

## Entertainment, Spectacle, Crime:

### Puppetry in the Year 2000

by John Bell

– What reaches people? What power do live puppets have that video can't mimic or counter? Is it possible to make performance somehow stronger than that fed to us by television, film, video, and the internet? Is it possible that, in fact, it is very easy to make such performance, particularly with puppets?

### Working With Outmoded Forms

– This past June, the mother of one of the students in my New York University puppet workshop asks me "what is it like to work in such an outmoded form?" I briefly attempt to explain the current puppet renaissance to her, and the proliferation of puppet forms all over the place—television, film, avant-garde theater, the Henson Festival itself, political demonstrations and advertising—but I sense that these have all somehow fallen below her cultural radar, perhaps invisible to a sensibility stuck on defining the form as only marionettes or handpuppets.

– An African-American acting student in the class says he wants to study puppet theater because on Broadway, "truthfully speaking, the only parts open to me might be in The Lion King."

– A few months earlier the head of NYU's undergraduate theater studios has rejected a proposal to make puppet theater a regular part of the program's offerings. "I don't know why our students would be interested in this," he says.

### Puppets and World's Fair Spectacle

– Later in the summer I spend five weeks working with Bread and Puppet Theater at Expo 2000, the five-month-long world's fair in Hannover, Germany. Almost all of the exhibitions there are object performances, but the objects are for the most part video screens, computers, and sound systems. We seem to be the only participants fully engaged in the old art of puppetry, and certainly the only ones engaged in a critique of globalization and twenty-first-century capitalism.

– World's fair spectacle a hundred years ago featured--or depended on--non-mechanical puppet and object performance. Miguel Utrillo, fresh from his shadow theater experience at Le Chat Noir cabaret in Paris, performed shadow puppet shows with Les Ombres Parisiennes at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. The spellbinding American dancer Loie Fuller had her own pavilion at the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition, where she created performances focused on yards of flowing cloth and a new invention: directed, colored theatrical lighting.

– Over the century, such spectacle performance made increasing use of innovations in the means of mechanical reproduction of image and sound. Remo Bufano worked the 1939 New York World's Fair at the Hall of Pharmacy, performing a giant puppet spectacle, "From Sorcery to Science," which incorporated an original score by Aaron Copland in one of the first recorded soundtracks for a live puppet show. In fact, the 1939 World's Fair employed most of the puppeteers in New York City in a wide variety of shows, but also used performers who operated pseudo-robots (like Elektro, the Westinghouse Moto-Man), futuristic automata, and mechanized displays of hoped-for modernistic opulence.

– At the 1958 Brussels World's Fair stunning innovations were unveiled by Josef Svoboda's Laterna Magika company from Prague, which combined film, slide projections, recorded sound, and live actors and dancers in performances that announced the dawn of a new genre in search of a name: multi-media performance. At the 1965 World's Fair in New York Bil Baird made a chorus line of leggy engine-block marionettes (the Motor Blockettes) to animate the Chrysler Pavilion, but the trend toward automated displays with no performers present was making traditional marionette theater seem old fashioned and quaint, even if the puppets themselves represented machines.

### Puppets at Expo 2000

– Thirty-five years later, in the new century, puppeteers are a distinct minority at the Hannover World's Fair. The most dominant image there—which captures perfectly the spirit of Expo 2000—is the Deutsche Telekom corporation's giant outdoor video screen. Twice as big as the screens I've seen at Times Square, it faces a huge staircase connecting the two halves of the Expo fairgrounds. German fairgoers leave off their television watching at home and come to Expo and see Teletubbies, Pink Panther cartoons, Whitney Houston music videos, air disasters, fashion shows, and sporting events on the 60-foot-square screen: Yes! television watching as giant participatory spectacle! befitting the magnificent scale of a great international event!

– Bread and Puppet's "Paper-Maché Cathedral of the Seven Basic Needs" is a notable contrast to this. It is comprised of hundreds of Peter Schumann's puppets, masks, banners, texts, and other objects, arrayed and animated in seven different stages by Bread and Puppeteers and German volunteers. Like a huge Dadaist assemblage, it contrasts gigantic human, animal, and nature images with texts by Friedrich Hölderlin, Karl Marx, the New York Times, Situationist Alan Bergman, and ex-International Monetary Fund economist Davison Budhoo; as well as traditional East European singing, American Sacred Harp music, and New Orleans brass band tunes. I first see the exhibit after passing through an overload of bombastic techno-futurism featuring metal, glass, and plastic, and am simply thankful and relieved to see wood, paper, and cloth the center of focus at the Bread and Puppet exhibit.

– We perform shows seven days a week at Expo, and are continually exhausted. Between shows, I rest behind the scenes in a huge backstage shared with other exhibits. Behind the other exhibits there are only video projectors, giant screens, stacks of amplifiers and computers, and miles of electric cable—no human performers. Technicians hide out in little cubicles drinking coke and monitoring their machines.

Pre-recorded tape loops play all day throughout the whole building, imbedding their sound effects ("cock-a-doodle-doo!") and repetitive chants ("Hello-o? Hell-ooo!") somewhere in our brains.

– Every day at Expo 2000, there is a parade in the center of the fairgrounds, and Bread and Puppet enthusiastically takes part. The parades are different from the exhibits, because they depend so much on people, not machines alone. It's exciting to make big theater in front of the live crowd, even if the street is not a real street. The organizers have wisely chosen an array of old and new parading forms: German folkdance groups with masks or elaborate *Fasnacht* headdresses; Belgian carnival stilt warriors and multiple obnoxious masked clowns with phallic noses; Portugese sword dancers; old-fashioned hurdy-gurdy players; Brazilian samba schools; German street theater companies with stilts, jugglers, and funny perambulating machines; the avant-garde stars La Fura dels Baus, a Catalan techno-spectacle theater group parading with a gold Ceres puppet mounted on a black truck, and tossing handfuls of grain on the street; Trigo Limpo, a Portugese theater group with a twenty-foot-tall yellow tricycle ridden by a giant puppet; the Hannover Star Trek club, seriously costumed as humans, Klingons, and others, and towing a scale model of the spaceship Enterprise; scores of medieval re-enactors, equally dressed up and devoted to reliving the Middle Ages, even down to a vigorous evocation of the Black Plague; Berlin butoh dancers on stilts; brass bands from Pittsburgh and Poland playing Duke Ellington; and finally Bread and Puppet, with its life-size and giant garbagemen and washerwomen, masked animal figures, white birds, stilts, brass band, and a street skit criticizing Globalization and proposing the creation of art out of Expo garbage, which, in part, is exactly what Bread and Puppet has done. Audiences take notice because ours is the only parade section in which any kind of dramatic conflict is performed.

### Interlude: A Dire Situation in India?

– In July, puppeteer Ravi Gopalan Nair has come from Kerala, India to work with Bread and Puppet Theater at Expo. Ravi explains to us how a master of South Indian shadow puppet performance now sometimes plays the traditional six-hour excerpts of the Ramayana to no one except the god Rama himself. Old audiences and potential new ones can now watch the epic performed by actors on television, instead of by live puppeteers. Ravi is clearly intrigued by the idea of a puppet performance appreciated only by a god, as if this intensity made up for the alarming lack of human spectators.

### Twenty-First Century Puppet Activism

– Also in July, Hannover political activists, expressing a local discontent with Expo's effect on the city, as well as a general mistrust of the blithe future-by-corporate-globalization promoted everywhere at Expo, make a demonstration just outside the fairground gates, with the help of Bread and Puppeteers Clare Dolan and Ben Majchrzak. The giant puppet they make, and the Bread and Puppet banners used in the protest, are precisely the elements which make the demonstration spectacular.

– Back in the U.S., at the end of the month, Bread and Puppet member Jason Norris and his Insurrection

Landscapers go to Philadelphia to join other artist-activists gathering there to protest the focus of the Republican presidential convention—an extension of anti-globalization protests in Seattle the previous fall.

-- At Expo I read the International Herald Tribune's coverage of the convention. An article about street protests there describes them as quaint, nostalgic, and of course ultimately ineffective and futile throwbacks to the sixties. This reminds me of New York Times reporter Thomas Friedman's similar consternation about the WTO protests in Seattle: street demonstrations with puppets are *so* outmoded—these days all you really need is a good website to get your message across.

-- Back in Philadelphia, Norris and other puppeteers conduct a week-long open workshop in puppet building and political street theater, which is infiltrated by undercover Philadelphia police posing as union members and serving as *agents provocateurs*. The City of Philadelphia is clearly wary of the kind of puppet street performances which made the Seattle protests a world-wide spectacle, and on the afternoon of August 1, 180 Philadelphia police officers without a search warrant surround the puppet workshop and arrest all those inside, including Norris and Tennison. The 300 puppets and 100 banners the puppeteers had just completed are smashed in a trash compactor—a pre-emptive strike against political puppet spectacle. The puppeteers' sense of political activism is consequently heightened; they call themselves "puppetistas," and invent a new slogan: "Puppetry is not a crime!"

– How is it that this outmoded art could be so threatening to the State in the year 2000?

### Old Art in a New Century

– In considering these events of the past summer, I think of all I learned in long, fascinating discussions two years ago with Bernice Silver, the vivacious and spirited puppeteer who, during the Depression, had become part of a radical political street theater group in New York City called Theater Advance. Bernice tells me of a street show she performed throughout the city in the mid-thirties: an agit-prop piece denouncing Mussolini, Hitler, and William Randolph Hearst's tacit support of them through his control of the press. I realize the show was a *cantastoria*, or picture performance, one of the oldest forms of performing object theater in the world.

– In the same city at the same time (1936 to be exact), young Jackson Pollock made giant puppets with Mexican painter David Siquieros in a political art workshop for radical New York City artists. The puppets they made paraded through Union Square as part of communist political demonstrations (but Pollock soon after turned away from socially engaged art to become the first modern art superstar, thanks in part to the splatter painting techniques he had discovered with Siquieros).

– In other words, political puppet spectacle has been a consistent part of twentieth-century modernism, not only in the sixties, but throughout the entire century.

## Persistent Powers of Paper-Maché

– The constantly repeated message at Expo 2000, which simply reiterates what we hear everywhere today, is that new modes of media performance--machines and technology--will define life, progress, and culture in the twenty-first century. Are the insistent messengers right? Puppets in the streets of Hannover, Philadelphia, Seattle, Los Angeles and New York echo the old gesture of the shadow theater master in India. Does anyone besides Rama and the other gods watch the outmoded forms?

(Yes.)

And if people watch, what do they see and discover from the images created by live puppet theater?

(They see great possibilities of thought and action.)

The question and its answers bother the calm vision of the messengers of corporate global spectacle.

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