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Inspired by Trash:
Finding a New Path to Tradition, Ethics, and Sustainability in Puppetry

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The art of puppetry is, as puppeteer John Bell describes, a "coming to terms with the material world, a momentary alliance or bargain between humans and the stuff of, or literally stuff *in* performance."[1] As such, it isn't surprising that puppeteers have a profound connection to the materials from which their puppets are built. Materials impact performance in an immediate and obvious way both in terms of what the puppet looks like and how it moves. But throughout the long and varied traditions of puppetry, materials have also helped puppeteers achieve a necessary social function. Historically, puppeteers spoke for the god(s), or, alternatively, for the community, through their puppets. In doing so, puppeteers were charged with some combination of education, enlightenment, and community advocacy.

This important cultural function was frequently enhanced by using materials indigenous to the community itself. These materials were not only easy to access and inexpensive, but they were also reflective of the culture from which both the puppeteer and the audience emerged. In essence, when puppeteers built puppets from indigenous materials, they were practically

[1] John Bell, *American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 4.

and spiritually tying themselves and their art to the community – rooting their practice in an ethical social function.

Yet for the contemporary American puppeteer, building puppets from the same materials that puppeteers have used for centuries is often not enough to ensure either practical or ethical social function. In many puppetry forms, traditional materials are not accessible due to geography, cost, and, often more significantly, diminishing natural resources. Moreover, contemporary cultural concerns and questions have shifted and changed with time, making many materials less culturally meaningful than they once were. This raises a new question: what materials can be used in American puppet design and construction that retain the aesthetics, functionality, and ethics of traditional practice that are also abundant, affordable, and reflective of contemporary cultural concerns?

Responding to these questions as a puppeteer, I've arrived at trash. Trash is certainly plentiful; it comes in a variety of shapes, colors, sizes, and textures; and, as an American puppeteer living and working in the early 21st century, trash is relevant. Whether or not we choose to deal with it, trash begs to be addressed. Its presence raises questions and debate. Yet with this new material, I also enter new territory as a puppeteer. Trash comprises a broad category of materials that do not have hundreds of years of accumulated knowledge on how to best manipulate them, nor are there established practices or processes dictating the ethics of how trash can be effectively used in the creation of puppets. Thus, the challenge becomes one of building new traditions that respond to the material in terms of what it can do and how it can serve a culture.

While the use of trash as a building material initially appears to defy tradition, puppetry's rich and diverse history provides countless examples of how puppeteers have built traditions responding to specific local materials, particularly as it relates to ethical-social function. In the Vietnamese water puppetry tradition, puppets were created in the environment around rice paddies. The environment itself provided the material foci for both puppeteer and audience. In one respect, the use of water combined with organic wood and plants growing in and around the fields allowed puppeteers efficient, economical access to their materials. More importantly, it tied their storytelling to the same materials that tied their audience—typically farmers, field workers, and their families—to the land and the community. Pham Quynh Phuong and Ngo Duc Thinh of the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam, describe this evolution of pragmatic material selection to art:

> Water puppetry shows Vietnamese creative ability to change a natural element into an art production reflecting the soul of rice-fields and of rural life. The reality of the rural life comes straight forward into art from simple things such as rod, stick, pole, string, wire, from wood, bamboo, from water, wind, smoke, but the art enciphered that reality in closed-opened symbols of things that we can see, imagine and feel. Water puppetry is real and unreal, theatrical and life-like.[2]

Here, the rituals of puppet creation grew from community engagement—resourceful farmers recognized that the same materials that ensured the livelihood and survival of the community could be used to preserve the stories, myths, and traditions of the culture through puppetry.

Through examples such as this, we see that successful puppet tradition is built from the union of logos and ethos. Because trash is plentiful, accessible, and relates to our culture in a

[2] Pham Quynh Phuong and Ngo Duc Thinh, "Natural and Social Aspects of Vietnamese Water Puppetry," *Third World Water Forum, 16–23 March 2003, Kyoto, Japan Proceedings of the Theme Water and Cultural Diversity, Third World Water Forum, 16–23 March 2003, Kyoto, Japan,* Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006, 198.

vital way, it becomes a natural material to investigate based on its own merits as well as its viability as an alternative to scarcer, more traditional materials. Consider shadow puppetry—specifically the creation of large, colored shadow characters similar to those found in Eastern and Middle-Eastern traditions. This type of puppet proves particularly difficult to create when it comes to materials, in part because of the practical considerations in creating these semi-translucent shadow puppets. Here the puppeteer must consider several properties, the first being opacity. In the case of creating Eastern and Middle-Eastern styled shadow puppets, the materials used must allow for the ability to see not only the puppet's shape but also its elaborate color. Plasticity must also be considered in that the material must take and hold specific (and often intricate) shapes while still allowing for easy, consistent, and flexible movement of multiple joints. Likewise, for the puppeteer to effectively operate multiple shadow puppets for extended periods of time, puppet weight must be kept to a minimum.

Traditionally, the answer to the challenge of building semi-translucent shadow puppets has been to build the puppets from animal hides. Animal hides are a logical choice in that they can be treated in such a way as to support intricate shape and color, becoming almost translucent over time. They are also strong and light, creating the ideal mechanism for the puppeteer's storytelling. Yet in considering the social-ethical tradition of puppetry, the animal hides used should be geographically indigenous to the puppeteer's community—camels, donkeys, cows, or water buffalo, for example. One such tradition dating back thousands of years—the Cambodian Sbaek in Khmer—is described here:

> The classical show is a sacred form of theatre with each performance seen to be an act of worship. This belief is so entrenched that special measures have to be taken when carefully hand-carving three of the tale's characters from large pieces of cow hide—a meticulous process that takes up to 20 days. While cutting

> these characters, artists must wear white, abstain from alcohol and lead a sin-free life. The cow hide must also come from an animal that has died of natural causes rather than being killed.[3]

Here an even more significant ethic of puppeteers' shamanistic function comes in to play; puppeteers may not inflict harm in their practice. Similar practices can be observed throughout the Eastern world, including in the creation of Southeastern Indian Tolubommalata puppets. These large, beautiful, and ornately colored shadow puppets must be constructed solely from "non-violent" hide, meaning the animal has died naturally.[4]

For me, a puppeteer practicing in the United States in 2016, the exercise of finding the hide of a cow or water buffalo that has died of natural causes, which I can then treat according to ritual practice handed down to me by my family or my village priest, poses some obvious challenges. Beyond this, it is not an exercise that holds specific cultural meaning for me or my potential audience, nor does it root me to my community in this particular time and place. Finding an appropriate and practical substitute for animal hides has proved surprisingly challenging. I have experimented with multiple materials, many of them plastics, with little success. Then one day my daughter put a plastic Target bag over a lamp in the living room. "What a pretty shadow," I thought.

In that literal lightbulb moment, I began to consider the logical aspects of this choice. Plastic bags seem an obvious selection when it comes to opacity and weight, but they threaten disaster when considering things like ability to hold shape and joints. So was there a way to stiffen the bags while retaining their translucency and weight? Yes, as I discovered through trial

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[3] "Ancient Art of Shadow Puppetry," AsiaLIFE Cambodia, N.p., 4 Aug. 2014, Web, 15 March 2015.
[4] David Currell, *Shadow Puppets & Shadow Play*, Ramsbury, Marlborough, Wiltshire: Crowood, 2007.

and error, the start of my own pragmatic ritual. Multiple layers of plastic bags can be fused with heat—something as simple as an iron—resulting in a tougher, stronger, and still-flexible material. In creating shadow puppets from this material, I discovered that the color transmission was quite good, as was the ability to form a variety of shapes that could hold multiple moving joints.

Shadow puppet prototypes made from fused plastic bags (Photo: Amanda Petefish-Schrag)

Early light diffusion experiment with shadow puppets made from fused plastic bags, Shadow Puppet Workshop for *The Nutcracker* – Northwest Missouri State University, 2013 (Photo: Patrick Immel)

The ability to retain those shapes, however, proved slightly more challenging. On many of the puppets created from this fused plastic, the shadow tended to distort along the edges as the shapes began to curl in on themselves over time. Interestingly, this problem occurred

primarily on puppets made from plastic bags that required higher temperatures for longer periods of time to fuse the layers. This was already a “red flag” on the ethical end of this process, given that the higher the temperature used to fuse the plastic, the more chemicals were released in the process. This, of course, also raised a larger question when applying a traditional framework of social-ethical function to my role as puppeteer: should I be releasing toxic chemicals into the air to create a puppet? Fortunately for both function and ethics, the plastics that fused at a low temperature were sturdier, smoother, and resulted in better shape retention. Yet there remained larger, unanswered questions regarding this material. Is it responsible to incorporate materials in puppetry construction that may pose a danger to the community itself? What does the use of plastic bags mean to me and my audience? Does it signal abject consumerism? Does it speak to the necessity of repurposing materials that would otherwise end up in a landfill? Or does it mean something else entirely?

These questions experienced further exploration in a production of *The Nutcracker* which featured various puppet types, all constructed from discarded household and industrial materials. I worked on this production with students at Northwest Missouri State University in the fall of 2013. It proved a fascinating experiment not only in trying to build new traditions for using these materials, but in seeing how the act of creating with trash impacted both the puppeteers and the audience.

The production, which involved ten puppeteers operating 54 large-scale puppets (ranging from four to 12 feet in height and length), ended up with material costs of less than $300, the majority of which were used for puppeteer “costumes” (unified black clothing for performance) and set construction. From a financial perspective, these materials represented a

fiscally logical choice. Moreover, the materials were easy to source; we found an abundance right on campus. The following indicates a basic breakdown of some of the common (and free) puppet construction materials used on the production: 400 lbs. of newspapers, 300 aluminum cans, 140 magazines, three garbage bags of old coffee filters, 800 candy wrappers, 120 plastic bottles, 14 discarded sweaters, 27 pairs of discarded dance tights, 200 plastic shopping bags, and 32 pizza boxes. In addition, the puppet design and construction incorporated a variety of broken auto parts, an old tent, and the discarded decorations from a local prom among other unusual objects retrieved from local dumpsters and trash cans; all were obtained for no cost other than time and effort.

That time and effort, however, was significant. Countering the advantages of material cost and accessibility was the labor involved. The process from initial puppet design to final puppet construction took approximately 1020 hours. This number reflects the holistic nature of puppetry practice—most of the puppeteers who performed with the puppets were also responsible for building, modifying, and repairing their puppets, so the breakdown of these hours often blends with rehearsal time. More importantly, though, this number demonstrates the need for continuing experimentation with best practices in regard to these materials if they are truly to prove a pragmatic choice in puppet design and construction.

Creating puppets from trash provided a transformative experience for puppeteers. Aside from experiments with construction practice, there was an intellectual—perhaps even spiritual—process that the students and I experienced while designing, building, and performing with these puppets. This process proved highly instructive in beginning to recognize the potential social function of trash as the primary material connection for both puppeteer

and audience. While working on this production, we started to look at the world differently. We became infamous on campus for digging through dumpsters and stopping people who were about to throw away potentially interesting objects. We started to see possibility, beauty, and expression in the ordinary—what had previously been demoted to "trash." And we became aware, in a very immediate way, of just how much we consume and discard every day. As one of the student puppeteers aptly noted as we sat surrounded by piles of trash during one of our work sessions, "It sucks that we're called 'consumers.' That's not what I want to be. I want to be a creator." This realization changed our habits as a company and forced us to become more intentional about how we made choices—not just as puppeteers and artists, but as human beings living in a community with one another.

In this way, our process was not unlike puppetry traditions in which material transcends pragmatics to engage the puppeteer spiritually. Within many Indian traditions, the practice of puppetry has been viewed as mirroring the divine act of creation. As such, the materials used in the creation of puppets must be reflective of their divine purpose. In her case history of puppet theatre in Rajasthan, India, Asian theatre scholar Poh Sim Plowright addresses the extensive ritual practices built around the puppeteer's primary material—wood—which holds a sacred place within Rajasthan culture:

> It is fervently believed that wood is the substance of the primary essence of life and for this reason it is identified with brahman… The term brahman is identifiable with the very stuff at the heart of all appearances. So apart from the utilitarian and aesthetic aspects of wood, its symbolic significance as representing brahman cannot be overstated. Wood is also naturally associated with the 'World Tree' which is the 'Tree of Life' whose stem, it is believed, passes through the centre of all life and of every state of being.[5]

[5] Plowright, Poh Sim, "The Desacralization of Puppetry: A Case History from Rajasthan," *New Theatre Quarterly* 21.3 (2005), 282.

In order to honorably use this sacred material, artists had to engage in fasting, ritual bathing, and the purification of tools for carving.[6] In doing so, the puppeteers prepared themselves to work in harmony with the material which, beyond holding obvious practical and aesthetic properties, was uniquely suited to communicate a sacred purpose to the audience.

The transformative power of grappling with the material realities of "stuff" is fundamental to not only historical puppet tradition, but also traditions being revised contemporarily. A recent experiment using puppetry in health promotion and suicide prevention among youth of the Mi'Kmaq Nation (a Canadian First Nations tribe) concluded that the simple act of gathering and interacting with indigenous materials to create a bullfrog puppet had a profoundly positive impact on the puppeteers:

> First, going into the forest in search of natural materials to manufacture the bullfrog as well as other supportive scenery, reestablishes contact with the land, where knowledge about the local flora and fauna have served the First Nations well through the ages. In the process of gathering these natural materials, the puppet makers are schooled by their elders in respect for the land, in claiming stewardship and knowledge of traditional hunting/gathering lands, in learning the traditional names of gathered materials, as well as their traditional functional or ritualistic use.[7]

While the materials in each of these puppetry cases are different, the social benefit to the puppeteer in terms of community interaction and increased connection to the environment demonstrates the value of material use grounded in the community itself.

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[6] Plowright, Poh Sim, "The Desacralization of Puppetry: A Case History from Rajasthan," *New Theatre Quarterly* 21.3, (2005), 281.

[7] J. Jacono and B. Jacono, "The Use of Puppetry for Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention Among Mi'Kmaq Youth." *Journal of Holistic Nursing* 26.1 (2008), 53.

Is trash a sacred material? Almost by definition it is not. But this is perhaps a better question: is trash uniquely suited to communicate a sacred purpose to the audience? Here I again reflect upon the *The Nutcracker*. Our front-of-house display for the production included piles of the various materials we used to create the puppets. In overhearing some of the comments in the lobby before the show, I feel safe concluding that there was a certain audience skepticism about how a production built from piles of old socks, aluminum cans, and newspapers was going to tell the much-beloved holiday story of a girl's journey to a magical and, more importantly, *beautiful* kingdom of sugar and dancing. But I think I can also safely say that we not only engaged our audience members in a good story, but we engaged them in a manner that led to a greater awareness of the transformative power of theatre in an immediate and tangible way. Clara's kindness, generosity, and bravery was revealed more fully by an awareness that she was nothing more than the daily detritus of newspaper, curtains, and old sheets given life by a committed puppeteer.

Clara puppet from *The Nutcracker* – Northwest Missouri State, 2013 (Photo: Patrick Immel)

The sugar plum fairy was somehow more beautiful upon realizing that she was built from an office building's coffee filters and a dance school's discarded dance tights. And the multi-headed mouse king's villainy became all the more menacing upon recognizing he was made from the scavenged stuff that might compose a rat's nest: dryer lint, old newspapers, bottle caps, and shards of metal found littering the ground after a football game. In experiencing this material cognizance, those in the audience experienced a story and witnessed the environment they occupy anew.

Students rehearse with The Nutcracker's Mouse King – Northwest Missouri State, 2013 (Photo: Patrick Immel)

While the specific trash materials of our contemporary culture may be new, creating a new vision of the world through found materials is not. It is rooted in both centuries-old traditions and new experiments within contemporary theatre. My work on *The Nutcracker* echoes experiments in live-actor theaters where artists are grappling with the inevitable results of "throw-away" culture. In Madison, Wisconsin, Theatre LILA's recent production, the aptly named *Trash*, incorporated literal piles of garbage in creating both the play's narratives and the onstage world of the play itself. As Theatre LILA co-artistic director Jessica Lanius explains, the very idea of trash, its social and environmental implications, and its visual and theatrical

possibilities prove automatically inspiring for theatre creation.[8] Scenographer and performance-maker Andrea Carr addresses a similar thought in her design work on HOAX Theatre's new production exploring mining and climate change: *Journey to the Centre of The Earth*. Here, Carr uses discarded camping equipment from the UK's Reading Festival to create the production's unique costumes. She describes the challenge, reward, and impact of working with discarded materials:

> The sleeping bags and tents took four days from collection to being ready to use (washed and dried). I believe that there is nothing that gives a deeper appreciation of the resources that go into the production of an item than mindfully deconstructing it… or more personal satisfaction than re-imagining its new life. Once you have experienced this (which I highly recommend!), it becomes increasing difficult to relegate things to the scrap heap and is highly insightful.[9]

Experiments like those happening at Theatre LILA and HOAX represent a fraction of those occurring across the globe. Through dialogue between live-actor and object-actor (puppet) theatre, the route to establishing new traditions and best practices for the use of trash as construction material can be more quickly and firmly established.

There is undeniable wisdom in the traditions handed down to us by ancient puppeteers. The value of practice that marries practicality, function, and ethics can prove transformational. Famed puppeteer Bill Baird notes at the end of *The Art of the Puppet*,

> In these softer, but tenser days, when urban life pushes us more and more into the big pattern and denies us the need to know how to build a barn, train a horse, or when to plant a certain crop, our fingers ears, and minds can still be fully absorbed. Puppetry can open up all the avenues.[10]

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[8] Gayle Worland, "A New Play Takes on the Mountain of 'Trash,'" *Wisconsin State Journal,* N.p., 27 Sept. 2015, Web, 15 Feb. 2016.
[9] Andrea Carr, "Case Studies: Sleeping Bag Metamorphosis," *Ecostage*, N.p., 3 Dec. 2015, Web, 15 Feb. 2016.
[10] Bill Baird, *The Art of the Puppet,* New York: Ridge, 1973, 246.

For me and countless other artists, Baird's statement rings particularly true as we continue to grapple with materials and what they mean. It is a practice manifesting the value of tradition that lives alongside innovation, and it is one that forces the artist to remain rooted in an ideal while striving to invent new techniques.

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