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Conducting, Distancing, Double Vision and Metaxis: theorising Applied Puppetry

Abstract

This paper draws on the dialogue between puppetry and applied drama that arose from the AHRC *Objects with Objectives* Research Network in 2017-2018 to explore a tentative theory of ‘Applied Puppetry’ (Smith). A range of theoretical approaches to applied drama are examined in the light of practical examples of applied puppetry using case studies in Northern Ireland, South Africa and Australia. Morton (2013) highlighted how in performance ‘tension between the material puppet and the imagined puppet’ gives rise to a kind of “double vision” (Tillis), a concept that the paper considers alongside Brecht’s *V-effekt*, Meyerhold’s distinction between the materiality and agency of the actor, and Boal’s idea of *metaxis*. The paper concludes that the distancing and conductive qualities of applied puppetry often work in parallel and that the puppet can be seen as the site of *metaxis* when used in an applied context.

Introduction and Context

The roots of the research to be discussed in this article lie in the *Whose Voice is it Anyway?* symposium that I was invited by the Derry-based ICAN initiative to convene at Queen’s University, Belfast, in March 2012. ICAN (The International Culture Arts Network) was based at the Playhouse Arts Centre in Derry and was supported by European Union Peace funding, so the symposium took as its starting point ethical issues arising from the Playhouse’s acclaimed Theatre of Witness programme. Led by the American artist, Teya Sepinuck, the Theatre of Witness gave people with traumatic memories of the Northern Ireland *Troubles* the opportunity to share their stories on stage in a scripted and edited version of their own words. Unlike many similar verbatim performances, it has been a cardinal principle of Theatre of Witness that participants speak for themselves, rather than have their stories mediated by actors: hence the title of the symposium.

Along with myself and Sepinuck, Professor Jane Taylor, the South African academic and theatre-maker who has close associations with Cape Town’s Handspring Puppet Company, played a key role in framing the event. Suggesting ventriloquism as a useful metaphor, she recommended that Aja Marneweck, a South African puppeteer who had recently completed a practice-based doctorate at the University of Cape Town, be invited to lead a workshop on the making and manipulation of life-size Bunraku-style paper puppets. The shift from ventriloquism to puppetry opened up a whole new field of practice and led ultimately to the development of the *Objects with Objectives* applied puppetry research network.

FIGURE 1

Figure 1: Ciaran McQuillan, a participant in Aja Marneweck's 'Paper Meditation' workshop

Marneweck's workshop was, for me, the pivotal point of the symposium. It began with a *paper meditation* in which a roomful of participants, sitting on the floor in the dark, crumpled, kneaded and broke down large sheets of newsprint paper. This was an engagingly tactile activity and the noise generated by the thirty or so participants added powerfully to the immersive nature of the experience. We proceeded to create objects from the crushed paper which were then animated in a variety of ways. Especially memorable was the woman who caressed an elongated tubular piece of crumpled paper with a telling tenderness and who later explained that she was imagining it to be the arm of a dying friend she had spent the previous evening with, in hospital. In the discussion afterwards, Aja explained the importance of engaging with the materiality of the paper, in order to develop a deep sense of its organic origins. The materiality of the objects was thus already establishing itself as an important aspect of the work.

I had had no prior experience of puppetry and its potential within my own field of Applied Drama was immediately evident, suggesting some compelling research questions. Given that one of the concerns raised in relation to the Theatre of Witness was the perceived risk of retraumatisation, could the use of puppetry provide an aesthetic distance between the storyteller and their own stories? How might the use of puppets affect the role of Boal's *spectator* in Forum Theatre? Would the use of puppets in applied drama encourage or inhibit participation? These became the basis of the working hypotheses for the AHRC Research Network, *Objects with Objectives* which brought together academics and practitioners in both applied drama and puppetry from the UK, the United States, South Africa and Australia.

It quickly became clear that not only Jane Taylor, but also Laura Purcell-Gates (University of Bath), Cariad Astles (CSSD and Exeter) and Matt Smith (Portsmouth) were already working as practitioner-academics in the emerging field of "Applied Puppetry", a term coined by Smith himself (2014). Distinctions between group members based on mode of practice and discipline therefore quickly broke down. Nevertheless, it was important alongside myself to have Applied Drama specialists Kat Low (CSSD), Caoimhe McAvinchey (Queen Mary UL), Matt Jennings (Ulster University), Sara Matchett (University of Cape Town) and Elliot Leffler (Reed College, Portland) bring their own expertise to the conversation along with practitioners Teya Sepinuck (Theatre of Witness), Tamara Lynn (Living Stages, Portland) and Hector Aristizabel (internationally recognised for his work on Boal). Karen Torley of Banyan Puppet Theatre in Derry, and Nicholas Paine and David Morton of the Brisbane-based Dead Puppet Society also came on board as puppetry practitioners, with Morton's doctoral research into puppetry exerting a strong influence on my theoretical understanding of the field.

Theorising Applied Puppetry

Morton (2013) highlighted how in performance ‘tension between the material puppet and the imagined puppet’ gives rise to a kind of *double vision*, a term borrowed from Tillis (1992). While this phenomenon may occur whenever puppeteers and puppets are visible to the audience (contrast the *Punch and Judy* show where the puppeteer is concealed), it has particular relevance in the context of the kind of Bunraku-style puppetry practised by Handspring and Dead Puppet Society, where up to three puppeteers work together to directly manipulate different parts of the puppet without the use of rods or strings. Reason (2008), in an investigation into whether children responded more to the illusion or to the material reality of a puppet performance, challenged Zich’s assertion that there are two forms of perception, namely that ‘[t]he puppets may be perceived [either] as living people or as lifeless dolls’ (quoted in Bogatyrev, 1983: 48). Based on his close observation of an audience of children, Reason rejected the idea that we can perceive puppets only one way at a time, in favour of Tillis’ idea of *double vision*: that we can hold two perceptions of the puppet event in our mind at the same time, simultaneously acknowledging both its reality and unreality. The effect of this is to imbue the puppet with something of the emotion manifested by the puppeteers, whenever they display an empathetic connection with the puppet they are manipulating.

From an actor training perspective, this duality parallels the distinction Brecht urges on his actors when he asks for them to be aware of the separation between themselves and the characters they are portraying (the *V-Effekt*). It also recalls Meyerhold’s celebrated formula $N=A1+A2$ in which he draws a distinction between the materiality and the agency of the actor. As Leach explains:

Beginning with the formulation that: ‘Every art is the organisation of its own material’, Meyerhold asserted that... the actor, unlike other artists, ‘is at one and the same time the material and the organiser’. This was formulated algebraically by Meyerhold as: $N = A1 + A2$ (where N = the actor; $A1$ = the organiser of the material; and $A2$ = the material). (2010: 28-29)

Meyerhold’s use of the word material is fortuitous in our present context, as the relationship between puppet and puppeteer is the material embodiment of this principle and can therefore be seen as a potential method for training actors to understand Meyerhold’s ideas, enabling them greater control over their performances.

The kind of proprioception (one’s awareness of oneself) urged on actors by Meyerhold can be better understood through the psychologist Shaun Gallagher’s distinction between *body image* and *body schema*:

A *body image* consists of a system of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to one’s own body, originating in a self-referential consciousness directed toward one’s own body. A *body schema* is a system of processes that constantly regulate posture and movement. It consists of motor capacities that are in part governed by sensory feedback but that function without body awareness or necessity of perceptually monitoring the body.... Although it is possible to make a conceptual distinction

between *body image* and *body schema*...in the normal case [they] are quite integrated in their functioning. (2002: 51)

Gallagher illustrates this distinction through the example of a brain-damaged research subject who could only move his limbs if he could see them. He had lost the capacity for direct motor control and therefore had to rely on *body image* rather than his *body schema*. Puppeteers appear to operate in a similar way, observing how the puppet moves in order to guide their manipulation of its arms and legs. But might there be a simultaneous recourse to *body schema*, through which they connect their own bodily experience to that of the puppet in a form of kinaesthetic empathy? Reynolds and Reason (2012) have argued that kinaesthetic empathy, through which our mirror neurons simulate in our own brains the responses experienced by those we observe, can help us understand how audiences experience live performances. As Davis observes, ‘a participant is also a percipient’ (2014: 52).

Since this is so, are similar processes not at work between the puppeteer and their puppet? And might an audience member not experience kinaesthetic empathy in relation to their observation of both the puppet and the puppeteer? How does the use of a puppet affect this empathetic relationship? Do observers report a transfer of empathy to the puppet? Or continue to associate this with the puppeteer? Or do they engage equally with both at the same time? How are we to understand the interaction between multiple puppeteers with a shared puppet and with each other? And what implications does this have for wider Applied Drama and Applied Puppetry processes? A significant consideration in relation to actor-training is the high level of complicity required between the multiple operators of Bunraku-style puppets. Can this be shown to have wider benefits for actors when they return to conventional performance in enhancing ensemble skills?

Applied drama theory can illuminate this discussion. Augusto Boal takes Brecht’s *V-Effekt* a step further with his concept of *metaxis*, ‘the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality [the aesthetic] and the reality of the image [the social]’ (1995: 13). In a Forum Theatre performance, for instance, participants model real-world situations as an exercise in problem-solving. For this to be effective, they must give themselves fully to the simulation, while retaining a sense of distance for the purposes of analysis and self-protection. For it is a central tenet of applied drama that these simulated worlds exist in ‘safe space’. Where Boal differs from Brecht then is in encouraging participants to think of themselves as co-existing in two states at once, rather than in sustaining a sense of separateness between the role played and the self. Applying this, then, to puppetry, rather than consider the puppeteers to be creating a critical distance between themselves and the roles being played through the use of the puppet, might it be helpful to understand the blurred relationship between puppet and puppeteer in terms of *Metaxis* – with the puppeteer existing both inside and outside the puppet? If so, what risks might be involved in this reduction of the distancing principle when dealing, as so often in applied drama, with the sensitive or traumatic? These theoretical ideas will now be explored in the context of fieldwork and case studies.

Tiger's Bay Men's Group, Belfast (2014)

My first attempt to use life-size paper puppets in an applied drama context was with the Tiger's Bay Men's Group in 2014. There were eight core members, four in their 50s (who had grown up through the *Troubles*) and four in their 30s (who had lived through the equally unsettling Peace Process). They had been brought together through the Light House, an organisation in North Belfast that assists those affected by suicide. Although my work with the men did not require us to engage directly with traumatic stories, I was conscious of the need for sensitivity when dealing with even the seemingly everyday anecdotes that informed the devising process for a short performance about their own neighbourhood – a Loyalist enclave surrounded by Nationalist areas. The potential for puppetry to be used in this context was suggested by a moment during the *Whose Voice is it Anyway?* Symposium, when one of the community participants volunteered to re-enact a moment in her own life using a life-size paper puppet she had modelled on her own body. As we watched in silent apprehension, we saw her act out the process of entering her own house in search of someone, exploring it room by room, until she discovered her mother dead by suicide. The story-teller appeared remarkably at ease with what for us watching was understandably a very disturbing narrative, but it also seemed clear that the puppet enabled the story to be told in a surprisingly gentle way.

Nevertheless, I was astonished at the enthusiasm with which the Tiger's Bay group engaged in a *paper meditation* and puppetry workshop facilitated by Aja Marneweck. To see these mature men on the floor crumpling paper and breathing life into paper figures was very moving, and when later we started to improvise using the puppets I was struck by the openness with which they conveyed scenes of great poignancy and tenderness. In one of these, they used a mixture of adult- and child-sized puppets and, without any pre-planning, spontaneously created a scene in which one of the child puppets together with one of the adult puppets approached a second seated adult puppet. Without a word being spoken, it became clear that this was a mother and child trying to get the child's father to come home from the pub. There was very little discussion beyond confirming that this was the intended meaning. But there was a palpable sense that the work had tapped into real and profound shared memories.

FIGURE 2

Figure 2: Aja Marneweck with members of the Tiger's Bay Men's Group

The puppetry was unsophisticated, with each puppet having only one operator at a time, so there was no scope for the level of complicity required between multiple puppeteers, but there was undeniably a readiness to engage with themes and ideas that did not arise when we relied on verbal discussion alone. Instead, a non-verbal dialogue was enabled. From the performers' perspective, the puppet appeared to serve as a distancing device: this isn't me telling the story; it's the puppet telling it. As an observer, however, it was impossible not to discern a clear emotional and empathetic connection between puppet and puppeteer, and a

community of connections linking all the participants together. So in this case, the *V-Effekt* and *metaxis* seemed both to be in evidence.

Barrydale Reconciliation Parades, Western Cape (2015 and 2018)

Although at a far remove both geographically and culturally, Barrydale's annual Reconciliation Day Parade shares some similarities with the work in Belfast's Tiger's Bay. In both cases participants had come together to tell stories of relevance to their own community and the communities around them. In Tiger's Bay, however, the neighbouring Nationalists were very much the unseen 'other'. In Barrydale, although the Coloured township, Smitsville, sits invisible from the town itself behind the brow of a hill, the result of the enforced sundering of the community under Apartheid (the township's nickname translates as *Hide Me Away!*), the Coloured community treats the event as an opportunity to welcome outsiders from both near and far into their own environment and to share their stories with them. This is symbolically achieved by having the audience process from the old town up the hill towards the township to the Coloured community's primary school, where the large-scale performance takes place in the open air. The event is produced by the local community organisation, Net Vir Pret, and for the first seven years was actively facilitated by Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, the Co-Founders of Handspring Puppet Company and partly funded from the proceeds of their internationally successful *Warhorse* production. In the two years in which I witnessed the Reconciliation Parade, Aja Marneweck provided artistic leadership, but with an increasing sense of direct ownership by local community puppeteers, notably Donna Kouter who fulfilled an essential artistic role in 2018.

FIGURE 3

Figure 3: the 2018 Reconciliation Day performance with Smitsville in the background

The use of puppetry ranged from large-scale figures with multiple operators, to smaller puppets worked by individuals, allowing over a hundred performers to be involved. Over the years, not only has a company of skilled puppeteers evolved, but the community has also developed the specialist skills to manufacture puppets for their own and other performances, culminating in the establishment of the Ukwanda Puppetry and Design Collective. The contribution made by the event to social cohesion both within the Coloured community and with their white neighbours who attend the performance in increasingly large numbers, can therefore be seen to have both a material and performative dimension. The use of large-scale puppets (in 2018, for instance, an enormous fish to represent the threat of intensive agriculture to the local water supply) fits well with the big themes addressed in the performance (in 2015 it was the Slave Trade), amplifying the stage presence of the individual performers as they work in closely integrated puppetry teams. The smaller puppets also serve to empower less experienced performers (including nearly all of the township's children), giving them a clear focus and a channel for their creative energies. In both Barrydale and

Tiger's Bay, then, the use of puppetry allowed performers to exist in a liminal space between presence and invisibility, both seen and unseen whenever the audience's attention was drawn towards the puppets they were manipulating.

ASSITEJ, Cape Town (2017)

FIGURE 4

Figure 4: The Cape Town Workshop

The main site of research for the *Objects with Objectives* research network was a weeklong programme held as part of the ASSITEJ (International Association of Theatre for Children & Young People) World Congress in Cape Town in May 2017. Network members shared their practice through workshops and discussions which combined direct engagement in a variety of puppetry techniques with presentations on a range of applied drama contexts including work with refugees, intergenerational groups and women with HIV, in each case reflecting on the potency of objects when used to open up participants' stories. Caoimhe McAvinchey, for instance, described how props in prison theatre projects carried with them the emotional trace of previous participants who had used them, from Rio to Peterborough. The 'vibrant materiality' (Bennett, 2009) of these everyday objects in applied drama practice had clear resonances with puppetry. One memorable Forum Theatre experiment, led by Elliott Leffler and Tamara Lynn, invited participants to create a puppet oppressor from furniture and found objects in the room where we were working. Far from distancing us from a sense of identification with the antagonist, the effect was strangely liberating, allowing us to channel the oppression in an amplified way through these monstrous edifices, the collective nature of the puppetry diluting any individual sense of responsibility. As for the audience, or *spectators*, rather than being inhibited by the collective nature of the antagonist-oppressor, they seemed to find it easier to confront the puppet than might have been the case with a human actor.

FIGURE 5

Figure 5: A multi-operator puppet-oppressor in a Forum Theatre Scene

Alongside the sharing of practice, a series of rigorous theoretical discussions cast light on our conceptual understanding of applied puppetry. Cariad Astles emphasised that puppetry was not about control or manipulation, but about the transmission of energy, which ultimately was an expression of love. Aja Marneweck expressed this in terms of *radical empathy*, a term derived from the way in which traditional healers become the vessel for the trauma of others. As an example, she cited the use of a puppet to represent the emaciated form of a hunger-striker in the Theatre of Witness production, *Release*, in Northern Ireland in 2012. 'The

puppet was like putting a key into a lock' in the way it allowed the performers to engage with their difficult personal narratives. Theatre of Witness director, Teya Sepinuck, in an interview with the author shortly before the ASSITEJ symposium, explained how seeing the archival film of *Release* revealed to her the astonishing intensity with which the puppeteer, Paddy McCooley, had connected with the soul of the character represented by the puppet. The puppet had 'allowed him to go somewhere he could not have gone on his own. Yet afterwards audiences talked about the puppet, not Paddy' (Sepinuck, 2017).

For Sepinuck, it was the non-specificity of the featureless paper puppet that was key to this effect, which permitted each member of the audience to project their own empathetic response onto the puppet's neutral expression. As a puppeteer, Marneweck understood the profundity of these processes from the outset, in a way that Sepinuck had not. Basil Jones from Handspring Puppet Company, in his Symposium presentation, cast light on this phenomenon at the Cape Town Symposium when he spoke of 'objects as verbs. It's our job to make the machine. When the audience see the horse, they feel the commitment of three people that agreed to be the horse. If they pull apart from one another the horse disappears. The audience are not aware of that cloud of energy, but they feel it.' As the session chair, Jane Taylor explained, 'when people see a puppet like the famous Warhorse what hits the audience is 4,000 hours of observation of the horse'. The puppet serves to collapse time.

As a result of the symposium, six training videos were produced for use by the wider applied drama and educational sector. In one of these, David Morton, using a simple puppet made from a plastic carrier bag, demonstrates the three key principles that inform Dead Puppet Society's approach to training new puppeteers: **breath** as a means of animating the otherwise inert object, the importance of **focus** to ensure that the puppet is at the centre of the performance, and **gravity** to help explain the puppets relationship to the space it inhabits. In another video, Aja Marneweck shows how to create life-size paper puppets and Sara Matchett helps first-time puppeteers evoke clear emotional states for the puppets by using the Indian actor training system of Rasas. There are also short films illustrating Laura Purcell-Gates brown paper puppetry which celebrates imperfection (with clear implications for an inclusive applied practice), Matt Smith's training approach in which puppeteers use living models to better understand puppetry techniques, and Matt Jennings and Karen Torley's work animating medical mannequins as part of a training programme intended to enhance *sympathetic presence* in health professionals. Like Marneweck's concept of *radical empathy*, the idea of *sympathetic presence* in which student nurses are taught how to perform empathy while focussing on their professional responsibilities, resonated with the way puppetry has been argued to enable *double vision* – a shared focus on more than one preoccupation at a time.

Dead Puppet Society, Brisbane (2017)

Strongly influenced by Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler of Handspring Puppet Company, Brisbane's Dead Puppet Society is the prolific start-up initiative of two graduates of Queensland University of Technology, David Morton and Nicholas Paine who as a part of a

course assignment identified puppetry as a market gap in their home city of Brisbane, and set out spectacularly to fill it. Although they do not work explicitly in Applied Drama, two of their recent activities are relevant here: a youth theatre training programme I was fortunate to observe in 2017, which demonstrated how working with directly manipulated puppets can provide a powerful training mechanism for actors to help promote interpersonal awareness and complicity on stage, and *Laser Beak Man*, a production based on a character created by Australian artist Tim Sharp. Sharp's autism makes it difficult for him to engage with a conventional devising process, but interviews with him and members of the DPS company made clear the way in which he was able to use the puppets created from the rich range of characters that people his work to enhance the way in which he contributed to the creative process. Sharpe's artworks, which often take the form of an extended meditation on quirks of language that have come to preoccupy him (e.g. Barbecue becomes a drawing of a queue of Barbie dolls), have attracted national and international attention, but a previous attempt to create a stage version of his work broke down because the theatre company concerned sought to use the production as a vehicle for championing disability rights, which seemed to Sharp and his mother Judy to narrow the context for his work. The current production has resulted from a remarkably equal collaboration between Sharp and Dead Puppet Society.

FIGURE 6

Figure 6: Puppets from *Laser Beak Man*, at rest!

Interviews with Morton, Sharp, his mother Judy and two members of the *Laser Beak Man* company, John Riddleberger and Maren Searle, make it clear how the use of puppets allowed Sharp to participate in the lengthy devising process in a way that would not have been possible through conventional performance. Morton recalls how every time Sharp entered the rehearsal room he would systematically greet every member of the team, which became an essential ritual rather than an interruption. There were many occasions when Sharp exercised editorial control (Morton 2017). Searle remembers Sharpe spontaneously responding to creative discussions by drawing images of additional scenes (Searle 2017). For Sharp, a key factor has been that the entire team were close to Tim in age (late 20s) during the development process, providing a strong sense of an integrated creative community (Sharp 2017). The puppetry medium, which Morton describes as 'a process of constant resculpting something' allowed scope for Sharp, who as Morton puts it 'has done twenty years of art direction' on the project, to be involved in an embodied process of discovery which rendered his verbal limitations irrelevant.

For the actors too, working through puppets opened up entirely unfamiliar and fresh ways of thinking about acting. Dead Puppet Society often work with performers who haven't used puppets before, it being easier according to Morton 'to take actors towards puppetry than puppeteers towards acting' (Morton 2017). Searle describes the excitement of 'channelling impulses through things' and how 'puppets sometimes surprise you', how you learn to 'listen through your feet' (Searle 2017). This echoes Riddelberger's reflections. An experienced

Warhorse performer, he spoke about how the puppetry teams for that seminal production rotated through different roles night by night, taking on a different character every night, giving them ‘a lot of permission to be reactive and alive’. The relationship within each team of puppeteers was very intimate, with initiative constantly shifting from performer to performer throughout each performance. ‘Each position in *Warhorse* had different emotional signifiers – neck muscles, ears, eyeline – telling the audience what the puppet is seeing or hearing.’ The heart is evoked by the breath and the feet and tail are as important as the head, which is not dominant. ‘Those limitations ended up being really freeing. Sometimes the feet lead. It doesn’t function if all three people aren’t listening to one another intently’ (Riddleberger 2017).

Riddleberger also emphasised the importance of what the puppet is made of, what it can do. ‘There are certain things the arms of the puppet won’t do. If you force them you’ll break it. The *Laser Beak Man* puppets have limits. Their joints have limits, which is very different from cloth and paper’ (Riddleberger 2017). This emphasis on the materiality of the puppet, resonates with Marneweck’s *paper meditation* and underlines the intense connection and interdependence between puppet and puppeteer. But the audience’s reaction also exerts a great influence on the performers. According to Riddleberger, ‘the audience is the fourth puppeteer’ (Riddleberger 2017).

David Morton’s Youth Theatre Workshop, Brisbane (2017)

The way in which puppets channel energy both between performers and with those observing them was something I had the opportunity to observe at first hand when I was permitted to attend a [week-long puppetry workshop](#) for young people led by David Morton in Brisbane in September 2017. Like Marneweck, Morton worked with paper, but showed the young participants how to create limbs for their puppets by tightly rolling and taping long tubes of paper (a technique used by boy scouts, he tells me, to make kindling), which were then jointed using tape and attached to torsos made from crumpled paper. These were table-top puppets, rather than the life-size ones used by Marneweck, but still required multiple operators in the Bunraku-style. The apparently easy way in which Morton guided the participants through the process of making and animating the puppet was (as I would later discover when I tried to replicate his process myself with students) deceptive, built on years of developing his craft as both puppeteer and tutor.

FIGURE 7

Figure 7: Ewan Brown, a participant in David Morton’s puppetry workshop

He begins by having the first-time puppeteers explore what the materiality of their puppet allows the puppets to do. Then they have the puppet explore its immediate environment, before interacting with an object and then with another puppet. A particularly instructive

moment is when they are asked to show the puppet becoming aware of itself. This reflexivity was crucial in helping them understand how the puppet could be both autonomous and wholly dependent on its operators. A similar phenomenon occurs in Hijinx Theatre Company's production, *Meet Fred*, in which puppetry is used as an ingenious metaphor for disability. When a table-top Bunraku-style puppet has to decide which of its three operators it has to dispense with because of funding cuts it elects to do without its legs! Most impressive to me as an actor-trainer, during David's workshop, was the organic way in which the three operators of each puppet develop a high level of mutual awareness as described above by John Riddleberger. As Morton puts it: 'actors report becoming hyper aware of what they're doing and then the conduits open' (Morton 2017).

FIGURE 7

Figure 7: A scene from *Argus*

A formative project in the development of Morton's pedagogical practice was *Argus* which arose from a fifteen-week programme with drama students. When it came to the point when it would have been necessary to build puppets, they began to try and use found objects and discovered that these could be done without if the actors conjured an imaginary puppet. A seven-handed creature emerged, evoked purely by the hands of four puppeteers, with LED lights suspended between the fingers of one of the hands to suggest eyes. The group soon discovered that they could cause the puppet to dematerialise and reappear in another part of the room, simply by having another team of puppeteers take up the puppet shape. 'It all accidentally fell into form in a theatre one day', Morton explained. 'And then it searched for love. A journey to try and get home. A kind of odyssey'. He emphasises the importance of letting the puppet lead the story rather than have performers engage in discussion. 'There is a shifting hierarchy amongst the puppeteers, a shifting focus point; for example, the gesture is impulsed from the left arm' (Morton 2017). I am reminded of Peter Brook's concept of *respons-ability* – the ability to be responsive to the nuances of fellow performers. Puppetry can help enhance this quality in actors.

The Kingdom of the Blind (2018)

FIGURE 8

Figure 8: A scene from *The Kingdom of the Blind*

Inspired by my experience of David Morton's workshop, I resolved to share it with my own students and worked with them on an adaptation of H.G. Wells's short story, *The Kingdom of the Blind* in which a sighted visitor encounters an isolated community in the high Andes where everyone has lost the ability to see. The premise that all the blind characters should be

represented by live-size paper puppets, which of their nature have no eyes, worked well in performance, and the students enjoyed training workshops with another research network member, Karen Torley. But I wholly underestimated their resistance to sublimating their own performance ambitions in a collective commitment to the puppets, and it proved to be one of the more fractious student productions I have directed. In spite of themselves, however, I observed the students significantly to enhance their capacity for *respons-ability* and their listening and ensemble skills.

Conclusion

To return to the research questions posed at the start of this article, the work of the research network, including the case studies discussed above, have served to challenge some of the underlying assumptions that initially informed the project. The original emphasis on Brechtian distancing has given way to an understanding of the benign duality at the heart of Bunraku-style puppetry, in which audience members seamlessly assimilate their reading of both puppet and multiple puppeteers. Well-focussed puppetry keeps the audience's attention on the puppet, but reception of the puppet becomes blended with a peripheral awareness of the facial expressions and movement qualities of the puppeteers. And this *double vision* is only one half of the equation. The balancing component is the way in which the puppeteers' own sensibilities have to fuse into a single dynamic consciousness, which in an almost metaphysical way is informed by the puppet itself. This discovery led us in turn to the idea of *vibrant materialism*, an acknowledgement of the extraordinary potential energy of objects: as Basil memorably put it in our Cape Town Symposium, 'objects are verbs'. The use of puppets alongside live performers adds a further layer of complexity, with interaction between characters also being mediated through these puppet prisms.

Despite some interesting experiments with using puppetry within Forum Theatre, the project's original preoccupation with some of the more specific implications for Theatre of the Oppressed techniques gave way to a wider understanding of how Applied Puppetry as a distinct discipline from Applied Drama can illuminate deeper truths about participatory performance. Concepts such as radical empathy and sympathetic presence emerged to help articulate the extraordinary capacity of the puppet-object for holding and transferring energy. The use of the term *conductor* in Playback Theatre also came to mind, evoking as it does not only the role of co-ordinating a Playback session, but the way in which that person become a conduit for stories being told (Fox, 1994). In a similar way, we have discovered how the puppet in an applied drama context can become an effective channel for personal stories and emotion. This brings us back finally to Boal's idea of *metaxis*, the simultaneous coexistence of imagined and real states of being. David Davis traces the origins of this Greek term, which was popularised by Augusto Boal, to 'the place of spirits according to Plato' (2014: 52). This fits well with the animistic nature of puppetry. When puppets are used within an applied drama, their capacity to hold and channel emotional energy allows them to become the liminal site in which *metaxis* can occur.

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Objects with Objectives Training Videos

Essential 'Direct Manipulation' Puppetry Techniques: Focus, Breath and Gravity (Dr David Morton, Artistic Director, Dead Puppet Society, Brisbane, Australia)

Making Life-Size Paper Puppets and using these to explore the use of the Rasa with Puppets (Dr Aja Marneweck, University of Western Cape and Dr Sara Matchett, University of Cape Town): PARTS 1 & 2

Brown Paper Puppetry and the Celebration of Imperfection (Dr Laura Purcell-Gates, Bath Spa University): PARTS 1 & 2

Embodying the Puppet Experience as a Training Strategy (Dr Matt Smith, University of Portsmouth): PARTS 1 & 2

Applied Puppetry and Sympathetic Presence in medical simulation and Nursing pedagogy (Dr Matt Jennings and Karl Tizzard-Kleister, Ulster University and Karen Torley, Banyan Puppet Theatre)

Making Puppets from Found Materials (Karen Torley, Banyan Puppet Theatre, Northern Ireland)

Access at: <https://mediasite.qub.ac.uk/Mediasite/Catalog/catalogs/objectswithobjectives>

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