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What's in a name? The sense or non-sense of labelling puppets in contemporary Western theatre

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Abstract: Different terms can be use for puppet theatre: figure theatre, object theatre and animation theatre. Contemporary performances including puppets are nowadays often referred to as multimedia performances, crossover theatre and visual theatre. Some artists avoid the word "puppet" because of negative associations: close association with children and low status amongst the arts. Professional puppetry in many Western countries has evolved into a wide-ranging theatre form. Puppets traditionally used to be seen in isolation in performance and a distinct line could be drawn between puppet theatre and other forms of theatre, but the bonding with other art forms has diminished this segregation. As an artistic label, "puppet theatre" is perhaps not always appropriate as it does not acknowledge the artistic scope and complexity of an art work in which multiple visual and acoustic elements are applied, and this bonding raises questions about genre as a classification system.

Subjects: Arts; Arts & Humanities; Puppetry; Theatre & Performance Studies

Keywords: puppet theatre; multimedia; crossover theatre; visual theatre; genre

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Her research on puppets began 40 years ago when she was offered the opportunity to do puppetry as a theoretical and practical specialisation as a fourth year drama student at Stellenbosch University. Since then she has conducted a research project on the use of puppets in Africa. At the moment she is involved in a research project with Ghent University on puppets and masks as tools of critique and resistance in dealing with cultural trauma. Although puppet theatre is one of the many forms of theatre, academics have showed limited interest in this long-standing art form as puppetry is usually taught as a separate field of study. Analysing the application of puppets in contemporary Western theatre shows that puppets are often merged with other expressions and this eclectic merger are flagged by arts festivals under different genres. The paper submitted here is a result of this awareness.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Although not all adults are regular supporters of puppet theatre, many have a childhood recollection of the art form. Apart from terms such as "puppet show" and "puppet theatre", some people know the art form as figure-, object- or animation theatre. In the programmes of arts festivals, performances including puppets are nowadays often referred to as multimedia performances, crossover or visual theatre. Puppets are no longer only seen in isolation in performance. A distinct line could be drawn between puppet theatre and other forms of theatre, but bonding with other art forms has diminished this segregation. As an artistic label, "puppet theatre" is in many cases perhaps no more an appropriate term as it does not acknowledge the complexity of an art work in which multiple visual elements (live actors, dancers and film) and acoustic elements (music, singing and speech) are applied and this raises questions about genre as a classification system.

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1. Introduction

Different terms, deriving from different conditions, have been applied over the years to puppetry in live performances or as a form of "theatre art" (Jurkowski, 1988, p. 31; Tillis, 1992, p. 25) in Western countries. Terms such as motions, figure theatre, object theatre and animation theatre have been or are still used. Eclectic performances including puppets are nowadays often referred to as multimedia performances and crossover theatre, and they are also often labelled as visual theatre or simply called theatre with puppets or just theatre. Comparisons between Western trends and trends in Asia and Africa with the exception of South Africa with puppetry as part of its colonial heritage are beyond the scope of this article and the focus will be on contemporary Western performances with puppets.

The expectation of audiences, naturally driven by the common norm, was for many years that puppets would appear on their own and would be operated from below within a booth, or behind a screen, or from above on a bridge in the case of marionettes, and the puppeteers were therefore obscured by some or other means from being visible. This is what is commonly referred to as traditional or conventional puppetry. The subject matter and tone of puppet plays have also varied and once again the known and familiar conventions can be seen as traditional.

Adrian Kohler, one of the founder members and artistic director of Handspring Puppet Company from South Africa, says in his essay "Thinking Through Puppets" (in Taylor, 2009, p. 130) in the build-up to *War Horse*, which has become an international sensation:

> Unlike in Europe, theatre with puppets in the UK carries a stigma. At European theatre festivals we would hear English puppet companies complain that audiences were put off by the "P" word. Through constant hard work over decades, theatres like London's Little Angel Marionette Theatre (*sic*) had cultivated a dedicated audience, but newer companies had kept "puppet" or "marionette" out of their company and festival names, substituting "visual" or "object" or "figure" to fill the gap.

Whether this uneasiness with the simple term "puppet" only applies to England is debatable. Many contemporary artists in South Africa and elsewhere in the Western world avoid the term for various reasons: the association with traditional puppetry and all its negative connotations in some cultures—a lack of creativity, tradition for the sake of tradition, old-fashioned scenarios, out-dated mannerisms, performing for young audiences and a low status among the performing arts. To this must be added the fact that professional puppetry in many Western countries has evolved into an eclectic form of theatre that is often labelled by puppet artists as anything but puppet theatre— visual theatre, crossover theatre and multimedia theatre—partly to escape the negative connotations and partly to draw attention to the experimental and eclectic nature of their work. Dissociation from a well-known term is therefore not the only reason for the use of different labels. Innovation has changed the face of performances with puppets exclusively, or including puppets as one of a number of visual elements, and "puppet theatre" or "puppet show"—as it is commonly called—may perhaps now have become a dubious term.

The term "puppet show" was the common term in English most of the time. This, however, changed in the second half of the twentieth century, when "puppet theatre" had become the "smart title" in English when the term "puppet show" was thought to sound "unbecoming" for the latest productions with their higher aspirations in pursuit of trends in the Soviet Union (Francis, 2012, p. 11). The new title became current, especially when the Communist-dominated countries poured subsidies into what Moscow considered an ideal educational medium and a handful of production companies in England started to model themselves on the East European state companies. "Puppet show" has, however, "stubbornly remained the common English label" (Francis, 2012, p. 11). Today, terms such as "theatre of animation" and "theatre of animation forms" are also used in English "to avoid the humble 'puppet' word" (Francis, 2012, p. 11). In the 1960s and 1970s, the term "figure theatre" (*Figurentheater*) was often used in Germany. This term is still used in Germany today and is also used by some artists in France, Italy, Holland and Belgium.

The situation in South Africa, where puppetry is part of the colonial heritage, is more or less the same. "Puppet show" (*poppespel* in Afrikaans) is a common term, but mostly reserved for puppetry for children. Very much as in Europe, the increasingly eclectic nature of puppetry in South Africa since the 1990s has made "puppetry" and "puppet show" unpopular and rather stigmatised descriptive terms and artistic labels for adult shows, and practitioners feel that they do not acknowledge the artistic scope and complexity of their work, in which a variety of elements are applied in a layered text.

Puppets traditionally used to be seen in isolation as a mode of performance and a distinct line could be drawn between puppet theatre and other forms of theatre. Francis (2012, p. 12) is of the opinion that puppetry had allowed itself to become "ghettoized entertainment suitable only for the very undemanding" in the years before theatre makers from other disciplines became interested in applying puppetry. Adrian Kohler (in Taylor, 2009, p. 168) has the same view and refers to Handspring Puppet Company's objective of "always trying to escape the puppet ghetto". As the eclectic practice of contemporary puppetry can no longer be separated from other forms of dramatic expression, the question arises as to what to call these shows. The eclectic nature of contemporary performances with puppets, the negative associations and the low status of the art form therefore largely serve as the springboard for this discussion about the sense or non-sense of labelling contemporary performances with puppets.

Before taking a look at the evolution of the art form from street performances by humble show-men with a low social standing in the Middle Ages to a number of contemporary popular productions in mainstream theatres and numerous fringe theatre productions with puppets, two important key terms—puppet and puppet theatre—need to be clarified.

2. Defining the puppet
There have been numerous attempts to define the puppet, but "Perfect definition eludes theorists, historians, puppeteers, dictionary-makers. It is easier to state what a puppet is Not: it is not a "doll" … Dolls are for personal play; puppets are essentially theatrical in function" (Philpott, 1969, p. 209).

Objects not manufactured primarily to serve as theatrical figures can take on a theatrical quality when applied in the same way as a puppet: "Almost any object can be a puppet: a toy, a doll, a hairbrush, a lollipop, a spoon, a broom. Even your hand can be a puppet if you move it and speak so that your hand seems to be doing the walking and talking" (McCaslin, 1977, p. 1). Francis (2012, pp. 14–15) therefore distinguishes between object puppets and figurative puppets, and this distinction, one would assume, is the basis of alternative terms such as "object theatre" and "figure theatre" instead of "puppet theatre".

Technological advances gave rise to new performance figures, some of which have led to controversy. Tillis (in Bell 2001, p. 175) proposes that traditional (or figurative) puppets should be viewed as tangible puppets, while computer graphics figures are virtual puppets. He dismisses stop-action figures as puppets as no real-time control is possible, but argues that if tangibility and real-time control are discounted, stop-action figures can be seen as puppets. Francis (2012, p. 17) accepts stop-action figures, animatronics and computer-operated figures as screen puppets, although she is less convinced by computer-controlled figures, as a trained performer is not moving the figures.

3. Defining puppet theatre
Puppet theatre can be defined as a theatre art which differentiates itself from live theatre, as the main and basic features are the speaking and performing objects which make use of the physical sources of the vocal and driving powers that are present beyond the object (Jurkowski, 1988, p. 31).

Puppets do not always "speak" in performance. This is commonly found in shadow theatre, which often uses only music to support the visual images, and in other performances where speech may be absent as part of the sound system—which is one of the three sign systems (Jurkowski, 1988, pp. 57–84), as seen in the work of the well-known Bread and Puppet Company and many

contemporary performances which rely on music to complete the meaning of the visual images. The core of Jurkowski's definition—also acknowledged by Tillis (1992, p. 25)—is that puppets are the principal feature of theatre that can be labelled as puppet theatre. Determining the prime feature in some contemporary performances which use multiple visual mediums—puppets, dance, mime, film, masks, objects, puppets and live actors—may at times be a complicated matter. This may lead to questions about the labelling of contemporary theatre which includes puppets and the sense (or non-sense) of trying to brand these types of performances at all.

4. The evolution of Western stage puppetry: a brief historical overview

This brief historical overview of Western puppetry will focus on the most important developments in the art form, as well as the status and the popularity of the art form in different times. The use of different terms will also be pointed out.

With the fall of the Roman Empire, puppetry disappeared from all historical records for almost 700 years and most probably survived only in the hands of humble travelling showmen. While these players in the "low tradition of puppets" (Nelson, 2001, p. 48) continued roaming the highways of Europe during the Middle Ages, the Christian church started to use puppets instead of live actors: "the early church, while it frowned on the vulgarity of live actors, was fully aware of the educational value of the theatre and the arts … In order to have the one without the other, it welcomed the puppet" (Baird, 1965, p. 66). Unfortunately, the popularity of the puppets did not last: "With the success of puppets in the church, their clowning got the upper hand … there was so much buffoonery in the service that the shows had to be moved out to the churchyard, and finally into public squares … When the puppets were thrown out of the church, it was not because they weren't getting their message across … they became too theatrical or too vulgar" (Baird, 1965, pp. 67–68). And so the fairgrounds and taverns once again became their only performance space. The social status of these travelling showmen was lowly and the puppets were associated with coarse humour and frivolity—enjoyed by many, but not suitable entertainment for the upper classes.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seem to be the first era in which English puppeteers turned to another term to describe their work when some of them started to use the word "motion" for what they were doing. To understand the origin and meaning of this term, one must turn to Italy and France. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, puppetry in Italy was of a high standard and puppeteers were capable of producing quite elaborate marionette performances (Speaight, 1970, p. 17). These highly skilled performances by the Italian puppeteers were of course presented in indoor puppet theatres and not from portable booths on the streets. Italian puppeteers started to visit France and England. Paris saw its first puppet theatre when the Italian Brioché opened one in 1640. Brioché and his son were even invited to perform at the French court (Beaumont, 1958, p. 9) and it is clear that the arrival of the Italian puppeteers lifted the status of puppetry in France. By the seventeenth century, puppet performances was so popular in France that puppet theatres had to be closed in response to protests from ordinary actors (Beaumont, 1958, p. 9).

It was the arrival of Italian and French puppeteers in Elizabethan England that gave rise to the terms "motions" and "motion men". There were, of course, no indoor puppet theatres in England at that time and portable puppet booths were set up by travelling puppeteers on busy street corners, in front of inns and on the fairgrounds, including the well-known Bartholomew Fair. Many of the puppet shows were presented by French and Italian puppeteers who could not speak English and therefore an interpreter stood next to the booth to explain the "motions" to the crowd or to speak the dialogue on behalf of the "motion men" (Speaight, 1970, p. 35). Interpreters or commentators became a common feature of Elizabethan puppetry, often also used by English-speaking puppeteers, and this explains the common use of the term "motion", which was an attempt to describe a prominent element in the performance style. The "vulgar and crude" (Speaight, 1970, p. 37) Elizabethan puppet performances, though quite popular, had a low social status. When all theatres were closed in England in 1642, puppet shows, as they were then commonly called, could continue as they were seen as "too lowly for legal interdiction" (Speaight, 1970, p. 37).

Francis (2012, pp. 10–11) correctly points out that the puppet show and the puppeteer have since made a long journey into "respectable society". An important step for England in this journey was the appearance of Punch or Punchinello, as he was called when Signor Bologna arrived in England with his marionettes to perform in Covent Garden in 1662; he was later commanded to play at the court of Charles II and awarded a gold medal and chain. Punch became the star of the English puppet theatre, even in the "fashionable marionette plays of London Town" and "no play was complete unless he was there to provide tricks, subvert the authority of his superiors and generally stir trouble" (Francis, 2012, p. 157). By the middle of the eighteenth century, Polichinelle was also flourishing in France and Germany.

A significant upwards step in terms of the social ranking of puppeteers in Europe came when the Italians made opera with puppets fashionable. This was an extravagant affair—elaborate scenery and costumes, a variety of staging mechanisms, several operators and compositions by well-known composers such as Haydn and Gluck added to the artistic standard and status of these marionette performances. But these shows were expensive and became the prerogative of kings, emperors and princes (amongst others, Louis XIV of France, Empress Maria Theresa of the Habsburg dynasty and Prince Nikolaus I Esterhàzy of Hungary), bishops, the aristocracy and other rich European patrons of the marionette theatre:

> In short, puppets took their place in fashionable society; to own a puppet theatre in one's palace symbolized good taste and wealth; to invite the best travelling professionals to set up their refined entertainment for the pleasure of your courtiers displayed your generous hospitality. (Francis 2012, p. 158)

This, however, does not mean that the "less pompous artists and musicians" (Jurkowski, 1996, p. 118) and ordinary man did not develop a taste for this new development in Western puppetry. Some alternative versions were created which resulted in the creation the opera comique (Baird, 1965, p. 145).

At the end of the eighteenth-century, Italian puppeteers once again introduced a new form of entertainment that became popular all over Europe. The *Fantoccini*—a term applied to puppets operated with rods and strings, and with Arlecchino as the hero (McCormick, 2004, p. 141)—were trick puppets, full of humour and surprises. Although these performances brought "much wit, delicacy, beauty and charm" (Speaight, 1970, p. 59) to the puppet theatre, they had a negative impact on an older tradition:

> The robust folk-dramas suffered from the craze for tricks and turns introduced by the Italian Fantocchini: before an invasion of rope-dancers and posture-masters the simple fables of the puppet stage degenerated into vulgarity and nonsense. (Speaight, 1970, p. 62)

The nineteenth century saw a number of changes which affected the popularity and status of the puppet theatre. One of the positive changes was that a number of permanent theatres were founded. In Germany, like elsewhere in Europe, puppet shows had been enjoyed by some aristocrats in their castles, but mostly they were presented by showmen with a low social status to the less fortunate on the street. This changed with the opening of puppet theatres such as the Haenneschen and Weyermann theatres and the theatre of Josef (Papa) Schmid in Munich. The latter can be attributed to implementation of the ideal of Count Franz Pacci to change the marionette theatre into something with high artistic merit (and more prestige) by moving it away from the fairgrounds (Simmen, 1975, p. 6). Count Pacci himself wrote about 50 puppet plays, combining fables and irony, and these plays became part of the classic repertoire of the German marionette theatre. Papa Schmid inspired the creation of more puppet theatres in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, where Anton Aicher began the Salzburg Marionette Theatre in 1913 that would make puppet operas famous.

Although the newly founded permanent puppet theatres by distinguished producers and artists such as Lemercier de Neuville in France and Josef Schmid in Germany "gave the puppet theatre an artistic and academic *cachet*" (Francis, 2012, p. 161), travelling marionette family troupes were

common, an established feature of everyday life in much of Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century and street shows were likewise a key element of urban culture (McCormick & Pratasik, 1998, p. 1). Puppets from Europe still had to make their appearance in South Africa. The number of travelling troupes in countries such as Italy, Belgium, France and Britain increased, and this emergence of travelling marionette troupes is "perhaps the most remarkable" development in puppetry of the nineteenth century (Francis, 2012, p. 161). They attracted crowds from every social class; some were invited to perform for the royals and many succeeded in becoming viable business ventures.

The travelling troupes brought puppetry to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. WFP Parker and his Mechanical and Picturesque Theatre of Arts entertained the settlers in Cape Town in 1837 with more than five hundred automata and travelled to some of the towns in the Cape colony (Fletcher, 1994, p. 76). Parker and his troupe were very popular and they returned the next year. The visitors from France, Germany and Italy who soon followed brought the typical marionette shows of their time, of which some were pantomime ballets. Local puppeteers would only emerge years later.

In Europe, the touring marionette troupes, however, lost popularity towards the end of the nineteenth century, a "terminal decline" (Francis, 2012, p. 165), and it was their "determined attempts at human mimesis" that led them into "an artistic cul-de sac" (Francis, 2012, p. 165). It was indeed the coming of naturalism that impelled the reproduction of human movement and appearance, but does not suit the puppet as a simplistic, metaphorical expression which should not imitate but rather represent.

Street performances such as the Punch and Judy shows and the once popular Guignol in France suffered the same fate as the travelling marionette troupes gradually declined in popularity. Colonial South Africa never experienced the European street performers, but marionette troupes continue to visit the country, perhaps in the hope of gaining fame somewhere else. In England, Punch players invented a new form of shadow play, the so-called "gallanty shows" with "Chinese shadows" (Whanslaw, 1950, p. 64), which they performed on the street at night. Europe showed great interest in things from the Orient and this was hopefully something that would draw back the crowds which the street performers had lost by now. All street players, however, seem to have lost their former audiences, and became poorer and less respectable. "The resident comic heroes had been forcibly separated from their original theatre context, and the shows looked isolated and run-down" (Francis, 2012, p. 164).

Europe started to show a strong interest in shadow shows. The French interest in shadow theatre already began in the latter half of the eighteenth century, when their interest in marionettes and glove puppets faded, and the *Ombres Chinoises* began to draw full houses, a change which can be contribute to the interest in and desire for things from the Oriental world (Segel, 1995, p. 65; Stockwell, 1966, p. 11). After public interest in shadow shows started to fade, the opening of the Le Chat Noir in 1881 in the bohemian Montmartre quarter in Paris and the popularity of this cabaret venue, visited even by the future King Edward VII, made shadow plays more popular than ever before and they became a common feature of the cabarets presented by impresario Rudolphe Salis. He toured France with cabaret artists and the last shadow play by his company was staged shortly before his death in March 1897 (Nichols, 2002, p. 119). Puppets have since become a recognised component of cabaret and this phenomenon serves as an example of how the ghettoisation of the puppetry is been demolished.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, most of the puppet entertainment was still provided by travelling marionette troupes, who continued to present worn-out repertoires, which impacted negatively on the popularity and status of the puppet theatre. Jan Malik, a former Secretary General of UNIMA and director of the leading puppet theatre in Prague for many years, refers in his essay "Tradition and the Present Day" (in Niculescu, 1969, p. 7) to the growing prejudice against puppetry among the adult public in Europe because of the commercial touring marionette theatres between the two World

Wars, which showed a tendency towards traditionalism by preserving "outdated mannerisms, bad taste and often deliberate coarseness, all usually without any talent on the part of the puppeteers" and "an uncritical conservatism which regarded them as a popular manifestation of a folklore tradition." Francis (2012, p. 169) also notes, with reference to Britain, the negative influence of the Arts and Crafts movement, which led to a decline in puppetry's dramatic value in favour of handcraftsmanship and the "well-made marionette" as an end in itself, and adds: "A formerly lively professional landscape gave ground to uninteresting performances by semi-amateur companies whose merit, at least in Britain, was judged by their puppet's ability to copy human appearance and movement".

Although puppeteers in Europe continued presenting traditional puppetry, from about 1918 there was also a renewal, which Baird (1965, p. 176) describes as the "Surge": "The whole period of the Surge was an effort to demonstrate that dramatic impact through story and character is just as important as theatrical effects" and he highlights the contribution of Paul Brann from Munich with his puppet operas and serious plays, Ivan Puhonnny from Baden-Baden, Josef Skupa with his surrealistic puppets, Vojtech Sucharda with his modern lighting, Jan Malik from Czechoslovakia, Vittorio Podrecca from Italy with his satirical caricatures, and the Americans Tony Sarg with his serious marionette plays, Ellen von Volkenburg, and Remo Bufano with his experimental work. Ivan Puhonnny (cited in Baird, 1965, p. 168) made the following interesting remark about public perceptions:

> The thoughtless plunging into an unperfected art lowers the general standards of the marionette show. The public does not charge the clumsiness and inadequacy they see to the worker, but imagines it to be an intrinsic part of a puppet performance, and sees therein only a pleasing pastime … charming but after all only a form of child's play.

The bridge from traditionalism intensified when practitioners of puppetry, fine art, graphic art, theatre and design started to exchange ideas. This created the opportunity for the German Bauhaus design school and the Dada movement to contribute to the move towards more intellectual and artistic expression through puppets. Puppeteers developed individual styles, for example, George Lafeaye, who turned everyday objects into puppets, Yves Joly, who replaced the puppet with his bare hand, and Micheal Meschke, who produced Jarry's *Ubu Roi* with huge two-dimensional figures and body puppets. Baird (1965, p. 191) remarks about Yves Joly: "If anyone can be said to have stripped puppetry to its skeleton and started afresh, it is Joly, who threw away the puppet and allowed his hand to assume the attributes of the most sophisticated drama".

A new phenomenon which grew in popularity and became a common feature of contemporary Western puppetry is the absence of the booth since the late 1950s. This was seen as revolutionary (Alkema, 1984, p. 14) and impacted not only on the content and form, but also on the dramatic and theatrical quality of the presentation and opened up the possibilities for eclectic performances.

In the meantime, puppet theatre underwent major changes in the Soviet empire, changes that would eventually affect puppetry elsewhere. Puppet theatre, seen as an ideal educational and propaganda tool, would receive ample funding in the Soviet Union. In the late 1960s, many Western puppet companies started to see the Soviet structure as a model to aspire to. Sergei Obraztsov, well known for his ingenious glove puppet performances in cabarets, was appointed as the artistic director of the Central State Puppet Theatre in Moscow in 1931 and had a huge impact on puppetry:

> Obraztsov's over-riding principle, in effect a powerful contribution to the aesthetics of present-day puppetry, was that no production should attempt to emulate a show for human actors … the over-all result was a surge of artistic excellence which exerted a worldwide influence, when the best and most suitable productions of the Soviet puppet companies toured abroad. Their productions values, the originality of the scenarios, their inventiveness, humour and colour, made Obraztsov, as virtual artistic director of the whole Soviet empire of puppetry, famous—one of the few names in puppet theatre ever to enter the consciousness of the general public. (Francis, 2012, p. 171)

At first puppet theatre in the Soviet empire, synonymous with good technique and discipline, largely concentrated on children's entertainment, but practitioners gradually started to address adult audiences and also contributed to the development of the rod puppet, which has grown in popularity and can now be seen regularly in contemporary puppetry in the whole Western world.

It was not only the Soviet Union that applied puppetry as children's entertainment. As the twentieth century progressed, puppets not only grew in popularity as children's entertainment, but also developed a reputation as educational and therapeutic tools. The twentieth century also saw the advance of arts festivals and this in turn created new platforms for puppets in children's and adult theatre. Many festivals are dedicated exclusively to puppetry. The Festival Mondial des Theatres de Marionettes, hosted by Union International de la Marionette (UNIMA) in Charleville-Mézières, is a showcase of contemporary puppetry and hosts some of the most experimental and eclectic work with puppets. Multimedia and visually orientated theatre shows which incorporate puppetry are frequently seen on arts festivals, especially on the fringe programmes. Some festivals offer puppetry as part of a varied programme, sometimes without any reference in publicity material to puppetry as a genre. And it is also festivals that have to a certain extent brought to the foreground the tendency to substitute the term "puppet show" or "puppet theatre" with other terms.

5. Puppetry as a marginal art form in Western countries

Jurkowski (1988, p. 85), one of the most prolific authorities on the history and theories of puppetry, refers to puppetry as "a marginal art form". Roman Paska (cited in Francis, 2012, p. 27)—writer, director, filmmaker, puppeteer and for several years director of the Institut International de la Marionnette in France—says: "And despite all efforts to feather a nest for puppet theatre in contemporary society, it remains a fundamentally deviant, subversive, marginal art form".

Being considered trivial might have saved the puppet theatre in Elizabethan times, when it was considered too lowly for banning, while the other theatres were closed down for almost two decades; but still being considered insignificant while some of the most innovative contemporary theatre includes puppets is very unfortunate. Because it is associated with fringe theatre, many audiences with a taste for more conventional presentation (and even subject matter) keep away, as fringe theatre can also be associated with the provocative and the untested and untried. But this is also precisely what attracts many people to fringe theatre. But it is true of fringe theatre that artists in this field receive less recognition and ultimately less funding.

Being considered a peripheral art is also connected to puppetry's close connection with children's entertainment in Western countries. This stands in sharp contrast to traditional African puppetry, where puppets are part of masquerades with a meaningful social and cultural purpose, and to the prestigious and well-funded Bunraku theatre of Japan.

Puppetry used to be a theatre for all ages and children attended performances meant for adults, as the notion of theatre especially for children was unknown for many centuries. But this changed drastically in the twentieth century, with the arrival of television; like the arrival of the movies, this meant fierce competition for theatre in general and the puppet theatre did not survive this onslaught without a decline, especially in adult audiences. Hanford (1976, p. 36) correctly points out that adults started to favour television as entertainment, which undermined the performing arts and left puppeteers with young audiences as their only feasible market. Puppets also started to feature very prominently as children's entertainment on television and this, of course, strengthened the association of puppets with children. This connotation was further strengthened by the growing application of puppets as educational and therapeutic tools:

> Puppetry has suffered a number of distortions in this century, each tending to undermine its primary function as theatre … Gradually, these by-products of the old art of puppetry began to dominate, and its original function of dramatic entertainment was often forgotten …

puppets have been used as teachers of health and safety and to make direct appeals for numerous different purposes. While this is a perfectly legitimate use of puppets, it has tended to obscure or supersede puppetry as drama. (Batchelder & Cromer, 1959, p. 22)

The close association of puppetry with children's entertainment, education and therapy contributed to the low prestige of puppetry amongst the arts and cultivated a prejudice against the art form in adult theatre. This is one of the reasons why contemporary puppeteers in adult theatre rather refer to themselves as theatre-makers and brand their work as visual or multimedia theatre, or even object or figure theatre to escape the uneasiness associated with the term "puppetry", which seems to have become a stigmatised descriptive term for an activity which carries a low status and a label which may alienate adult audiences.

6. The eclectic nature of contemporary puppetry

When pondering on a suitable term for contemporary puppetry, one must take into account the eclectic and experimental nature of performances which include puppets. Since the late 1980s puppetry has undergone an "evolution" (Francis, 2012, p. 1) and has become a wide-ranging performance practice in which constant innovation has become an inherent quality. The combination of puppets, even different puppet types in one show, and other visual elements and performance modes has created a multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach to meaning making and representation. Music and visual images often take the place of dialogue. Puppets share an open performance area with their puppeteers, and often with actors and even dancers. Puppets are also mixed with masked performers and projections. Rod puppets have become very popular and are often technically highly sophisticated and operated by more than a single visible puppeteer.

Since the late 1980s, there has been a growing international awareness of the impact created by puppets when different artistic elements and forms are brought together in performance. South Africa seems to be a typical example of this tendency. Since the 1990s, this eclectic nature became very prominent when the boundaries between puppetry and ordinary theatre started to blur, and puppets became part of a number of award-winning and internationally acclaimed mainstream theatre productions that featured a mixture of visual elements in a layered text in the collaborative works of visual artist William Kentridge and Handspring Puppet Company. In 1995, after two successful productions in collaboration with William Kentridge, Basil Jones (private correspondence, 3 October 1995) as one of the founder members of Handspring Puppet Company wrote:

> As theatre practitioners we do not think of ourselves as being puppeteers as such, but rather as artists who use several media in our productions—dance, music, animated film, live actors, objects animation and puppets. We don't see ourselves as producing a rather marginalised form of theatre … We are fortunate that more and more puppetry is being considered simply one of the powerful tools of the theatre. It is being use as such to a greater or lesser extent by leading theatre directors. Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, Robert Lepage are just three renowned directors who have used puppets in recent productions. The same can be said for a number of South African directors and productions … We seldom see puppetry used in isolation … I believe that we need to review the way puppet theatre is conceived by theatre practitioners, historians, critics, and the like.

Their productions were never referred to in the press or festival programmes as puppet theatre and in *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, Kruger (1997, p. 289) refers to their work as part of the new crossover theatre in the country. *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, first performed in 1997 and revised to celebrate South Africa's twentieth year of democracy with a world tour (including Edinburgh International Festival) in 2014, is referred to as a "theatrical multimedia piece" (Anonymous, 2014). It prominently features exposed-style rod puppetry, which is combined with live actors in the foreground and animation strips of Kentridge's charcoal drawings as a backdrop. Their exposed style of puppetry and "experimentations in crossover multi-disciplinarity" (Handspring Puppet Company, XXXX) with William Kentridge has set the local standard for contemporary puppetry performances. Since 2010, the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, the oldest

festival of its kind in Africa, saw an explosion of puppetry and featured acclaimed productions which were until recently labelled as visual theatre with either puppets or masks, but this festival no longer features visual theatre as a separate category. Out-The-Box festival for puppetry and visual theatre was held in Cape Town from 2005 until 2011, when funding became a problem. It served as a platform for the support and development of visual theatre, which UNIMA/Puppetry SA defines as "interactive artistic expression using visual imagery, puppetry, objects, video, art and multimedia" (Out the Box Festival, 2008). It is this form of visual theatre that enables performances to be created that move beyond realism and a spoken text, and which encourages performances through experimentation and the integration of artistic mediums to create multidisciplinary crossovers.

7. The sense and non-sense of genre classification

The eclectic nature of a large section of contemporary puppetry and the bonding of genres raise a number of questions about genre classification: what is the purpose of genre classification? Does genre as a label influence audiences? References to and descriptions of genre often seem to be the concern of the academic and/or theatre critic and/or commercial entrepreneur. Genres with reference, for example, to arts festivals create a kind of order by simplifying the mass of information available for audiences. Genre considerations are one of the factors which guide audience choices—genre is, after all, an indication of what artistic mode to expect and some people do have particular preferences. These preferences are influenced by their understanding, preconceptions and perceptions of the genre.

Puppetry is often referred to as an applied art, which indicates that puppets can function in more than one artistic mode. Puppets, as an international phenomenon, are utilised in a variety of cultural and social forms of expression which vary from religious rituals and cultural festivals to topsy-turvy carnival events, from children's entertainment and adult edutainment to socio-political dramas, and even erotic cabarets and razor-sharp social satire. Puppetry is widely absorbed into fringe theatre and at times into mainstream theatre in different genres. Although some people such as Lenora Spzpet (cited in Jurkowski, 1988, p. 28) from Poland have expressed their anxiety about the "destruction of puppetry as a theatre genre" and the "disintegration of the traditional puppet theatre as the result of too much analysis of its characteristics", puppetry is also still practised as a separate genre. Francis (2012, p. 2) therefore makes a distinction between puppet theatre and theatre with puppets:

> The company Tartana of Madrid produced a version of *King Lear* in 1987 in which human-sized, animated figures were the principal medium, playing all the characters, thus clearly "puppet theatre". Complicite, a company based in England, frequently employ animated objects in its productions, a theatre with puppets, for example *Mnemonic* (1999), *Light* (2000), and *Shun-kin* (2009).

The latter refers to a production of "mixed means of expression" (Francis, 2012, p. 12). To the above examples of performances which can be described as theatre with puppets can be added many more titles, of which *War Horse* by the Royal National Theatre of England and the Broadway adaptation of *Lion King* are the best known. Francis (2012, p. 12) admits, however, that it is "hardly an accepted label or category", but does serve as a "useful description in the evolution of stage puppetry". This category is what Jurkowski (1988, p. 28) refers to as a "'third genre', situated between the elements of live and puppet drama ... the mixing of the means of expression of the puppet's and the actor's theatre", but he does not attempt to name this genre.

In some performances, puppets are the key element, but they operate in a theatre form with a distinct modus operandi. Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet theatre in America, with "rents, rats, police, and other problems of the neighborhood" as their initial concerns (Bread and Puppet Theatre, XXXX), is well known for its anti-authoritarian stance, and many of their works can be classified as protest theatre and street theatre. *Puns and Doedie—Puppets against Apartheid,* by Gary Friedman (formerly from South Africa and now living and working in Australia) is another example of protest theatre done as street theatre with puppets. The show was performed in public spaces full of activities and challenged long-standing social attitudes embedded in South Africa's oppressive

apartheid system (Kruger, 2008, pp. 26–28). Friedman's influential *Puppets against AIDS* was also performed in public spaces and included applied theatre, interactive theatre or interventional theatre techniques, and this approach can also be seen in the work of a number of NGOs in Africa, most notably in the presentations of Community Health Awareness Puppeteers in Kenya (Kruger, 2007, pp. 66–70). Giant puppets are part of street theatre in many countries—Brazil, the Caribbean, Spain, Britain, Denmark and France, to name a few—and these street performances range from carnival entertainment to highly radical politically driven protest.

Puppets feature strongly in visual theatre. The positioning of puppetry as part of visual theatre is nothing new; it is in fact a widespread phenomenon which distinguishes contemporary metaphysical puppetry, which can be complex in imagery and meaning, from traditional and therefore conventional puppetry. Visual theatre as a cutting-edge art form encourages experimentation and the integration of artistic mediums. Apart from movement—various dance forms, mime and gesture—other visual elements such as puppetry, masks, video and projections can combine with music and the spoken word to create through such juxtapositioning a multilayered texture with many levels of interpretation. Visual theatre therefore opens up the potential to apply puppetry as a multifaceted and interdisciplinary approach to meaning making and representation. Puppetry is by its very nature an applied art form with symbolic and metaphorical qualities that flourish in non-realistic representation.

Yet, to classify eclectic puppet performances as visual theatre is also not without problems. Visual theatre is as such not really a theatre genre, as all theatre is to a certain extent visual, and what is called visual theatre is often absorbed into other theatre forms. The increasingly eclectic nature of contemporary puppetry and the possibility of including puppetry under the umbrella term of "visual theatre" seem to emphasise the problem of classifying this diverse phenomenon in its theatrical application simply as puppet theatre, a name which has diverse and often mutually exclusive connotations in different cultures at various times. Puppetry or puppet theatre as an artistic marker emphasises the presence of inanimate objects as a structural characteristic, but as an artistic label the term is perhaps not always appropriate, as it does not acknowledge the artistic scope and complexity of an art work in which multiple visual and acoustic elements are applied. This sorting reduces this form of representation to a single and discrete genre, and does not acknowledge the amalgamation and integration of artistic modes.

It is interesting to note that in 1962 Krystyna Mazur (cited in Jurkowski, 1988, p. 26), although acknowledging the distinctive characteristics of puppet theatre, was troubled by the effect of stressing puppet theatre as a separate genre on the future of puppetry:

> Insisting on the independence of the puppet theatre as a theatre genre, trying not to see the links with the live theatre, though they certainly exist, seems to be pushing puppetry into an artistic backwater which will sooner or later cause its artistic decline.

This decline was prevented by the promotion of the kind of attitude that Harro Siegel (cited in Jurkowski, 1988, p. 26), the well-known German puppeteer and teacher, encouraged in 1966 by saying:

> As puppeteers, we should look at our artistic genre as an element of a larger whole. We should not be afraid of some sallies into unexplored territory, nor of a new way of expression. Within the boundaries of each particular area of theatre, we should not stress what divides but what unites us, to encourage a mutual approach and to strengthen bonds.

Genre as a classification system for the arts has its limitations and suffers from the same deficiencies as any classification system. Theatre genres are not always precisely definable and works can fit into multiple genres by way of borrowing and recombining conventions. Like all art genres, theatre genres are dynamic and constantly evolving entities in which it is difficult to classify everything in absolute terms.

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8. Conclusion

The use of other terms instead of "puppet theatre" in the case of eclectic puppetry must be seen against the backdrop of a number of factors: perceptions of puppetry as being more suitable for young audiences, the low profile of puppets in popular adult theatre, the low status of puppetry amongst the arts and the growing impact of arts festivals on the theatre industry in general. Perhaps, the legitimacy of puppets in the so-called straight theatre has been accepted in many countries by now, as puppets have been seamlessly blended into stage works that are puppet plays and theatre plays at the same time, as well as being well received by theatre critics.

Perhaps, there is at times something in a label or name, though not always merited, and if negative connotations are embedded in a name, they must be neutralised. This can be a long and complicated process. A label should suit the artistic mode which, as its trademark, can attract audiences and at the same time create audience expectations. Perhaps, puppetry has in many instances become so eclectic as a result of constant innovation in the art form that broad terms such as visual theatre, multimedia theatre or just simply theatre with puppets are not misleading or inappropriate. Whether avoiding the term "puppet" will in effect support the process of eliminating prejudice and destigmatising the practice remains an open question.

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Cover image
From the production of *In Medeas Res,* directed by Aja Marneweck from Paper Body Collective, South Africa. Source: ©2009, Anthony Srack van Schynde for Paper Body Collective.

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