

Identity: Gertrude Stein's Puppet Show

by John Bell

Donald Vestal and the Modernist Midwest

In the fall of 1934, when Gertrude Stein undertook a lecture tour of United States, she was the American writer who since the turn of the century had most clearly broken with traditional art, to become a critical fulcrum of modernism. In Chicago she first met (and enthralled) Thornton Wilder, but also had an effect on scores of other Midwesterners who were fascinated and inspired by modernist approaches to art and literature which she represented. Stein's unprecedented opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (with music by Virgil Thomson) had premièred the preceding February at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, after which it had moved to Broadway—a stunning example of the possible popularity of avant-garde theatre—and during Stein's sojourn in Chicago *Four Saints* premièred there as well.

In that fall of 1934, Donald B. Vestal ran what he termed “the only gallery in Chicago that handles ‘modern’ art.” But he felt there were no “outstanding artists” in the city, and he was desperate to break out of Midwestern propriety and isolation, into the larger world of avant-garde art making, which he had mostly read about rather than experienced (Vestal 1934). Vestal was well aware of Stein, having read her bestselling *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, as well as *The Making of Americans*. He was certainly aware of the momentous appearance of *Four Saints in Three Acts* that year, although it is not clear from his letters whether or not he had even heard her lecture in Chicago or had seen her opera. But he certainly knew what she looked like, and when he and a friend happened to see Stein walking down Michigan Avenue on November 30th, he simply had to walk up to her. “He was a young man who talked to me one windy day on

Michigan Avenue,” Stein later wrote to Carl Van Vechten; “we had a conversation and he had a funny looking satchel in his hand and I asked him what it was and he said marionettes!” (Burns 1986: 460). Stein was enough amused by Vestal’s exuberance to engage in a four-year correspondence with him, which for Vestal was a life-changing experience. “I cannot tell you how exhilarated you made life in Chicago feel,” he wrote to her about that first meeting (Vestal 1934). This exhilaration would propel him into the puppet experiments of the following years.

In his letters to Stein, Vestal explained how he had begun to work with puppets as a means of getting at modern art: “I have been working on my marionettes as though there is something in them after all,” he confided to her, and he then cautiously wondered if she might in fact be able to help him discover what that “something” might be. The problem was that he had already begun making and performing puppet shows, but had reached a point of frustration.

Puppets, he wrote to Stein,

seem supremely fitted for political satire, and I’m scared to tackle it. I can see them as adult entertainment, more fraught with symbolism and import than the imagists themselves. As yet a perfect style of writing for them has not been devised. It shall be as stenographic as the short steps they must take to keep proportions. Long-windedness kills all effect and I can’t forever have them kick each other which seems to be what my audiences like best. (Vestal 1934)

Like most puppet modernists, Vestal was familiar with Edward Gordon Craig’s high opinion of puppet possibilities, although he didn’t necessarily find himself in agreement with Craig. “Most puppeteers here,” he wrote to Stein, “have swallowed whole what Gordon Craig has preached for years: that there is no limitation to the things a marionette can do.” But Vestal’s puppet experiments lead him to passionately disagree with the English visionary. “Gordon Craig is

wrong,” he wrote to Stein; “[a] puppet has decided limitations” (Vestal 1935a). Vestal’s letters show that he was also aware of the world history of puppetry and some aspects of contemporary puppet theatre, enough so that he was developing his own aesthetics of puppet theatre. “I have read everything I can find on the subject,” he wrote to Stein, and had come to some clear conclusions. Marionettes, he said, “must never be representational,” but instead “exaggerated almost to the point of caricature in expression and over-size.” But while Vestal felt sure there was some legitimacy in the idea of puppet performance as a modern art form, he was equally convinced that this possibility was not dependent on the possibility of moving sculpture alone. Text, and in fact a very particular kind of text was needed. “The voice and the words [the marionette] delivers are more important than keen manipulation because a marionette fascinates whether or not the action at any given point is the one planned on—the word and the manner of its sounding are paramount, therefore” (Vestal 1935c).

Vestal felt he could not make a modern puppet show without the right kind of modern text, and he was sure that only Stein could provide it. “There are loads of people like myself who think best when provoked or ‘exposed’ to ideas and once someone gives us the incentive we go ahead and think,” he wrote to Stein, and clearly he wanted Stein to motivate him (Vestal 1935c). “You [are] the one person who could preeminently write a play for marionettes,” he wrote her, “in a manner that [has] never before been devised, that would suit marionettes as they have never before been suited. [...] No one has written for marionettes since Maeterlinck’s Death of Tintagiles,” he continued, “and I would like the next person to be an American writing for American marionettes.” For Vestal, Stein was “the only person in the writing world” capable of writing a perfectly modern American puppet play (Vestal 1935a).

Stein herself, like so many avant-gardists in Europe, was more than open to considering

the possibilities of puppets. At that moment she was working on The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind, a meditation on the nature of the mind as a kind of transcendental, unending intelligence whose highest expression happened to be Stein's vocation: writing. Stein's sense of the limitless, unanchored nature of the Human Mind (versus the earthbound and ultimately uninteresting Human Nature) included thoughts about theatre, or specifically "plays." She wrote:

There need be no personages in a play because if there are then you do not forget their names and if you do not forget their names you put their names down each time that they are to say something.

The result of which is that a play finishes. (Stein 1998: 482)

Her sense of the play's possibility of expressing the human mind by means of pure and unfixed representations instead of the creation of human characters and realistic situations paralleled Vestal's nascent sense of the possibilities of puppet theatre, and thus it was not much trouble for her to cull the play-like sections of The Geographical History of America, and put them together into a drama for puppets, which she titled Identity A Poem. "I am full of meditations these days," she wrote to Vestal in August of 1935, "but I find I must know about the relation [of] human nature and geography to the human mind, but you see it does connect itself with possibly a marionette" (Vestal 1935b). In fact, Stein had already mentioned puppets in The Geographical History of America, as one way of getting at the question of identity:

Marionette.

Is a marionette a Punch and Judy show and suddenly how to know that Punch and Judy are their names. (480)

The WPA, and Chicago in the Depression

The creation of *Identity* as a puppet show would have been impossible without government funding for the arts, and I would here like to consider how the apparatus of the federal Work Projects Administration set things in place for the creation of the Stein/Vestal collaboration. On September 1st, 1935, Vestal began his new job as head of the Work Projects Administration's marionette unit in Chicago. He was in good company. Remo Bufano ran the WPA's New York City puppet project; veteran puppeteer David Lano ran a Detroit version; Ralph Chessé headed the California project; and Paul McPharlin would later become supervisor of a state-wide project in Michigan. In explaining his new job to Stein, Vestal wrote the following:

My share is to work with intelligent adults with marionettes—some poetic drama—perish the thought—and some satire but at any rate adult. I am one of the governors of the marionette work and I intend to keep standards and I do want some modern materials that will be enriching to participants and onlookers. (Vestal 1935a)

It's at this point that the story becomes complicated and interesting, because in 1935 the high-art world that Vestal knew became connected to the hard-luck dynamics of Chicago kids looking for a job in the midst of the Depression. Burr Tillstrom had dropped out of the University of Chicago after one year and was already interested in puppets; and Carl Harms had emerged from utter poverty as one of ten children living in a shack on Chicago's South Side, into the theatre world, where he was already working in the WPA, as a Shakespearean actor. Vestal hired both of them, "two beautiful young men," as Harms later put it, and they became the core puppeteers of Vestal's WPA project, specifically focused on doing Shakespeare with marionettes and handpuppets.

When I interviewed Harms in June 2003, he described what the Chicago WPA marionette project was like:

We were in a museum building up on North Clark Street, [...] and there were about thirty people. [...] We had a shop, and we had carpenters who were working in the shop; we had musicians, piano players. [...] and what we did was take shows out and play them in the park. The Chicago Park District had field houses in all of these neighborhood parks.

And in the field houses they had theatres. So we could play indoors or outdoors. (Harms)

In small companies of three or four puppeteers, Tillstrom, Harms and the others performed handpuppet shows outside in a booth stage; while indoors, with marionettes, they would perform scenes from *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and other plays. They “learned the very core of puppetry,” Harms says, by taking part in all its aspects, from designing and carving marionettes out of wood, to playwriting and performance. Harms and Tillstrom were the two WPA puppeteers “most interested in performing,” and so when Vestal’s plan to make the Stein puppet show began to take shape, concurrently with the beginning of the WPA marionette project, it was natural that Vestal would invite them to participate, along with Rita Lewis, another WPA puppeteer, and pianist Owen Haynes, who would write the music for the piece.

By September 9th, 1935, Vestal had received Stein’s puppet script, and he wrote back to her that *Identity* was “a consummate story” that “sounds like delightful marionette material” (Vestal 1935c). With the unwitting help of the WPA, Vestal would be able to develop Stein’s play into a performance. Those familiar with Stein’s writing style might ask how and why Vestal imagined he could make a dramatic event out of her remarkably de-centered, abstract, repetitive and often confusing prose. But Vestal convinced himself that it was eminently and excitingly possible. Why?

Human Nature and Human Mind

Stein's Geographical History of America is a long meditation on what its subtitle calls The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind. The 120-page work sets up a dichotomy between two quite separate areas of human existence: Human Nature and Human Mind. Human Nature, which, Stein says, is "not interesting," is concerned with day-to-day events including adventure, government, history, propaganda, war, and storms; as well as such everyday concerns as identity: the question of who we are. But human identity must not be of the greatest importance, because it can be confirmed even by such a lowly creature as a dog. To say that "I am I because my little dog knows me" is to point out that the aspect of Human Nature we call identity is more of an animal instinct than a subject of great concern. Something higher is desired: Human Mind. Human Mind, different than Human Nature, its baser companion, is a kind of transcendental state: timeless; without beginning, middle or end; and connected to similarly timeless and unlimited entities such as the universe, landscape (especially "flat land"), romance, money, plays (particularly those without beginnings and endings), and masterpieces. The optimum means of expressing the Human Mind is writing, and the essential expression of Human Mind is the masterpiece, and, Geographical History points out, since Stein herself is engaged in writing masterpieces, she is thus a perfect example of the Human Mind. "In this epoch," she writes, "the only real literary thinking has been done by a woman": Stein herself. In this context, the idea of the play became interesting to Stein because although a play "is not identity or place or time [...] it likes to feel like it" (485). In other words, a play can be a link between *timeless* Human Mind and *time-bound* Human Nature, because while it is an emanation of Human Mind, it gives the appearance ("feels like") Human Nature.

Upon receiving Stein's script, Vestal thought he had something to turn into a puppet show. "I have it visualized," he immediately wrote to her, "with no more than an intimation[,] as a duality play." He imagined it focusing on two characters (in addition to an inevitable dog puppet), personages who "can talk back and forth, [...] identical figures representing one character tossing a soliloquy between them, on the subject of consciousness and identity and the hows and whys of recognition." "The divided character," Vestal went on to say, "will give me a chance to use sur-realism in the setting," and he was excited at the prospect of "us[ing] stranger figures rather than representational ones." "How far I can go into the fantastic," he added, "depends of course, on the text" (Vestal 1935c).

By the following summer, Vestal's WPA marionette project had shifted into high gear. In June of 1936 he wrote to Stein that his company of twenty-five puppeteers had built 80 marionettes ("some of them second to none"), created six different productions, and had performed 150 times in the past eight months. "All this experience," he said to Stein, "will show in Identity" (Vestal 1936a).

Stein, Harms, Tillstrom, Lewis, and Haynes set to work, and in fact built and rehearsed the whole Identity project during their WPA hours. They used what Harms calls "a regular marionette proscenium," about six feet wide and three feet tall, probably identical to the marionette stages on which they performed their excerpts from Shakespeare. The main characters were two silver-colored marionettes representing Human Mind and Human Nature, which, according to photographs, could easily have been inspired by Constantin Brancusi's metallic figure sculptures. The two puppets are quite similar, but Human Nature features a skeleton rib cage, and has no facial features, while in contrast, Human Mind has eyes, nose, mouth, and a full body, no doubt a reflection of the earthbound mortality of Stein's Human

Nature, versus the completeness of Human Mind. Both figures floated in space, never touching ground. There were also a female marionette figure named “Possibly a Woman,” and a male marionette called “I am I, a Man.” Additionally, the show included two almost identical portrait marionettes of Stein, each one seated on a chair at a little desk suspended in the air. One was “Gertrude Stein, Herself” and the other, which grasped a pen in its right hand, was “Gertrude Stein, a Playwright.” Two Modigliani-like busts with leaf-like hair simply sat on the stage, with no strings attached. These were The Chorus. And finally, there was the Little Dog which, although no photographic record of it seems to exist, quite likely was also a marionette.

According to Harms, Donald Vestal directed the rehearsals of Identity or, I Am I Because My Little Dog Knows Me with a full command of what he wanted to do, and a sophisticated sense of how the puppets could do it. “The whole action and the way that the whole thing intertwined was a brainchild of Don Vestal’s,” Harms says; “he did it all, and we were puppets as well, of his” (Harms). According to Harms, the whole show followed the performance techniques of traditional Sicilian marionette theatre (with which Vestal was familiar). That is, while Harms, Tillstrom, and Rita Smith were backstage operating puppets, Haynes and Vestal were stationed on the side, visible to the audience, where Haynes could play piano and Vestal could read all of the lines except those sung by Smith. There was in fact a sixth important contributor to *Identity*’s creation process: Thornton Wilder, who was then a part-time lecturer in Comparative Literature at the University of Chicago. It’s not clear exactly how Wilder managed to connect with Vestal, but by the summer of ‘36, the playwright had helped Vestal “enormously,” acting as a kind of dramaturg by explaining the intricacies of Stein’s difficult text, and listening to Haynes’s piano score. Vestal happily told Stein that Wilder “heard and liked” the music (Vestal 1936a).

By late June, Vestal wrote, the “rehearsals [were] going slick as a whistle,” and the *Identity* company had its sights trained on the world première performances, to take place at the Detroit festival the following month. Vestal scheduled a July 7th dress rehearsal for an invited audience of fifty, including Wilder as well as “one small child” (Vestal 1936a). The illness of Wilder’s father prevented him from attending the dress rehearsal, but, according to Vestal, the select audience represented a noteworthy collection of Chicagoans who would understand exactly what was going on. These included music and art critics, and the surrealist painter Gertrude Abercrombie, who brought with her “some young artists from the University of Chicago.” Everyone, Vestal said, “earnestly liked what they saw and heard and there was no end of nice things said” (Vestal 1936b). *Chicago Daily News* music critic Eugene Stinson “was elaborate in his praise for the clarity with which [the puppeteers] delivered the lines, particularly the choral effects,” Vestal wrote, clearly invigorated by all the positive response.

Identity at the Festival: “Difficult Thinking” and “Inner Exhilaration”

The next day, according to one of Vestal’s letters to Stein, he and ten other Chicagoans “entrained” to Detroit, while Burr Tillstrom’s mother drove her son, Carl Harms, and Carl’s wife to the festival. Vestal was particularly excited about the First American Puppetry Conference and Festival because it seemed like his modernist puppet experiment might find its ideal audience: a group of people who understood the possibilities of puppet theatre and had some sense of the modernist (largely European) “avant-garde.” McPharlin understood and was part of the great interest in the Stein-Vestal collaboration, and (as Vestal excitedly told Stein) gave the *Identity* production “the most important position in the four-day program,” Thursday night at 8:30. Upon arrival in Detroit, Vestal wrote, “we found ourselves the lions of the moment due to

the treasure we were bringing” (Vestal 1936b). He was impressed by the fact that although the Conference and Festival featured most of the important figures in United States puppetry (except Bil Baird and Remo Bufano), *Identity* was “the only feature advertised.”

McPharlin’s festival was a seminal moment in modern American puppet history, not simply because it gave rise to the creation of the Puppeteers of America the following year, but because it brought together for the first time all the strands of twentieth-century United States puppet theatre which had each been developing in their own way across the country. Traditional European puppetry was represented by the English puppeteer and Guest of Honor George Middleton, whose family had been performing marionette shows in England since the 1830s. The other Guest of Honor was Tony Sarg, who epitomized the success of mainstream commercial puppetry in the U.S. Exhibitions at the Detroit Institute of Arts (where most of the events took place) showcased puppet forms from China, Java, Japan, Russia, Italy, Spain, France, and Germany. The exhibits included recent creations by such luminaries of the American puppet world as Harry Burnett of the Yale Puppeteers; Donald Cordry of New York; Perry Dilley and Ralph Chessé from San Francisco; Basil Milovsoroff, then at Oberlin, Ohio; Romaine Proctor, from Springfield, Illinois; Rufus Rose, from Connecticut; and Martin Stevens, of Cincinnati; as well as rod puppets by Marjorie Batchelder and marionettes by McPharlin. Conference events included talks and discussions about the commercial possibilities of puppet theatre (including the problem of WPA competition with “professional” shows); the use of rod puppets and shadow figures; marionette techniques; puppetry in education; puppetry and storytelling in libraries; puppetry in occupational therapy; puppetry as a hobby; and finally McPharlin’s proposal that “there should be some sort of national organization” to coordinate all these varying approaches and practices (McPharlin 1986a). Over 170 participants took this all

in, during four excruciatingly hot days in July.

The other performances at the Conference included McPharlin's marionette version of a nineteenth-century German *Faust* play, as well as his "pantomime-ballet" set to Mozart and also performed with marionettes. Martin and Olga Stevens "reverently offer[ed]" their Christian passion play, and Marjorie Batchelder performed a marionette *St. George and the Dragon*. The Tatterman Marionettes did Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, and Elena Mitcof performed a handpuppet excerpt of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The Stein-Vestal *Identity* was, as McPharlin put it, "anxiously awaited" in Detroit because it marked the most radical subject matter and most recent scriptwriting at the conference.

This is how Paul McPharlin described the performances of *Identity*, which were preceded by the Stevens' *Passion Play*:

That evening, in the same auditorium, the anxiously awaited world premiere of Gertrude Stein's newest play, *Identity, or I am because my Little Dog Knows Me*, was accomplished by Don Vestal and his associates from Chicago. As musical commentary on the play, the talented young Chicago composer, Owen Haynes, executed with virtuosity his clever and robust score at the piano. The diction of the puppeteers was especially fine; Rita Smith, the soprano, enunciated clearly in the most difficult quick passages of her songs,—which could be heard, even from behind curtains. Few opera singers match such a feat. The audience was vastly amused by the play, by puppets which came and went, or floated through the air, in Einsteinian parallels to Stein's words, and encored the whole performance. (McPharlin 1986b)

Thornton Wilder, who had so helpfully worked with Vestal on the Stein text, had also written an Introduction to the play, which arrived in Detroit the morning of the performance (sent

special delivery by Wilder, who couldn't come because of his father's death), so that the audience could read it before the show. Typically, Wilder succeeded in interpreting Stein's terribly challenging methods in a gentle manner which implied that not only could anyone understand Stein's philosophical disquisition on Identity, but that this process might in fact be fun! After sweetly explaining Stein's dichotomy of Human Nature and Human Mind, and why Human Nature is not, in fact, interesting (a difficult point to argue to your audience!), Wilder concludes on an upbeat note: "Her discussion of the Human Nature and the Human Mind is very serious to her;" he writes, "but everything she does is also done in the spirit of gaiety." Wilder immediately follows this with quite different point: "The reward of difficult thinking is an inner exhilaration"; next, he patiently explains to us that the repetitions we're about to hear are no cause for alarm; and then he concludes with an encouraging pat on the audience's back: "This play should make you think and should make you laugh. The thinking, and the poetry and the gaiety make a very original mixture which it is your pleasure to accept. As Miss Stein always says of her work: 'Be natural and you will understand it'" (Wilder 1978: 95).

The Performances

It's hard to say how exactly Vestal's puppets performed the play, how they coordinated with Haynes's music, and what that music may have sounded like: I've so far not found any records of the scenography or of Haynes's music. As mentioned above, Vestal and Haynes apparently performed in front of the puppet stage, while Tillstrom, Harms, and Davis operated the puppets backstage. According to Vestal, their production followed Stein's script word for word, except for repetitions of the Chorus's lines, which were sung by Rita Lewis.

Carl Harms remembers that the Detroit audience was "baffled by what we were trying to

say, but what they saw was amusing [...] and we were strangely new. Nothing like *The Taming of the Shrew*, or *Joan of Arc*; this was a whole new crazy thing in the world.” The Festival program suggested that “Mr. Vestal and his company will, if encouraged by applause, repeat the entire play, as they believe, like Mr. Stowkowsky [sic], that new things are best appreciated on second hearing” (Coad, n.p.). The first time through the show, according to Vestal, the audience “stopped the show at several stages with applause and laughter at the nonsensical bits, for the preface that Mr. Wilder had written to explain the nature of the play prepared them for the gaiety of its parts.” Perhaps inevitably the audience called for an encore (the show was less than a half-hour long), but they had a different response the second time through because, as Vestal noted, “the laughter and the applause did not come at the same places.” Fulfilling Wilder’s expectation, the audience, according to Vestal, was thinking so hard “that you could hear their brains creak.” (Vestal 1936b). But, they were also enjoying something: “the applause at the close,” Vestal wrote, “was as vociferous as the first minor ovation.” After the show, the puppeteers “were deluged with fine words,” and to his embarrassment, Vestal was asked “left and right” for his autograph. He wrote to Stein that he “was so busting with accomplishment” that he “wrote ‘Love and Kisses’ for everyone and they seemed to like it” (Vestal 1936b).

After that first Puppet Conference and Festival, Vestal fully intended to perform *Identity* again back in Chicago, but his desire was never fulfilled. The few interested venues Vestal tried to cultivate couldn’t pay his fee, and a high-profile charity performance he managed to organize ended up being canceled. A year later, in July 1937, Vestal’s WPA marionette project was dissolved, the puppeteers scattered into other WPA jobs, or out of the program completely. But Vestal found, and moved into, the nearby “Little Theatre of the Bush Temple Conservatory of Music” (featuring a 250-seat auditorium), where he hoped to start an “experimental marionette

theatre” with a group of eighteen ex-WPA puppeteers who, despite the loss of their jobs, still wanted to work together. This possibility must have been a difficult one for Vestal to focus on, because his new job was to “supervis[e] marionette projects in twenty-two counties in the northwestern part of Illinois,” including the formation of “Marionette Guilds in the larger towns throughout the district” (Vestal 1937). According to Carl Harms, *Identity* was never performed again in Chicago.

Conclusion

If *Identity*’s lifespan ended with the two Detroit performances, why could it be considered an important moment in American puppet modernism? One aspect of the project’s effect involves those who had created it: Carl Harms said that his puppet work with Vestal made it possible for him to make a living in theatre for the rest of his life, performing with Rufus and Margo Rose, the Tattermans, and Bil Baird, in addition to his acting work in summer stock and on television. And Vestal’s project set Burr Tillstrom on a pioneering course in American television puppetry, with the Kukla character which he had invented during the WPA years.

Identity did not immediately create a vogue for abstract, art-theatre puppet shows, but it did reinforce what Remo Bufano, Ralph Chessé, W. A. Dwiggins, Paul McPharlin, Marjorie Batchelder, and scores of other puppeteers at the festival had already theorized, earnestly desired, and sometimes achieved: entertaining and thought-provoking modernist puppet theatre. If it marked out a possible path for modern American puppet theatre as avant-garde performance, its appearance in the midst of the Depression and three years before the beginning of the Second World War also meant that, as Vestal’s own post-festival experience showed, the environment for modernist puppet art theater in the United States was at that time severely limited. In other

words, the burst of radically invigorating puppet performances which characterized the first three decades of Europe's twentieth century was not to be repeated in late-1930s America. Certainly the economic situation of the 30s, and then the constraints of the war years, were not conducive to liberally funded experiments in the arts. In the U.S. (and across Europe as well) all aspects of theater began to be valued for their educational and propaganda potential, and in the United States this became a great impetus for American puppeteers to see puppet theater as childrens' entertainment and an advertising medium, both of which forms folded nicely into the traditional American sense of theatre as commercial enterprise. And yet the serious puppeteers of the thirties knew from such works as *Identity* that the possibility of puppet theater as a legitimate modern art form did exist, and the high-modern abstraction and philosophical gravity of the Stein/Vestal experiment established a precedent for the burst of puppet and puppet-inclusive works of the sixties and seventies by Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater, Mabou Mines, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and scores of other puppeteers, Happening makers and performance artists.

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