Productions

Claudia Orenstein

Puppets Invade France

XIVème Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes
Charleville-Mézières, France, September 2006

The most talked-about feature of the Metropolitan Opera's 2006 season, the first under new general manager Peter Gelb, who promised to shake things up with risk-taking productions, has been the presence of a bunraku-style puppet in the role of Cio-Cio-San's child in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. *New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini reported that on opening night, during the second intermission, "patrons could be overheard heatedly debating the puppet used to portray Butterfly's little boy."[1] In the *New Yorker*, Alex Ross called director Anthony Minghella's use of the puppet his "most drastic measure" and claimed that the puppet's "jerking movements and plaintive mask push the story in a more symbolic direction."[2]

If one small puppet can unsettle a time-honored behemoth like the Met, imagine the potential for disruption and innovation in the thousands of puppets that invade the small town of Charleville-Mézières, France, for the Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes, a ten-day-long celebration of world puppetry held every three years. In September 2006, its fourteenth edition, the festival presented more than 250 puppet shows from at least forty countries, along with twelve puppet exhibits and countless street performers.

Charleville's devotion to puppetry is born from the presence of both the Institut International de la Marionnette and France's own national puppetry training school, L'École Supérieure Nationale des Arts de la Marionnette. Local residents, who make up 80 percent of the festival audience, fully embrace the triennial puppet onslaught, lodging and hosting performers, managing the festival's thirty-five-plus venues (as volunteers), decorating their buildings and store windows with puppets, and gathering nightly for music, beer, and *tartiflette* (a favorite local dish) at the festival's central hub. This year, Charleville named one of its streets after Jacques Felix, founder of the fes-

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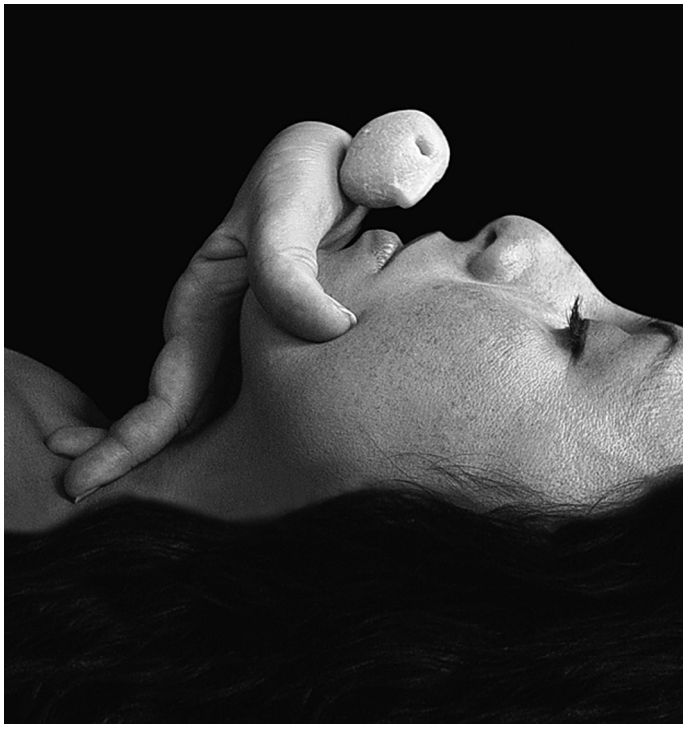
tival, who, sadly, died before seeing its 2006 incarnation. The residents of Charleville have discovered something about the power of puppetry that the Met is only beginning to understand.

Puppetry is one of the oldest art forms. Some kind of puppetry has existed in nearly every culture and historical period. Doubters need only turn to Eileen Blumenthal's new book, *Puppetry: A World History*, to find examples of object manipulation of every kind, from ancient times to the present, from Iceland to the Ivory Coast and beyond.[3] In the vast offerings at Charleville, however, it was also clear that puppetry remains a particularly timely art today, speaking to current concerns as much through its medium as through its subject matter.

Our increasingly technological world forces us to examine our relationship to the machines that share in all our daily activities and to question how we find and stay connected to our own humanity with so many interactions mediated by technology. The central element of all puppetry is the relationship of a human being to an object, an object a person manipulates and brings to life. As Stephen Kaplin has pointed out in his article "A Puppet Tree," today's puppeteers take a broad view of the term *puppet*, and they include any kind of object that can be manipulated in any way, from a mask placed directly on the performer's face, to a simple rod puppet, to an object controlled by an electromechanical device (known as animatronic puppets), to real and virtual objects controlled by sophisticated computer panels.[4] Always the actor projects character through an object; the farther the object is from the performer, the more technology is required to manipulate it. This view of puppetry presents an image of human beings at home with and in control of a myriad of technologies, which they use to impart life and humanity to the things around them. It is a vision that can quell many of our anxieties about new technologies by underlining the importance of human action in their construction and operation and equalizing our relationship to technological forms.



Les Mondes de Fingerman (*The Worlds of Fingerman*), performed by Inés Pasic. Photo: Eduardo Suarez

Puppeteers and scholars continue to debate how far to draw the relationship between three-dimensional puppets and cyber figures, created through computer animation, whose various manifestations appear in video games and the like. Today some puppeteers are also computer animators and vice versa, and, as Steve Tillis points out in his article "The Art

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Angel, performed by Duda Paiva. Photo: Sergio Gridelli

of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production," many of the skills animators require to create and operate cyber figures—an understanding of how physical form expresses character, and how to move a figure to create believable motion—parallel those honed by puppet builders and performers.[5] While an acknowledgment of the connection offers insights into both forms, live puppetry also reveals differences between them by asserting the presence of the three-dimensional object on stage. In live puppetry we hear the sounds performing objects make as real materials push against each other. We witness the objects' most subtle movements as they surrender to laws of physics—heavy wood forced toward the earth, light fabric fluttering in the breeze—and simultaneously defy such laws through the puppeteers' art, which can make wood fly or bring fabric to a standstill.

Give-and-take between performer and object is the essence of puppetry. This close relationship captivates us, and the product of this interaction confirms or challenges our experience of the physical world. We invariably project our own physical memories of how bodies function onto the performing objects in front of us, even onto supremely abstract creations, and we take pleasure in the points of comparison and difference. Machines we interact with daily that are merely functional do not give us this combination of both emotional and physical satisfaction; if anything, they frustrate us with their lack of compatibility.

In "The Dancer and the Danced," Kathy Foley argues that in the West puppeteers have traditionally approached puppetry on the model of a machine, seeing "the puppet qua object obediently carrying out the intention of the puppeteer" (14). Asian theater, by contrast, "sees the puppet as having a life, law, and logic of its own, which it imposes on the manipulator" (14). The puppeteer discovers that "the visual form of the object has a rhythm and energy that the puppeteer cannot deny. It has nothing to do with him, so he goes out to meet it" (16).[6] This second view, Foley says, is becoming more prevalent in contemporary performance as a result of intercultural work. As both Foley and Victoria Nelson, in *The Secret Life of Puppets*, point out, seeing the object as a machine under the control of an operator leads to fear that the object will reject that control, take on a life of its own, and dominate its master—a fear that hovers over modern technological society.[7] The Asian view, by contrast, allows for a communion between object and operator. It places puppeteers, and therefore people, in har-

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mony with the objects around them, offering a balm to contemporary anxieties about encroaching technologies. In contrast to cyber images, brought to us through technological means, puppetry offers us a more direct experience of the harmony of human and object, one that is not set off solely in a fantasy world on a screen but physically embodied onstage.

At any puppet show we are immediately engaged in what Steve Tillis calls "double vision,"[8] being simultaneously aware of the puppeteer—the source of action and life onstage—and the performing object. We are conscious of that which is organic and human, on the one hand, and that which is not but is made to appear so, on the other. The game of hide-and-seek puppeteers play onstage, both inviting us to indulge in the illusion of the puppet as a fully constituted persona, and either showing us or asking us to discover the source and manner of human agency at work in the performance, is one of the timeless pleasures of puppetry. At Charleville, puppeteers capitalized on this game in both the most accessible and the most challenging productions.

Teatro dei Piedi, a two-woman troupe from Italy, is probably one of the most delightful companies to watch in this regard. As their name implies, they manipulate their characters mainly with their feet. Their stage is decked out with suitcases of varying sizes, each with a bold, colorful Fernando Botero–style painting on the front, and containing the puppets and props for one of their short, vivacious, vaudevillian sketches performed to music. Before each scene, we watch the women pull the characters' cloth faces over their feet and put their arms through a set of sleeves, so their hands become the puppets'. The lively comedy is framed by our amazement at the expressivity of the women's feet and our own attempts to extricate the original shapes of the performers from the alternative physical images they've concocted. We are also conscious of the strain on leg and stomach muscles this unusual art surely requires.

La Brouille (*The Fog*) by Théâtre des Tarabates and *Tèkimoi?* by La Puce a L'Oreille were among a number of productions from a genre in which bare hands, with the aid of a few simple props or decorations, portray characters. Here the double vision of character and puppeteer is always vividly present in the very flesh and skin of palms and fingers arched into four-legged beasts. The artistry in these fairly simple tales, which follow characters through a series of interactions and discoveries, lies in the hands' flexibility and expressivity. The most innovative was *Les Mondes de Fingerman* (*The Worlds of Fingerman*), performed by Peru's Inés Pasic, who covers her pinky and ring finger in black, leaving her other fingers, with the help of a tiny carved head placed near her wrist, to form the figure of a man walking upright. Fingerman struggles with the world around him. Its landscape is the angles, curves, and movements of dancer Gabriela Bermudez's body, transformed into a performing object in an intimate encounter fully uniting performer and object, human and nonhuman.

Interplay of actor and object becomes more meaningful when it moves beyond optical illusions and to some greater purpose or more challenging artistic expression. The dancer-puppeteer Duda Paiva's *Angel* introduces us to a homeless beggar, who spends his days in confession, confrontation, combat, and embrace with a broken,

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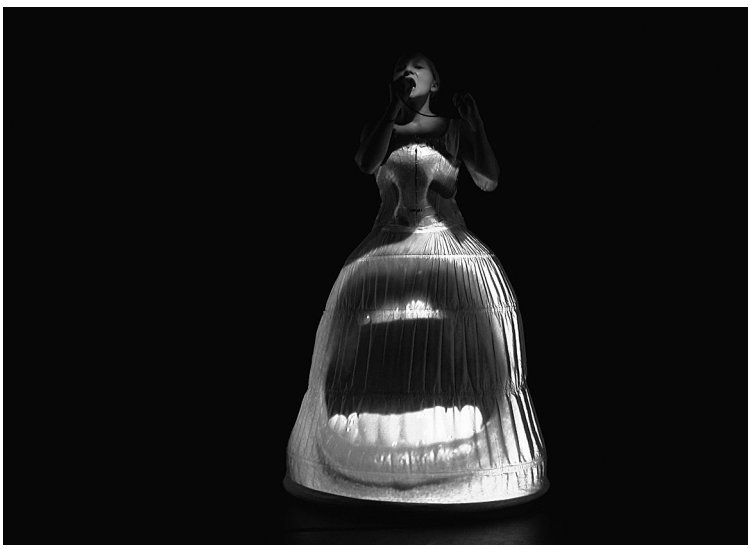
stone-carved *puti* in the middle of a leaf-strewn cemetery. Paiva, as the tramp, operates the baby-faced angel—a soft foam puppet—in a series of dances and comic exchanges, as impressive for Paiva's ventriloquism as for the unique, dependent love established between the broken angel and the broken man. This compelling setup, and the endearing character of the angel, who instantaneously transforms from needy child to benevolent divinity to wrathful accuser, brings the show to deep philosophical reflection. The ultimate goal of Paiva's meandering through philosophical and religious ideas never becomes completely clear, however, leaving individual moments of comedy and revelation of the angel's mercurial character as the piece's main offering.

Angel's dance sequences intersperse with more theatrical exchanges, but *Mannji*, from the Japanese company Dondoro—led by the actor-dancer–puppet builder Hoichi Okamoto—uses no dialogue but attempts a complete fusion of puppetry manipulation and Butoh-style dance. Within this framework, images of a violent love relationship emerge. Okamoto manipulates what appear to be life-sized male and female figures, but the male head is identical to his own, so spectators experience a fusion of forms within the movement of black and red cloths concealing and revealing figures, obscuring where the real dancer lies within. As the piece opens, a woman cradles an ailing man. We assume the man, who bears Okamoto's features, to be him, manipulating the female figure from a prone position. In fact Okamoto is manipulating his own doppelganger and soon removes his female mask, allowing a new head born from his own torso to emerge in place of the first. In one quick gesture, the dancer stands and presents an eerie quartet of faces to the audience, his own nearly indistinguishable among them. In the most memorable and violent moment, Okamoto pulls thick ribbons of red cloth out of the female lying in his arms, fluttering the crimson flows through his hands, reveling in his lover's disgorgement. When the female figure finally lies lifeless, he removes her face from the rest of her head to don this small, Noh-like mask.



Intimitäten/Choses Intimes, performed by Iris Meinhardt. Photo: Michael Krauss

While some spectators were turned off by the violent, misogynistic imagery, the piece was as powerful as a punch to the stomach and showed the possibilities of performing objects freed from traditional expectations. Dondoro and Paiva's pieces both exploit the abutment of dance and puppetry.

The festival's most impressive show was *Chair de Ma Chair* (*Flesh of My Flesh*), by Germany's Ilke Schönbein and her company Maman Fatales. It is the tale of the uneasy

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birth, growth, and coming of age of a girl whose circus-performer mother hangs from her hair under a big top. Schönbein uses interplay of object and performer to talk about the physical and emotional bonds of mothers and children. The forms she draws from as she, with her ultra-thin girlish physique, plays the girl and other roles, are expressionist in style and reveal the child's apprehensive view of the adult world. Another actress, similar in build to Schönbein, provides a French translation for Schönbein's German and serves as master of ceremonies, introducing the different "acts" of the girl's life. She describes the opening act, the girl's birth—nearly prevented by her father's desire for the mother to have an abortion—as "the amazing feat of the child who made herself smaller than a needle." Schönbein portrays the mother, lying on an upright plank, pushing from between her legs a large head with soulful, but also slightly frightened or even angry eyes. The head then recedes as the large, threatening needle passes in front of it. Another act, "My Mother's Beautiful Legs," is devoted to these objects of admiration, which also fill the girl with fear as she worries each night that her mother will fall during her aerial act. Schönbein puts on one black legging and one red shoe and pairs this real leg with a similarly attired papier-mâché leg to display the mother's allure and her physical stunts. One night the mother does fall, ironically allowing the girl to breathe a sigh of relief, since the worst has finally occurred. In a reprise of "My Mother's Beautiful Legs," the same papier-mâché leg returns, now skewered with a cane through the thigh. Schönbein leans nonchalantly on the cane: the mother has been both literally and metaphorically brought down to earth by her accident. Eventually the girl follows her mother into the entertainment business, becoming a stripper. The mother proclaims the girl's sexual innocence, in spite of her profession, since she is, after all, "just a girl." Schönbein tears off her shirt, exposing her breasts and declaring, "But, mother, is *this* just a girl." The girl's entrance into adulthood, her newfound independence, and her burgeoning understanding of how the sexual escapades of adults have shaped her childhood are all expressed in this exhibition of real flesh within a world hitherto delineated in papier-mâché. The piece ends with the girl's own initiation into sexuality: Schönbein moves a large male figure on top of herself, simultaneously playing the girl, bemused and bewildered at her first encounter with sex, and the lustful older man. In *Chair de Ma Chair*, the performer's engagement with simple but visually evocative objects emphasizes the brute physical connections between human beings in sex and procreation. This grotesque imagery also evokes the confusing emotions of physical mergings and the ways they shape our lives from childhood on.

Charleville also presented some technologically complex puppets. One playful and thoughtful example was *Intimitäten/Choses Intimes* from Germany's Iris Meinhardt, which used technology to restage the age-old struggle for power between puppet and puppeteer. Armed with a handheld camera, Meinhardt, playing a woman from the sixteenth century searching for her true self, strides on stage in front of a large white screen dressed in a wide, white hoop skirt and bodice. The screen shows us the close-ups of the dress and floor Meinhardt films as she moves through the space. But the images on screen don't remain in her power. Instead they begin to tell their own story,

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as do her dress and body, which soon serve as additional projection screens. At one point they show an image of fingers walking along a surface, but then Meinhardt lifts her dress and the fingers, now visible against her legs, wave at the audience, turning Meinhardt into both a projection screen and a finger puppet. At another point, Meinhardt stands in front of an oversized projected image of herself. The real Meinhardt is then manipulated as a puppet by her own projected simulacrum, which appears to pull at her arms and legs.

Intimitäten/Choses Intimes has broader intentions than just playing out this game of manipulation. Meinhardt's sweet, tiny voice recites the text, and images of the lines she writes in a book appear onscreen even as, onstage, she opens an old book to discover her story already written there. In the context of a puppet festival, Meinhardt's joining of technological apparatuses with themes and images endemic to the puppet throws the possibility of liberation through technology into question. In this piece and others, the creation of an alter image, either three-dimensional or projected, gives artists an opportunity to explore notions of the self.

Productions like *Bistouri* from Belgium's Tof Théâtre and *Tunnel Vision* from England's Faulty Optic take the integration of puppets and technology in an altogether different direction, using a mixture of live and recorded images alongside more traditional puppetry to amplify the audience's perspective on the action. In *Bistouri*, a surgeon of questionable ability (a life-sized figure of an elderly man in scrubs manipulated by a puppeteer, who stands behind him in a nurse's hat and surgical mask) operates out of the back of his truck. His patient turns out to be the Big Bad Wolf of fairy tale fame, ailing from his recent indulgent repast consisting of Little Red Riding Hood, her grandmother, house, herd of sheep, and other objects. The doctor removes these from his belly, and a small camera and monitor that the doctor uses to see into his patient's insides soon cuts from live footage to a subterranean maze with a treasure of gold coins, among other obscure objects, and, finally, a door. Live and recorded imagery dovetail when we see the live Bistouri putting his hand in the creature's stomach and then watch video of the hand placing a tiny bundle of dynamite in front of the little door. The monitor shows the door blasting open as the live Bistouri runs to take refuge inside the truck. In *Tunnel Vision*, an onstage camera and monitor allow the audience to follow the adventures of two escaped convicts (Bunraku-style puppets) as they move out of their onstage cells and into a bizarre Terry Gilliam–esque underworld, ending with a ride on a painstakingly constructed miniature roller coaster. In both productions, the progression of action and affinities between puppetry and video facilitate the integration of live and recorded imagery. Neither piece uses the camera to "deconstruct" stage images; rather, they fill out the theatrical world of a fairly linear, if bizarre, narrative. These shows demonstrate puppetry's fitness for connecting the worlds of live and recorded performance. Embedded within a puppet performance, video can become another manipulated stage object.

Rust, from England's Green Ginger, shows another avenue through which today's puppetry is engaging in a dialogue with film and other media. In a practice followed by many puppeteers, especially those who have worked in film—such as Julie Taymor,

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Ping Chong, and Larry Reed—Green Ginger's scenic montage techniques mimic film aesthetics. Here, quick scene changes—accomplished by staging the show within a number of frames that open and close across the stage—echo film's fast-paced scenic shifts. Relatively large puppets simulate close-ups while smaller figures provide the equivalent of long shots. A montage of projections showing photos and newspaper clippings provides background story for the main characters: a megalomaniacal villain and a two-headed DJ, once friends, who now battle for control of the seas and the airwaves. This borrowing of cinematic structure appeals to contemporary sensibilities, but the objects' physical dimensions set them apart from slick Hollywood productions. The performers of Green Ginger further distance themselves from their sources by interspersing the show's filmic elements with music-hall song interludes that provide comic, Brechtian comment on the action.

Bistouri, performed by Tof Théâtre, Genappe, Belgium. Courtesy of Tof Théâtre

Even as some puppet productions flirt with contemporary media, a large number of the offerings at Charleville take puppetry back to its origins, with masterful execution of traditional forms. France's La Pendue performed *Remède de Polichinelle* (*Polichinelle's Remedy*), starring France's version of Punch, with hand puppets in an open-air courtyard.[9] Brazil's Compagnie Jatoba and Belgium's Les Royales Marionnettes each presented their countries' mischievous equivalents of Polichinelle from traveling fairground booths. Traditional Asian forms included fabulous presentations of water puppets from Vietnam, marionettes from Myanmar, and a twentieth-century tradition of Thai Bunraku-like puppets, presented by Thailand's Joe Louis Theater.[10] In this beautiful form, three operators moving each large puppet echo the character's gestures through their own unison dance movements. Olga Alexandrova, an Udmurt shaman from Russia, used a drum, primitive wooden puppets, and traditional chants, prayers, and songs in a ritual storytelling presentation. Just as puppetry allows us to connect to the most contemporary, global technologies, it also brings us back to our roots, to local arts and specific communities in which puppets have expressed or defined communal identity and continue to do so today, when traditional forms overcome apparent dichotomies—past and present, tradition and innovation, low-tech and high-tech, self and other, East and West—and stress continuity and connection.

Finally, companies like La Chana Teatro and Denmark's Sofie Krog showed how puppetry can bring enticing objects on stage only to emphasize the presence and importance of human performers—rendering objects once again at our service. In *Entre deux déluges* (*Between Two Floods*), Spain's Jaime Santos (of La Chana Teatro) uses everyday objects to illustrate his own comic retelling of Bible stories, exploring man's

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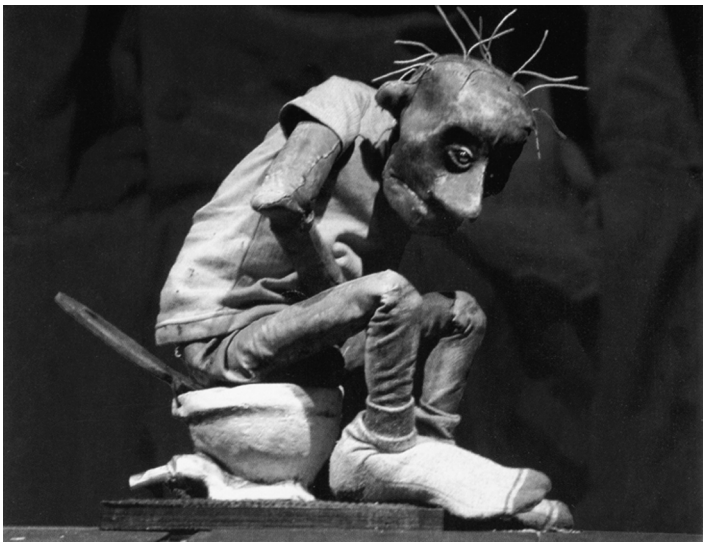

Tunnel Vision, performed by Faulty Optic, United Kingdom. Courtesy of Faulty Optic

fundamental conflicts with himself, his world, and his destiny. A simple series of arrangements of wooden building blocks speaks simultaneously of the rise and fall of Sodom and Gomorrah and our own urban alienation. A bowl of grapes handily transforms into a yarmulke (the bowl) and an old patriarch's beard (the grapes) for Santos to wear as he plays Noah. Each time Noah runs into a problem with the great demands God has made of him, he guzzles down another, ever and ever larger, bottle of wine, which represents his "thinking" on the problems at hand. Finally he is drunk enough to face the ark packed with animals. In his role as storyteller, Santos uses objects to illustrate his narrative directly, indirectly, or through comic counterpoint. Like a god, his words magically endow the lifeless things on his small table with weighty meaning, taking them away from their ordinary uses for a higher purpose. Here language manipulates the objects and their meaning as much as action.

In a further display of the centrality of the human performer to the world of puppetry, Denmark's Sofie Krog stands literally at the center of her superb show, *Diva*, inside a revolving stage with four openings, which she turns to change scenes as she operates both stage and characters. In her odd, engaging tale, a mad scientist—just a head on wheels—sends his servant, a strangely hyperactive rabbit, to steal fake fruits from the hat of a female singer in a tropical cabaret act. He needs these fruits for the magic potion he is concocting to give himself a body. The diva is Krog's arm, holding up the mask of a heavily made-up woman, and her butler is simply Krog's hand in a white glove. These are the only glimpses we get of the puppeteer at first. After a mad chase in which the diva tries to retrieve her stolen fruit, a mix-up transpires, leaving the diva with the scientist's painstakingly prepared potion. She drinks. A final turn of the revolving stage brings us to a long curtain. It opens revealing Krog, wearing the diva's mask, and the full length of her body clad in evening gown and pumps. The potion has given the diva a body, and the show now offers the magic of a full human form in place of the hand-sized puppets that previously captivated us. Krog's show enacts the birth of human beings from puppets.

The Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes exhibits puppetry's current diversity and reach. Seeing its full expressive potential, one begins to understand puppetry's renewed prominence in contemporary theater. Practitioners are discovering not only the deep kinship that exists between puppetry and other arts, such as music, dance, and film, but also how puppetry's cultivation of the visual can help theater connect with the expectations of a generation raised on the visual culture of television, film, and the

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Internet. For as we watch puppetry, we are poised between giving ourselves over to the images in front of us and searching out the human performer who brings these illusions to life. Puppetry puts objects at its center, only to reflect back on our own humanity. It places people against objects but reveals their interconnection. Today puppetry simultaneously pushes us forward to the most innovative future technologies[11] and pulls us back to cultural roots. The art form's internationalism offers human connections and perhaps even an artistic antidote to darker aspects of technology and globalization. No wonder Peter Gelb brought puppets to the Met to offer a new vision for the Met's future. But there remains no more inviting place to be swept up in puppetry's rejuvenating potential than the small, genial town of Charleville.

Notes

I am extremely grateful for a PSC-CUNY Research Award and for the help of Patrick Byrne, Sean Carman, Nadine Orenstein, and Taylor Carman, which allowed me to travel to the puppet festival in Charleville.

1. Anthony Tommasini, "A Met Production with a Decidedly Cinematic Approach," *New York Times*, September 27, 2006.

2. Alex Ross, "Metamorphosis: 'Butterfly' at the Met," *New Yorker*, October 9, 2006, 90. Notably, Gelb followed up *Butterfly* with *The Magic Flute*, directed by Julie Taymor, infused with her performing objects. In a further experiment, this production was broadcast and shown both live and then on video to spectators around the country.

3. Eileen Blumenthal, *Puppetry: A World History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005).

4. Stephen Kaplin, "A Puppet Tree," in *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*, ed. John Bell (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 18–25.

5. Steve Tillis, "The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production," in Bell, *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*, 172–85.

6. Kathy Foley, "The Dancer and the Danced: Approaches toward the Puppeteer's Art," *Puppetry International*, no. 8 (2000): 14–16.

7. Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

8. Steve Tillis, *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art*, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, no. 47 (New York: Greenwood, 1992).

9. I couldn't get a ticket to *Polichinelle's Remedy*, but the show was apparently hilarious and the talk of the festival.

10. For a full discussion of the Asian theater offerings at the Charleville festival, see my report in *Asian Theatre Journal*.

11. The festival also included a series of ten-minute demonstrations of *Ça Vous Regarde*, by Om Produck. In this work-in-progress a kind of computerized, robotic arm chooses interactions to music as it spins on its axis in the center of a circle of spectators. The project continues to progress as the technologies involved become more refined. The demonstration I saw was delayed almost an hour due to technical difficulties.

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Jacob Gallagher-Ross

Ghost Map

OFF Stage: The East Village Fragments
Peculiar Works Project
New York, June 2007

The off-off Broadway movement was a serendipitous accident of geography. In 1960s Greenwich Village, an entire generation of rebellious artists found themselves living and working down the street from one another. Rent was cheap, day jobs were easy to find, and commercial theater—Broadway and off Broadway—was anathema, which was lucky, because the mainstream had no place for all these mutinous newcomers, anyway. The result was an uncanny concentration of aesthetic explorers, daring each other to promiscuous feats of cross-pollination. Sam Shepard and Charles Mingus Jr. were roommates, and Shepard's incandescent wordplay assumed the improvisatory fury of jazz. Visual artist Allan Kaprow arranged quasi-theatrical Happenings that aimed to embody the scattershot multiplicity of being itself—tempting the theater, in turn, to flaunt the border between art and life with metatheatrical puzzles like the Living Theatre's *The Connection*.

Even the movement's name—facetiously, but lastingly, affixed by the *Village Voice*—was a measurement of cultural and actual distance: two rejectionist syllables and many city blocks' removal from the profit motives of the Great White Way; a degree of risk beyond the purview of the respectable repertories of off Broadway, the art theater of a previous, midcentury generation. Café and church theaters refused to extort admission charges from their audiences, believing that art was a human right, not a prerogative of privilege. Anticuratorial impresarios like Joe Cino and Ellen Stewart granted shoestring productions to untried playwrights based on a felicitous first impression or auspicious birth sign. Circulating gregariously between the scene's mostly tiny stages, off-off's writers and directors—Sam Shepard and Ralph Cook at Theatre Genesis and Rochelle Owens and Tom O'Horgan at La Mama were two among many fertile partnerships—created a compressed aesthetic of linguistically inventive, vividly imagistic one-act plays, written, in many cases, for the peculiar qualities of the cramped rooms where they were produced, and the quirks of the idiosyncratic performers, some trained, some enthusiastically amateur, who acted them. (Faced with an empty house, Joe Cino would instruct companies to perform "for the room.") Life and art blended so thoroughly in off-off Broadway theater because such volatile mixing was happening on the streets and at the parties, too.

This is the idyllic creative landscape that Peculiar Works Project's *OFF Stage: The East Village Fragments*—a companion piece to the OBIE grant–winning group's

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West Village Fragments from 2006—seeks to resurrect by staging excerpts from landmark off-off Broadway plays on the streets where they were conceived and performed. A walking tour that wends its way from Astor Place to the Public Theater, and then along St. Mark's Place and down Second Avenue, detouring at a few side streets before ending up at La Mama ETC's present-day home on East Fourth Street, the *Fragments* traces the ghostly contours of the East Village's theatrical past, creating an eerie collision with its bustling, slick present. The performance begins with an induction by an actor playing the East Village's matriarch, Ellen Stewart, who describes a life-changing encounter with a benevolent clothing merchant who told her that "the most important thing in life was to have a pushcart, and if I pushed for other people as well as myself, I would find fulfillment." Threaded together by the motif of a peddler's cart—a memento of the neighborhood culture that off-off Broadway supplanted—the tour is led, relay-style, from performance site to performance site by a succession of characters from off-off plays, each with a customized pushcart (an alien plastic gizmo for Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*; a jumbled junk cart for the tramp from Paul Foster's *Hurrah for the Bridge*). The piece maps history onto geography, walking us back in time, and through a shadow terrain that charts the wax and wane of off-off Broadway in its East Village sector.

Excerpt from *Why Hanna's Skirt Won't Stay Down*, *The East Village Fragments*, New York, 2007. Photo: Jim Baldassare

Some cities wear their cultural history more ostentatiously than others; you can't walk a block in some stretches of London without catching sight of a bright blue plaque announcing that Virginia Woolf, or Oliver Goldsmith, or some other literary luminary was at one time in residence. In self-inventing New York, though, many of the East Village's most important theaters have disappeared almost without a trace, effaced by the inexorable gentrification of New York's downtown—a creeping gentility for which off-off is partly responsible, by helping to make the neighborhood hip. (This is now a conscious and time-honored strategy of real estate speculators. In hothouse neighborhoods like DUMBO, building owners gave artists cheap studio and performance space in order to lure people there, then put up condos and priced the artists out.) The site of La Mama's first incarnation is now a nondescript redbrick walk-up nestled between a massage parlor and a store vending miscellaneous ethnic knickknacks. St. Mark's Church is the recognized home of Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater, but you could be forgiven for not knowing that it once housed Theater Genesis, Sam Shepard's proving ground. The *East Village Fragments* is mnemonic drama, intended to remind New York of its vanished theaters and their

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Futz, Café La Mama, New York, 1967. Photo: James Gossage

playwrights; the company is agitating for a set of plaques that would identify these now-anonymous sites. A skeptical spectator might liken the event to similar pseudohistorical reenactments conducted for the benefit of querulous tourists: the New York art world's version of Colonial Williamsburg.

Perhaps inevitably in a time when Vietnam-Iraq comparisons have become commonplace, and the American theater struggles to come up with a meaningful way to engage with the current conflict, the *Fragments* is bookended by two of the 1960s' more renowned plays of protest. The tour begins with an extract from *Hair*—performed on the doorstep of the Public Theater, where it premiered in 1967—that is sparked by a rancorous argument between a serviceman on leave and a group of petition-wielding antiwar activists. The actors are in modern dress, and the dispute's eruption causes a jarring moment of spectatorial adjustment: is the argument real? Their rhetorical sparring about how best to support the troops sounds credible enough. Soon, though, a synthesizer begins to pound those familiar chords, the choreography jumps into a smiling, hand-waggling register, and the enthusiastic cast begins to belt out the antiwar sentiments—garnished with cloying hippie platitudes—that signaled off Broadway's cooption of off-off Broadway's rough-and-ready theatricality and underground politics.

The anti-imperialist indictments voiced by Megan Terry's Hanoi Hannah—from *Viet Rock* (1966), the *Fragments*'s last stop, performed in La Mama's lobby—on the other hand, are less comestible, more chillingly prescient:

> You are too spread out, my tiny GIs. You cannot be every place at once. You cannot be here in Vietnam and also guard your Stateside sweetheart and your Momma too. . . . The people of Asia, Africa, and Latin America can destroy the United States piece by piece, some striking at its head and others at its feet. . . . Pull yourself together and confess to the world that you were wrong.

It is unfortunate that the *Fragments*'s probing of the legacy of the politically committed theater of the sixties stops at being a framing device; this is a fascinating subject that demands more rigorous treatment. Why is the Living Theater's *The Brig*—ironically, another holdover from that turbulent time—the only serious theatrical investigation of war onstage in New York in late spring 2007?

By beginning with *Hair*, the *Fragments* starts with off-off Broadway's last gasp; but it quickly cycles backward in time, introducing us to the movement's antecedents with a brief reenactment of Julie Bovasso's 1955 American premiere production of *The*

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Maids at Tempo Theater (performed in front of the current St. Mark's Bookshop, near the theater's original home at Four St. Mark's Place); and a giddy, but too short, approximation of Kaprow's watershed *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959). Several young dancers skip down Stuyvesant Street handing peanuts to bemused passersby; one has oranges in her hands, another wears bright incarnadine claws. Alan Ginsberg materializes from the dead to lead the tour toward St. Mark's Church, intoning verses from *Howl* as he does.

The line of history followed by the *Fragments* corresponds almost exactly to that developed by Stephen J. Bottoms in his wonderful 2004 study of off-off, *Playing Underground*. Bottoms served as an adviser on the project and, indeed, the book makes an excellent accompaniment to the tour, functioning a bit like the audio commentaries distributed by art museums. While traveling from the former site, in Cooper Square, of the Five Spot Jazz Club—where Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) went to hear John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk—to St. Mark's Place, we see the percussive flights of Beat poetry and the rhythms of jazz infiltrate the extravagant language of playwrights like Diane Di Prima (*Murder Cake*, 1961). Further along the tour's route in time-space, the nascent broil of gender politics inflects relations between men and women (Michael Locasicio's *A Corner of a Morning*, 1961); the incompletely digested influence of Beckett and Ionesco records the North American arrival of the so-called Theater of the Absurd (Paul Foster's metaphysical vagrant in *Hurrah for the Bridge*, 1963). Changing sexual mores are reflected in the joyful, taboo-busting, anatomical frankness of Sam Shepard's *The Rock Garden* (1964); Murray Mednick and Anthony Barsha's hallucinatory *The Hawk*, from 1967, attempts to assimilate theater to rock and roll and Village street culture.

But for anyone not conversant with off-off's history, the tour is likely to blur together. Only upon consulting *Playing Underground* does the event's confused bipartite rendition of Charles Ludlum's *Conquest of the Universe* come into clearer focus as a dramatization of the creative dispute that led Ludlum, after being fired from his own play, to found the Ridiculous Theatrical Company and stage a rival version down the street. Many of the plays excerpted by the *Fragments* were originally written for small, familiar spaces and depend on intimacy of scale to achieve their effects; in 2007, forced to compete with the rude noise of an East Village Saturday night, the cast resorted to strained shouting and gestural generalities. Filigreed works like *A Corner of a Morning*—set in and around a hotel room bed on a hazy morning after a pickup—are drowned out when staged on a mattress plunked down in a vacant parking spot on East Ninth Street. Conversely, pieces like Jean-Claude Van Itallie's *America Hurrah*, and Rochelle Owens's *Futz*, inseparable in reputation from the expansively theatrical productions they were given by the Open Theater or Tom O'Horgan's La Mama Troupe, suffer from straitjacketed street-corner stagings that cannot communicate the putative élan of the originals. But—now as then—artistic polish is not really the point. There is a kind of authenticity in the rough-hewn performances and hasty direction; off-off's democratic ethos allowed for travesties as well as triumphs. The *Fragments* is clearly a

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labor of love for its mammoth company of over eighty actors and twenty-two directors, and their excitement is contagious. Most of the project's personnel are students or recent graduates of university theater programs; it is poignant to see a rising generation of artists perform the youthful works of their theatrical forbears.

As Bottoms points out in *Playing Underground*, off-off's plays were site-specific before the term meant anything. Often they did not survive—financially or artistically—their transfer to larger theaters, or their revival by outside casts. Off-off scion H. M. Koutoukas habitually destroyed the manuscripts of his plays after they opened: the event, the present moment of performance in a crowd of one's peers, was everything. This perishability is the source of one of the signal paradoxes of off-off Broadway: although theater artists and historians alike now rhapsodize the movement as a kind of prelapsarian Golden Age of New York theater, innocent of commercial pressures and the taint of careerism, much of the actual writing, along with the theaters themselves, has disappeared into oblivion. The anthologies collecting the plays are out of print; the magazines that once published them are long gone, too. The playwrights have dispersed. A few are canonical; most are forgotten.

The *Fragments* confronts the viewer with a wider and more vivid sampling of off-off Broadway playwriting than can be easily encountered anywhere else. The diversity of styles—from sentimental realism to storytelling theater to high-camp science fiction—and questing dramaturgical ambitions evident in the plays are remarkable, and the sense of a community of writers sharing ideas and images palpable, but many of the works are mawkish, purple, dull. Disparaging an entire decade of playwriting experiments based on brief snippets performed in less than optimal conditions would be foolish, and many of off-off's most important playwrights and theater companies—Maria Irene Fornes, Adrienne Kennedy, the Judson Poets' Theater, the Performance Group—did not appear in the *East Village Fragments* (they premiered west of Broadway), but I came away wondering whether there really is a neglected off-off Broadway repertoire that merits revival. The *Fragments* might be right in positing, implicitly, that it is the heady atmosphere of rebellion and innovation, the feeling of coherent and self-sufficient community—in other words, the "landscape" of off-off—that most people are nostalgic for.

Many of the *Fragments*' best moments come when conjured theatrical figments create stereoscopic images of past and present superimposed. A listing teenager in skinny jeans holding a bottle of vodka heckles the Saran Wrap–clad apparitions from Robert Patrick's *Camera Obscura* (1969), yelling that "plays are supposed to happen indoors!" Two tough-seeming neighborhood guys with gray hair and corrugated faces, looking as though they could have once been the inspiration for Shepard's swaggering hoodlums in *The Rock Garden*—or, at the very least, in attendance at its premiere—watch its present-day iteration impassively. Trailing Paul Foster's Beckettian tramp down East Ninth Street against the flow of East Village foot traffic is weirdly akin to chasing a ghost.

The *Fragments* invites the spectator—anticipating a new performance at every

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street corner—to appreciate the theatricality of the East Village itself. More than once, I mistook the antics of a group of inebriated yuppies dancing on the pavement, or the raucous mating rituals of teenagers on the sidewalk, for the beginning of a new scene. Though most of the theaters are long gone, performance has migrated into the tissue of the neighborhood, permeating its brash self-regard. No longer gritty or bohemian—but still trashy—the East Village now enacts its misspent youth for the kids that flock to St. Mark's Place to buy punk paraphernalia at Trash/Vaudeville or wander around at night. Amid the strutting and fretting on the streets, the *Fragments* did not look so out of place. Life and theater are still companionably close in the East Village, even if the neighborhood has been crassly commodified. Pied Piper–like, my tour group took on new members as it traveled. None of these joiners knew the significance of the route we were traveling, but several seemed beguiled by the plays. One young man, evidently befuddled by the florid language and wacky costumes of Charles Ludlum's *The Conquest of the Universe*, turned to me (I was carrying a press kit and taking notes) and asked what it meant. I said something about pastiche and camp, but he seemed unsatisfied: "I understood all the plays except that one."

Excerpt from *Futz, The East Village Fragments*, New York, 2007. Photo: Jim Baldassare

Of course, the mourning for the halcyon days of off-off Broadway began almost as soon as the movement hit its stride and has hardly abated since. Michael Feingold, writing in the *Voice* about the *West Village Fragments* in 2006—rebuking today's theater with off-off's supposedly "greater political and dramaturgical daring"—chimes with Robert Pasoli, saying, in 1967 (also in the *Voice*) that, although "there was probably a long moment when the off-off-Broadway movement promised hugely as an alternative theater. That moment is now passed." The *Fragments*—and the myth of off-off Broadway—can be seen as the New York theater's version of pastoral: a utopia, removed from the corruption of the city in both space and time, that shows the failings of the present in stark relief. If "downtown" theater today is marginalized, academic, politically irrelevant, economically besieged, geographically dispersed; then off-off was culturally garrulous, populist, politically engaged, anticommercial, and communal. It is no wonder that artists—especially beginning ones—might wish to pause for refreshment in the memory of a more commodious New York, and a theater made and frequented by the young.

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