

# Finding the Wooden Voice

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(D - Headline) FINDING THE WOODEN VOICE

(D - Standfirst) IAN GRANT

It is an irony that actress/director Eleonora Duse said to puppet impresario Vittorio Podrecca that she envied his position as a director of a puppet troupe: 'Your actors do not talk, but obey; mine talk and do not obey!' (1) A big irony considering the continual struggle by puppeteers to convince audiences that their puppets talk, and doubly ironic when late nineteenth and early twentieth century theatre theoreticians attempted to 'de-humanise' the actor.

Voice is a reliable indicator of breath and breath is a prerequisite for living. It is a short and logical step to assert that voice is a primary tool for the puppeteer when bestowing the impression of life on dead things. Why then are 'puppets speaking' such a problem for many puppet artists, trainers and scholars? For some it is a mantra that puppets should not speak. For others, the discovery and location of a puppet voice is a tricky but necessary creative journey. For others still, giving voice to an object is second only to moving it, as a defining aspect of puppetry.

'Puppet theatre is not a text-based theatre, puppets do not speak. When you introduce a voice, it is a layer of illusion - one step removed from the essence of the object.' So said Roman Paska, director of the Institut International de la Marionnette, Charleville-Mezieres at the Puppetry Into Performance Symposium. Duccio Bellugi Vannuccini, a performer with Théâtre du Soleil, took issue with Paska's view that puppetry with voice was

not about pretence or illusion; arguing that puppetry is intrinsically about giving 'voice to some thing'. The acts of giving voice and giving life (or animus) are related.

(D - Subhead) Voice is not necessarily text

At a symposium held as part of last year's Henson International Festival of Puppet Theater in New York, Richard Termine posed some useful questions: Can the object speak? Can it be given language? Once we impose text, how can we make the object theatrically viable?

It is a common position to hold that puppet theatre represents the flight into the visual, where image replaces the word. In the puppet sector many of the best artists are suspicious of the expressive limits imposed by words. Problems of voice are not only problems about enlivening literary text with wooden speakers, however. There are many issues to do with the oral nature of puppet speech that are not centred around the written text. Even though puppet voices often have linguistic form, sound, breathing, noise and nonsense (like The Swedish Chef or Beaker from The Muppet Show) also form part of the repertoire for puppet voices.

The performance maker Hanne Tierney commented at the Henson Festival that, 'Puppets just aren't as interesting to watch speaking language written for humans.' Is this so? Is it necessary to simplify the system of speech for puppets? Are puppets capable of speaking poetry? What is distinctive about what puppets can speak?

The theoretical and practical problems of relocating the human voice into the performing object raise some unique issues. The main problem with puppets speaking is that the voice is dislocated, the source is elsewhere. The human presence, with its weight of psychology, intelligence, feeling and intentionality is elsewhere. The supposed identity strongly associated with voice is removed. The assumption is this: through conventions of puppet illusion and movement, the presence of character is relocated to the puppet. For many this transposition of identity is peculiar.

(D - Subhead) Dealing with puppet presence and human non-presence

According to Professor Henryk Jurkowski, Heinrich von Kleist believed that the best actor is the actor without consciousness, one in which all traces of humanity have been removed. He aimed to find the 'puppetesque' in actors -to dehumanise and stylise them. Here is the same zeitgeist expressed in contemporary puppetry practice, with special reference to voice:

'A great actor may find it challenging and stimulating to come into contact with the puppet theatre and the puppet player's intricate technique and feeling for movement. I remember how some actors, late one night, after they had completed the job of recording voices for a production, discussed the experience. They agreed unanimously that their encounter with puppet theatre had taken them back to the roots of dramatic art, to the roots of their profession. The reason was that the rehearsals had made demands on them that they had long ago ceased to encounter in their daily stage work: such as maximum clarity of diction, not allowing a trace of anything approximating "humanness", incorrect breathing, or a wavering sense of rhythm to enter. The voice should be as pure as the puppet.' (Meschke and Sörenson 1992: 67)

The physical separation of presence and psychological entity from the speaking puppet/object need not be an insurmountable aesthetic hurdle, but simply a problem of integration. Ronnie Burkett, using still-faced marionettes, achieves a temporary integration of puppet and human presence in performance through his sympathy, pace, vocal quality, focus, precision, concentration and virtuosity. Jim Henson and the Muppeteers achieve integration with an elaborate use of moving mouths. So giving voice to objects, along with movement, is a principle tool of the animator when intimating the 'presence' of a soul.

Maurice Maeterlink, for one, questioned a human's right to speak on behalf of the inanimate, helping to breed a suspicion of puppets speaking. Maeterlink expresses the puppet theoreticians love for the marionette, and typical discomfort with the human presence and ego in the land of the object and the inanimate:

'I do not know: but the absence of the human to me seems to be essential. When a man enters into a poem, the great poem of his presence dims everything around. A man can speak in his own name only; he has no right to speak in the name of the whole world of the dead.' (Maurice Maeterlink translated by Jurkowski: 1988: 12-13)

Perhaps the ethos expressed here informs those contemporary aesthetes who find the vocal presence of the human in puppet theatre a form of pollution. I find it a bizarre position of those, along with Kleist and Maeterlink, who rationalise that the 'objectness of puppets' makes puppet theatre somehow non-human and somehow immune from the impurities of an actors' ego, psychology and falseness. Puppet theatre requires actor/manipulators, whether visible or invisible. At the Puppetry Into Performance Symposium, Julian Crouch wryly observed: 'Puppeteers who are the best at being invisible are often the most visible.'

So voice is a philosophical problem; when it is disembodied, it has spiritualistic associations - it is a ghostly non-human abstraction. This is why we mostly hate hearing our own recorded voice. The distance from the 'human' allows such a voice to possess the puppet. Should the speaker therefore be invisible? Or like a ventriloquist, simply disguise the act of speaking? This philosophical problem is actually a very practical one, with multiple solutions.

At the Puppetry Into Performance Symposium Roman Paska commented that a puppet presupposes the presence of a person otherwise it is an automaton. This assertion is a problem. What about solo performances, such as Ronnie Burkett's solo multi-vocal marionette play like *Street of Blood*? Such plays have to include the life and death of objects, as objects need to drift into and out of repose and stillness, to allow the polyphony to continue with other characters.

(D - Subhead) The humanness of the vocal: grounding the physicality of voice

Voice is a physical gesture, it is borne of a breath and a muscular contortion of the larynx, the throat, the tongue and lips. The word is fundamentally an action. Voice humanises and 'grounds' figurative puppets as being nearly human. In this way, the puppet is imbued with its own psychology just by association with the human voice. Speech gives identity. This is as true when the non-figurative object is given a voice.

Voice contains echoes of a past, of a tradition, of learning. It is a present-tense carrier of cultural inheritance, of the tradition of the cultural and theatrical past. As soon as a puppet speaks, it is cultured, it has a past - it is not only living, it has lived. In contrast to this 'past-tenseness', the manipulated object has to play, it has to be. This is very present tense.

Speech gives identity, a historicity to the speaking object. To have speech is to have past. So a performing, speaking object is both past and present tense. What a contradiction!

#### (D - Subhead) Location and dislocation

When given a voice, the performing object suffers a temporal, time-based, dislocation - it is both present tense when playing, and past tense when envoiced. Add to this the spatial dislocation between the puppet object and the human source of voice and it seems 'dislocation' has risen to be a creative principle of puppet/object theatre. This dislocation breeds oddness and what Steven Conner calls a 'loss of anchorage' of the voice (2). Instead of this disruption appearing wrong, it is an alienation effect - engaging and strange. I propose we are at once fascinated, obsessed and repulsed by this peculiarity. The inter-play of presence and non-presence is what is ambiguous about the speaking puppet, we are surprised, as Conner asserts, by the 'ugliness and alien qualities of the disembodied voice'.

Despite this cerebral theorising, does it matter where the speaker/operator is positioned in relation the puppet? Should the design of a puppet reflect a drive to integrate the act of speech. What about the drive for naturalism, verisimilitude, and the animatronic? Does the puppet as symbol transcend the naturalistic? Should approaches to 'speaking' be stylised when a still, sculpted face speaks? Is it necessary to have a make an illusion of life through extended 'articulatedness'?

#### (D - Subhead) Illusion and non-illusion

'The observation of these three rules: the right inclination of the head and body of the speaking puppet; the restriction of all movement on the stage to the puppet that is speaking; and synchronization of speech and action - will go a long way towards creating the illusion that it is the puppet which is speaking.'  
(4)

I question the naturalistic basis of this 'illusion'. There is something unnatural about a convincing illusion of puppets speaking. A lot of puppeteers feel this 'economy' in their guts. But the 'technocrazy' love mechanical complexity - blinking eyes, articulated eyebrows, articulated mouths, moving tongues and smoking pipes. This is an issue about staging and design. Is less more? I do not believe we are on a journey progressing towards the ideal 'synthetic thespian'. What do we value more, the mimetic or the abstract? The literal or the suggestive? The 'completed' or the unfinished? What is the object/puppet best at doing?

What would you rather your children played with? An inanimate doll, where the child's imagination 'finishes' the object through play, or an all-singing 'Amazing Ally' ('My mouth moves when I talk!') or a 'Baby Expressions' ('her face really changes')? This is death for creative object play. The fact objects can't speak, but still allowing them to do so, is part of their theatrical power.

#### (D - Subhead) Some practical issues regarding voice and puppets

In the following sections, I want to mention some more practical issues that emerge from what has been quite a cerebral discussion of puppets and voice. What of the lip-syncers and those that are so convinced puppets should speak that the mouth becomes an absolute defining design characteristic of a puppet? What of the polyphonist - the solo, vocally virtuosi puppeteer who brings multi-vocalness to a higher artistic discipline? How should we train the speaking puppeteer?

#### (D - Subhead) Lip-syncing and the mouth puppet

Lip-syncing with mouth puppets is a relatively unstudied and non-systematised performance skill. It is hard to train. It involves a psycho-kinetic performance problem of relating sound to very specific hand movements. The puppeteer should enjoy the feeling of blowing the 'voice' through the puppet. A puppet with presence is created when there is a visual integration of the human and the object. Shari Lewis with Lamb Chops, is a very good example of this process. It is almost inevitable that the human voice needs to be live, co-present in the moment, with the lip-syncing puppeteer.

The performance problem where the lip-syncing puppeteer is not the source of the voice is not often analysed. How should a puppeteer train for the situation, common with complex TV puppets, where more than one performer needs to operate the same mouth - one on the upper lip and one on the lower?

#### (D - Subhead) The polyphonist or multivoiced performer

Puppet theatre is often host to polyphonic performance, where one single performer provides multiple voices. We are probably more familiar with the skills of the polyphonist from watching the impressionist, ventriloquist, or Warner Brothers cartoons. Ronnie Burkett's The Memory Dress Trilogy is a most elaborate recent example in puppet theatre. In Street of Blood a lone performer routinely enacts conversations between three separate personas, represented by marionettes, some still-in-repose, others, animated. Occasionally the puppeteer interrupts these three way conversations with his own voice representing Christ.

The artistry involved in this kind of performance is not often part of the training for puppeteers. In my future writing about voice and puppetry, I intend to form a programme of exercises for the aspiring polyphonist, and help contribute to the development of this rare performance discipline. Such a programme must begin with an analytical listening to different voices, particularly studying voice dynamics and voice qualities. The would-be polyphonist understands that psycho-physical investment is needed when developing multiple-voiced performance personas.

#### (D - Subhead) Beginning an analysis of voice dynamics and voice qualities

More or less fixed aspects of our physiology make certain qualities of voice beyond the control of a performer. I list below some aspects of voice dynamics and voice qualities that are within the performer's control. Puppeteers can consciously practice a trained 'set' of vocal configurations and nurture others through exercise. Lip shape, tongue position, throat tensions, 'imagined location' of air and voice, air quantity and pressure, tensions and 'stressing' of the vocal chords all bring variety to different voices. Voice Dynamics describe a range of aspects a puppeteer can control largely to add stress, but also can be manipulated to mimic other voices and disguise one's own voice.

#### (D - Subhead) Conclusions

I have hopefully established that it is an assumption that to be vocal, is to be human. But puppetry has always reveled in the possibilities for the anthropomorphic, or as Dennis Silk might have put it 'objectomorphic'. Scissors and combs have voice. It is radical transgression of what it is to be human when we see a typewriter or a sock speak.

Phelim McDermott in dialogue at the symposia, made a comment that could take this discussion about objects and voice to another level; where the object stands in an imaginative, creative relationship to the actor/puppeteers pre-expressivity: 'Watching a performer using newspaper [in object improvisation] is very revealing. You sometimes see the actor dominating the paper, rather than interacting with it and letting it speak to you.'

Through their play with objects, puppeteers seek to discover voices. The encounter is not based on a dogmatic assertion that 'no puppet should speak', but an exploration of its potential vocality.

(D - Subhead) An emerging solution: Finding the puppets voice in musicality, the gestic and the physical

(D - Subhead) Finding musicality

At the Puppetry Into Performance Symposium, Duccio Bellugi Vannuccini of Théâtre du Soleil told an anecdote of an elaborate journey undertaken as research for the company's latest show, *Tambours sur la Digue*. The company struggled because they couldn't find a way to give voice to the puppets. Should they use a narrator? Where should the speaker be located to give the puppet a voice? What should the voice sound like? They experimented with placing the speaker to the side, or behind, yet they felt things didn't work. 'Puppets could not take such complicated poetry,' Duccio asserted. So Hélène Cixous' poetic text was cut.

In the end, the experimenting actors enjoyed the 'feeling' of the voice of the puppeteer coming from behind, blowing the voice 'through' the puppet. Vannuccini described the joy of discovering an uncomplicated manipulation where 'spiritual significance explodes from physical ease' - when wood breathes from suggestive movement. It is that contradiction, the dialectic of the silent sound (or silent scream), or of animated stillness, that makes puppets attractive. But still their puppet couldn't speak.

In retrospect the puppet only found its voice, in the opinion of the actors, when it stopped talking naturalistically, and when it found melody not song. The puppet needed to find a drone. Singing is an abstraction from the spoken word and, Vannuccini probably felt, this abstraction fundamentally suited the puppet.

Puppet language can be spoken, sung, chanted, or whispered. The Japanese have recognised this musicality for a long time in Bunraku's orchestration of speakers, singers and puppets.

(D - Subhead) Gestus and physical attitudes

When making puppets speak, sound equals gesture equals movement. Bertolt Brecht's *Gestus*, his theory/practice of exploring story through discovering physical attitudes, is profoundly useful to the puppeteer when seeking puppet 'voice-gestures'.

Consider Merleau-Ponty's point that 'the spoken word is gesture' (cited in Conner 2000: 4), then make a cursory observation of the expert lip-syncing and writing in *Sesame Street*. Here, the physicality of sound - the accentuation of breath, voice and body rhythms through a hand - dictates a distinct, relatively new, writing style. The relationship of both gesture and physical body attitudes to speech and narrative has not been fully explored in puppetry. Brecht, with *gestus*, I feel, provides the conceptual armoury to allow a new rationalisation of how and why puppets should be allowed to speak.

In mapping out the theoretical and practical terrain inhabited by envoiced puppets, I hope to have established a valid and rich area of research and practical exploration. One thing is inevitable; no matter how much some performers, scholars and trainers dislike

puppets speaking, puppets and objects will be given and will find their voices. Regarding how mistaken it is to let speaking and the mouth dominate a puppet's physicality, the American puppeteering legend, Bil Baird warns: 'I could write a book on this, but one thing to avoid [when performing] is talking too much and depending on lip-sync rather than the action of the whole body.' (4)

Unfortunately Bil Baird didn't write that book. Maybe I will.

(1) von Boehn, Max Dolls and Puppets (Boston, Charles T Branford Co. 1956)

(2) Conner, Steven Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000)

(3) Blackham, Olive Puppets into Actors (London, Rockliff, Salisbury Square, 1948)

(4) Ten Eyck Hanford, R. The Complete Book of Puppets and Puppeteering (New York, Sterling Publishing Company, 1981)

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