Inkfish ([www.inkfishart.com](http://www.inkfishart.com)) founded in 2004 with designer Michael Kelly and director/performer Brian Snapp, this research culminates with a show in a new city—London—and working with an unknown group of performers, selected during a workshop audition. In my previous work and because the performers with whom I work in New York are known to me, I have not focused on performance techniques or presence, but rather on the ideological and narrative content of a play. This production—including its development, training the performers, and rehearsal process—was to be guided by and continues my research on performance training, the negotiation of presence between ontologically different performer types, and the application and investigation of theories and techniques developed by Genty, Underwood, and Tranter. To facilitate my investigation, I aimed to give agency to the performers and the techniques by allowing these as much as myself as director a voice in directorial choices made throughout the making process.

### **Production Set Up**

As my research project evolved, I found my questioning when the practice based research initiated. Arguably it began with the practice component during the first rehearsal period for the production. However, the conceptual starting point was when I discovered the lack of documentation and investigation about contemporary practitioners and began my archival research, historical inquiry, and production analysis about the specific artists, companies, and their work. Carole Gray, as I noted in Chapter Two, argues that *practice-led* research firstly initiates in practice and secondly is carried out through practice (Gray 3) Framed thusly, it began when I was engaged in my participant observation with the companies themselves during their workshops, which I noted overlapped with making production decisions that would affect the physical rehearsal periods.<sup>105</sup>

I was aware in advance of my research of both companies, though not of their specific techniques or theories. However, I knew that each company creates their own narratives or plays. I therefore chose a show concept that would be original and could be

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<sup>105</sup> Nor is it inconceivable to say that the starting point was when I first applied for the doctoral programme at Royal Holloway with my research proposal.



developed as part of the practice as research process, rather than an existing play. The theatrical premise of the production was determined prior to my starting research of any kind for this thesis, and is a product of my interest in and feelings about the prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is premised on a feminist re-imagining of, or proposition about, a character called Penelope, suggested by Margaret Atwood in her book *Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus* (Atwood). From this initial kernel, and in response to our current wars, *Three Good Wives* evolved into an original puppet theatre piece that weaves the stories of contemporary military wives with three mytho-historical female characters—Penelope from Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Scheherazade from *The Arabian Nights*, and Mandodari from the *Ramayana*—in order to investigate the themes of revenge, war, regret, waiting and healing. I had intended to employ a playwright and develop a play script in a process incorporating aspects of Genty, Underwood, and Tranter’s notions about developing a narrative for the stage. However, as I note below, the playwright disrupted, rather than facilitated, the process. The cast and I therefore devised the play script using Genty and Underwood’s collaborative techniques, such as playing ping-pong, exploring character conflicts and experimentation, followed by periods of rewriting in combination with Tranter’s notions about developing and forming character as an integral part of the writing process. We based this development on our collective research about each of the mytho-historical characters and contemporary military wives and using verbatim text found also during our research.

### **The Messiness of Theatre Making**

The production faced a number of creative and practical challenges. The creative challenges will be addressed later in the case study analysis. Some of the practical challenges are those faced by any professional production, whereas others are related to the nature of production as an instrument for research. The challenges that had direct consequences for the research were: timing, and the relationship between the research about the companies and the practice component schedule; funding; collaborator difficulties; as well as tensions between what it means to create a piece as research versus making a show for a paying audience. These challenges are one aspect of what I am referring to as the messiness of theatre making. This messiness, or what Gregory Bateson calls a muddle in his ‘Metalogue: Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?’ (Bateson 3 – 8), is highly subjective and calls into question the very meanings of the concepts of tidy or neat and muddle or messy. Bateson argues that the range of what one might refer to as tidy is different from anyone else’s notion of tidy. Further, he goes on there are many more

possibilities for things to be not tidy or muddled. For example, for me the ideal scenario for this research would have been to conduct the research about Genty, Underwood, and Tranter first followed by all the pre- and production work for the practical component. The available opportunities to conduct research however coupled with the academic timeline for completing the project and the needs of the production requiring that some activities begin two years prior to performance led to overlapping activities; in other words, a muddle. This muddle, however, leads to opportunity in that it opens the way for a hermeneutic spiral methodology as framed by Tringham and discussed in Chapter Two where by each overlapping activity effects the other and informs the research. These opportunities emerge in my investigation and theorization below and in Chapter One.

The audition for performers was held at Jacksons Lane in North London on 5 April 2009.<sup>106</sup> It was structured as a workshop, during which the performers participated in acting and movement improvisations, and each worked with a puppet (loaned to us by Little Angel Theatre). My decision to use this model for casting was inspired by Genty and Underwood though I had not experienced one of their workshops nor would I have an extended workshop period like their own practice. As a structure for conducting an audition, a workshop gave me the opportunity to witness how each potential actor-puppeteer approached their craft and worked with others rather than a more typical audition form of presenting rehearsed material or learning and repeating choreography. It was evident that casting would have clear implications for the research. One challenge, as mentioned above, was the timing of the audition, and therefore my selection of performers, relative to the research questions. The audition took place based on the assumption that we would be researching techniques and methods for production development. I knew that Compagnie Philippe Genty often casts individuals who were not puppeteers but rather trained actors, dancers, and clowns, while Tranter was initially trained as an actor and was introduced to puppetry later. This knowledge guided my casting decisions. I assessed three skill sets of the potential performers: acting, movement and affinity for, though not necessarily training in, puppet manipulation. The audition lasted six hours, during which time we did individual acting and movement improvisations, and worked in pairs with simple table top, multi-person manipulation puppets.

From this audition group, I selected two performers with vastly different training and experience. Elisa Gallo Rosso trained as an actress, including voice and movement studies, and had extensive clown training at École Philippe Gaulier. She has worked in

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<sup>106</sup> For information about Jacksons Lane, visit <http://www.jacksonslane.org.uk/>.

theatre, film, and television. She was selected for her physical abilities and affinity for working with the puppets, though she had had very little training in puppetry. Katerina Damvoglouis was a recent university graduate who had also trained as an actress and had some dance and vocal experience as well as limited Lecoq training. She had some experience with puppetry but no formal training. She was beginning to develop puppetry skills from working on projects such as this one. She was selected because of her vocal qualities and physical movement skills. The final performer, Anna-Maria Nabirye, was found with the assistance of Little Angel Theatre. She did not attend the audition, but I saw her perform in a production that required acting and puppetry skills as well as a little singing. Nabirye is a trained actress and comedian with puppetry experience. Although she is not trained in dance, she had a strong physical presence and good puppet manipulation skills. The casting represented a range of performance maturity and experience, as well as different levels of puppetry experience. I anticipated that this range of skills and experience would help me to unpack the effectiveness of Genty, Underwood and Tranter's techniques and training that we would later employ.

Three types of puppet were used in this production: overhead projector shadow puppets, a puppet modelled on Genty's Señorita puppets used during their workshop, and two small tabletop human simulacra puppets that used direct (hands on) manipulation. I decided not to employ a working mouth in any of the three human simulacra puppets because I knew that we would not have the rehearsal time to adequately teach the live human actors lip synch skills. This allowed us the latitude to focus exclusively on Tranter's techniques for manufacturing the physical attributes of equal status and presence but posed challenges in our investigation of a vocalic body.

The research and development for the production was conducted in two working rehearsal periods, during which time we tested Genty, Underwood, and Tranter's theories and techniques. The project was awarded a residency by the Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre (CETT), supported by the Puppet Centre Trust (PCT) that included free rehearsal space and a work-in-progress showing at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC), London. This four-week slot was used as a research period during which we developed a central scene of the production by experimenting with combined techniques drawn from both companies, with an emphasis on exploring Tranter's theory of 'equal status' and Genty and Underwood's use of memory as a generative performance practice. During the four weeks, we met three times a week for a total of sixty-three hours of rehearsal time. Our first development period, at BAC, started on 16 November 2009 and culminated in a workshop showing on 15 December 2009. During this same period, I received a small

stipend from Royal Holloway that was used to fund a video shoot. This material was used to create the security camera footage played on a flat screen located downstage left during Scene Three – ‘Waiting.’

Our second development period at the Pleasance Theatre rehearsal rooms ran from 8 February 2010 until 14 March 2010 for a total of seventy-seven hours of rehearsal, not including technical and dress rehearsals in the theatre. Little Angel Theatre presented the final production as part of their season, and they provided the venue, technical support and equipment, theatre personnel, and some marketing and publicity. All other expenses—collaborator fees and expenses, rehearsal space, and set and costume design and construction—were self-funded. The performers worked on the production for a cut of the box office after expenses and we had intended to get additional bookings. There was no funding to hire a videographer for documentation nor was I able to identify an intern. Therefore, I acted as videographer for all rehearsal and performance video documentation, using digital video equipment from Royal Holloway. Rehearsals were recorded with a single camera and the recordings were used, by me, in my directorial role; performances were recorded on two cameras at the back of the house: one long shot, one for close-ups.

There were two collaborator issues: one with the playwright and one with a performer, Damvoglouis. Initially, I had contracted a playwright as a collaborator to be responsible for the script development. This individual was supposed to be part of in-room process and would develop a working script collaboratively, based in part on our character work. It became evident after two weeks of rehearsal at BAC, and the resulting scene treatments, that this individual was not able to or interested in dedicating the time necessary to the production. After a company meeting it was determined that, in order to stay focused on the performance research, we would be better served by letting the playwright go and allowing the research to structure the content. The second and final rehearsal period was complicated by a conflict with an actress, who I decided to replace one week before moving into the theatre. Thus the final week of rehearsals were used to train a new actress, Marianna Vogt, thereby shortening the intended research period by one week. The following section with accompanying rehearsal and production video is documentation and analysis of our investigations on memory, presence and puppets.

## Section Two

### Memory Made Material

The playwriting and dramaturgy of *Three Good Wives* were designed to be rigorous, flexible, and responsive first to the research needs and second to the production needs. At different moments in the production lifecycle, my roles as researcher, director, and dramaturg facilitated and muddled the negotiation between these occasionally conflicting needs. Though I defined the initial concept and use of verbatim material, the project was conceived of as including a playwright who would participate in a collaborative process with the actor puppeteers to develop the narrative. While the content was in response to political events at the time, the form was chosen to allow for experimentation of techniques developed and used by Genty, Underwood, and Tranter. Genty and Underwood use verbatim text generated by their actor puppeteers through their technique *The Fugitive* but their use of text is not predicated on the meaning of the words but rather the sensibility it conveys as part of an emotional and audio soundscape. Tranter's productions are plays but he does not use verbatim.

Although the playwright was eliminated early in the rehearsal process, the elements that we chose to use remained the same. The play was developed using verbatim theatre as a model. Whereas verbatim theatre is typically devised from first person interviews, our production used documentation of the real memories and experiences of United States and United Kingdom military wives sourced from blogs, radio shows by and for military wives, and journals and articles including first and second hand writings (see the supplemental bibliography for resources). Despite this difference, our production was written in a similar manner to verbatim theatre in that we used the words and experiences of contemporary military wives in a play writing process that verbatim playwright Rebecca Whitton describes as '*conceived, collected and collated*' (Whitton) as opposed to fictional plays in which the words are also imagined. We did not create a linear story; rather we created scenes based on three statuses of being a military wife thematically structured by the states that the mytho-historic female character archetypes represented: waiting (Penelope), mourning (Mandodari), and healing (Sheherazade). The character archetypes mirror one technique of Tranter's used at an early stage in his practice in which Tranter defines each character's archetype at the beginning of his playwriting process; the character states depicted three pivotal moments of being a military wife.

This structure positions each character within the play and is one level of understanding whom each character is. Similar to Tranter's practice, the archetypes

associated with each of the three mytho-historic characters in *Three Good Wives* was also a step toward building each character's psychological subjecthood. Tranter however develops his shows in succession first writing the play as he builds each character's psychological subjecthood followed by designing and building the puppets in response to these elements and then going into rehearsal. Our play was not written prior to rehearsals but was developed in tandem with the development of each character and was devised in collaboration with the actor puppeteers based on research I provided and their own personal research. The prologue (Secrets) and first two scenes (Wasteland and Revenge) emerged during our development process.

As a verbatim theatre piece, *Three Good Wives* is similar to Jane Taylor's 1997 play *Ubu and the Truth Commission* directed by William Kentridge with puppets by Handspring Puppet Company in South Africa. This production combines Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* with testimony from the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission. According to Kentridge, the project began as two different projects – *Ubu Roi* and *Waiting Room*, based on *Waiting for Godot* – but merged because he did not have the time to complete both projects (Kentridge x). The combined project, however, presented the challenge of negotiating high burlesque with testimony and 'brought a whole series of meanings and opportunities' (ibid., xi). Similarly, *Three Good Wives* brings together the fictional with the real and weaves together the cultural memory of three mytho-historic characters with personal accounts. Unlike *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, we did not have a play to either ground our production in or to provide a dramaturgical structure. Rather, I chose to devise the play as part of my investigation of memory as/in performance practice and allow the theatrical style to emerge from that same practice.

Though we incorporated verbatim material and techniques, the production is a dramatization and is not intended to portray the life, experience, or memory of a single individual. Counter to verbatim theatre which is a specific moment and encounter with particular words, memories, and experiences, *Three Good Wives* uses verbatim words, memories, and experiences as material for characters - live human and puppet – that are schematized through cultural memory. This also posed interesting design challenges.

Each of the mytho-historic characters suggested their own stylistic possibilities. In early discussions before rehearsals began, the designer and I explored the idea of setting each of the three main scenes within a visual landscape directly influenced by the mytho-historic character origin. The puppets however, which were needed during the rehearsals, were designed with the archetypes in mind but were intentionally minimal, rough, and lacking detail in order to focus on the performance practice and to allow space for the

audience participant's imagination to fill in these details including the psychological and emotional gaps. Once our rehearsals began however, the practice led to a naturalistic style of performing. This direction was surprising because although I intended to develop a project aesthetically different from Genty, Underwood, and Tranter I had not explicitly conceived nor expected the play to result in naturalism. The designer, who joined rehearsals via Skype before coming to London, and I adjusted the set design concepts in relation to the performance style. This change to a minimalist aesthetic for the sets further enhanced the focus on the performance techniques of the actors – live humans and puppets, presence and co-presence, and memory without the distraction of complicated stage effects as can be found in Genty and Underwood's work or the grotesque design aesthetic found in Tranter's work. These choices, I believe, provided a solid experimental framework within which to conduct my research.

The final production had six sections: Prologue – Secrets, Scene One – Wasteland, Scene Two – Revenge, Scene Three – Waiting, Scene Four – Mourning, and Scene Five – Healing.<sup>107</sup> The Prologue and Scene One emerged during the second rehearsal phase in response to our research about military communities and the position of women within them. The hierarchical structures, expectations, and social demands of the communities often places military wives in paradoxical positions of managing the family yet remaining subservient to their deployed husbands. Interestingly this seemingly dated positioning of women was criticised by an audience participant at our work-in-progress showing at Battersea Arts Centre however, we felt that it was necessary to include because it was and continues to be a very real aspect of these women's lives. Additionally individuals with deployed partners are often in a state of not knowing – not knowing if their partner is alive, injured, safe, or will return the same person who left. One element that emerged in our research was that these cultural paradoxes and uncertainties, and these are only examples of some of what we uncovered, often lead to a sense of living with secrets in inhospitable surroundings yet they are the same surroundings that support and truly know what it means to be the partner of an individual deployed in an active war zone. The Prologue, 'Secrets', is designed to literally show their mouths being sealed and represent what we, the creative team, understood as their inability to talk about the challenges they face whereas Scene One, 'Wasteland', represents the wives' internal badlands, a fictionalization of their fears about their partners while deployed and who they become when they return. Scene Two, 'Revenge', was developed from our explorations

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<sup>107</sup> The timings of each scene are: Prologue – Secrets (00:00:24-00:02:48); Scene One – Wasteland (00:02:49-00:06:52); Scene Two – Revenge (00:06:53-00:14:00); Scene Three – Waiting (00:14:01-00:34:40); Scene Four – Mourning (00:35:00-00:44:20); and Scene Five – Healing (00:44:41-00:52:06).

of paper as a medium used by many wives to find creative ways of helping their children cope with their father's deployment. During our explorations, we asked how the medium could effectively show the wives' relationship to distance war and violence as ever-present concerns within the home. This question led to extensive online research about paper and war leading us to a vast number of instructional videos about paper gun making. The scene developed into a moment of war playacting by the wives and empowered the characters to engage in violence.

The final three scenes are the foundation of the original show concept and represent three states of being a military wife: waiting, mourning, and healing. Each scene weaves elements of cultural memory meaning the mytho-historic characters and their archetypes with verbatim text and research about contemporary United States and United Kingdom military wives. 'Waiting' is in direct response to the extended state of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars that led to multiple deployments of military personnel often without any furlough. At the time that I conceived of the project in 2006/2007, the war was in its third year and there were emerging reports of personnel fatigue, suicides, and multiple deployments. In December 2006, then President Bush acknowledged that the US was not winning the war and that armed forces were stretched well beyond their limits (Baker). While the media were largely concerned with military personnel, I asked what about those who were left behind waiting for news and the return of loved ones. Penelope immediately came to mind as an archetype of the wife who waits for return over an extended period of time. Thus the scene was set at an iconic moment of Penelope at midnight away from the revellers who had invaded her home, unravelling the shroud, and free to contemplate and face her fears. In this scene, we also drew on stories from women, the many articles and blogs with tips for women with deployed partners, and our own imagining and memories of waiting. The Indian character Mandodari inspired Scene Four - 'Mourning.' She is the demon Ravana's wife in *The Ramayana*, one of the five virgins acknowledged in Indian prayer and a model female archetype of a good wife (Mukherjee 39 – 49). Despite her being a model female and part of Hindu cultural memory, in the many versions that I have read of *The Ramayana* she is only tangentially referenced until her husband Ravana is killed at which point she is the focal point of a highly charged and passionate scene mourning his death. For many military wives, their moment of public and social visibility, like Mandodari's, is often when they are mourning. The scene weaves together three young widows' reminiscences about the deaths' of their husbands with personal, physical, and vocal memories of the actor puppeteers. This is elaborated on in the next section. Finally Scene Five, 'Healing', weaves together the archetype of the healer represented by Scheherazade who heals through speaking. The scene reintroduces the puppet seen in The Prologue and again in Scene One whose mouth has been sewn shut. The scene is an encounter



between two wives who console each other through touch and unseal their mouths allowing them to speak and breath.

The production received both positive and negative reviews included in the appendix. These generally focused on the overall dramaturgy of the production particularly the pacing of the show. As the director, I agree that the dynamics need more work yet believe that area where the show failed was our not incorporating the humour of these women's lives that was also evident in our research. However, the focus of the production was as a vehicle for performance practice research. This aspect will be discussed and evaluated in the following sections accompanied by rehearsal video clips. At this moment, I invite you to watch the full performance, which can be found on DVD 1.

### **Memory and Puppet Manipulation**

Puppet theatre practice has a spectrum of modes of performance ranging from non-visible to visible actor puppeteers each with its own performance paradoxes. Though this research focuses on two modes of visible actor puppeteers- present but not an active character in the scene and co-present live human and puppet actors, I believe that my conclusions regarding memory as an aspect of performance practice apply beyond this specific research to other modes of performance such as when an actor puppeteer is not visible to the audience participant. The performance paradox for the actor puppeteer in puppetry in which the actor puppeteer is visibly present but not a visible character or participant is the contradiction between their visible performance and what they are actually doing. This conflict is reflected in their bodies and training. On the one hand, puppeteers are trained to perform invisibility, meaning that they are physically present yet display as neutral on stage. This state is achieved through 'the development of muscles of stillness and silence' (Astles 'Wood and Waterfall: Puppetry Training and its Anthropology' 57). Yet, at the same time, the actor puppeteers are 'the *producer* of the signs that communicate dramatic character' (Tillis 'The Actor Occluded: Puppet Theatre and Acting Theory' 109) and, I would add, the manufacturer of presence through their externalization of memory and emotion to a puppet or performing object. This means that puppeteers simultaneously perform external neutrality in their visible bodies while gathering the internal energy and focus that they will pass to the puppet through what Francis calls a 'process of transference' (Francis 5). When performing co-presence in which a single live human actor performs two or more characters of different ontological types – meaning themselves acting with puppets, the paradox for the actor puppeteer is the negotiation between apparent neutrality yet staying in character when acting as the

puppet and activity when acting as a character themselves. Although both modes of performance are to some extent paradoxical, they each require the manufacture of presence in live human and puppet performers, and the negotiation of different types of presence and energies in performance. The manufacture of these paradoxical performances of presence are, in the work of Genty, Underwood, and Tranter, directly related not only to the actor puppeteer's use of memory, negotiation of energies, and their ability to focus and transfer memory and energy, but, as my research shows, also to their knowledge and execution of technical puppetry manipulation as a mechanism of transfer and externalisation.<sup>108</sup>

Technical puppetry manipulation as the externalizing mechanism by which memory is made material functionally operates similarly to Stanislavski's theory of physical action in that the physical aspects of the puppet are underpinned by reflexivity but requires training and practice to competently initiate and direct the object. Although the continued use of techniques is not unique, the fact that these artists continue to teach technical aspects of puppetry contradicts Astles' assertion that puppetry training is moving away from craft 'towards a sensibility focused on animation of multiple forms' (Astles 'Puppetry Training for Contemporary Live Theatre' 22). Rather, I propose that, among contemporary puppet theatre makers, though production aesthetics may appear to reflect a shift away from craft and technical manipulation, there is an ongoing need for these practical skills to be honed in performers as an aspect of externalizing



**Figure 21: *Three Good Wives* (Scene Three) 2010. Performers: Elisa Gallo Rosso and Marianna Vogt. Photography by Lynette Shanbury.**

memory and manufacturing presence. In object oriented ontology terms via Harman's framing of Heidegger's terminology, when the techniques function effectively they are ready-at-hand; whereas when not they are present-at-hand (Harman). This means that

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<sup>108</sup> This is not necessarily true for all practitioners. Some may have alternative propositions, but these theories and techniques have not been documented, analysed and made publicly available.

when puppet, object, and material manipulation techniques are deployed effectively they are not overtly present as the thing themselves but as an actants and/or characters on stage; whereas when the techniques are not effectively deployed they are overtly present and their puppetness, objectness, and materiality become the focus of attention rather than their function within a performance. Though in performance terms each state may be used to dramatic effect as I noted in Chapter Six about Tranter's conscious undermining of the presence of his puppet co-actors. Further, the appearance of contemporary practice moving away from craft may also be the result of the invisibility of the craft, meaning that because of technical competency in manipulation we, the audience participant, pay attention to other aspects of a performance.

The technical craft of puppet manipulation relies on two uses of memory: remembering the physical attributes: vertical and horizontal positions in space, actions/gestures, rhythms, and sequences of movement; and use of a performer's memory of symbolic gesture and their ability to recreate it in order to create a meaningful physical score and convey that meaning through gestures and, when used vocal production. Genty and Underwood encapsulate their approach to puppet manipulation training in six points: concentration, impasse, conviction, association, 'distanciation', and fixed point. Tranter, on the other hand, incorporates these aspects within the structures of his exercises designed to manufacture puppet presence. Throughout our training and rehearsal period, Genty and Underwood's six points were incorporated as key concepts for the puppeteers to be aware of as they worked with a puppet. Over the course of our total rehearsal time and through repetition, each performer gained an increased intuitive awareness about their relationship with and how to manipulate a puppet. In other words, they developed competency in the physical skills needed to manufacture presence in a puppet such as: the illusion of agency, controlling puppet focus, and use of symbolic coding. This competency allowed the performers the freedom to react intuitively to and explicitly use memory as part of the performance practice with the puppet. The development and increased competency is dramatically evident in the differences between the actor puppeteers' first contact with the puppet and their performances at Little Angel Theatre. As can be seen in clip 1 of Nabirye and clip 3 of Gallo Rosso, their puppetry manipulation, discussed in more detail below, lacks solid control of gesture and gaze. The puppet appears to be floating rather than standing on the ground and does not appear to be the instigator of her own movements. In other words, she lacks agency and the appearance of being an independent character. As a result, the audience spectator neither connects with nor believes in the life or presence of the puppet actor. This contrasts

sharply with their performances seen on DVD 1 in which their puppet manipulation is clearly and precisely articulated to the extent that it disappears beneath the surface of the presence of the character on stage.<sup>109</sup> Thus the repetition and mindfulness through real time correction during rehearsals enhanced as opposed to dulled their performance.

Agency, Genty suggests, is created when the puppet appears to both initiate action and move first. Conversely, Tranter is concerned with the puppet appearing to initiate actions, regardless of whether or not they are the first to move, and with a puppet establishing empathy between itself and the audience participants by making eye contact with them. In fact, in both approaches, it is the puppeteer who both initiates and physically moves first while creating the illusion of it being the puppet. This illusion is created through a transference or redirection of impulse from an actor puppeteer into the puppet (or external performing object). The three live human performers in *Three Good Wives* had, as I mention above, a range of experience with puppets from none to having performed in a few shows that used them. This was an intentional casting choice to attempt to assess the effectiveness of Genty, Underwood, and Tranter's training techniques in a situation similar to numerous productions' casting such as that of Compagnie Philippe Genty. For my research, our early puppet manipulation training combined Tranter's exercises with Genty/Underwood's six points. Though I will discuss the external (technical puppet manipulation) and internal (memory and presence) in two sections, our investigations were simultaneous alternating from one to the other and, as I will evidence below, each effecting and revealing the other.

### **Externalizing Memory through Puppet Manipulation**

In order for an actor puppeteer to be able to utilize a puppet as a means to externalize memory, they must understand and be able to make use of its visible aesthetic principles: design, movement, and in some cases voice. Although the actor puppeteer may or may not design the physical object, they must at the very least know how the design functions meaning for example though the puppets we used were aesthetically minimal they were designed to shift expression based on how and where light hit their face, and the actor puppeteer must be able to learn and work within the constraints of any given puppet's movement capabilities and design features. Voice, as discussed below, posed a number of technical and aesthetic issues including whether or not to have an operable mouth,

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<sup>109</sup> Damvoglous also significantly improved her competency in puppet manipulation but, as I noted in *The Messiness of Theatre Making*, she was let go from the project and not in the performances.

whether or not to see the source of vocal production, ability to synchronize sound with movement, and finding a voice. Counter to Kleist's notion of the perfection of the puppet as an object in and of itself, a puppet is, as I argue in Chapter One, reliant on the human hands that design, build, and manipulate it.

The first puppet we worked with was Penelope. She is similar in form to Genty and Underwood's Señorita puppets. Penelope's head and hands however are more in line with the proportions of the puppet body than those used by Genty and Underwood and she was conceived with a minimal rather than either a detailed (Genty and Underwood) or grotesque (Tranter) aesthetic. The puppet's full character was developed through practice and the actor puppeteers' memories. This interplay between the technical demands of puppet manipulation and structured improvisation will be elaborated later in this chapter. Her mytho-historic character references were Penelope from the *Odyssey* and Atwood's feminist interpretation of this character combined with contemporary military wives though we did not initially define the partner's rank in the service. I used a simple improvisation structure performed individually to introduce each cast member and the puppet to each other. Their instructions were to enter with the puppet, cross through the space, and exit. The live human actor puppeteer was not an active participant in the scene rather they were to find the puppet's fixed point, begin to understand how to hold the head rod to achieve accurate directional focus, explore how she moves, and find what they intuit are the puppet's qualities of movement.

Video clips 1, 2 and 3 show each of the three actor puppeteers' (Nabiyre, Damvoglouis, and Gallo Rosso respectively) first handling of the puppet. All three initially experienced challenges finding the puppet's fixed point, direction of gaze, and site of physical impulse to create the illusion that the puppet initiated movements. These challenges were overcome through repetition to reinforce the physical memory necessary to achieve sufficient control of the puppet and manufacture the illusions of standing on the floor, looking, and independent movement. What is apparent in the video at these early movement explorations though, are the different qualities that each actor puppeteer imparted to the puppet. Each of the actor puppeteers displayed a certain amount of poise, which to a certain extent is built into the design and construction, but they also brought out individual qualities premised on their own experience and memories. Nabiryre, the more experienced of the three with puppets, attributed quickness and swinging qualities to the puppet's movements. Damvoglouis was significantly more reserved and solemn in her interpretation of the puppet, whereas Gallo Rosso, the least experienced with puppets, was focused on the mechanics of handling the puppet but like the other two actor

puppeteers her manipulation elicited a regal bearing. One noteworthy moment was performed by Damvoglouis, at approximately one minute into clip 2, the puppet reaches up and strokes her own head and face displaying a moment of vulnerability, fragility, and self-reflexivity. These qualities would each become part of the puppet's character at different moments in the final scene.

We followed the first meeting between actor puppeteer and puppet with a brief exploration of Tranter's Exercise 1 that also reinforces three of Genty and Underwood's six points: concentration, disassociation, and fixed point. The actor puppeteer, in this exercise, is still not a character working in active relationship with the puppet but they continue to be a visible presence. The exercise requires concentration on the part of the puppeteer as they negotiate multiple physical skills: impulse, rhythm, controlling direction of puppet focus, movement, and reaction as indicators that the puppet is in control in addition to fixed point in order to maintain the illusion that the puppet is 'standing' on the floor.

These exercises, the introductory solo improvisation and Tranter's Exercise 1, introduce and focus the actor puppeteer on key manipulation skills needed to manufacture a puppet's presence. Our next step was to introduce and develop the manipulation skills to perform co-presence. Genty and Underwood do not directly teach this mode of performance rather they expect it to be an extension of their practice that emerges within the context of working on a production. Tranter specifically teaches co-presence in his Yes/No exercise and his notion of action/reaction in which the manufacture of co-presence is created because the two actors are in conflict – one party indicating yes while the other responds no.

The instructions to perform the exercise belie what actually occurs between the actor puppeteer and puppet. What we experienced in the performance of the exercise is that character and co-presence are triggered by the live human actor's memory and experience. It is their memory of past experiences that drives their performance of the action/reaction including how they act/react, the rhythms they perform, and the spaces between their yeses and nos. In the beginning of clip 4, Nabirye is clearly working to engage with the puppet and the situation as they exist in the space at the time of the exercise but there is a shift in how she approaches the puppet when she smiles at it and attempts to direct the action between herself and the puppet. The puppet's 'no' response, though performed by herself, surprises and challenges her attempt to direct the interaction. Nabirye's engagement, as she later stated, is no longer only in response to the

puppet but memories of a similar situation where she was convinced to do something by someone else – in this case the puppet.

Though different from Nabirye's, Gallo Rosso's and Damvoglouis', clips 5 and 6 respectively, experiences are very similar to each other's. They each struggle with performing the instructions for the exercise and connecting with the puppet. The mechanics of action/reaction and merely indicating yes and no responses to looks is forced until both connect to personal memories while working with the puppet. Clip 5 shows that Gallo Rosso begins to connect with the puppet when she draws on her experiences as a clown. It emerges as moments of play between the actor puppeteer and the puppet such as when the puppet realizes that she does not have either hair or legs like Gallo Rosso. Through the playful exchange of acknowledging difference, Gallo Rosso and the puppet find their individual presences in relation to each other. While for Gallo Rosso memories as a performer trigger connection, for Damvoglouis it is, as she later stated during rehearsal, a childhood memory that colours her behaviour and how she manipulates the puppet. Her connection to the puppet substantially shifts just before the puppet reaches up toward her face and continues until Damvoglouis taps the puppet on the shoulder at which point her training in commedia colours an other wise memory based interaction. While the specifics of what shifts each actor puppeteer's work with the puppet are not transparent to the audience participant per se, their presence as individual characters in dialogue with each other is. The specifics were discussed among our group after each actor puppeteer performed the technique. Damvoglouis said that it was in those moments when she was not trying but felt as though she was just reacting that her own memory was triggered. This technique is designed to focus a performer's awareness of separation of character through conflict and physicality yet in our investigation for each performer their memory was triggered in response to perceived stimuli from the puppet and subsequently coloured each gesture, look, rhythm, and response between the two actors.

Focusing on the physical challenges of puppet manipulation in general and issues with the specific puppet though proved to be an important set of skills to establish in the beginning in order to increasingly free the actor puppeteers to explore memory as an element in their development of the characters, the play, and the performances. While the skills were developed throughout the rehearsal period, early introduction allowed for the greatest amount of time for the skills to become a part of their physical memory, in other words second nature, and therefore to support the ongoing psychological development of the character(s) devised in parallel with the scene. Additionally, the manipulation skills –

fixed point, gaze, illusion of initiation – that were learned and developed with the Penelope puppet transferred to the later work with the small puppets used in Scenes One and Five despite the difference in puppet types.

As the physical skills are acquired and developed through repetition and incorporated into the cast's body memory, we also explored how psychological aspects of the puppet character were externalized, meaning those physical signs that suggest thought and awareness that are performed as physical actions in the puppet actor, and memory as techniques for building their performance scores. These are, according to Tranter, the intentional uses of symbolic coding and a puppet's action/reaction to each and every moment on stage not just to the moment at hand as in the Yes/No technique. Our construction of symbolic coding, however, was not solely premised on recognizable body language, it incorporated gestures and rhythms in particular that were found in personal memory, which will be discussed in more detail below. Although Genty and Underwood do not explicitly refer to personal memory as an aspect of puppetry, it is, as I discussed in Part Two, implied in their expectation that live human actor and puppet performance techniques will blur in practice.

The performance of our investigations of these skill sets is evidenced in the three puppet scenes. In each scene, however, it is not the manipulation skills that one is aware of or attending to as the skills themselves have receded to below the surface of the actor



**Figure 22: *Three Good Wives* (Scene One) 2010. Performer: Elisa Gallo Rosso. Photography by Lynette Shanbury.**

puppeteers' practice allowing the externalization of memory and character presence to come to the forefront. The first, shown in Scene One – Wasteland, demonstrates the puppet's individual presence with an obscured puppeteer. In this scene, the puppet's presence, projected by the manipulator, Gallo Rosso, emerges in its playful investigation of its environment on top of the table and its subsequent reaction to the intrusion into the space by live human actors. Its presence is heightened through the lighting that transforms its white naked body into a luminescent body—glowing, small, and seemingly vulnerable surrounded by darkness—controlled by an unseen force: Gallo Rosso. In the second, Scene Three – Waiting— a single puppet, Penelope, is the central character manipulated by all three actor puppeteers. This scene also incorporates Genty and Underwood's memory based

techniques, which will be discussed below. And finally in Scene Five – Healing, two puppets



are used: the one seen in Scene One and another, similarly designed and constructed, with three visible but neutral actor puppeteers. Interestingly, the puppets' presence in this scene is, I believe, less affected by the visibility of the puppeteers than by the differences in lighting. In contrast to Scene One, the stage is brighter overall. Though the focus is mostly on the tabletop in downstage right that the puppets perform on, the sensibility of the stage space is less closed in or confined. Still, the luminosity of the white puppet bodies, combined with controlled directional focus, thoughtful action/reaction, specific movement impulses seeming to initiate in the puppet body as opposed to the puppeteer's, and use of symbolic coding found in personal and cultural memory to communicate narrative, converge to manufacture the physical aspect of each puppet's presence.

In the course of our above investigation, it was evident from an early stage that the mechanics of puppetry manipulation are the foundation that allows the actor puppeteer to externalize memory by providing a set of principles that guide the transfer of memory through physical mimesis. In other words, how we, as manipulators, order and execute gestures determines in part how they will be interpreted. Yet our practice also shows that even implicitly memory focuses an actor puppeteer's intention and provides a detailed score – what gesture and how it is re-enacted by a puppet – that ground the actor puppeteer in what they are doing and that this transfers to the puppet as an aspect of their presence. Genty and Underwood's six points form a set of general principles that guide puppet manipulation whereas Tranter teaches both general principles and techniques for manufacturing co-presence. Regardless of approach, the principles are the same – create the illusion of agency, control gaze, show clear action and reaction, and understand how rhythm and order of gestures constructs meaning. Though these principles are part of a more traditional understanding of puppetry and form an important part of manufacturing a puppet's presence through its physicality, what lies beneath the principles is the performer's memory as a source of where the movements and meaningful rhythms come from; this aspect of consciously drawing on personal memory is investigated through Genty and Underwood's techniques in the following section.

### **Memory as/is Practice**

Presence in both live human and puppet performers is as I have theorized not merely inherent or the result of their sign systems and execution of a puppet's visible aesthetic principles but is also related to the actor puppeteer's and audience participant's memory. As discussed in Chapter One, Goodall frames live human actor presence through the history of electricity and mesmerism (Goodall 18), and Roach as an 'easy to find but hard

to define... it' (Roach 1). Both, however, continue to ephemeralize presence as something that is inherent in a live body. Counter to this, Power proposes that an actor's 'auratic' presence can be deliberately constructed (Power 49). For a puppet, presence is theorized through their visible aesthetics creating the illusion of life or agency visibly through intention, apparent initiation of movement (or appearance of moving first) and actions perceived of as thought and sight. Yet, in puppetry, as numerous scholars write and I discuss in Chapter One, there is also an element of the uncanny, what Francis calls 'the perceived investment of the inanimate with anima' (Francis 5) that is unaccounted for in the visible aesthetic principles. I have argued that the performance technique creating this element is the externalization of memory initiated in the actor puppeteer transferred to the puppet expressed through precise and mimetic use of the puppets visible aesthetic principles as evidenced in the practice of Genty, Underwood, and Tranter. This theory marks a shift in puppet performance practice from an external to an internal set of processes.

Tranter employs both cultural memory and personal memory to construct a puppet from design to character. His use of cultural memory and our adaptation of it in this project were discussed above. His use of personal memory is grounded in his training in Method techniques and is incorporated into the entire life cycle of a production. However, he does not teach these techniques rather he focuses on visible manipulation techniques and assumes a performer is competent in acting techniques. Genty and Underwood's training techniques are explicitly concerned with a particular construction of the live human actor's presence as an indefinable, individual, idiosyncratic energy, as well as an actor's 'presentness' or being in the moment in the proverbial here and now of rehearsal and performance making. Their techniques for constructing both states are captured most precisely in two exercises: Memograms and The Fugitive.<sup>110</sup> These techniques formed the foundation of my practical investigation of memory as a generative source for both the live human and puppet actor.

Memograms uses the live human actor's memory of physical actions from their life as a means to develop movement vocabularies that will implicitly trigger the performance of emotion for use in a show, and dispel inhibitions about contributing to choreographic vocabulary and dancing on stage. The Fugitive uses memory and resistance to access emotion, develop text, and improve vocal production. Additionally, though not an explicit aim of the exercises as developed by Genty and Underwood, we

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<sup>110</sup> Another exercise, *Moucherie*, is, from my experience during the workshop in 2009, useful to free the actor. However, our cast was too small to work with it as it calls at least four participants.

found that they facilitate the development of physical listening skills among actors, meaning the physical awareness of where others are and how they are moving, without necessarily looking at them, as well as improving general responsiveness when working in a group.

According to Genty and Underwood, by physically re-enacting memory in Memograms emotion will emerge and support the live actor's long term performance and implicitly will imbue the actor's presence. Our initial focus when integrating Memograms into our process was on developing the live human movement vocabularies and the emotional underpinning for Scene Three – Waiting and the beginning of Scene Four – Mourning. During our first explorations of the technique that took place during the development for Scene Three – Waiting, questions quickly emerged about the ways that Genty and Underwood's techniques could inform and be explicitly explored as a technique for puppet manipulation, character development, and the manufacture of presence.

Memograms, stages one to four, was used to develop our movement vocabularies. Stage one initiates in physical (sensory) memory re-enactments of childhood experiences particularly those associated with destruction and loss. In the clips, one can clearly see each performer's level of ease or dis-ease with performing movement vocabulary. Nabirye stated before beginning this technique that she was very uncomfortable creating and performing anything remotely like dance. However, even in stage one, we begin to see that physical re-enactment of a memory facilitates a performer's clarity of action and focus in the moment. In Clip 7, Gallo Rosso re-enacts a sad skipping location, killing bugs, and picking up and carrying a dying baby bird. In Clip 8 (unfortunately a portion of her action is off camera), Damvoglouis re-enacts playing with and intentionally destroying one of her toys, a temper tantrum that began with anxious walking and finger wiggling and concluded with stomping, and walking on a hot and dangerous surface. In Clip 9, Nabirye re-enacts destroying an object that was not hers, a moment when she was pouting as a child, and destruction of a game that she was playing with friends. Within each performers re-enactment, one can see when they connect to the action they are re-performing and when they do not. For Gallo Rosso the most present moments were killing the bugs and briefly when carrying the dying bird. For Damvoglouis, though a bit more challenging to determine in part because she was a very proficient dancer and she is largely off camera, the most present moment is when she is stomping with rage. For Nabirye the most present moments are when she throws the object she is destroying in her first action sequence and when she is kicking/rubbing out the game in her third action. In

discussion with the performers, it emerged that those actions that were the most present in their re-enactments were also those that they had the strongest memories of. For each, memory focused their intention and attention to precisely re-enact the experience. As can be seen in the video excerpts, this focus radiates as presence in their bodies.

Stage two introduces personal creation of short phrases of choreography integrated with movement developed through memory. The performer's task is to first develop two movement sequences unrelated to a specific memory. These ostensibly pure movement sequences are introduced to accustom the performers to working solely in movement. The movement sequences are then combined with the memory sequences to create a longer piece of choreography. Please watch Clip 10: Gallo Rosso, Clip 11: Damvoglouis, Clip 12: Nabirye. Though the phrases of movement are combined, one can see qualitative differences in energy and focus relative to their performances of memory-based sequences and movement-based sequences. Stage three introduces a choreographic technique for exploring the possibilities of any given movement sequence by altering the tempo (this technique is used in many contemporary dance practices). Please watch Clip 13: Gallo Rosso, Clip 14: Damvoglouis, Clip 15: Nabirye. During this phase, the memory based and movement sequence qualities begin to blur as the memory-based material acquires dancerly qualities and the movement-based material acquires pedestrian attributes in response to the tempo shift. While each actor puppeteer performs their movement sequence for stage three, those observing are asked to identify movement sequences that interest them. Stage four then incorporates the movement sequences of others into each performers choreographic score introducing the notion of transposing memory-based material from the originating performer to others. Please watch Clip 16: Gallo Rosso lead, Clip 17: Damvoglouis lead, and Clip 18: Nabirye lead. There are two methods of transposition: 1) the selection and incorporation of another performer's vocabulary based on observation, and 2) as in the clips 16, 17, and 18, following a lead performer's score in real time. Both methods are based on mimesis that is similar to transposing human gesture to puppets. In alignment with Genty and Underwood's intentions for the technique, Memograms accomplished two functions for our production: building movement vocabulary based in each actor's personal physical memory, and developing performer confidence as a creator and performer of movement on stage. As Nabirye noted, after engaging with the technique, she gained proficiency in creating and performing movement. She also noted, and Gallo Rosso and Damvoglouis agreed, that using memory as a means of finding performance vocabularies was introducing new movements that were her own but not part of her everyday vocabulary, meaning that they

were old but new and therefore broke physical movement clichés. As I discussed above in reference to Tranter's Yes/No technique, it was evident that our work with memory and Memograms was informing the performer's work with the puppet. Memories of gestures, experience, and emotion were manifesting in the technical manipulation triggering responses based on memory in their action/re-action and the gestures that surface.

During our explorations of the techniques and theories on puppet manipulation, gaining competency with the Memogram technique, and developing material and vocabularies premised on physical memory, we were devising Scene Three – Waiting using improvisation for a work-in-progress showing in December 2009 at Battersea Arts Centre. The improvisations with the Penelope puppet were not only a mechanism to reinforce manipulation and performance technique but also to discover and develop the puppet's character, the characters of the actor puppeteers who perform in co-presence with her, and to devise the content of the scene itself. The improvisations were used in lieu of Tranter's writing process that uses personal (Method acting techniques premised on memory) and cultural (archetypes as a way of situating each character in a play and relative to each other) memory to develop the characters in his plays. We explored gesture, memory vocabularies, and vocalic body though the puppet was intentionally designed without an operable mouth, character development through movement rhythms, each character's through line and subtext (meaning all four actors - live humans and puppet - in the scene), and developed the scene narrative. Additionally, the improvisations were used as a means to refine and reinforce the six points and technical puppet manipulation. These corrections were, in agreement with the actors, given in real time during the improvisations to facilitate the actor puppeteers' awareness of what they were doing at the moment they were doing it.

While our improvisations evolved throughout the rehearsal process, the premise remained essentially the same: Penelope enters with her companions, she turns on her surveillance video to watch the revellers, she sits at her table to unravel a shroud, and she waits. Elements of the characters and the scene were added in layers over the course of the rehearsal period. As the scene and the characters developed, so did the action. Penelope's character drew on the mytho-historic character Penelope from the *Odyssey* and Atwood's feminist reimagining in *The Penelopiad*: she is a commanding officer's wife waiting for her husband to return from war and is surrounded by revellers who have imposed themselves on her hospitality. This broad description was informed by details about contemporary military wives such as the role of the commanding officer's wife who maintains the social and cultural order or norm among the wives and furloughed

personnel, stories about the various activities that military wives use to help their children count the days before daddy returns home, and, though this emerged later in the process, the live human actor puppeteers interpretation of the psychology and effects of waiting, not knowing, uncertainty, and fear. Throughout our development, the ethical question regarding our responsibility to the stories and material we were drawing from was a constant presence. Rather than telling one story, we collaged verbatim material and personal physical memory to, as Taylor suggests, arrive at a dramatic narrative that might stand in for the larger narrative (Taylor ii) of what women, and a small percentage men, whose partners were deployed were dealing with during the wars. A list of resources used to gather information about contemporary military wives can be found in the supplemental bibliography.

The situational improvisations during the first two weeks of rehearsal were done with the assumption that we were working with a playwright who would collaborate on the development of the text. Our first explorations were planned as investigations to find a voice or vocalic body for the puppet, refine manipulation skills, and build each. Clip 19 is an excerpt from an early improvisation on the second day of rehearsal. At this stage, we had not begun training in either manipulation or memory techniques rather it establishes a baseline of competency. The puppet manipulation at this stage is fragmented and uncertain, the puppet's movement reads as arbitrary, is disconnected, and without intent. The impulse appears to come from the actor puppeteers and not from the puppet. Though the puppet is present is the sense of being in the room, it does appear to have presence in the sense of being an independent actor. Early in our exploration we also worked with voice and finding the voice of the character. Unfortunately, the early video is corrupted and not available for viewing. In our early stages, the vocalization was intended to externalize the puppet actor's through line. In practice though, it detracted rather than contributed to the puppet's presence in the space because a voice quality appropriate to the character was not in place. This and other challenges we experienced when working to establish a vocalic body for the character are detailed below.

Outside of rehearsal hours, each collaborator conducted their own research that we would weave into the improvisations. This research was brought to together and discussed among the cast. From this, we identified core character conflicts, psychological issues, and activities that we would explore. We found a number of common threads in blogs and advice for military wives that became increasingly useful such as how to deal with the unknown and fear; how to deal with or counter media overload (particularly from

2006 on media coverage of the wars was increasingly negative<sup>111</sup>); how to maintain a sense of home during deployment, which often led to a sense of fragmentation, separation, and a broken home; and activities to do with children. These psychological aspects were explored throughout our process and were coupled with recordings of news items specific to the war incorporated as part of our soundscape during improvisation work. The following clips show two different types of investigation the first of a narrative question, the second of a material.



**Figure 23: *Three Good Wives* (Scene Two) 2010. Performers: Marianna Vogt, Elisa Gallo Rosso, Anna-Maria Nabirye**

Clip 20 is an exploration in of the question: what does one do when waiting with a close group of friend to lighten a dark moment? The actor puppeteer’s answer was dance. This improvisation, also from our second day of rehearsal, has many of the technical manipulation issues found in Clip 19 yet the puppet is more present as a character in part because the actor puppeteers are re-performing familiar physical material. Clips 21 and 22 introduce paper as a working material. Clip 21 is based on a commonly suggested activity for military wives to do with their children to count the days until a deployed partner is scheduled return – making a paper chain in which each link represents a day.

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<sup>111</sup> For an overview of media coverage see “Media Spinning The Iraq War” online at <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/viewSubCategory.asp?id=22>.

Based on this, the actor puppeteers devised the improvisation in Clip 22 to explore a psychological aspect of Penelope. Though premised more directly on *The Odyssey* than the scene we were constructing, it is an exploration of loss situated around Penelope's son Telemachus. The actor puppeteer's cut out a paper man/child, which during the rest of the improvisation is the focus of Penelope's sense of loss of her family. In this improvisation, we also explored attributing a voice to Penelope. At this stage, the actor puppeteer's manipulation has visibly improved: they have established more control of its gaze, a sense of weight, and impulse augmenting the physical presence of the puppet. The vocal quality and lack of visible connection – meaning the puppet does not have an operable mouth to indicate that she is speaking, however, detract from the puppet's presence. While none of this material was used in the final show, the dancing provided useful information about ways the puppet could move and our explorations with paper led to the development of Scene Two – Revenge.

I began to notice during the second week of our work that gestures from the Memograms were beginning to appear in our improvisations with the puppet. Within the construct of Memograms, movement vocabularies are transposed from one live human performer to another. On the one hand, in these moments of transposition from the originating actor, the vocabulary loses its original memory associations. On the other, the actors who acquire the memory-based vocabulary weave their own memories and experience into the execution of someone else's movement(s). What emerged in the course of our practice was the question: if vocabularies developed through the use of personal memory can be transferred among live human actors why not to a puppet? Genty and Underwood do not explicitly use any vocabulary developed from personal memory as part of a puppet's gestural language rather they rely on mimetic and symbolic gesture according to the construction of and bound by the physical mechanics of any given puppet. Yet these gestures, one could easily argue, are also premised on live human memory. They are the unconscious remembrances of how to walk, wave, run, crawl, hunch, or stand erect with excitement that are part of everyday human body language. Symbolic gesture, however, in puppet theatre conveys both physical and emotional states that may or may not include text. As performance practice the physical and emotional narrative is told and performed by the actor puppeteer who must understand and connect to what is being performed in order to transfer it through the puppet to the audience participants.

Tranter underpins his practice in Method acting techniques yet not all performers have this training. During our practice, we asked: do Memograms create a similar



underpinning for the performer and if transposed to a puppet is the emotional underpinning conveyed through the puppet performance? There are four gestures in Scene Three, 'Waiting', from the performance (DVD 1) that draw directly from our experiments with Memograms: the puppet's reach forward from Damvoglouis' memory of reaching for a forbidden fruit, the section where the puppet is slapping the floor from Gallo Rosso's memory of squashing insects, followed by the puppet brushing away things on her body and dress from Nabirye's memory of destroying a game, and when the puppet brings the cloth to her face from an evolution of Nabirye's memory of pouting. In discussing the performance of these gestures with the actor puppeteers, they stated that origination in memory, even if not their own, gave them focus and intention from which to perform their manipulation of the puppet. Although the puppet does not experience memory or create new ones, memory grounded the actor puppeteer in the movement and this was transferred from live human actor to puppet actor to create the illusion of agency and manufacture presence in the puppet as a recipient site of memory. As a performance practice for puppetry, it shifts the focus from what is done to the puppet to what is done by the actor puppeteer. Prompted by this notion of a puppet as a site of memory, I expended my research by continuing work with Genty, Underwood, and Tranter's techniques but also pushing the limits of memory as a performance practice in the next two scenes.

Scene Four – Mourning positions the live human actor as the performing object activated by memory and experiments with three kinds of memory: cultural memory, verbatim memory, and personal physical and aural memory. The cultural memory reference is Mandodari, discussed earlier in this chapter, though for some critics this reference was obtuse. Despite this, our own research and accumulated knowledge of this mytho-historic character and her role as an iconic figure was used, like Penelope in the previous scene, as part of our devising practice. Mandodari framed the invisibility of military wives except at the moment of their mourning. The verbatim memory is the text we extrapolated from three contemporary military wives and is spoken in the second half of the scene. The personal physical and aural memories are derived from a second round of Memogram experiments and Genty and Underwood's technique *The Fugitive* that led us to devising the lament song based on a Greek melody from Damvoglouis' personal memory with text from military wives. All of the verbatim text in this scene was found on <http://lastingtribute.co.uk> and <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18599169/>.

The movement sequence is comprised of four gestures: fall, hand through hair, kick, scrub each found through Memograms stages one explored during our rehearsals in

February 2010. For our second round of experimentation with this technique, I broadened the criteria of what types of movement could be re-enacted by adding task based memories similar to Genty and Underwood's Rituals and decided not to discuss the specifics of the memories with the performers but rather to let the movements stand on their own. Clips 23, 24 and 25 show each of the actor puppeteers' – Gallo Rosso, Damvoglouis, and Nabirye respectively - stage one movement sequences. Rather than adding additional movement elements or abstracting the movement sequence as in Genty and Underwood's technique, I worked with the actors to transpose the memory-based vocabulary by asking them to select movement from either or both of the other performers and develop a new movement sequence using this and their own vocabulary. The results of this phase can be seen in Clips 26, 27, and 28 – Gallo Rosso, Damvoglouis, and Nabirye respectively.

As can be seen in the clips, the actor puppeteers individually elected to acquire many of the same memory movements into their individual phrases. All three chose to incorporate the backward walk, swipe action, scrubbing action, and being on their knees whereas two chose the sequence laying down on their side and back; and two chose the sprinkling action with their hands, the arms coming from back to front and over their head, and carrying a heavy item. While in the rehearsal, we discussed their choices and they all agreed that they selected gestures from the others' movement sequence if it seemed to trigger a personal memory. Though the intention behind their decision is not necessarily evident in their first performances in clips 26, 27 and 28, in discussion they each indicated it was vital to their decision. We continued to devise a sequence for the scene through a series of improvisations beginning with those gestures that appeared in two or more of their phrases. Clip 29 shows an excerpt of the actor puppeteers' first improvisation. Although we had discussed what gestures would be incorporated, the performers both adapted some - for example the hug was a standing version of lying on the ground - and added gestures from their Memograms in the moment of performance. As a performance practice, starting with vocabularies based on the actor puppeteers' own memories or triggered memories grounded and connected them to the performance scene and enhanced their ability to activate or manufacture their own presence.

While Genty and Underwood's use of memory in practice focuses on physical and textual memory, and Tranter's on emotional and cultural, we began to investigate a concept of aural memory as a layer for this scene. As in the Memograms stage one, I asked the actor puppeteers' to recall two melodies from their pasts. They each learned each other's melody and we began to incorporate them as an element in our

improvisations first through singing alone and then singing during improvisation. Clip 30 is an excerpt from a mid-point improvisation using the memory-based movement vocabulary with the beginnings of a sung lament in which the actor puppeteers' vocalize the melody only. What we found is, similar in practice to the use of memory-based physical vocabularies, that there are two ways memory based material activates performer presence and situates the actor as a site of memory. For the originating performer who initiates a gesture or sound from memory, the recalled vocabulary regardless of any transformations retains traces of the memory and associated sensory and emotional qualities. For the material to contribute to the manufacture or activation of presence in the acquiring performers however, the action (in this case a melody) must trigger a memory that is then associated with the action. As the scene developed over a number of rehearsals and improvisations, the movements and melody seemed to self-select. The self-selection was premised not on choreographic or directorial choices rather they were made in response to the actor puppeteers' visible and audible connections to any given movement or melody made possible by the use of memory as a performance practice. Albeit subjective, this visibility is the actor puppeteer's focused intention and quality of presence; what Power describes as 'auratic presence' (Power 47).

In the scene, the text is not their own nor are any of the actor puppeteers military wives with first hand experience of the stories they relate. The lament and movement sections were mechanisms to ground the actor puppeteers' physically and emotionally to enable them to speak and connect with their verbatim text. Despite their various training though, vocal commitment and projection were not as well developed in the performers. I approached this issue by using Genty and Underwood's technique *The Fugitive*. Genty and Underwood use this technique as a means to find text based on personal memory and to develop an actor's vocal projection through a physical and emotional need to speak. At first, we executed the technique as defined by Genty and Underwood using personal memory thus establishing a level of competency with the structure of the technique. As an experiment, we substituted the verbatim text for the personal memory and I invited the actor puppeteers' to include movements from our memory-based vocabulary. Clips 31, 32 and 33 show each of the actor puppeteers' – Gallo Rosso, Nabirye, and Damvoglouis respectively - moment of vocal breakthrough. As the performers stated, in agreement with each other, the act of having to physically push through the other bodies supported their vocal production and activated their need to communicate. Although during the exercise they were communicating someone else's memory, they found that they could draw on the sensory experience to engage a need to speak supported by strong, intentional

vocal projection. This added to the residual energies and emotions built up during the prior movement section in the performance. Additionally, we found that the technique was useful for developing physical listening skills among the actors. The combination of memory based material and verbatim text conveyed as energy/presence, which infused the action and contributed to its meaning. Throughout this evolution, one can trace elements of the originating memory or if a transposed action the memory it triggered in the acquiring performer through the gesture's impetus, focus, and intention.

The final scene of the show, Scene Five – Healing, presents an interesting challenge to my theory about the puppet as a site of memory activated through the use of memory based performance practices. The visible scene – two small puppets on a table top with visible manipulators who are not active characters in the scene – could potentially have been developed without the use of memory-based vocabularies. Yet for the performers, the dramatic narrative of the scene is entwined with the culturally based memory of the mytho-historic character Scheherazade as a healer of the king and a healer of the society through story telling or as we interpreted it, in the context of cotemporary military wives, as well as the puppet as a cultural memory figure. Our rehearsal process to develop this scene (unfortunately there is no video footage) brought together the mechanics of puppetry manipulation and mimesis with memory-based gestural language. The gesture drew from the actor puppeteers' personal experiences of moments from their childhood when they gave or received comfort. These were re-enacted as individual improvisation and, as in our use of gestures derived from Memograms, the gestures we selected were premised on those that the actor puppeteers' responded to.

Towards the final stages of developing our production, as I noted above in *The Messiness of Theatre Making*, one of the original performers was released from the cast very late in the practical research period. The replacement actor, Vogt (now Annairam), who joined our cast in the final research week before our preview, did not work though the techniques developed by Genty, Underwood, and Tranter. Additionally she did not



**Figure 24: *Three Good Wives* (Scene Five) 2010. Performers: Anna-Maria Nabirye and Elisa Gallo Rosso. Photography by Lynette Shanbury.**

have prior experience with puppetry but was trained in classical acting, mask, and clown techniques. Three key questions directly related to my research about using Genty, Underwood, and Tranter's training theories and techniques thereby arose:

- Is a performance score created using memory based material rigorously constructed such that it will still resonate with trace memory and transmit meaning when learned and performed as choreography?
- If a performer learns a performance score as choreography without the benefit of knowing or understanding either the manipulation techniques or what the agency/intention is premised on, will that performer manufacture a puppet actor's projected independent presence and negotiate between their own live presence and the puppet's material presence when acting with them?
- If the relationship between memory and physical action is severed (in our case, the two performers did not meet), will the transposed memory based material trigger new memories for the new performer?

Because of the limited time, Vogt learned of all the scenes, including puppet manipulation and movement sequences that the originating research cast developed through memory and devising, as if it were choreography in other words as movement sequences unconnected to the memory source. We found that in Scene Three – Waiting, which necessitated a negotiation between presences, and Scene Five – Healing, built on the notion of projected presence through a puppet with visible puppeteers, the theories and techniques used to devise each scene mapped out a rigorous moment-to-moment sequence of movements, behaviour, and focus for both puppet and puppeteer, which could be taught to a performer not engaged with either companies' training, without necessarily diminishing the presence of either puppet or performer. However, because Vogt did not experience the puppetry training exercises, she did not necessarily leave the performance experience with a developed set of puppetry skills that could be later used in other projects. Similarly, she learned the movement sequence in Scene Four – Mourning, as a dance, unconnected to the memories from which it came, though she was informed verbally about Genty and Underwood's process that had been used to develop the scene.

What emerged was akin to Roberta Mock's experience when recreating autobiographical performance material by Dee Heddon. In 'It's (Not Really) All About Me, Me, Me', Mock positions her performing style as non-representational. Though she was not trying to be Heddon, Mock writes that when speaking Heddon's text: 'I conjured my own memories and those of my family... and while doing so, my material body was

firmly located in the site from which these specific words and the memories they describe arose' (Mock 20-21). Like Vogt's learning the movements grounded on another's memories, the movements hold traces of its origin and a dialogue between the movements and the new performer's own memories underpin the communication of meaning to the audience participants. The performer's presence is, as Genty and Underwood propose, still bound to the actor's memories, but transposition of memory-based movement from one actor puppeteer to another changes the way memory is invoked. Rather than memory originating the movement, movement stimulates memory. This is also valid when a puppet performer is activated by and creates meaning through the memories of the actor puppeteer and the audience participants. Thusly the puppet is the receiving site of the actor puppeteers' memory though the gestures, qualities, and rhythms imparted to it; and it is read through the memories of the audience participant – the 'wow' or aha moment of recognizing one's self or others in the gestures that recall one's own personal memory.

### **Contemporary Puppetry Practice and the Puppet as Site of Memory**

This practice-based research project was initiated by a simple question: what are the performance techniques and theories that have been developed in and are used by contemporary puppet theatre experts? Despite the growing discipline of practice-based research and the increased interest in puppet theatre, this question is only now beginning to be a point of departure for scholarly inquiry in puppetry. When considering the practice and performance of puppetry as approached by contemporary practitioners such as Philippe Genty, Mary Underwood, and Neville Tranter, it is revealed to be far more complex than puppets and objects making temporal use of external resources and the principles that can be deduced from production and spectator analysis alone. Jurkowski himself notes that, after World War II, 'puppet companies were practicing a theatre in which the puppets were "scenic subjects", meaning that they were given the function of stage characters' (Jurkowski *A History of European Puppetry Vol. 2, the Twentieth Century* 240). The performance of puppets as stage characters as it manifests in the works of Genty, Underwood, and Tranter suggests more than a symbolically coded performance based on a puppet's aesthetic principles; it suggests acting and internal processes that are below the surface of the visible performance. All puppeteers— whether visible or invisible, providing the character voice, or not—act. The question and challenge facing contemporary directors and performers is not, as Francis has suggested, a question of whether or not puppeteers act, but rather of how they act.

I have argued that not only are Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre seminal companies but also that their work represents a fundamental shift in puppetry performance practice from external processes founded on the visible aesthetic principles of puppets to internal processes premised on memory externalized through transposition and manipulation. This dissertation contributes to new knowledge in two ways: the documentation and analysis of the workshop practices of Genty, Underwood, and Tranter; and new theorization about the nature of puppets in performance as site(s) of memory activated by the real memories of actor puppeteers, audience participants, and cultural memory. Further, I have argued and shown that both the shift in process and theory are only revealed through a deep analysis of and engagement with practice.

Contemporary puppet theatre practice is often a complex, paradoxical negotiation among different ontologies, energies, and contradictory performance modes. The demands in terms of performance skills require a syncretic practice that combines a variety of skills and techniques. Actor puppeteers, like mask performers, clowns, commedia dell arte and, to a certain extent, dancers,<sup>112</sup> act through an intermediary or an extension of themselves. Live human actors perform through their own bodies, experience, and psychology. These differences in techniques, and the increasing need for performers to be capable of crossing the borders between performance genres, sometimes within a single show, pose challenges both to devising all-round training and to the performers themselves when switching between the various modes. Astles suggests that there is still a need for training methods that address the issues faced by live human actors performing with puppets and materials (Astles 'Puppetry Training for Contemporary Live Theatre' 28) yet as my research shows contemporary practitioners have devised many techniques and theories that address these very issues, which have yet to be documented, analyzed, and unbound from their originating aesthetic. The present circumstances give rise to much debate and examination of alternative methods (Francis 25), yet, as Genty, Underwood, and Tranter's workshops also suggest that although puppetry practice has shifted from external to internal processes and towards a fluid negotiation of multiple

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<sup>112</sup> I am including dancers in this category because on the one hand they are like live human actors performing as her- or him-self on the other we, in my experience training and being a professional dancer, are also taught to think of our extremities—arms, legs, feet, and hands—as extended expressive bodies or entities. Dancer training includes being able to isolate different body parts, and sustain multiple rhythms and impulses. This is similar to working with a puppet that extends from one's body directly or indirectly and can be seen in Tranter's notion of splitting the actor. Genty and Underwood have similar expectations but do not have specific techniques for accomplishing the split rather it is implied in their principle of showing agency through impulse and the puppet always moving first.

presences (Astles 'Wood and Waterfall: Puppetry Training and its Anthropology' 58), the training needs to be attentive to the practical skills of acting, the craft of puppetry manipulation, and materiality as mechanisms to externalize internal processes.

The case studies on Compagnie Philippe Genty and Stuffed Puppet Theatre include four components: the artists' histories, close production analysis of a significant production from their repertory, analysis of key aspects of their creative process, and the documentation and analysis of their workshop theories and techniques. The histories articulate the background of each artist and influences that emerge in their practice whereas the production analysis function as evidence of aesthetic and visible performance principles revealed in the moment of performance. A central contribution of my research though is my documentation and analysis of Genty's, Underwood's, and Tranter's workshop theories and techniques, which are further investigated and tested during the creation of *Three Good Wives*. My analysis reveals that their external production aesthetics are founded on internal processes using personal and cultural memory and my theory that puppets function as 'site(s) of memory' and that their presence/illusion of agency is activated by the 'real' memories of both the actor puppeteers and audience participants. This notion is investigated in practice as part of the dramaturgy of *Three Good Wives* that uses performer memories, experiences of others, and cultural memory as part of the narrative, drawing on the techniques of verbatim theatre.

My research encountered a number of challenges, obstacles, and opportunities. Foremost was the challenge of translation from experience to page of both the theories and techniques developed by Genty, Underwood, and Tranter as well as documenting the investigations and outcomes in *Three Good Wives*. I argue in Chapter One that although translation between experience and page is incomplete and an attempt at the impossible, meaning to transmit more than mere information (Benjamin *Illuminations* 69), the act of engaging with the impossible is a pathway to growth (Gasset 99) and new knowledge. The practice component also encountered numerous challenges such as the time/order of production needs and schedule relative to the research, and firing and replacing a cast member a week prior to opening. This messiness or muddle during research however also led to opportunity. To negotiate this messiness, I used Tringham's notion of a hermeneutic spiral methodology where by each overlapping activity affects the other as a mechanism to inform the research. This methodology provided a rigorous yet flexible way to utilize obstacles productively during the development of *Three Good Wives*.

The techniques and theories, though used in a production aesthetically different from those of either Compagnie Philippe Genty or Stuffed Puppet Theatre, remained



useful tools for negotiating multiple presences on stage, as well as functioning as specific training techniques in acting and puppetry. Though the cast was made up of performers with varying experience in puppetry and each had more extensive training in live human acting techniques, their engagement with Genty, Underwood, and Tranter's approaches to live human performance and manufacture of presence made a marked, and I would say, positive difference in both Gallo Rosso's and Nabirye's performances. In *Three Good Wives*, they not only learned or improved puppet manipulation skills but also learned how to invest in the manufacture and projection of presence into an external object as well as techniques for manufacturing their own presence and the simultaneous performance of both. Genty, Underwood, and Tranter's respective techniques will inspire fresh pathways for designing training in puppetry as well as offering practical techniques for the actor in puppet theatre.

Power suggests that '[T]he actor's 'having presence' therefore, seems to function beyond the level of (or merely of?) theatrical semiosis; actor presence appears to work underneath the level of semiosis and representation' (Power 75). The 'underneath' of the actor, in Genty and Underwood's proposition, is the actor's own memories and experience—physical, mental, and emotional—that Memograms and *The Fugitive* access through physical re-enactment or resistance. This includes memory of physical actions, its associated residual emotions, and pushing through physical and mental obstacles that are then contained in a performance narrative and communicated in the moment of performance. Whereas the underneath of the actor for Tranter is grounded in cultural memory through his use of archetypes and personal memory in his character development based in Method training. His practice shares similarities to Stanislavski's notion of physical action in his use of symbolic gesture to externalize a character's internal truth.

A challenge in contemporary puppetry practice arises when performers are required to simultaneously manipulate and act with puppet partners. It requires the actor to negotiate projecting presence into an external object while simultaneously constructing and radiating their own presence. Paraphrasing Michael Meschke, Astles writes that 'multi-functional puppetry, where there is a moving dynamic between puppeteer and puppet, is among the most difficult of performance modes' (qtd in Astles 'Puppetry Training for Contemporary Live Theatre' 32). Though Genty and Underwood have moments that require this level of negotiation of presence, they do not have any training techniques that directly address the challenges it poses to the actor. Instead, in my experience of their workshop and from watching archival video of rehearsal, they rely on the actor to find a path to achieving the desired effect in any given scene. In the

workshop, it was evident that there was slippage between techniques for actors, puppets, and raw materials wherein the actors themselves unconsciously applied techniques from one category to another. This was most apparent when actors applied their actor/dancer techniques—such as those designed to free the actor of inhibitions and use of memory as source material—to their work with raw materials and puppets.

Tranter does have specific tools and techniques designed to negotiate performing multiple presences and achieving equal status, or perceived equal presence, between live human and puppet actors. These techniques were used and adapted, specifically intentional character development and performance, splitting the actor, and attention to action/reaction, in our training and production development for Scene Three – Waiting (DVD 1), that weaves together the character Penelope from the *Odyssey* and Atwood’s feminist re-imagining of Penelope with research about contemporary military wives whose husbands were deployed. Like Genty and Underwood’s techniques, his have broader implications to puppetry technique.

Our process of building both the live human and puppet characters overlapped with the development of the physical skills needed to negotiate the live human and puppet presence. As this was the more challenging aspect of our research, it received the most studio time. The first working period took place during our residency at BAC, which concluded with a work-in-progress showing on 15 December 2009. Having two working periods allowed us to experiment with and learn from—as well as throw away aspects that were not contributing to, or in the case of using voice for the puppet character, was distracting from—constructing equal presences on stage. It was clear in our early investigations of splitting the actor, thus enabling them to simultaneously perform two characters, that while puppets demand ‘absolute clarity of intention in...[their] movement; simple, direct communication of text’ (Carroll), their presence is constructed using many of the same tools that Power notes in the construction of the auratic presence of the live human actor. These are ‘manipulation of space... including... [its] own body and posture, as well as the way in which the actor [read: puppet] confronts... [its] audience and engages their attention’ (Power 49). The challenge for the live human actor, as Tranter’s training (and his own performances) suggests, is to modify their performance so that when performing with puppets there is continuity between the two methods of acting, without losing emotional underpinning and being in the moment.

This modification of the live actor’s performance may or may not inform and support the live human actor’s performance on stage. Gallo Rosso spoke of how Tranter’s Exercise 3 developed her abilities in:

[L]istening [to] the other [the puppet] and following the impulse of her [the puppet's] action, [enabling one] to respond to it and react, [while] continuing to engage with the audience. This exercise allowed me to enter completely in her world and get to 'know' her better so that I could relate to her more easily, exploring the various colours of her face, expression of her neck, movements of her arms and body. Like learning her body languages and capability of communication without words. (Gallo Rosso Email communication, 8 April 2010)

In performance she said: 'I didn't see [her]self adjusting... [shortening] my performance as a character' (ibid.). Yet, working exclusively through this particular exercise during the studio experimentation, she and the other two actors all expressed similar sentiments about not always being able to fulfil what, as actors, they felt were the full intentions for either themselves or the puppets as characters (ibid.).

To fill this gap in the construction of character and presences, we turned to Genty and Underwood's live actor and movement techniques as methods to develop movement vocabulary for the puppet character that would be underpinned by the live human actor's own memory and experience. We chose to use stages one – find three movements from your childhood, two – create two contrasting movement phrases not premised on memory and combine these with the memory-based movement, three – transform the movement by altering the speed at which it is performed, and four - combine or replace one's own memory based vocabulary with someone else's - of the exercise, as these incorporate the live human actor's memory in some form. In their performance of stage one, Gallo Rosso and Damvoglouis were more comfortable with the creation and performance of movement than was Nabirye. However, as the group progressed to stage two of the technique,<sup>113</sup> Nabirye focused on the task of working from memory rather than thinking about the technique as dance or choreography. This shift in her thinking was actually one of the desired outcomes of the exercise, and it began to alter her relationship to movement. As a group, we also discovered that stages one and two were useful not only for generating new vocabulary, but also for provoking a conscious understanding of rhythm as a tool for meaning making and, as I hypothesised when proposing we use this exercise as a puppetry technique, it created an underpinning for these manipulators when they performed that physical vocabulary with the puppet. Additionally, I noticed that stage three of the technique functioned as an alternative means of developing the three live human actors' physical listening skills and thus improving their manipulation skills

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<sup>113</sup> In our investigation of this technique, I instructed to the performers to begin transposing their work (according to Genty and Underwood, this instruction is the first part of stage three) though rhythm and performing their sequence twice: once at 50% of original tempo, once at what they consider their normal tempo.

when performing multi-person manipulation or handing off the puppet between manipulators. From a training perspective, it was evident that in order for actors to be prepared to negotiate projecting presence into an external object while constructing and radiating their own presence, they need a combination of internal and external performance techniques similar to Stanislavski's physical action however the ontological difference of puppets and the demands of manipulating an object add to the complexity of skills needed to perform action(s). Not only are actor puppeteers reconstructing behaviour in their own bodies but they are also reconstructing it in puppet bodies that have limitations and opportunities for movement, and as Tranter articulates particular requirements of action/reaction, attention to gaze, and the deconstruction of movement because of their ontology.

Production analysis of either company suggests that their work decentres the human, my research of their practices, however, shows that the human is at the centre of both in the form of memory as an activator of live human and puppet presence externalized through the body, which for the puppet means their visible principles design, movement and when used voice. Compagnie Philippe Genty categorises techniques according to the material: live humans, puppets, or raw materials. But, as Astbury suggests, '[A]ctors, pro's all, manage themselves' (Astbury 43), and the majority of individuals invited to participate in a Genty/Underwood production are professionals in some capacity and usually have performance training and experience; they often choose to take the workshop because they aspire to be selected as future company members (though there are exceptions). In my experience of the workshop training, there is slippage and mixing of techniques across categories. Tranter, on the other hand, is explicitly developing techniques to negotiate ontological difference between equal acting partners that incorporates both acting and puppetry. In other words, presence is manufactured through physical action underpinned and activated by personal and cultural memory as opposed to necessarily being inherent as in Goodall and Roach. This notion resonates with Hodge's notion that presence 'is understood...as potentially a constructed phenomenon that can be realized by coordinating the actor's body/consciousness and the circulation of energy' (Hodge *Actor Training* xxiii). For Genty, Underwood, and Tranter, the energy being circulated is found in personal and cultural memory; the emotions and physicality that emerge from memory are transposed among actors – live human, puppet and material – as performance vocabularies in what Roach might refer to as a process of surrogation in which memory is perpetuated through re-performance in substituted bodies (Roach *Cities of the Dead* 2, 36). I have argued that there has been a fundamental shift in

puppetry performance practice from external to internal techniques and that this shift affects performance practices of the live human actor puppeteers whose practice is modified in relation to performing with their puppet acting partners. I have argued and shown through analysis and practice that puppets function as site and sites of memory. On one hand, they are the literal receiving site of the actor puppeteer's memory that is made externally material in the body of a puppet through transference and craft based manipulation whose meaning is then read through the audience participant's memory. On the other, they are sites of memory – constructed objects where personal and cultural 'memory crystalizes' (Nora 7). In this sense, puppets perform cultural memory, remembrance, and histories at the intersection of the personal and the public.

## Appendix

### Supplementary material: *Three Good Wives*

Following are the press release, a pre-production article, program information, and the online versions of the four reviews for *Three Good Wives*. The article and reviews include the text only and not the images as originally published.

#### Press Release:

#### *Three Good Wives* At Little Angel Theatre

14 Dagmar Passage

London N1 2DN

020 7226 1787, [info@littleangeltheatre.com](mailto:info@littleangeltheatre.com)

#### Dates & Times

16th Mar–28th Mar 2010

Tues 16 – Sun 28 March (not 22 or 23), 8pm (4pm Sundays, 7pm Fri 26 Mar)

**Tickets:** £10 / £8 conc (£5 previews Tues 16 & Wed 17)

An original puppet theatre piece that takes contemporary US and UK military wives' stories and weaves them with mytho-historic heroines: Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey*, Mandodari from the *Ramayana*, and Scheherazade from *The Arabian Nights*. The production is inspired by the stories of 21st Century women whose lives have been affected by war. It draws from personal accounts, news and radio stories as well as online social media to investigate the core themes of waiting, mourning, and healing.

*Three Good Wives* features Katerina Damvoglou, Anna-Maria Nabirye and Elisa Gallo Rosso with puppet and scenic design by Michael Kelly, sound design by Joemca, and director Alissa Mello. *Three Good Wives* is presented as a part of the Vistors Season by Inkfish in association with Little Angel Theatre

There will be a post-show Q&A with the director on Wed 24 March. This production is suitable for adult audiences.

Inkfish, founded by Michael Kelly, Alissa Mello and Brian Snapp, creates original, exciting and innovative performances, events, and visual art using a wide range of traditional and advanced technologies, peoples, and ideas to explore our humanity and the world we live in.

**The Times**

**March 17, 2010**

**Pulling strings for the wives of war**

**A new play uses puppetry to back up the words of military wives in *Three Good Wives* at the Little Angel Theatre, N1**

**Nuala Calvi**

Three women cut Sellotape and roll up paper tubes with the air of Blue Peter presenters, stopping frequently to give each other approving nods and smiles. Then, into their happy bubble seeps the emotionless voice of a computer: “I’m out of my mind with sadness ... the very first night he’s gone, I just cry all night. I stay in my pyjamas all day and eat microwave food . . .” When the trio finish their task they proudly hold their creations aloft: three paper machine guns.

The words are the confessions of real women — wives of US and UK soldiers deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan — collected by the theatre company Inkfish from blogs, messageboards and online amateur radio broadcasts. The production, *Three Good Wives*, is a startling mix of verbatim accounts, puppetry, film and dance, to give a stark warning about the state of military marriages after nine years of conflict. Websites such as [militarywives.com](http://militarywives.com) allow women anonymously to discuss subjects that would once have been difficult in a tight-knit barracks community: falling out of love as a result of prolonged separations; resentment when husbands return and disrupt lives that have readjusted in their absence; anger over jealous comments from spouses; putting money aside in case of divorce.

The testimonies speak of a growing tension between the public face of the supportive army spouse and the reality of women struggling with the heartache and disruption of repeated deployments. “With the kids and the house and no help and no relief in sight, it’s often really hard to keep from being completely overwhelmed,” one says. “But I’m a military wife. I knew the job description when I married him, so I feel like I don’t have any right to complain.”

In rehearsals for the show, puppet women have their mouths sewn shut with blood coloured thread and are left to drown on coffee tables piled high with paper weaponry; a shadow image of a perfect home struggles against collapse as an infestation of armoured insects rises from the basement. “One of the things that’s come out of our research is that social expectations of what it means to be a good wife have not really changed in the military community since the Second World War,” says the director, Alissa Mello.

“But the added challenge in these two conflicts is that, while the women support their partners, they don’t necessarily support the war. Some wives have said that, but it’s a difficult thing to do, especially if your whole world is the military, which has the potential to ostracise you.” One woman who questioned why her husband had volunteered for early redeployment was rebuked for not being proud of him doing his duty. Another, who admitted to looking at other men, faced a torrent of condemnation from fellow wives, one of whom tracked down her husband on MySpace and informed on her.

“If your partner is away for six months it’s natural that you’re going to have those feelings,” says the performer-puppeteer Anna-Maria Nabirye. “But the official message is that you have to stay strong. Looking at some of these websites there’s a certain amount of self-policing that goes on, wives chastising each other if they have doubts.”

Inkfish’s production will feature a three-quarter life size puppet — inspired by Odysseus’ longsuffering wife Penelope — as a commander’s wife who keeps her fellow spouses in check with disapproving glances while they sit sewing her legendary shroud. In private she becomes a wild thing — sniffing and clawing at the cloth with barely concealed sexual frustration.

The nod to mythology suggests a universality about the theme of women waiting for men that goes beyond the individual, real-life accounts. And puppets lend themselves to the job, Mello says, because they feel “familiar, yet unfamiliar. “They also have no personal history — it’s not like watching Vanessa Redgrave and saying: ‘I remember when she did such-and-such’. They’re purpose built for the show, so it’s a clean slate — people have to bring their own associations and engage more imaginatively than with actors.”

A former dancer from California, Mello discovered puppetry’s potential when a choreographer asked her to help with a show for the Henson International Festival of puppet theatre in New York. “I realized how limited the human body is,” she says. “With puppets the visual possibilities are much wider.”

Ten years of working with the avant-garde New York puppeteer Theodora Skipitares followed, working with everything from 12ft-high blow-up dolls to Indian shadow puppets, tackling epic subjects such as the history of medicine.

In 2005, Mello and fellow New York puppet maker/performers Michael Kelly and Brian Snapp founded Inkfish, with a mission to present similarly big ideas on an intimate scale. Their most recent production, *The Brain*, used toy theatre, rod puppetry and film to explore Einstein’s moral dilemma over the atom bomb. It played at the cult off-off-



Broadway venue La MaMa before coming to the Little Angel Theatre in London, where *Three Good Wives* is being staged.

“This show came out of a desire to tell the stories behind the news,” Mello explains, “On TV we often capture soldiers’ wives at the worst possible moment, when their husband’s died, and that becomes a very strong image.”

But I’ve read some lovely things where, several years on, women talk about dating again. We forget that life continues, that life goes on.”

**Programme details, as printed and distributed to audience participants:**

## ***Three Good Wives***

**16 – 28 March 2010**

### **Director's Note**

*Three Good Wives* is a collaboratively developed investigation of three core themes using puppetry, sound and visual image. The themes of waiting, mourning and healing are explored through the lens of contemporary US and UK military wives' stories whose lives have been affected by our current military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each thematic etude is inspired by a mytho-historic heroine: Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey*, Mandodari from the *Ramayana*, and Scheherazade from *The Arabian Nights* and is woven with 21st Century women's personal accounts, news and radio stories, and from online social media.

Our project developed using an experimental, non-narrative structure to create a meditation or visual poem. Through this structure, we investigate the spaces between the words and stories to evoke different ways of experiencing these stories that goes beyond language. Through the research and development of our production, I have begun to understand our current military engagements from numerous personal perspectives, giving us an opportunity to try to understand these wars and what they mean beyond the politics. Our performance is a visual and poetic representation that emerges from our encounter with contemporary personal accounts, mythic heroines, puppetry, dance, video, and sound.

Performers: Anna-Maria Nabirye, Elisa Gallo Rosso, Marianna Vogt

Director: Alissa Mello

Puppet, Set and Video Design: Michael Kelly

Sound Design: Joemca

Costume Construction: Rebecca Sykes

Set Construction: Christopher Westwood

For Little Angel Theatre:

Lighting Design: David Duffy

Technical Staff: Alison Alexander, Jason Vakharia

Press Relations: Anne Meyer

Marketing: Jack Orr

**David Duffy** (lighting design) has been resident Technical Manager of Little Angel since 2007. He has lit shows for Tawala at the Drill Hall, Sadler's Wells and the Soho Theatre, toured nationally with Platform 4, taught lighting design at Wimbledon College of the Arts, and was Technical Manager at Magic Eye Theatre for several years.

**Joemca** (sound design and composition) sound design and sound-scores have been featured in Inkfish's 2008 experimental puppet theatre production *The Brain* at the Club, La Mama (NYC), Inkfish's 2006 puppet adaptation of Gogol's *The Nose* at Collective Unconscious (NYC), Murakami inspired experimental puppet theatre pieces *Slow Ascent* (2006) and *UFO in K* (2005) at the Labapalooza festival in St. Ann's Warehouse (Brooklyn, NY), Audiomatic Theater's audio play productions (2005-2006) including an original piece written by John Hannon - *The Transmitter Victim*, Poe's *Tell Tale Heart*, *A Night Before Christmas*, *Walt Whitman-Selections*, and Willow Breaking Production's 2004 ancient Chinese experimental opera re-interpretation *The Disembodied Soul* at the NY International Fringe Festival with original music/sound-score by Joemca. As a songwriter and singer, Joemca released an eponymous EP in 2006 on One Stone Records, and performs with his band, Joemca & the Poets. Joemca's debut album is slated to release in June 2010 on One Stone Records. In addition to his work on *Three Good Wives*, he is in the early stages of planning future audio sound-score projects for later in 2010 and 2011.

**Michael Kelly** (puppet and set designer) founded Inkfish with Alissa Mello and Brian Snapp. Design credits include *The Brain: an experiment in puppet theater*, *The Nose* and *Time Flies* with Inkfish; *Beauty And The Beast*, *Rip Van Winkle* with The National Marionette Theatre; *Optic Fever* and *Helen*, *Queen of Sparta* with Theodora Skipitares. Performance credits include: *Twelve Iron Sandals* with the Czechoslovak-American Marionette Theatre; *Body Of Crime II*, *Optic Fever*, *Timur The Lame*, *Helen*, *Queen of Sparta* and *Odyssey: The Homecoming* with Theodora Skipitares; *The Lone Runner* and *Universe Expanding* with Jane Catherine Shaw; *If You Take a Fish Out of Water Will It Swim?* with Eva Lansberry; *The Cry-Pitch Carols* with Tiny Mythic; and *The Adventures of Maya The Bee* with The Culture Project. Currently he is working with Brian Snapp on puppet and stage designs for his new production *Gilgamesh*.

**Alissa Mello** (Director) Productions include *The Brain: an experiment in puppet theater* featured in the 2009 Suspense festival premiered at The Club, LaMaMa ETC, *The Nose* at Collective:Unconscious, and *Time Flies* at The Puppet Lab Arts at St. Ann's with Inkfish. She has appeared as a puppeteer and choreographer in productions created by Theodora Skipitares, Anna Kiraly, Jane Catherine Shaw, Ishara Puppet Theater, and the Czechoslovak-American Marionette Theatre. Prior to her work in puppetry, she was a member of Naomi Goldberg's company WeDance/Los Angeles Modern Dance & Ballet in California. Currently, she is also working on her doctorate in contemporary puppet theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London, and teaching at the Central School of Speech and Drama.

**Anna-Maria Nabirye** (performer) trained at The Brit School and Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts, which has led to a varied career. As well as collaborating with Inkfish she has devised political based works with Daedalus Theatre and The Playground. She has performed as a puppeteer with Halfmoon YPT in their productions of *Igloo*, *Hullabaloo* and *Icicle Bicycle* and with the Little Angel in *Handa's Hen*. She is one half of comedy sketch act Strong & Wrong with whom she also writes and produces. Other credits include Diamond Lil - *The Night Kitchen Cabaret*, Abigail - *The Jew of Malta* at *The Hall For Cornwall*, Titania - *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Cambridge Shakespeare Festival, various singing roles in *Photo Me* at Riverside Studios.

**Elisa Gallo Rosso** (performer) trained at Philippe Gaulier Ecole, she comes from a various background which includes Visual Art, Music, Impro and Architecture. She has been working as international trainer and facilitator for cultural projects based on theatrical tools for the EU. Founder of Quinta Tinta, Turin, Company based on The Match of Theatre Improvisation. Recent credits include being assistant director for Chris Johnson in *Night, London* at Tristan Bates Theatre; writer/performer for *The Tail of Phoenix*, Teatro Ellenico, in collaboration with Animate (Mexico City). At the moment, she is collaborating in the creation of *Clowns* acts with the International Clown group directed by Jon Davison.

**Becca Sykes** (costume construction) is currently studying at Central School of Speech and Drama and will graduate this year. During the last two years Becca has been making costumes for a range of different productions, including *The Greek* at the Minack Theatre,

*Christmas Baking Time* at the Lyric Hammersmith and working as part of the running wardrobe team at the Rose Theatre, Kingston.

**Marianna Vogt** (Performer) has recently relocated to London from the United States via Brussels. Most recently she has appeared as Brutus in the Brussels Shakespeare Society's all-female version of *Julius Caesar* and as a performer and creator of *EXILKABARETT* presented last summer at various venues in New York City. She trained in both classical acting and movement-based mask and clown theatre. In *Three Good Wives*, she is making her debut as a puppeteer.

### **Thanks...**

We would like to thank Katerina Damvoglou for her contributions during the creative development, Peter Glanville and Yasmine van Wilt for their provocative questions, everyone at The Little Angel Theatre for their assistance throughout our production, Gregg Fisher, and the staff at The Pleasance Theatre, Islington. To Stathis Aposporis, Sophia Aposporis, Lefteris Dousis, Philip Hager, Emanuele Nargi, Konstantinos Thomaidis, and Fay Tsitou for joining us at a party and allowing us to film it. This project is funded in part by a grant from The Jerome Foundation with additional support from Central School of Speech and Drama, The Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre, The Puppet Center Trust, Battersea Arts Centre, The Pleasance Theatre, Islington, and Royal Holloway Department of Drama and Theatre, University of London. Inkfish has been awarded grants from The Jim Henson Foundation, and The Puffin Foundation, and had additional support from Materials for the Arts, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs/NYC Department of Sanitation/NYC Department of Education.

## Reviews

www.spoonfed.co.uk

### **Three Good Wives at Little Angel Theatre**

**19 March 2010**

**by: Naima Khan**

**Four Stars**

Three Good Wives proves to be a powerful example of graphic, non-narrative puppet theatre and just the right amount for Naima to make sense of. To someone whose experience with military families and relationships ranges from little to none, the image of the lives of those in this oft-forgotten sub-section tends to be monolithic. The most common picture is one of a sisterhood that celebrates tradition and firmly believes in standing by your man. In this graphic poem, director Alissa Mello has, with great gentleness, presented a moving, visual acknowledgement of the strained aspects of life for the wives of deployed army men.

Defined by a profession, inseparable from the personal, and one that doesn't really belong to them but to their husbands, these are the wives who consent to being left long-term. As an unescapable robotic voice explains, "I knew the job description when I married him". Mello highlights the 'job' of a military wife and the toll it takes through influential cyber chattering and the ubiquitous news streams that have become white noise to many of us, but play a far more frightening role to these women. Her talent lies in being affective without being overly sentimental.

Three performers – puppeteers, actors and singers all at once – manipulate featureless puppets with their mouths sewn shut as they wait, mourn, and heal. What's most apparent is their incredible sense of loss: not just of their partners but of their sense of self and purpose. Using puppets certainly maintains the dark side of this reality for "women who wait". They're holding down the fort, but for who exactly? Snippets of stories emerge via internet forums of women whose husbands only disrupt steady homes when they return, or spend more time with their friends than their wives.

Mello makes no bones about the stagnant Second World War attitudes that seem to pervade the domestic military community. Through Three Good Wives she has identified the part that social media has played in opening up long unspoken issues. The wives themselves are no angels. They judge and chastise as humans do, they are vulnerable and influential, needy and enduring.

Three Good Wives is an excellent showcase for theatre-makers Inkfish. Inkfish have demonstrated the impact of utilising different mediums in theatre which seems to work best in this non-narrative theatre. They've expertly struck a balance without overkill. The combination of penetrating sound and stark imagery through shadow and rod puppets contrasts with the sense of urgency and the sense of emptiness. The constant stream of internet chatter and news reports soon become nails on a blackboard but it's the vacant dial tone that's worse.

At only an hour long, this thought-provoking piece stops before it becomes too heavy, but it's unfailingly fascinating.

Three Good Wives runs at Little Angel Theatre until 28th March

**Three Good Wives – Little Angel Theatre, London**

**Created by Inkfish**

**Reviewer: Marie Kenny**

**The Public Reviews Rating: Three Stars**

The Suspense Festival in 2009 really proved that adult puppetry is in demand at the moment. In *Three Good Wives* three female performers blend puppetry with video, movement and song. The performance is apparently inspired by Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey*, Mandodari from the *Ramayana* and Scheherazade from *The Arabian Nights*.

The piece explores the experiences of the wives left behind when their partners go to war. It's a visual, physical expression of the strains and stresses they encounter as they wait for their men to return. There is some humour to be found from an automated voice which explains how they can expect to feel and some coping techniques worth trying out. On the whole though this is no laughing matter, at one point the three performers stand and announce how many soldiers have died each year since the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan began. You can't help but notice that this American company read an extensive list of allies but then fail to mention how many soldiers have been lost from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Anyway, there are some quirky and wonderful moments in this piece, one in particular where the three women take a pad of paper, transforming it rapidly into a huge gun. The dark side of waiting and trying to find the ability to stay patient is gracefully explored in subtle moments between performers and puppets. The concept of the puppets having their mouths sewn up and then freed when they find like-minded people is touching. However, there are moments in this piece where their multi-media performance is doing too many things, over too much time, from one point of view- without really telling us anything new.



**The British Theatre Guide**

***Three Good Wives***

**By Inkfish**

**Little Angel Theatre**

**Review by Philip Fisher (2010)**

The idea of using puppetry to entertain adults sounds intriguing and Handspring showed how well it can be done when they collaborated with the National Theatre on *War Horse*, still going strong at the New London Theatre 2 1/2 years after its debut on the South Bank.

At the Little Angel Theatre in Islington, New York-based company Inkfish attempt to explore the lives of the wives of men at war in an hour-long show that supplements simple puppetry with a soundscape, video, song and movement.

A trio of actresses using a remarkably slow tempo visualise tales that are apparently inspired respectively by Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey*, Mandodari from the *Ramayana* and Scheherazade from *The Arabian Nights*.

It is hard to have to say it but this is one of those occasions where the meaning lies entirely with the director and her actresses and is hardly conveyed at all to the audience.

With no text and few images, spectators are left to fathom out the stories with the assistance of a director's note on the front of the programme but little else.

Along the way, a machine gun is made out of paper, voices of presumably real wives recount the difficulty of seeing their men go off to war and puppets controlled by rods are utilised together with television footage from war zones.

**Three Good Wives**

**Little Angel, London**

**Lyn Gardner**

**The Guardian, Friday 19 March 2010 18.30 EDT**

**Two Stars**

Patience is often considered a womanly virtue. But think of all that sewing you have to do. If only Penelope had been a little less handy with the needle and a little more proactive, she might have had more than a bit role in the Odyssey. But even in the 21st century, patience is being preached to the wives of soldiers who are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Inkfish's meditation on the women who wait, a US army wife offers tips to those whose husbands are about to be deployed. She looks on the bright side: "I've got three months to get a body like Britney Spears." There are some lovely moments in this show – although meditation might be a better word – which melds the stories of mythical women such as Penelope, Scheherazade and Mandodari with the experiences of military wives.

At one point, the three performers construct a machine gun and magazine of bullets from paper; in another, a little puppet figure has her mouth sewn up. But this production always seems like an idea for a theatre piece rather than the show itself. The mix of video (Bush telling the world "we have prevailed [in Iraq]"), collages of sound that are sometimes hard to hear, puppetry and live action is awkward, as if everything has been thrown into the pot without editing. From its stories of the knock on the door in the night to its radio news clips "another soldier has been killed in Afghanistan" the piece is constantly offering up snippets of things we already know, and is bereft of further insight and analysis.

A potentially powerful litany of the rising numbers of dead US and allied soldiers over the last decade is destroyed by its failure to address the Iraqi and Afghan dead.

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