

ART & PERFORMANCE NOTES



Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company, *Chapel/Chapter*. Photo: Courtesy of Paul B. Goode.

THE EMERGING PUPPETRY RENAISSANCE

Frank Episale

Sleepy Hollow, adapted from the novella by Washington Irving and directed by Gretchen Van Lente. Drama of Works, Abrons Arts Center, New York City, October 31–November 5, 2006.

For at least the last decade, puppetry has played an increasingly central role in theatre seasons around the world. In recent years, international festivals in Prague, Ontario, Melbourne, Oulu, Istanbul, and Jakarta, among others, have emerged, more than filling the void left by the Henson International Festival of Puppet Theatre, a biennial review that was active from 1992 to 2000. Puppetry courses both practical and theoretical are increasingly offered at major universities both in the United States—most notably at the University of Connecticut—and as far abroad as Indonesia and Vietnam.

Puppets have been interacting with human actors on stage with increasing frequency as well, even in the most ostensibly highbrow and mainstream of venues. Aaron Posner's *Measure for Measure* at the Folger Theatre in Washington, D.C., and Sean Daniels's *Merry Wives of Windsor* at the California Shakespeare Theatre (both 2006) featured puppets in prominent roles. The current season at the Metropolitan Opera in New York

features puppetry in two productions: Julie Taymor's *The Magic Flute* and, less predictably, Anthony Minghella's *Madama Butterfly*.

Despite these high-profile offshoots of the current craze, the heart of the puppetry scene remains rooted in more intimate settings. Small companies, devoted not only to their own work but to encouraging and developing the work of their peers, gather at conferences and workshops to offer each other feedback and applause as well as more material support like rehearsal space and grant proposals. In New York, the most visible of these sites of collaboration is the Puppet Lab at St. Ann's Warehouse, a decade-old consortium that meets weekly over the course of nine months and culminates in a mini-festival of performances each spring. Seemingly ubiquitous in the biographies of New York-based companies, the Lab is perhaps second only to the Henson Foundation in providing support to puppet and object-based performance.

Other significant sources for development support in New York have emerged more recently. The Voice4Vision festival at Theatre for the New City finds TNC combining its own resources with that of the Henson Foundation and other donors to create a season-long festival of puppet performances culminating in the annual appearance of Peter Schumman's venerable Bread and Puppet Theatre. HERE Arts Center—where Basil Twist's celebrated underwater puppet ballet *Symphonie Fantastique* premiered in 1998 and then ran for two years—has launched Dream Music Puppetry, an expansion of their artist residency programs that commission and support new work through multi-year development processes.¹ Avant-garde stalwarts Mabou Mines continue to nurture the work of young puppeteers in a variety of ways. The Linux Loft—sponsored Passport to Puppet Theatre acts as a sort of bridge between these events and venues. If audience members present a stamped “passport” at the box office of participating venues, they can receive ticket discounts and, oddly enough, free Linux-based operating system software.²

One of the companies at the center of all this activity is Drama of Works, a Brooklyn-based collective led by Artistic Director Gretchen Van Lente. It was awarded its first Henson grant in 1998 and has been active ever since. The year 2006 was a particularly busy one for Drama of Works: *Warhol™* was part of the Voice4Vision festival at Theatre for the New City; it has been curating and hosting the monthly Punch festival at Galapagos Art Space in Williamsburg, occasionally including their own *The Sid and Nancy Punch and Judy Show*. They curated and hosted the Fifth Annual *Carnival of Samhain*, a kind of hipster

puppetry and performance jam that ran concurrently with their full-length shadow adaptation of Washington Irving's *Sleepy Hollow*.

Van Lente recently visited Bali for six weeks of intercultural puppetry workshops, which is where she met Vivian Fung, a Juilliard-based composer who contributed the musical score for *Sleepy Hollow*. Drama of Works publicity materials have noted that the project began in Bali as an exploration of collaboration between shadow puppetry and live music. Despite its roots in Indonesia, however, this production does not read as derivative of *Wayang Kulit* or similar “traditional” forms. Instead, *Sleepy Hollow* is, in part, an homage to hand shadows cast on the sides of tents by the light of campfires and flashlights. Just as filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman trace their fascination with projected images back to childhood memories of magic lanterns and zoetropes, Van Lente seems to be paying tribute to schoolchildren creating shadows of dogs and rabbits by the light of filmstrip projectors.

This is not to suggest a lack of sophistication, however. While many contemporary companies inspire “oohs” and “ahhs” from their audience, the focus is sometimes so exclusively on craft that the end result feels a little shallow. I have often left productions impressed by technique but wishing the technique had been applied to something with more narrative and thematic depth. Van Lente and Drama of Works, however, consistently produce work that functions and satisfies on multiple levels. This may be in part because of their inclusive casting approach; program notes for *Sleepy Hollow* state that the company “[pride] themselves on including members

from a variety of backgrounds, including puppetry, experimental theatre, clowning, classical theatre, folk dance, and comedy.” Indeed, biographies of the performers indicate that several of them, though experienced performers, had never danced puppets before taking part in this production. Even more than the variety of perspectives brought by performers with a variety of backgrounds, the company’s oft-stated ambition to “cross the line between actors and puppeteers,” renders each production a metatheatrical meditation on the ontology of puppetry.

In previous productions, this focus has manifested itself in a variety of ways reliant upon the onstage presence of puppeteer/actors: moments at which the puppets turned to acknowledge the puppeteers, dream sequences in which the puppeteer stepped away from the “sleeping” puppet to portray the character’s dream-self, etc. Because such devices are not readily available in a shadow-puppet production like *Sleepy Hollow*, Van Lente instead employs a variety of techniques to draw attention to the medium of shadow projection and to encourage speculation about what’s going on between the light source and the screen.

The screen itself is a kind of quilt, patched together from rectangles of various sizes. In some scenes, one image is projected over the entire screen but, in others, the individual panels serve as frames or windows, similar to those found in comic books and websites. In both configurations, the physical fact of the screen is foregrounded, which also serves to remind the audience of the three-dimensional objects behind

the onscreen shadows. The sound score serves similar metatheatrical purposes: other than the gorgeous chamber music score, performed live by a small ensemble under the direction of composer Fung, the sound of pen on paper is the most frequent audio cue in the production. The first occurrence of this writing sound comes early on, as expository narration is projected onto the screen.

As individual characters are introduced, the writing is heard again, during which time the screen is divided into the aforementioned frames: an open book, a scrolling passage of text that describes the character, and projected scissors cutting an image of the character from an inked transparency. At the end of this sequence, a more solid, larger shadow steps forward, replacing the ink outline. This larger shadow is clearly an actor wearing some rudimentary costume pieces. This three-dimensional human figure, casting a two-dimensional shadow of a textually derived character, greatly increases awareness of the storytelling process and of the translation of the story from one medium to another. During some early scenes, ghostly hands appear above the figure of Ichabod Crane as he rides on his horse. These hands are not projected in shadow, but in light, adding another layer of texture to the image, even as they further underscore the nature of the puppet medium. Notes from the musical score are occasionally projected along with text from the story. At one point, large versions of the characters, portrayed by human performers, manipulated smaller images of themselves, resulting in a hybrid marionette-shadow show.



Drama of Works, *Sleepy Hollow*. Photos: Courtesy Abrons Arts Center.

Less overtly metatheatrical moments draw attention to employed devices simply because of their ingenuity. Shifts in perspective and point of view are made possible in part by the scrolling of repeated images, a technique familiar from cell animation. As Ichabod looks at his reflection in a river, the movement of the water is reflected back at him, as is the shadow of his ghostly pursuer. The shadows of human actors and two-dimensional objects interact as if they were the same size. Varying the proximity of objects from light sources impacts not only the scale but the density of the shadows, the variance in size, color, and density allowing shapes and figures to be projected atop, around, and within one another. These and other techniques are part of the show's satisfying spectacle, but they also serve to engage the audience on another level. The spectator is encouraged to envision how the images are being formed: what variety of light sources and objects is being manipulated? Where are the objects hidden when the shadows disappear from the screen? How many people are on stage where we can't see them?

The adaptation is elegant and effective, incorporating projected passages from Irving's text and occasional snippets of dialogue that emerge from the musical score for a moment before being submerged again into the abstract vocal lines of Fung's score. The line of the projected figures effectively evokes nineteenth-century America even as the variety of techniques employed by Van Lente and her puppeteers marks the production as decidedly contemporary. Van Lente has said publicly that she is a student of punk music and culture as well as theatre and puppetry, and this anarchic spirit is present just beneath the polish

and sophistication of her work. As the audience entered the theatre on the night I attended, performers audibly warmed up and shuffled around behind the screen. When the performance was over, but before the audience had cleared the house, Van Lente could be heard welcoming visitors backstage even as she admonished them to be careful of the puppets and objects that had not yet been cleared from the performance area. It seems likely that the rough edges of the presentation were intentional or, at least, that little effort was put into avoiding them. A show that is so careful to draw attention to the process of its creation must inevitably be framed as always imperfect, always in progress.

Because Drama of Works has often been limited to runs of only a few performances, it has only occasionally garnered the attention it deserves. Within New York's puppetry community, though, it is clearly a significant presence. During the *Carnival of Samhain*, the Master of Ceremonies took pains to point to Van Lente as she swept the floor between acts, identifying her as the Artistic Director of Drama of Works, as if everyone in the audience should consider that a fact of some significance. Van Lente apologized for the delay and explained that she didn't want the next act to slip and fall. This exchange seems representative of the puppetry community at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They are each other's biggest fans and most vigorous promoters, protecting and supporting each other. If the transitions are awkward, or there's a mess that needs cleaning, or a projector isn't cooperating, they casually ask the audience to be patient and trust that whatever comes next will be worth the wait.

NOTES

1. The most visible recent product of HERE's program has been Eric Sanko's *The Fortune Teller*, an allegorical marionette show that initially attracted attention because it features original music by popular film composer Danny Elfman. It has extended twice because of favorable reviews that focus on the craftsmanship of the puppets themselves.

2. The program's Web page describes the relationship as follows: "Like puppet theatre, Desktop Linux is regarded as very cool and a little subversive." See "Passport to Puppet Theatre." <<http://www.linuxloft.com/upload/puppetfest.htm>>. Accessed December 1st, 2006.

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