

Bill

T TH week of  
Nov. 1st → 5th  
After 2pm.

Introduction

Erwin

503-621-8060

Connor Doe  
Puppets.

0848

The history of puppet theater in the German-speaking regions of the world parallels the history and evolution of the German identity itself. From the first millennium BCE when the representative art form crossed the Alps to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, puppet theater of one type or another has found an audience within the cultural and linguistic borders of the land that would eventually be known as Germany. While neither the puppet nor its theater are German inventions or even European ones, their historical path takes them through the land of *Dichter und Denker*, whose people received it, either with open arms or hostility depending on the socio-political climate. The German-speaking regions provide the perfect backdrop for an in-depth look at the social and economic evolution of puppet theater. These two aspects or spheres of worldly life pertain specifically to puppet theater and more generally to the German culture. Just as a sequence of historical events transformed puppet theater from a fragmented collection of isolated troupes into an institutionalized cultural force, so too did the German-speaking regions exist for centuries without a central identity before settling on a common cultural denominator. By the time of the *Gründerjahre*, Germany had finally achieved statehood in the modern sense, but this was only possible at the expense of the individual German identity. The unified Germany took precedence as its history and reclaimed cultural heritage became established in practice and custom –institutionalized. The historical development of puppet theater in the German regions is representative of the larger evolution of Germany as a whole. From its introduction to the continent during the first

millennium of the Common Era and its infancy as a performance medium to its continual search for identity and gradual ascension into the sphere of art, puppet theater paralleled Germany's long quest for legitimacy as a nation and desire for cultural unification.

In addition to the social and economic implications of the history of puppet theater, its development mirrors Germany's literary and philosophical heritage as well. From the Roman colonial times in the first century AD until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was no legitimate notion of popular folk culture amongst Germans. The notion that the poor had a culture of their own grew out of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanticism and led to the distinction, particularly strong in Germany, between low and high culture. For centuries, puppet theater served as a broad-reaching form of popular entertainment, intended largely for the common people. The movement of Romanticism arose in part as a counteracting force to rationalist Enlightenment principles as well as the aristocratic ideals of Classicism. With that came the need to reexamine the definition of art and to exclude nothing, especially those forms previously deemed low and uncouth.<sup>1</sup> Writers, thinkers, poets and artists helped to craft a new concept of 'the people' or *Volk* that celebrated their traditional forms of expression. The "discovery" of folk art (which included puppet theater) by the German Romantics led them to a belief in the naturalness of its forms diametrically opposed to the inauthentic contrivances of Neoclassicism. Ironically, the Romantics were, according to Ernst Fischer, the "...true children of the capitalist bourgeois world (58)". In elevating folk art to the level of *Kunst*, it became a commodity, contradictory to the intentions of most adherents to the movement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fischer, 53

The unselfconsciousness of so-called low or folk culture to which puppet theater belonged was thought to imbue it with a mysterious authenticity. In reality, puppet theater was a lark, the type of popular entertainment that was good for a laugh and a welcome break from daily life. For puppet performers, traveling theater was a means of a meager livelihood. For the Romantics, however, puppet theater was attractive because of its immediateness, its lack of a deliberate notion of its own cultural significance. Considered to be a homogenous form of folk art, puppet theater was, for them, entirely organic, high art form with a lowly standing. Important German literature and philosophy from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward reflects a cultural fondness for the *Volk* aspect of puppet theater. Many important writers, thinkers and artists experienced puppet theater as children and cherished its memory throughout their adult lives, influencing many of their seminal works. Puppet theater and its reception in German Romanticism helped to shape literary and philosophical themes that would lead to further recognition of puppetry as an art form and an integral aspect of German culture.

Beginning with a brief history of puppet theater in the German regions from the Early Middle Ages to the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the focus of this work moves to puppet theater as it relates to specific areas of research including sociological aspects, philosophical implications and literary influence. All of this culminates in the final section which explores the work of Peter Schumann, a German puppeteer and artist residing in America. Schumann's use of the *Verfremdungseffekt* in his 'live puppetry' performances brings the theories of Bertolt Brecht into the discussion. Accordingly, German puppet theater deserves more than a cursory mention in the field of *Germanistik*.

While puppet theater or *Figuretheater* enjoys a higher level of prestige in modern German academic institutions, a correspondingly high regard for the representative art form is not yet present in American university German departments. It took puppet theater centuries to achieve legitimacy as art. Hopefully far less time must pass before puppet theater and puppetry become a general course of legitimate academic study.

## Chapter 1

### Puppetry in the German-Speaking World: A Concise History

Puppets have existed at least since the beginning of Roman history, in nearly every cultural context. One finds evidence of puppets on all inhabited continents. In the West from the time of the Athenian democracy to the entirety of European history and in the East from the Han dynasty in China onward. For as long as human beings have sought self representation they have utilized the puppet to do so. T.C.H. Hedderwick argues that the doll is “one of the oldest monuments of human ingenuity we possess (Hedderwick xi)”. Puppetry likely began as one aspect of a performer’s repertoire, but exactly “how and when the puppet-play came to Germany we do not know; perhaps...the introduction of this art was due to the jugglers who followed the Roman legions over the Alps (Boehn 50)”. After the fall of Rome and its centralized society, puppet theater lacked the support of a central authority as well as cities and marketplaces in which to find an audience. Puppetry survived as a traveling attraction, a crude nomadic art form whose purveyors would have to wait centuries before a more fixed livelihood was possible.<sup>2</sup> The performances were not splendid, nor were they recognized at the time for their potential for high art. “Considering the miserable conditions of the wandering entertainers whose bread and butter depended on these shows, we may well assume that all the stage arrangements were as primitive as could be (Boehn 52)”. A resurgence began in 800 A.D. with newly-granted tolerance by the theocratic empire. While the earliest

---

<sup>2</sup> Currell, 8

Christians abhorred all vestiges of pre-Christian art and visual expression, Charlemagne encouraged the “visual representations of religious and secular themes (Jurkowski 53)”, reflecting the changing aesthetic attitudes of the day. From that time onward, Western Europe gradually became reintroduced to the puppet as either a court novelty or a wandering attraction found among the likes of singers, poets, musicians, mimes, jugglers and other skilled entertainers. Puppetry as a specific artistic skill or even a profession was not yet defined in the early Middle Ages, but those early performers almost certainly did not enjoy a high status.<sup>3</sup> Before the ascension of Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans in the beginning of the ninth century, western Europe was a collection of warring factions – a situation not conducive to the nurturing of the arts. By uniting a large part of the continent, *Karl der Große* helped begin the process of centralization and urbanization anew, breathing new life into the puppet theater.

With the gradual rise of towns and cities, puppetry also ascended into the realm of culture which continued through the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and Baroque eras, when puppets were used as a means of visual representation primarily religious in nature, such as the staging of the Nativity. Throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, “puppetry as such belonged to the “lower” forms of entertainment (93)”. As always, its performers led a difficult life, yet puppet theater was extremely popular among the common public, and for this reason it was held in a correspondingly low regard.<sup>4</sup> If puppeteers wished to venture forth to find new audiences or to perform outside of the influence of their town, they had to “...gain the protection of a Duke, Prince or Cardinal, the only route to success

---

<sup>3</sup> Jurkowski, 53-4

<sup>4</sup> Currell, 5

and safety (Jurkowski 99)". Considering the numerous duchies, fiefdoms, principalities and palatinates within the German-speaking world at that time, it was no easy task for a puppet player to move freely among them, for as soon as jurisdiction changed so too did the rules by which he must abide.<sup>5</sup> By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new outlook had surfaced in Europe, intent on religious, social, and economic reform, and puppetry reflected this change.<sup>6</sup> With this change came the need for institutions. While its growing culture freed puppet theater, the puppeteers faced new limitations such as where, when and under whose authority they may perform. Puppeteers often had to request permission from the local authorities to present their shows, and only then under strict rules dictating, among other things, performance times and content.<sup>7</sup> The literally thousands of different jurisdictions comprising the German-speaking regions made continual adaption and adherence to new rules the standard of the day for traveling performers.

By the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, puppet theater began to be a fixture of court entertainment – most notably in Austria under the patronage of Nikolaus Esterházy. Known as a generous benefactor who greatly enjoyed music, the Hungarian prince frequently attended marionette operettas produced and in some cases composed by Franz Joseph Haydn, the prince's *Kapellmeister*. Haydn's "interest in puppetry was born much earlier, at least from the period when he was visiting England and saw English puppets (Jurkowski 131)". Some of the puppet operettas produced included *Der krumme Teufel*

---

<sup>5</sup> Jurkowski, 161

<sup>6</sup> Jurkowski, 92

<sup>7</sup> Jurkowski, 100 - Only ten kilometers away, the governing laws might be the complete opposite of the neighboring jurisdiction.

and *Dido*, a parody of the Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*.<sup>8</sup> Esterházy and his courtesans delighted in the prince's puppet theater, as did the Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa, who invited his performers to her palace at Schönbrunn. In addition to its significance in terms of aristocratic patronage of puppet theater, it helped "...to satisfy the political ambitions of the Hungarian prince (Jurkowski 132)". While certainly not the highest-ranking servants in a royal estate, puppeteers taking part in these performances were able to attain a higher standard of living. Those performers who gained an aristocratic audience often found easier passage between different German regions as well as more freedom to perform locally.

Although "the Age of Enlightenment promised respect for every human life, and freedom to seek self-fulfillment (Jurkowski 246)", it was not always so in practice. The Enlightenment penetrated every facet of society, encouraging new interest in politics and art. Puppet theater began to take on a different shape as well, with puppeteers seeking to distance themselves from the wandering performers with whom they were formerly categorized. Despite some gaining acceptance as legitimate court entertainers, most puppeteers still faced challenges. McCormick writes:

In Bavaria and Austria from the 1790s authorities attempted to ban puppet theater from the towns. This pushed many showmen onto the roads, divorced them from contact with urban culture, and forced them to develop as entertainers of smaller rural communities (3)

The censorship of puppet theater was not limited to one time in German history, nor was it decreed in order "...to improve artistic standards, [but] was actually intended to get rid of shows which were improvised, and which might contain indecent language and

---

<sup>8</sup> Jurkowski, 131



unwelcome comments on current problems (Jurkowski 253)". Authorities tried to undermine the free, often unpredictable nature of puppet theater. Her enjoyment of courtly puppet theater notwithstanding, Maria Theresa, as Friedrich Wilhelm I before her had done in Prussia, issued restrictions limiting improvised puppet performances.<sup>9</sup> Common street and marketplace performers found themselves caught between the dying throes of the feudal system and the rise of the rationally-minded middle class. Considered subversive when outside of a controlled venue, puppeteers faced prohibitive measures that effectively forced them into the fringes of society. Once marginalized, the authorities could more easily justify the hardline they took.

In the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a burgeoning concept of folk culture began to arise, and the puppet theater, perhaps as much as the *Märchen*, embodied this conception.<sup>10</sup> This time into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century proved a boon for the puppet theater in the German-speaking world. Many of the luminaries of the day such as Goethe and Mozart took an interest in the puppet theater. The Age of Romanticism, among other things, gave birth to the notion that commoners and the poor had a culture all their own that was diametrically opposed to the pursuits of the Neoclassicists and the scientifically-minded elite. Whether or not that was true is immaterial. The reactionary Romanticist movement did, however, inspire at least a topical adoration of puppet showmen and their ilk. The Romantic theorists helped to rekindle widespread interest in the puppet theater and other folk art, a medium largely invented in the minds of the Romantics themselves.

---

<sup>9</sup> Jurkowski, 161

<sup>10</sup> Jurkowski, 246

There are few biographies of German-speaking puppet showmen before the onset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, since most were not of the means or inclination to leave records. Two puppeteers, however, defied obscurity and deserve a mention. Georg Geisselbrecht, originally a mechanic from Vienna (or Switzerland, depending on the source), won acclaim all over the German-speaking world during the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with his marionette shows. He would later be immortalized by Theodor Storm in his novella *Paul the Puppeteer*.<sup>11</sup> Besides Geisselbrecht, in Bavaria, the puppeteer Josef “Papa” Schmidt transformed a donated theater into a cultural icon. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until his death in 1912, Schmidt, as an artist and a man was beloved by people of all ages.<sup>12</sup> By 1900 in German regions as elsewhere in Europe, puppet theater had evolved from an ill-respected marketplace sideshow into a cultural force enjoyed by a wide spectrum of society. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century advancements of the puppet were largely overshadowed by its setbacks. As a consequence of the Romantic division of high and low culture (and art), “theater journalism of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century restricted itself to those theaters purveying ‘high’ culture and seldom had much to say about...such minor forms as the puppet theater...except in a rather patronizing way (McCormick 9)”. In a larger sense, paralleling the failed March Revolution of 1848 and its goal of unification and increased civil liberties, puppet theater and its performers were still a fragmented part of society struggling for freedom. Geisselbrecht and Schmidt, in the early and latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, respectively, were two exceptions. Perhaps due to talent, popularity,

---

<sup>11</sup> Boehn, 79

<sup>12</sup> Boehn, 88-9

good fortune or otherwise, the puppeteers share an equal part in the eventual forging of puppet theater as a legitimate cultural institution in Germany.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought with it a new era of respectability that would eventually manifest in academia, on the stage, in the newly-created mediums of film and television and in the realm of high art. Albrecht Roser of Stuttgart emerged in the 1950s with his famous marionette, Clown Gustaf. In 1983 he helped establish the *Figurentheaterschule* as a department of the *Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst* in Stuttgart. He continues building and performing to this day. *Die Augsburger Puppenkiste* also became famous in the 1950s with its television programs for children. This puppet company, too, remains active to this day. Finally, there is Peter Schumann, a Silesian-born resident of Vermont and founder of the *Bread and Puppet Theater*. An entire chapter devoted to Schumann follows. At this point, it is enough to say that his use of puppetry for politicized, sometimes controversial ends has been the focus of his professional life. Schumann embodies the very ideals he proclaims. He has renewed the ritualistic function of art without commoditizing it – something the Romantics could not – and he has done so in the spirit of the Brechtian Epic Theater.

Spanning its entirety and reflecting the course of German history, puppet theater is more than a legitimate field of scholarly and literary study – it is instrumental in the development of German culture. As a social phenomenon, the travails of puppet theater mirrored those of Germany as a whole from its infancy to its maturation. It was entertainment for the masses as well as fodder for the philosophically-minded who saw in it a deeper significance and useful allegory for the human condition. And while the great

works of German literature that took inspiration from puppet theater were more the result of creative prowess than a marionette or marketplace performance, it is undeniable that the age-old puppet theater left its impression on the young minds of many of Germany's literary masters. For these reasons, the field of *Germanistik* is arguably incomplete without the inclusion of puppet theater and its many implications in German history.

## Chapter 2

### Sociological, Philosophical and Literary Importance of Puppet Theater in the German-Speaking World

The long and complicated history of puppets and *Puppentheater* in Germany clearly deserves more scholarly attention. The study to date reflects three different yet complementary areas of research:

1. Sociological
2. Philosophical
3. Literary

With a brief look at its history behind us, it is now time to explore the relationship between puppet theater and each of these three areas or spheres. Given the public nature of puppet theater, its inherent social aspects are unmistakable. Evolving from disparate, unorganized individuals or troupes that wandered the land scraping together a livelihood into centralized performers was only possible as population centers grew and the social fabric became more complex. In a philosophical and literary sense, puppetry served as an essayistic and fictional motif as well as providing inspiration for other works. At once visual and literary, puppet theater combined language and histrionics in a unique way that rivaled the actors' theater while perturbing the authorities with its spontaneity and penchant for irreverence. Its embedded social nature combined with its philosophical and literary implications helped to eventually transform German puppet theater into a cultural staple.

The secondary literature on the subject includes a number of works from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Helen Joseph's *A Book of Marionettes* provides a detailed if uncontroversial look at the puppet plays of Germany. More of a digest than an in-depth analysis, Joseph's work nonetheless represents an early attempt to bring puppet theater into the field of serious scholarly discussion. Henryk Jurkowski's *A History of European Puppetry* delves far deeper into the subject matter. While the author does not focus entirely on the art form in Germany, he explores puppet theater in successive historical contexts from its introduction into the Germanic regions through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jurkowski's work looks at puppet theater from many angles, from the social, religious and political aspects that shaped it to its longstanding cultural significance. Another valuable source is John McCormick's *Popular Puppet Theater in Europe, 1800-1914*, a work that not only focuses on a specific time period but also narrows its scope to the sociological and economic conditions of puppet performers and their audiences. In addition to the secondary scholarly works, Heinrich von Kleist's essay *On the Marionette Theater* and *Paul the Puppeteer* by Theodor Storm serve to illustrate the use of puppet theater within famous German literary works.

After examining puppet theater from a sociological perspective and highlighting its impact on German philosophy and literature, this study turns its attention to Peter Schumann, a Vermont-based artist of German origin. Stefan Brecht's *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater* is a massive biography of this extant artist whom Stefan Brecht credits with being one of the few to fully grasp and utilize the theatrical vision of his father, Bertolt Brecht. From there, this study will give a cursory look at other 20<sup>th</sup>-

century German performers who have taken the art form to new levels of innovation and expression.

---

## Sociological Evolution of Puppet Theater

Mirroring the evolution of the Germanic world into present-day Germany, puppet theater likely started out as a component of the light entertainment repertoire of buffoons, acrobats, jugglers and other ancient showmen. After the decline of the Roman Empire in the late fourth and early fifth centuries until the Carolingian Renaissance that began during the ninth century, puppetry, like all figurative representation, was distrusted if not condemned outright by the church. It "...seems reasonable enough to assume that the tradition [of puppet theater] was kept alive through the [Early Middle Ages] by wandering entertainers (Currell 8)". Puppeteers, like mimes, poets, musicians and singers, were artists before such a conception existed. In the sociological reality of their day, though, they were merely poor wanderers in search of a livelihood. By the time of the first publication of *The History of Doctor Faustus* in 1587 – a wildly popular *Puppentheaterstück* – puppet theater in the German-speaking world had developed to a point that brought it closer to cultural recognition, but even that was epistemically impossible at the time. The hodgepodge of German-speaking peoples were – during the 1000-plus years following the collapse of Rome – geographically, politically and linguistically divided as well as culturally divergent. While the experience of puppet theater and its performers reflected these divisions, it is arguable that their traveling shows actually represented an early model of cultural unity among Germans.

With the Protestant Reformation beginning in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, there arose a conflict between the clergy and live actors. This development presented great



opportunities for puppet theater, for the anti-actor stance of the Protestant authority propelled puppetry into favor with the common people who found themselves with no other entertainment outlet. As in the Early Middle Ages, the portrayal of religious themes by live actors offended the clergy. Martin Luther even went so far as to ban dramatic theatrical performances in church, putting the actors out of work.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, it was Charlemagne who, over 700 years earlier encouraged the very same dramatic portrayal of religious themes.<sup>14</sup> The Protestant church unwittingly gave center stage to a form of representation far more irreverent than the live theater could ever be. Thanks to this decree, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century the puppet theater was indeed more popular than the live theater. Joseph continues:

Consequently the [actors' theater] fell into such disrepute that the number of regular theaters rapidly decreased and troupes were disbanded, while the humiliated and neglected players were forced to join puppet companies and read for the marionettes to earn a living (Joseph 123).

This reversal of fortune for live actors was a direct result of the decision of the Protestant authorities and benefitted puppeteers tremendously. The decline of live theater following the Protestant Reformation in the German-speaking world created a hole that was quickly filled by puppeteers and their marionettes and other *Puppen*. Luther's reforms helped to raise puppet theater to prominence by stifling the ability of live actors to perform. By the onset of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, "the undisputed predominance of puppets upon the German stage gradually subsided...as..[t]he actors assumed their own place in the theater [and] the Puppet returned to a more modest sphere. But they continued to be popular (Joseph

---

<sup>13</sup> Joseph, 123

<sup>14</sup> Jurkowski, 53

126)". Without the censorship of the Protestant church which inadvertently favored puppet theater, puppetry may have never experienced such popularity during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The marketplace and fairgrounds were the natural locales for the puppet theater as performers easily found an audience, but they often had to have approval from the authorities. According to Jurkowski, "[w]hen permission was awarded to a player, the municipality imposed severe terms, threatening punishment and the withdrawal of the license if any of these were disregarded (100)". Police in some localities had the right to censor a puppet player's script or prevent him from performing at all. Under extreme circumstances, mistrust of puppeteers was especially high. In Saxony in 1793, for instance, the Elector, in response to the upheaval in France, issued a ban on all puppet shows.<sup>15</sup> Being that each locality possessed its own set of rules and standards to impose on traveling performers, acceptance was hard to gain for those puppeteers whose livelihood depended on moving from town to town. Despite the ever-present threat of closure or arrest, puppeteers presented the darkest taboos or the most ridiculing satire on the stage. In Cologne, "...any person in the vicinity who had made himself unpopular was sure to be caricatured. Neither rank nor age was a protection (Joseph 128)". The ability of puppet theater to instantly react to the affairs and events of the day undoubtedly increased its popularity – much to the chagrin of the authorities. The farcical puppet Hanswurst (later Kasperle) in Germany mocked anything he desired with impunity, much to the delight of the audience "...who thronged into the show, which [could be,

---

<sup>15</sup> McCormick, 27

depending on the audience] as vulgar as possible (Joseph 128)". Later, in Prussia, the severity of the licensing authorities

...was exacerbated by the decree issued by Friedrich Wilhelm III, the...king, giving police the right to impose censorship. Each puppet player, from 1809, was obliged to present the text of his show to the local police station to get it accepted. This decree caused endless trouble for the players who were normally illiterate and whose texts had never been written down (Jurkowski 253).

While the average puppeteer barely made a living and left few traces of his existence, some puppet players took great measures to separate themselves from the rabble.

McCormick elaborates:

In many cases puppeteers perceived themselves as bringers of culture as well as entertainers, and their cultural values were those of the bourgeoisie. This often resulted in a very serious attempt to speak 'correctly', with the received pronunciation, dialect, or even language of the 'cultured' classes, and to keep 'vulgar' elements out of the main show (23).

Select performers such as Geisselbrecht along with Schutz and Dreher in northern Germany, thanks to elite patronage, were able to avoid the difficulties in obtaining a license to perform publicly.<sup>16</sup> Despite the low economic status of most performers, some were able to transcend social divisions and find an audience among more refined members of society, and with it a better living. The attempts of both church and civic authorities to control artistic production was as blatant with puppet theater as with any other popular form of expression.

The rivalry between actors and puppets arose again at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and on this occasion it involved none other than Goethe himself. In 1804, as director of the court theater at Weimar, Goethe was overseer when Johann Falk, a

---

<sup>16</sup> Jurkowski, 253

Romantic-era writer of puppet plays, had granted permission to Georg Geisselbrecht to perform his work. Falk wrote for Hanswurst a closing soliloquy mocking the court actors' more contemptible qualities such as their pride, vanity, and shameless behavior. Accordingly, the actors rebuked the slander and demanded that Goethe ban the puppet play, a move he resisted but ultimately undertook. In an account that has taken on legendary status, Goethe attempted to soothe the actors' wounded pride by recalling that the theater had long possessed satirical elements and that the ability to laugh at oneself is a greater attribute than conceit.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Goethe supported the ban but only begrudgingly, for, as he indicated in his memoirs, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, "[the puppet theater] made an especially strong impression on [me], which lingered and became a great, lasting influence (Goethe 24)". As for Geisselbrecht, "[t]he Weimar episode helped [him] to an even higher level of popularity (Jurkowski 259)". This story serves to illustrate two things. First, there was a very real feud that existed between puppet performers and actors. However, this feud begs the question: were the actors upset at the puppeteers or the puppets themselves? Secondly, it indicates that puppet theater, at that time, was held in a higher regard than other forms of dramatic entertainment precisely because satire and farcicality were intrinsic parts of every performance.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, puppet theater in the German-speaking world had experienced both prominence and ill-repute. Critics at this time dismissed puppet theater as low culture, as *Theater der Armen*.<sup>18</sup> McCormick insists that "...the study of puppet theater is not primarily a branch of literary studies or of art history, but rather of social and cultural

---

<sup>17</sup> Jurkowski, 259

<sup>18</sup> McCormick, 9

history (10)". In 1800 most players were poor, subsistence performers, often attracting unfavorable attention from the authorities, who felt that public performances disturbed the peace and kept their workers up late hours thereby inhibiting the next day's work.<sup>19</sup>

The power of the police to censor performances was ostensibly geared to eliminate vulgarity, but this was often only a pretext for the censorship of subversive political content. The criminalization of puppeteers was not uncommon either, but "in practice, the worst 'crime' of most puppeteers was their economic status (McCormick 21)". Grouping puppeteers together with gypsies, beggars, and thieves, the police had ample excuse to enforce their punitive measures, for, as Jurkowski notes, "the police seem to have been the guardians of various interests of the middle class (254)". In a sociological sense, the German-speaking regions were politically and culturally fragmented from the dissolution of the Roman Empire up until the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – 1871 as history remembers it. German puppet theater could not help but experience the effects of this fragmentation and reflects it throughout its own tumultuous history.

---

<sup>19</sup> Jurkowski, 254

## Puppetry as a Philosophical Metaphor

The comparison of human beings to puppets occurs throughout Western philosophy, practically from the onset. Puppets were often used to thematize the question of free will. There is hardly a better artifice to illustrate the control under which humankind labors than the marionette, a lifeless doll attached to strings, brought to life and action only through the manipulation of an omnipotent being. The use of the puppet as sign to represent the actions and motivations of the human being begins with Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. Plato alludes to the existence of sublime forms – a philosophical rabbit hole that goes ever deeper – comparing what humans can perceive to shadows cast upon a wall, the true form of which they cannot know. As an outsider looking in, the reader learns that objects of various shapes and sizes – animals, men, etc. – are held before a fire thereby creating the shadows humans see. In terms of representation, the objects – the puppets – are not the true forms either, making the shadows representations of things which are themselves only representations. Scott Shershow, in his *Puppets and "Popular" Culture* takes this idea further:

For Plato the puppet serves as a secondary metaphor within a philosophical parable, but that metaphor itself depends on the puppet's material existence as an iconic (and performing) object: an artifact of stone or wood embodied or invested with a particular histrionic identity. Thus, the puppet, a "figure" in both senses, becomes a peculiarly clear paradigm of all representations – which are, in Plato's famous formulation, mere copies of a copy, at "three removes" from truth (15)

Shershow philosophically examines the definition of the puppet and its theater as belonging to low or popular culture within the discourse of categorization. "...Plato's

hierarchy of representation finally corresponds to the assigned lowness of puppet theater within a hierarchy of cultural and social distinction (15)". That puppets hold such a foundational place in Plato's dialogue – able to cast shadows on a wall while themselves being something that is a representation – fits in a literal sense to the perception of puppets and the puppet theater in society. Plato's negative use of puppets illustrates the marginalization of puppetry as an experience of lesser worth than the legitimate stage.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, while representative objects of human existence, the shadow puppets of Plato's allegory stand behind the shackled onlookers. Backlit by the fire of sublime truth, puppets are closer to it, while those who carry the wood and stone figures move like concealed puppeteers behind a curtain. They are privy to the deceit that fools the onlookers but participate in it willingly. Describing the philosophical significance of puppets and puppetry was not the aim of Plato's allegory, but their inclusion in his dialogue bespeaks an underlying importance not yet realized at the time.

In the German tradition, Arthur Schopenhauer cites a similar comparison in his work *The World as Will and Idea*, likening man to a puppet compelled to act not through an outside force, but by the motion of an "internal clockwork", what the writer sees as the manifestation of the will-to-live.<sup>21</sup> In keeping with the metaphor, expert manipulation of a marionette does not require the puppeteer to control every last movement; rather, he must only manipulate it in such a way as to allow the puppet's own character and motion to come into being, its will to live. According to Schopenhauer, the string-puller – the will – is a tyrant. A man "...is such and such a man, because once [and] for all it is his will to be

---

<sup>20</sup> Shershow, 6

<sup>21</sup> Schopenhauer, 114

that man (Schopenhauer, *On Human Nature* 57)". The will allows man to entertain the illusion of personal freedom, and there is enough spontaneous movement to justify this illusion. Unbeknownst to him, though, in reality he is controlled by his will alone.

Heinrich von Kleist's famous essay from 1810, *Über das Marionettentheater*, influenced the use of the puppet as a philosophical motif as well as the art of puppetry itself in the German-speaking world.<sup>22</sup> Kleist also influenced both the theory and the practice of drama in Europe.<sup>23</sup> At one level, Kleist's essay is a philosophy of grace, with the marionette – as opposed to the actor – being the truest representative of that attribute. Boehn argues that the essay is, in actuality, not about the puppet theater at all, but rather a veiled criticism of the Berlin actors and dancers of his day.<sup>24</sup> Regardless, Kleist's piece serves as an example of the use of the puppet as a philosophical motif. Physically, a puppet is an empty vessel, yet it is the will of the puppeteer which infuses the otherwise lifeless object with a particular spirit. Poets and intellectuals imagined the puppet could reveal a profound truth about humanity just as "they believed that the puppet theaters had a connexion [sic] with the old mysteries (Boehn 76)". While Kleist may have been talking of something entirely different at the time, his essay persists as one of the most lucid examples of the puppet as a vehicle for the expression of something more significant than what a doll attached to strings immediately presents. Despite its subtle message, *Über das Marionettentheater* became a literary staple, especially among the Romantic poets and intellectuals of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

---

<sup>22</sup> Jurkowski, 264

<sup>23</sup> Shershow, 184

<sup>24</sup> Boehn, 78-9



In the essay, the narrator runs into an old friend, a man whom he has seen on separate occasions taking in a public marionette performance. Displaying the incredulous attitude of a high art connoisseur, the narrator is at first "...astonished at the attention [his old friend] was paying to this vulgar species of an art form". Such a dismissive attitude is concordant with the earliest views of the puppet theater. The old friend asserts that an actor could learn something from the marionette, for "[the marionette] would never be guilty of affectation...[which occurs]...when the soul, or moving force, appears at some point other than the center of gravity of the movement".<sup>25</sup> This center of gravity, possessed intrinsically by the marionette, enables it to move almost of its own accord in a dance of which the puppeteer is not in direct control. Kleist's literary dialogue concludes with the old friend explaining to the narrator how grace appears with the absence of thought and, more tellingly, it "...appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god". The rivalry between puppet theater and the "legitimate stage" contains philosophical implications. It is precisely the actor's attempt at grace and genuineness which causes him to have neither. The actor has learned how to be graceful, but the greater his knowledge, the more obvious his affectation because infinite knowledge of grace is an impossibility. A puppet has no knowledge of grace or anything else, yet it is precisely its lacking that enables it to be all the more graceful. Similarly, it is the puppet's lack of will that gives its manipulator the opportunity to exert their own will through the puppet. A

---

<sup>25</sup> See Heinrich von Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*

puppet is free of all human attributes while being the ideal instrument through which to explore them all.

The freedom of the puppet allows it to explore the dark side of humanity, the taboos that would otherwise be off limits to an actor.<sup>26</sup> “The marionette is naught but the expression of the artist’s idea; the actor is always a man, and only too often his personality seems to place an obstacle in the way of true expression of a thought (Boehn 143)”. Puppets convey a personality all their own separate from the agency that moves them. While some actors are certainly capable of becoming an empty vessel, fully embodying the character they portray, a puppet is always so and requires no preparation. This relates to Kleist’s assertion that the puppet’s lack of knowledge is precisely its strength. Imbue it with any emotion, attribute or disposition, and the puppet will not fail to become what was intended. It is not, however, due to any particular skill that it does so; rather, it is the puppet’s infinite emptiness that makes it the perfect candidate for representation. The puppet is free both in terms of its uninhibited representative ability as well as having a personality all its own, animated by yet distinct from its operator.

The English theater critic and innovator, Edward Gordon Craig (b. 1872 – d. 1966) is philosophically linked with Kleist in his assessment of the puppet theater. However, whereas Kleist considered both actors and puppeteers artists, Craig disagrees, writing:

Acting is not an art. It is therefore incorrect to speak of the actor as an artist. For accident is an enemy of the artist. Art is the exact antithesis of pandemonium, and pandemonium is created by the tumbling together of many accidents. Art arrives only by design. Therefore in order to make any work of art it is clear we may

---

<sup>26</sup> Currell, 2

only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of these materials (55-6).

This statement does not reveal Craig's distaste for the actors, only his belief that actors are incapable of making art. Craig wrote when, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the pendulum began to swing back and once again favor puppets. His essay entitled "The Actor and the Über-Marionette" begins with a quote from Eleonora Duse: "To save the theater, the theater must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of the plague."<sup>27</sup> That puppets and their theater might again come into fashion, evolving as they do into something newly appreciated is evident as Craig continues:

There is something more than a flash of genius in the marionette, and there is something in him more than the flashiness of displayed personality. The marionette appears to me to be the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of a past civilization...all puppets are now but low comedians (82).

A suitable replacement for the stage actor, Craig opines, would be what he terms – for lack of a better word, by his own admission – the *Über-Marionette*. Inspired by Kleist and Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, the new representative is "...a descendant of the stone images of the old temples...a rather degenerate form of a god (Craig 82)". Only such a character ideally represents the artist's thoughtful design and strives to go beyond life as opposed to the actor's attempt at the reproduction of it.<sup>28</sup> Craig's views are in philosophical alignment with Kleist's regarding the marionette's advantage over the live actor, namely that the marionette possesses a gracefulness that places it closer to a god than a man. Channeling both Kleist and Nietzsche, Craig sees in the marionette not only a

---

<sup>27</sup> Craig, 54 – This quote the author himself quoted from Eleonora Duse.

<sup>28</sup> Craig, 84

relic of a lost civilization, but a more faithful means of realizing the thoughts and conceptual aims of the artist to strive beyond rather than a compete with life.

Another philosophical concept pertinent to any discussion of puppet theater concerns the nature and power of laughter. In his work *Rabelais and His World*, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (b. 1895 – d. 1975) argues that there are three important features of laughter: its universalism, its freedom, and its relationship to the people’s unofficial truth.<sup>29</sup> While he does not focus on puppet theater exclusively, his thesis centers around the nature of Medieval and Renaissance laughter in folk culture as directly contrasted to the seriousness of official culture.<sup>30</sup> The Medieval history of the German-speaking lands and Europe as a whole concerns the puppet theater, so it is no stretch to include Bakhtin’s scholarship within its parameters. Through his analysis of the works of Rabelais, Bakhtin conveys the power and importance of laughter for the average person during the Medieval to Renaissance periods.

Thus carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a peculiar quality of all comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages (Bakhtin 8)

Carnivals, festivals, and marketplaces were the temporary homes for the puppet players, and it was in that setting that laughter held sway. Given the uncontrollable nature of laughter in its purest form, attempts to rein it in, corral it and make it respectable are synonymous with the history of puppet theater in the German-speaking world.

Laughter is universal in that it mocks the very things the established order takes seriously. It makes no exception for either the lay world or the sacrosanct. Laughter is

---

<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin, 90

<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, 5-6 – See his introduction

freedom, providing a voice to the marginalized, common ground for diverse audiences and a break from routine. Laughter represents an unofficial truth, simultaneously exclusive and inclusive. It is exclusive in that it resists ownership of itself while paradoxically belonging to all members of society. Bakhtin argues that laughter in the centuries preceding the Enlightenment and the birth of Romanticism was universal in its object, was free to be so oriented and served as the unofficial truth of the people. Counterbalanced with the official truth of the church, laughter in general and puppet theater in particular offered a form of sanctioned gaiety and ribaldry to ease the pressure of the prohibitive, strictly religious and ordered status quo.<sup>31</sup> Similar to the fool, the puppet expects the audience to laugh, but implicit in his idiocy is a profound superiority, the freedom to say and do as he pleases. While the authorities may ridicule, censor or condemn him because of his lowness, it is precisely because of such lowly status that puppet theater was able to appeal to a universal audience, offering freedom - if only temporarily, while unofficially speaking truth to power.

The puppet is philosophically important in German intellectual history in its negative connotation, namely that it serves as a useful metaphor for demonstrating that human beings have no will of their own. This negative use of the puppet started with Plato and continued through select works of Arthur Schopenhauer, for whom the will was a tyrant. Like a puppet master, the will controls each individual, most of whom haplessly believe themselves to be acting of their own accord. Philosophy as it relates to puppet theater is not, however, all negative. Heinrich von Kleist described the virtue and grace of

---

<sup>31</sup> Bakhtin, 88-90

the marionette, a thing lacking consciousness. Because it has no consciousness, the marionette is free of all affectation and capable, like a god, of demonstrating true grace. Both the English critic Edward Gordon Craig and the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin contributed to the philosophical discussion of puppet theater as well. Inspired by the Kleistian idea that the puppet's lack of consciousness places it closer to the infinite consciousness of a god, Craig combined it with Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* and imagined a day when the *Über-marionette* would return to the stage and assume its rightful place as the purest embodier of an artist's ideas. Lastly, while Bakhtin spoke not of puppets per se, his philosophical discussion of laughter implicates puppets as much as anything. Universal, free and the representative of unofficial, unsanctioned truth, laughter – arguably the most important province of puppet theater – belongs to all yet is owned by none, hence its philosophical significance.

## The Literary Significance of Puppet Theater

Puppet theater in the German-speaking world, though a very real artistic pursuit with a rich history, provides, in itself, an excellent metaphor for the evolution of Germany as a whole. It reflects the culture's long experience of religious intolerance, class struggle, censorship, and political *Enttäuschung*. A major aspect of its socio-economic reality was its association with the poorer classes. Philosophically speaking, questions often posed by German thinkers including those of free will, the nature of representation, and the tragedy of existence reflect a particular experience of reality. For many intellectuals, puppet theater was an ideal vessel with which to frame and pursue these questions. Linking the philosophical and the literary are Kleist's famous essay along with *Die Nachtwachen des Bonaventura*, a characteristically Romantic literary work with philosophical implications that includes puppetry as a thematic element. Most famously, Goethe's *Faust* revisited an old work played out frequently through preceding centuries upon the puppet stage. Goethe, it is known, witnessed and was inspired by this performance. Theodor Storm's *Paul the Puppeteer* stands as an excellent example of puppet theater as the primary motif of a German literary work. Without the literature inspired by it, the evolution of puppet theater from low, popular culture into a highly regarded art form might never have occurred.

*Die Nachtwachen des Bonaventura*, an anonymous German literary work, bridges the discussion of the philosophical and the literary as it applies to puppet theater. In the story protagonist encounters a puppeteer who hires him as his clown, the previous one

having “died laughing”. The two immediately set forth and perform a puppet show in which Judith decapitates Holofernes thereby causing such uproar among the audience that they storm the residence of the local bailiff to demand his head. Philosophy and literature intersect as the clown, in defense of the bailiff implores the crowd to be reasonable:

This wooden bloody king’s head which I here hold up high...used...to be governed by this wire, my hand in turn governed the wire, and so forth into the realm of mystery where the governing power no longer can be determined (Bonaventura 225)

The author informs the people that they too, like the marionette, have strings attached. Freedom, it seems, is not what they think it is; it is only the perception of it – or lack thereof – that moves them to act, however unreasonably. The innocuous yet inflammatory spectacle of pantomimed decapitation is no mere literary invention but was a popular aspect of certain puppet plays as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup> In Hamburg in 1472 a public announcement proclaimed the upcoming performance of *The Public Beheading of the Virgin Dorothea*, a grotesque exhibition of puppet theater greatly enjoyed by the marketplace denizens.<sup>33</sup> The ability to stir the passions of an uneducated audience may well validate the censorship handed down by authorities in some localities. In *Bonaventura* puppet theater plays only a minor role, a literary representation in support of a philosophical motif, yet its presence shows the historical validity of puppet theater in the German-speaking world.

---

<sup>32</sup> See Joseph, 115

<sup>33</sup> Joseph, 115 – Evidently, the popularity of this performance – besides the spectacle of pantomimed death – was due to the ever-changing and elaborate methods by which “Dorothea” lost her head.



In the year 1587 the Frankfurt-based publisher Johann Spies put to print the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*.<sup>34</sup> Only six years later an untimely death would befall Christopher Marlowe, and in the year 1604 his own *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* was published in England. It is a matter of some debate, then, as to which came first. Clearly, the date of the German publication precedes the English, but matters become complicated, for the Faust story in the German world was, before its printing, a familiar part of the puppet players' repertoire just as Marlowe's tragedy graced the stage even before his death. Hedderwick, introducing *The Old German Puppet Play of Doctor Faust* argues that

A puppet-play of "Faust" appears to have been not only well known but actually to have entered upon its decline, in [England], before we hear anything of the Puppet-play in Germany. The precise date when "Faust" was transferred from the theater to the booth may now be impossible to ascertain (xxix).

It is clear, however, that Goethe was inspired by both versions of the story to craft his own *Faust*. Goethe confirms his fondness for puppet theater in his memoirs *Wahrheit und Dichtung*.<sup>35</sup> Hedderwick also claims that Goethe "is the only German critic who appears to have formed a just estimate of Marlowe's genius from his *Faust* (xlviiii)". That Goethe could be so influenced by puppet theater is further founded on the fact that he wrote plays during the *Sturm und Drang* period for puppets and actors.<sup>36</sup> One such work, *Hanswursts Hochzeit*, written between 1774-5, satirizes overly-formalized social mores, with the ageless buffoon Hanswurst as the mocking protagonist.<sup>37</sup> "In 1781 Goethe got a shadow

---

<sup>34</sup> Currell, 14, ?

<sup>35</sup> Hedderwick, xvi, xvii & Jurkowski, 251

<sup>36</sup> Jurkowski, 250

<sup>37</sup> Williams, 140

theater built in Tiefurt, he himself and [Friedrich von] Einsiedel (author, lawyer, b. 1750 – d. 1828) preparing the *libretti* for the performances (Boehn 115-6)". Boehn goes on to say that, although there is no comparing the puppet-play of Doctor Faust with Goethe's tragedy, the puppet performances of the piece garnered the largest audiences.<sup>38</sup>

Hedderwick accredits to the German writer Karl Simrock the statement that "next to Goethe's "Faust", amongst all the poems to which the Faust saga has given birth, the old "Puppet-play" has the greatest merit (xiv)". The original source of this saga, as Simrock calls it, research may never uncover. The theme of a pact with the devil may be a universal concept in the Western world dating back to ancient times. Hedderwick makes no claim as to this original source, but does state

That the German Puppet-play was either directly or indirectly derived from Marlowe's tragedy; and further, that nearly every change that took place in the representation of "Faust", upon the stage in England, was followed by a corresponding change in Germany (xxxix).

He adds that, "for its preservation we are indebted to Germany (Hedderwick xiii)".

Whatever the truth may be, the puppet theater undoubtedly had a profound effect on Goethe, entertaining and inspiring him, and, for his *Faust*, the old puppet play thereof is at least jointly responsible – along with Marlowe's earlier work – for its creation.

Goethe's timeless poem stands as the best example of the influence puppet theater had on German writers. In *Germanistik*, the puppet play deserves recognition within the continuum of the Faust story, from its origins to the theater, puppet stage and finally to its written form.

---

<sup>38</sup> Boehn, 70 – Theodor Storm fictionalizes this claim in *Paul the Puppeteer*, as it is the puppet play of Doctor Faust that Tandler first performs.

Among the most effective use of puppet theater as the dominant theme of a work is Theodor Storm's *Paul the Puppeteer*. This novella from 1874 fictionalizes the life of Geisselbrecht, the ubiquitous puppeteer who figures prominently in both history and fiction. The character Joseph Tendler, a traveling puppet player from Munich whom Storm modeled after Geisselbrecht is the central literary element of this story.<sup>39</sup> As with other works by Storm, there is a deeper significance that touches on the social changes in the German-speaking world at time, namely, the transitional period between the end of the Confederation of German states and the formation of a unified republic. Storm masterfully reflects the reality of the changing socio-economic order in Germany of the *Gründerjahre*. At an interpretive level, the story portrays the beginnings of the institutionalization of puppet theater, looking at a player who represents the last of a kind – the traveling showman. As the title character, Paul recounts to his apprentice of his encounter with the puppeteer Tendler – Storm's familiar story-within-a-story framing device – the author places the performance in the house of the old guild, a literary allusion to the old, dying world.

The guild had shrunk to just three members...the old two-storeyed [sic] house was neither lived in nor used by anyone; wind-shaken and run-down, it stood there between the well-kept neighboring houses (Storm 82)

With frequent references to some of the more well-known characters, plays and the general nostalgia associated with it, Storm infuses his story with an accurate reflection of puppet theater in Germany. "A glance at the stage took me back a thousand years (Storm 84)" recounts Paul, the narrator, an indication of the rich history of puppet theater in the

---

<sup>39</sup> Joseph, 121

German-speaking world and the collective memory of it. Timeless characters and stories – all with historical antecedents – receive a mention as the narrator tells of his childhood experience with the puppet theater: Kasperl, Hans Wurstl, and *Doctor Faust's Journey to Hell*. Storm's novella intertwines a specific feature of German cultural history, puppet theater, with the larger narrative of the *Gründerjahre*.

Storm hints at the philosophical and sociological implications of puppet theater, alluding to Kleist perhaps when the narrator recalls that "...there was uncanny life in these small figures (84-5)". Remembering the precarious social position of the traveling puppet players through the centuries in the German-speaking world, Storm crafts his story intending to portray the traveling show-people as truly respectable, who save their money and take care not to offend their patrons.<sup>40</sup> The story portrays the puppet theater in its time of transition, running parallel to the story of a society in flux. The narrator speaks of old Tandler, a characterization of Geisselbrecht, as being "...tired of traveling; indeed, since it had exposed him to the danger of being confused with the worst vagabonds, his long for a settled home had only grown stronger (Storm 115)". Storm remarks on the entirety of puppet theater in the German world, as if for centuries its purveyors had simply sought a place in society, traveling only because they could not find a home. Just as old Joseph Tandler tired of constant traveling, Germany, too, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was a region weary of flux. At the threshold of a national identity and industrialization, Germans could not hold onto the old world and still embrace the new one.

---

<sup>40</sup> Storm, 102 – Within the story, the narrator remembers his father commenting on the respectability of the Tendlers – the puppet players

By Storm's time, the puppeteers Schutz and Dreher had established themselves in Berlin, and Josef "Papa" Schmid was a mainstay in Munich, sponsored and approved of by the municipal authorities.<sup>41</sup> Puppet theater had evolved from a nomadic, carnivalesque spectacle into an established cultural attraction with a permanent home, but the evolution did not cease there. Further institutionalization would occur throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the academic world to the mass dissemination made possible by television – puppet theater's triumphant return to popular culture. The literary realm in the German-speaking world converged with puppet theater and, to a greater extent, with the building of the concept of folklore. Jurkowski speaks directly about this bridge between high and popular culture:

The most notable modification in the relationship between high culture and popular culture happened in Germany, and for several reasons. The first was the general belief in folklore as the probable basis of German national culture, a belief which created a better climate for puppet theater. The second was the disillusionment of German writers with the actors in their theaters, which made them look for better, alternative performers of their works (250)

This statement contains an element of Kleistian thinking inasmuch as it provides one explanation for the evolution of puppet theater in the German-speaking world while tying many of its literary pursuits to a nostalgic sense of culture and national identity that largely did not exist. Lastly, it suggests the long transition of puppet theater as popular entertainment to a more refined expressive art form.

---

<sup>41</sup> Joseph, 121 and Boehn, 88

## Chapter 3

### Peter Schumann and the Rebirth of Radical Puppet Theater

Peter Schumann, a German-born resident of Vermont, has spent almost the entirety of his professional artistic life creating masks, larger-than-life puppets and political agitation. Peter Schumann is no mere entertainer, but rather an artist. The difference between art and entertainment is the presence of theory, an ideal to which the creator of the work aspires. In the opinion of Stefan Brecht, son of the German didactical playwright and artist Bertolt Brecht, Peter Schumann is one of the great artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stefan Brecht (b. 1924 – d. 2009), himself a poet, critic and theater scholar, believed Schumann to be one of the few artists to successfully implement the theories of the theater developed by his father, Bertolt Brecht. Unifying and popularizing the methods of Epic Theater which included near-journalistic succinctness and Greek-like choruses, Bertolt Brecht held that an audience should never lose sight of the fact that it watches a play. Theatrical illusion, while evincing the dramatic, leads to escapism which does not inspire the audience to change their reality. Changing the views of the audience is or should be, according to Bertolt Brecht and later Peter Schumann, the aim of art, the function of which, in agreement with Walter Benjamin, is always political the instant it ceases to serve ritualistic needs.<sup>42</sup>

Born 11 June 1934 in Silesia, Peter Schumann creates puppet theater to this day, having honed his craft for more than fifty years at first in Germany then in the United

---

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, section IV

States. Stefan Brecht, son of Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel, in his two-volume tome *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater*, perhaps best describes Schumann and his work, saying

[He] is one of the great artists of this century...He has invented a magnificent new medium, the 'live puppet' show or 'puppet masque'. He has been one of the few directors to develop and consistently to use 'alienation'. He has dealt with the issues of his age. His work – moral theater – is a major statement from the Left and presents the interest of an effort to carry on a large enterprise outside of the money economy (Stefan Brecht preface).

The assertions made by Stefan Brecht highlight the artistic efforts made by Schumann to create radical puppet theater in the Brechtian context. Schumann's work eschews trite sentimentality, and his public performances are not pasquinades. While he represents the continuation of German puppet theater which was, throughout much of its history, primarily entertainment, Schumann's work draws from pre-historical antecedents of shamanism and ritual. He tries to make art that serves a real function in human life rather than exist in a rarefied enclosure, a controlled commercial venture serving the tastes of the elite.<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that Schumann does not recognize the value of the marketplace puppeteer whose hand moved the Kasperl puppet to the delight of the onlookers. The purpose the puppet theater serves and for whom it is intended are of paramount importance to Schumann, which aligns him more with the nomadic puppeteers of medieval culture and their art rather than with the status-seeking puppet players of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Ryder, 1 – Summarizing a quote from an earlier interview cited in this text.

<sup>44</sup> Stefan Brecht, 22

Schumann takes great care to manifest his ideal not merely in his productions but in his life as well. Schumann's artistic *raison d'être* is as simple as it is profound, aiming for "...the spiritual regeneration of the Germans and ultimately all mankind (Stefan Brecht 19)". His ambitious pursuit is better understood within the context of how he defines puppet theater. Writing in *The Drama Review* in an article entitled The Radicality of the Puppet Theater, he states:

Puppet theater...is...by definition of its most persuasive characteristics, an anarchic art, subversive and untameable [sic] by nature, an art which is easier researched in police records than in theater chronicles, an art which by fate and spirit does not aspire to represent governments or civilizations, but prefers its own secret and demeaning stature in society, representing, more or less, the demons of that society and definitely not its institutions (Schumann 75).

Combining Schumann's own pronouncements with the views of Stefan Brecht, his work is moral, spiritual, and anarchistic in the sense that it does not aim to represent the institutionalized culture – the antithesis of the direction puppet theater took during the preceding centuries – but represents people and an ethos of the decentralization of political, economic, and spiritual power.

Paramount to Stefan Brecht's critique of Peter Schumann's *Bread and Puppet Theater* is Schumann's use of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, developed by his father Bertolt Brecht during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Schumann notes five aspects that free puppet theater from the limitations of theatrical representation: freedom from seriousness; redefinition of language; the evolution of acting; music as music; and puppet theater as sculpture.<sup>45</sup> These aspects imbue puppet theater with new vitality, although the

---

<sup>45</sup> Schumann – The Radicality of the Puppet Theater



established artistic order labels it differently.<sup>46</sup> Especially as the five aspects relate to the theoretical framework developed by Bertolt Brecht, they form a picture of Schumann's artistic vision, unconventional and anti-materialist in both theory and practice, and at its core a dialogue between society and the individual struggling within it. According to Schumann, puppet theater is exempt "...from the seriousness of being analytically disciplined and categorized by the cultural philosophy of the day (Schumann 75-6)". Inspiring both laughter and reflection, the historical (and to some degree, current) marginalization of puppet theater is, for Schumann, its "saving grace", allowing it, as a consequence, to evolve unencumbered by the demands of the consumer economy. The attempts to market puppet theater as serious art fall flat. Paradoxically, Schumann's puppet theater is serious art, but it is precisely because it does not take itself seriously that it is able to be taken seriously. Contradistinguished from the freedom from seriousness is his take on the modern German conception of *Figurentheater*, or the academic renaming of puppet theater, interpretive and serious in its scope, which he sees as "...a grand solution to the social-status problem of puppetry...so that nobody will find them guilty of complicity with Kasper, Punch, or Petroushka (Schumann 76)". Because puppetry is unbound by an expectation of seriousness, its effect when used to inspire serious reflection is more pronounced precisely because it is not expected.

The second aspect noted by Schumann concerns the redefinition of language. As this pertains to puppets, their language is not merely comprised of strung-together lines from a script. Rather, puppets communicate through gesture. *Gestus*, an acting technique

---

<sup>46</sup> Ryder, 1

developed by Bertolt Brecht, relates the social position of a character with his behavior. While Bertolt Brecht's ideas focused on the range of discussable, criticizable material between people, Schumann transposed it to include puppets and masked figures. Mirroring real-life relations between social beings, "...puppets need silence, and their silences are an outspoken part of their language (Schumann 77)".<sup>47</sup> Schumann dispenses with the fourth wall and sometimes walls altogether for his 'live puppet' theater, an interactive and communicative art driven by the notion that there is something spiritual and noble in people to which he can appeal.<sup>48</sup> Schumann says that puppet theater "... exists as a...new and daring art form...not in the sense of unheard-of newness, but in the sense of an uncovered truth that was there all along but was so common it couldn't be seen for what it was (Schumann 76)". Instead of implicating his audience in a staged situation he includes them in his narrative.<sup>49</sup> Using puppetry, Schumann employs the power of silence and gesture to communicate his artistic intentions.

That puppetry represents an evolution of acting is directly relatable to Bertolt Brecht. In his writings on the theater, Bertolt Brecht defines his Epic Theater, the essence of which "...is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things (Bertolt Brecht 23)". For Brecht, the spectators are not passively engaged in the act of watching, nor are the actors transformed before the audiences' eyes into the reproduction of a character. The audience, rather, is challenged to actively observe and study the text, as the

---

<sup>47</sup> Ryder, 1

<sup>48</sup> Stefan Brecht, 22

<sup>49</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 37

“...actor [is] allowed to enjoy his art as an art of faking, and with that be liberated from the self-possessed art of acting (Schumann 78)”. Speaking on the presence of alienation in Chinese theater, Bertolt Brecht says of the actor: “he expresses his awareness of being watched... The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place (Bertolt Brecht 92)”. Whereas the dramatic actor aspires to reveal the soul or essence of his character “...with facial and vocal gymnastics aimed at a most naturalistic pretending of something unreal [sic] and intangible: the ghost of a reality that is not there but insists on our acceptance of its existence (Schumann 78)”, the puppet’s soul is revealed only through its movement and function, not through a purposeful display of what the puppet is supposed to represent.<sup>50</sup> What the puppet reveals through its gestures and action is its intangible self, whereas the actor is concerned with the representation of a different self. To quote Bertolt Brecht from an essay entitled *A Dialogue about Acting*: “– Oughtn’t the actor then...try to make the man he is representing understandable? – Not so much the man as what takes place (27)”. In Schumann’s theater, what takes place is a demonstration against war or oppression, a spiritual transformation and not a pathetic pantomime focused on its intelligibility. Remembering the theater critic Edward Craig’s comparison of the puppet and the actor, the puppet does not reproduce life; rather, it goes beyond it.<sup>51</sup> He opines:

I pray earnestly for the return of the image – the über-marionette to the Theater; and when he comes again and is but seen, he will be loved so well that once more will it be possible for the people to return to their ancient joy in ceremonies – once more will Creation be celebrated – homage rendered to existence – and divine and happy intercession made to Death (94).

---

<sup>50</sup> Schumann, 79

<sup>51</sup> See Craig, 84

Craig's early 20th-century conception of the *Über-Marionette* aligns with Schumann's 'live theater' and its ritualistic functionality. Schumann's theater moves beyond its traditional milieu, trading the stage for an open space and acting for embodiment. Puppetry has the potential to encourage evolution in acting. Schumann's puppets reflect the unselfconscious grace detected by Kleist, Craig's desire for a return to ritual and Brecht's Epic Theater. Taken together, it is not acting for the sake of pretending, but acting genuinely.

The fourth aspect of puppet theater that, according to Schumann, frees it from traditional, theatrical representative forms is the notion of music as music. As he sees it, music should be "...sound production in its own right, operating in its own sphere, parallel to and not governed by the visual theater (Schumann 79)". Once more there arises a relationship between his views and the precedent set by Bertolt Brecht. Brecht speaks of music in the Epic Theater, noting that "its most striking innovation [lies] in the strict separation of the music from all the other elements of entertainment offered (Bertolt Brecht 85)". Brecht and Schumann are in agreement that there should be a space reserved for music within yet detached from the theatrics. Whereas Brecht disparages the impossibility of reaching an audience politically or philosophically through the use of music – that is, when music is emotionally tied to the action – Schumann complains of "...the misuse of sound for the purpose of vision, which keeps music from acting as music for the benefit of the larger scheme of collaborative production (Schumann 80)". Their views are related, however, with Schumann drawing on the foundation built by Brecht. The biggest difference, perhaps, is that between Bertolt Brecht's didacticism and

Schumann's aim of spiritual regeneration. Writing on the effects of concert music felt by an audience in his witty, hyperbolic style, Brecht says:

We see entire rows of human beings transported into a peculiar doped state, wholly passive, sunk without trace, seemingly in the grip of a severe poisoning attack. Their tense, congealed gaze shows that these people are the helpless and involuntary victims of the unchecked lurchings of their emotions... [Music] seduces the listener into an enervating, because unproductive, act of enjoyment (89).

Schumann sees the use of music in popular theater (and film) as playing an exploited role, utilized not for its own sake, but in order buttress and/or complement something visual.<sup>52</sup> In a written piece by Schumann from 1962 referred to by Stefan Brecht as his 'manifesto', he says of music:

Forget the notes. Don't waste your hearing on training... There can be no other relationship to music any more than this: to lower it to the status of an ordinary activity... For we are now making a useful music, a music whose order is the order of music, a music for the new world (Stefan Brecht 100).

Both Bertolt Brecht and Schumann desire a new world, but Brecht wants the human being to face himself, to alter himself. While Schumann wants the same, he would use spirituality to accomplish this, while Brecht would opt for science as the driving force. Schumann argues that if music is a manifestation of the spiritual aspect of humankind, of the collective 'self', if it is more than the sum of its parts, then the commercial venue is too exclusive, too orderly, and too controlled to express that essence, and moreover, that the puppet theater offers a superior stage with which to truly make music.

Schumann argues the final freeing characteristic of puppet theater concerns its function as what he calls "socially embedded sculpture". Sculpture in the public sphere

---

<sup>52</sup> Ryder, 1

has become an emblematic display of cultural and political power, bronze castings and stone-set idols that "...have long ceased to represent public heartbeat and yearning", the meaning of which "...has long been connected to its expense, and with that, to its sponsorship (Schumann 81)". Schumann argues that puppet theater as sculpture functions as a narrative, revealing the inner spaces of the human consciousness able to foster a regenerated spirituality, a conceptual story with a moral rather than a functionless – if avant-garde display of pure concept.<sup>53</sup> He says:

Puppetry is conceptual sculpture, cheap, true to its popular origins, uninvited by the powers-that-be, its feet in the mud, economically on the fringe of existence, technically a collage art combining paper, rags, and scraps of wood into kinetic two- and three-dimensional bodies (Schumann 81)

This statement contains all of the elements of Schumann's ideal – an art form stemming from and serving people, speaking truth to power, welcoming the poverty of its existence, and comprised of a hodgepodge of materials that are close to garbage apart from their whole. Puppet theater is art, yet art is not simply the exercise of its own self-importance.

Schumann asks:

Does the idea of doing with art more than art still exist? Are the arts interested in more than themselves? Can puppet theater be more than puppet theater by giving purpose and aggressivity [sic] back to the arts and make the gods' voices yell as loud as they should yell? (Schumann 83)

Of course, the answer to all of the rhetorical questions he poses is *yes*, but they are merely the outline of his theory, the practice of which, however, he has boldly undertaken by making puppets and puppet theater.

---

<sup>53</sup> Schumann, 81

The five aspects of freedom possessed by puppet theater – as averred by Schumann himself – confirm Stefan Brecht’s conviction that Schumann is a great artist. Revisiting Stefan Brecht’s claim, namely that Schumann is the inventor of a new medium, that he is one of the few to use the *Verfremdungseffekt*, that he has dealt with the issues of his age, that his work is profoundly moral and that he has consciously practiced his art outside of the money economy are put to the test in the context of the practice of his theory. *Why* he has chosen puppet theater should be clear; *what* he has done and *how* he accomplished it follows logically.

The new medium that Stefan Brecht credits Schumann with inventing, known as the ‘live puppet’ show, consists of the combination of various-sized puppets, some with visible operators, others operated invisibly, with masked and un-masked performers where “...the performance itself is the thing” the doing of which “must not be obscured by Things (Stefan Brecht 152-3)”. Schumann conceived of his puppets as live, not in the sense that they were powered by an invisible agency, but that they were themselves agents of some purpose.<sup>54</sup> Schumann’s invention is puppetry as sculpture, figures infused with aliveness as opposed to inanimate, monolithic fixtures. Schumann appears to have abandoned puppetry, or what is customarily thought of as puppetry: the artificial movement of an inanimate thing manipulated by an operator. Instead Schumann’s art is live and alive. His performances are free from any conflict between the audiences’ knowledge that the puppet is just an inanimate object and the illusion of its

---

<sup>54</sup> Stefan Brecht, 303

independence.<sup>55</sup> Schumann redefines puppetry, using a variety of types, from masked figures and rod puppets to oversized puppets operated from within. Schumann's art is alive with purpose. In the opinion of Stefan Brecht,

Schumann seems to have conceived of the theater he was trying to create as a combination of sculpture and dance, i.e.: of the sculptural abstractions of expressions of his puppets and masks with the gestural [sic] abstractions of their movements. He seems to have had in mind a theater substituting body movement – or rather the combination of sculpturally abstracted facial expression, body presence and of gesture formalized as in dance – for speech (Stefan Brecht 322).

The use of masks neutralizes the human performer in Schumann's performances, but for Stefan Brecht, the mask is the crux of a *Bread and Puppet* piece.<sup>56</sup> Abstract, misshapen, and often cobbled together from other masks, the lack of sophisticated technical execution "...is an essential part of the *Bread and Puppet* performance style (Stefan Brecht 288)". The mask represents the mysterious, concealing the performer, an anonymity which gives him superiority. "A puppet, to a greater or lesser extent, takes on its animator's life...A mask, on the contrary, gives its lack of life and its identity to the wearer of it...The puppet borrows from its operator; the mask gives to its wearer".<sup>57</sup> Schumann's art fuses together the charm and aliveness of puppetry with the anonymously foreboding power of mask to create a carnival of the representative, distinct and free from the expectations of 'high' culture. It identifies with traditional forms, yet it imitates nothing save for the original ecstatic and ritualistic uses of puppets and idols in the

---

<sup>55</sup> Stefan Brecht, 306 – "The tradition within which to view Schumann's puppet theater, then, is really not that of the puppet theater, a folk and children's entertainment on a small stage...but that of masked dance and drama, one of the oldest of all art forms, going back to pre-agricultural shamanistic and totemic ritual...(Stefan Brecht 317-18)"

<sup>56</sup> Ryder, 2

<sup>57</sup> Stefan Brecht, 309



ancient world. His art is a ceremony engaged in by performer and audience alike, "... something...invented as part of a transaction between [them] (Stefan Brecht 288)". The performance is the ceremony, and one sees it for what it is, alienating it. His invention is its adaptation to the modern world, a dance of life and death.

Stefan Brecht claims that Schumann is one of the few artists to utilize the *Verfremdungseffekt* and draw its political and aesthetic ramifications. Like Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theater, which aims to disassociate emotionally and narrate a picture of the world to an audience, Schumann's use of 'alienation' attempts to hold a picture of the world up like a mirror in the face of a non-audience – in other words, for those not intending to see a theatrical performance. Ideally, the audience does not identify with the characters, but is made to use their reason to understand the confrontation. Bertolt Brecht intended to interpret the world but also to change it. Likewise, Schumann's ultimate ambition was the regeneration of all mankind. However, Schumann's synthesis arose from a foundation of spirituality whereas Bertolt Brecht used science and politics as a vehicle for his expression.

Revisiting Schumann's manifesto – as delineated by Stefan Brecht – the necessity of art is of paramount importance: the doing of it rather than the imbibing of it. Stefan Brecht continues:

[The manifesto] stipulated the kind of art that everybody ought to be creating: a response to life, and thus to the actual historical situation people find themselves in; bypassing or transcending, not expressing individual peculiarity; helpful to others; not borrowing the forms of or reproducing art of another age; not response or attempt to contribute to existing contemporary art, to the given art being done

and recognized as such or as good; not application of technique and independent of technical skills.<sup>58</sup>

Schumann recorded his ideals just as he was making the transition to puppetry in the early 1960s, and therefore it is reasonable to assume he saw in puppetry the means to embody his them.<sup>59</sup> Schumann's first puppet exhibition entitled *Burning Towns* he performed in August and September of 1962 in upstate New York and New York City. Advertised as a "dance production with life-size puppets", it presented the theme of war's sudden descent upon a peaceful community, one to which Schumann would return.<sup>60</sup> The performance featured puppets of various sizes in their traditional milieu – behind a curtain. This wall between performers and audience was fluid, included at times and disposed of at others. This combination, says Stefan Brecht, "...is achieved with an ostentatious lack of neatness" which "...is alienatory [sic] and incites to creative apprehension (Stefan Brecht 105)". Schumann played with the fourth wall, both using it and discarding it, bringing the audience into the action, removing the illusion that they are witnessing an intimate scene by addressing them directly and purposefully.<sup>61</sup>

A later production entitled *The Story of the World* one reviewer placed in the Brechtian tradition, noting "...its starkly simple action, interplay of character and actor, and dissonant music..." but goes on to say it is "farther out" than Brecht.<sup>62</sup> Bertolt Brecht said of the artist that his "...object is to appear strange and even surprising to the

---

<sup>58</sup> Stefan Brecht, 97

<sup>59</sup> Stefan Brecht, 98

<sup>60</sup> Stefan Brecht, 105 – From the recollections of a Schumann associate.

<sup>61</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 136 – From an essay entitled *Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect*.

<sup>62</sup> Stefan Brecht, 112 – From a review of a show performed in March of 1963 at the Harvard College Adams House.

audience (Bertolt Brecht 92)”. Schumann’s simplistic production style combined with the narrative and the oddity of his presentation shows his courage as an artist. In another sense, it validates the claim that his art is an offspring of the Epic Theater, where what the exhibition represents rather than its form matters. Bertolt Brecht tore down the walls of dramatic reenactment and sought to alter the audience, to reshape the world out of the discord, but still depended on the stage. Schumann stepped off of the stage, confronting his audience at eye level, seeking to reshape them as well, but on a spiritual level rather than an intellectual one. People, for Schumann, though “...by and large...base- and or mean-spirited...[possessed]...a residue of simplicity of spirit and innocence of heart that could be appealed to, opening them to address of corresponding form, and potential for spiritual regeneration through such address (Stefan Brecht 22)”. Like Bertolt Brecht, Schumann does not intend for his audience to identify with his characters. He inquires into the historical situation in which his audience finds itself and offers them an alternative, arousing in them a desire for alteration. But unlike Brecht, Schumann’s simplistic and intentionally crude method aims to show the fundamental simplicity of life, one in which the most profound truths appear in the most ordinary ways and make room for the possibility of spiritual rebirth.

Stefan Brecht credits Schumann with dealing with the issues of his age, most notably, the legacy of the Third Reich, mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century American imperialism, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He calls Schumann’s work ‘moral theater’ rather than Epic Theater. These assertions relate directly to one another in that the issues of his age posed a moral dilemma, and he chose to confront them. His opposition to religious and moral

convention is also necessary, paradoxically, to make moral art. Humanity, as he sees it, is in need of spiritual rebirth, so to follow the same conventions that have led humankind to its current predicament would be self-defeating. In this way his art is normative – in the economic sense of the word. Schumann makes art not simply to astound, to innovate, or to beautify his conceptions; rather, he aims to challenge the conventional thinking that leads human beings to their soul- and life-destroying actions. He does it largely removed from the institutional sponsorship of the arts that rewards persons who validate the status quo, or at the very least make art oblique enough to be ignored. In dealing with the issues or trauma of his age, Schumann opted for the moral position rather than the immoral or amoral one. Working outside of the money economy that has largely consumed art was necessary in order to confront highly-politicized issues from a moral stance. The final three assertions of Stefan Brecht regarding Peter Schumann are entirely intertwined and mutually dependent. Looked at from another standpoint, the content and scope of Schumann's puppet theater reflect the three strands of political and historical critique previously explored: sociological, philosophical and literary. In a microcosm, Peter Schumann's artistic pursuits are the culmination of the entire history of German puppet theater condensed into one unified vision and represent a return to its earliest antecedents.

Born in 1934, Peter Schumann grew up in the midst of the Third Reich, too young to fully understand what was taking place around him but nevertheless surrounded by it. He understood his nation's past by looking backwards and reflecting on its recent history, precisely the type of reflection many Germans a generation or more older than Schumann were unwilling to do. He came into life after Hitler's rise to power and could only reflect

on its ramifications after the fact. His past was neither burdened by a sense of helplessness nor collaboration during the period, so he could approach it with a clean slate. Before his emigration to America, from the mid-1950s to 1961, Schumann pursued sculpture and dance in Germany. Although his artistic vision began to form during this time, namely that his "...art was to be not just indulgence, nor just entertainment, but [a] means of salvation: for the artist and for his fellow men (Stefan Brecht 30)", Schumann had yet to find a political purpose. Schumann's creative period in Germany from the late 1950s up to 1961 is notable for his early attempts at sculpture and dance – elements he would later employ in America for the conception and performance of his *Totentanz*, an interpretive work. Stefan Brecht explains Schumann's antecedent:

The Dance of Death, in literature and frescoes going back to the early 15<sup>th</sup> and perhaps the 14<sup>th</sup> century, probably a French invention, is a double Christian allegory, rooted in the notions that death is God's wages for our sins, and that it exposes us to his judgment: allegory of dying...and of life (42).

Schumann himself, in a 2007 radio interview, spoke of the mystery cycles of Catholic rite, also a 14<sup>th</sup>- and 15<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon, as not only the inspiration behind his own *Domestic Resurrection Circus* but also the origin of puppetry itself. According to Schumann, the allegorical, church-sanctioned performances retold important passages from the Bible, serving as a kind of morality play for a public audience. Eventually these shows became too outrageous to be tolerated by the church and were subsequently banned, which in turn gave rise to the marketplace puppet show.<sup>63</sup> One must remember that Schumann's aim was the spiritual regeneration of mankind. The public puppet show was a byproduct of church censorship, and considering his Christian upbringing, it is not

---

<sup>63</sup> Schumann radio interview

surprising that he would cite such an antecedent. Schumann's formative attempts at interpretive performance in his native Germany fell flat not because they lacked vision, but because his countrymen wanted little to do with political art.

It may be a stretch to suppose that Schumann's *Totentanz* was an outcome of the naïve reflection and "...his growing awareness of his nation's Nazi past (Stefan Brecht 40)". Described by one American critic as "...a ritual dance of death, performed by young men and women and one or two children, all in black garments...they circle about and leap...until one by one they are symbolically dead (Stefan Brecht 86)". It was naïve in the sense that he experienced it through the filter and innocence of his earliest childhood, although it was no less real for him. Stefan Brecht insists that "Schumann has in his art never dealt with National Socialism (Stefan Brecht 484)", but he does not fail to mention that Schumann saw the era and the subsequent war as the killer of the German soul in much the same way that he would later see the Vietnam War affecting Americans. In Stefan Brecht's opinion, what troubled Schumann about his native country's past was its collective silence despite the apparentness of its actions.<sup>64</sup> In 1950s Germany Schumann found no struggle, only a growing consumerist mindset and decidedly apolitical populace. Speaking of his motivation to make interpretive art in Germany, Schumann says "...it didn't seem to make sense...we didn't know what for, when we did it...In Germany there were no politics – no visible politics (Stefan Brecht 24)". Bertolt Brecht wrote "...for art to be 'un-political' means only to ally itself with the 'ruling' group (Bertolt Brecht 196)". Schumann averred his intent was to make "socially-minded,

---

<sup>64</sup> Stefan Brecht, 484 – Undoubtedly a recurrent theme among Schumann's contemporaries

politically-motivated theater” by “stepping out of the art circles” to make “theater in the streets (Schumann radio)”. In Germany of the *Wirtschaftswunder* he was an artist making political art for an audience that didn’t want to think about politics. He failed to reach an audience in Germany, but he did not have a polarizing political issue with which to work. Life in America and the Vietnam War would change that.

Among the movements in America during the 1960s – the Youth Movement, the New Left, the Black Movement, the Counter Culture Movement, etc. – Schumann found little to which he could relate. To quote Stefan Brecht regarding one such phenomenon:

Hippie culture in the East Village, flower children and all, must have been positively repulsive to [Schumann] during the 60s: diametrically the opposite of his work cult, sobriety and esteem for sobriety, responsibility and esteem for it, respect for the monogamous family and its life (478).

Schumann needed a cause, and although apolitical in the sense that he did not espouse one view over others, he nonetheless required a polemical force within society which to address, and he found this in the Peace Movement.<sup>65</sup> This movement centered on the apparent senselessness of the Vietnam War. Whereas the other movements relied upon radicality and the occasional ‘freak-out’ of mainstream values, institutions, and behavior, “...the Peace Movement had respectability which the other...movements did not have – it was white, middle-class, academic, and moralistic and law-abiding (Stefan Brecht 471)”. What he did not find in Germany he found in America as it entered into the quagmire of the Vietnam War: a factionalized, politically-divided populace engaged in open struggle. Taking up the cause of peace through the medium of puppet theater focused Schumann’s attention and his will and provided him the impetus to make art – not art for art’s sake, to

---

<sup>65</sup> Stefan Brecht, 478

perfect a technique, or to celebrate his own ingenuity, but rather “to render services to humanity” which gave his work a social imperative.<sup>66</sup> His audience was, for him, ideal, for they were not seated in a theater; they did not come to see his show or any show for that matter, nor were they particularly disposed to his views. They were, however, in desperate need of agitation.<sup>67</sup>

The *Bread and Puppet Theater* was not protest theater. It aimed to bring the spectacle of war into the sights of the average war-supporting American: distorted, ambiguous masks worn by solemn marchers holding representations of dead babies, signs indicating the number of murdered citizens of Vietnam, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki.<sup>68</sup> Others were ghoulish hand-and-rod puppets and masks depicting a sword-wielding statue of liberty and a demon-like effigy of Uncle Sam. In an interview with the *Tulane Drama Review*, Schumann says of his invention:

We’ve had our best – and sometimes our most stupid – performances in the streets. Sometimes you make your point because our point is simply to be there in the street. It stops people in their tracks – to see those large puppets, to see something theatrical outside of a theater. They can’t take the attitude that they’ve paid money to go into a theater to ‘see something.’ Suddenly there is this thing in front of them, confronting them (Stefan Brecht 483)

Schumann referred to the performance as ‘stupid’. In the same interview he said, “You don’t make your point unless a five-year-old girl can understand it”. By ‘stupid’ he means the intensity of the spectacle, not a thematic stupidity or triteness. Stefan Brecht notes two antecedents from which Schumann drew inspiration: processions of Palm Sunday in

---

<sup>66</sup> Stefan Brecht, 480

<sup>67</sup> Stefan Brecht, 488

<sup>68</sup> Anti-nuclear armament marches were part of his repertoire



the Christian tradition and American Fourth of July parades. Interestingly, Brecht mentions another German who utilized the spectacle of the parade and rally, albeit for a very different purpose: Adolf Hitler.<sup>69</sup>

In dealing with the issues confronting the age in which he lived – and which confront him still – Schumann has chosen to take a moral stand against injustice. Communication has been the centerpiece of his medium, the live puppet show. In order to stand up to something perceived as wrong, he must explain his reasons for doing so. Maintaining his communicational, moral stand outside of the world of high art has always been his intention. He never made art to sell. In the 1960s, he lived with his family in Manhattan's Lower East Side, then an area of town known for its poverty, crime and generally miserable state. Schumann performed his theater to bring a message to people away from the traditional theatrical venues with no mind to climb the artistic or social ladder. Part of his systematic approach to his moral art was to minimize what proceeds he took in from performances to meet only the needs of basic sustenance.<sup>70</sup> It is cliché to speak of an artist 'selling out' or not, but Schumann chose to live his art, to esteem that function of his own poverty that allowed the spirit of artistic authenticity to exist. In that sense, Schumann lived the Romantic ideal of the *Hungerkünstler*, resurrecting it in the context of the modern (1960s and 1970s) countercultural movement. Surrounded by despondency and economic misery and bearing witness to the domestic effects of American foreign policy sharpened the righteousness required for his creative vision. His proximity to destitution further intensified his goal of making socially-minded statements

---

<sup>69</sup> Stefan Brecht, 489

<sup>70</sup> Stefan Brecht, 161

that were motivated politically and kept outside of the “art world”.<sup>71</sup> To succumb to the temptations of the high art establishment would have not only taken him out of the context he required to remain motivated, but it would have neutered his message. In that sense, he did not ‘sell out’ his art to become, as it were, a businessman. He has remained an artist to this day, confronting issues he sees as morally outrageous and definably wrong.

As recently as 2008 Peter Schumann used his live puppet show as the vehicle for political expression pertinent to current events. Two distinct yet related issues – the “War on Terror” and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – were the subjects of two different exhibitions. Schumann’s *Divine Reality Comedy*, an offshoot of his live puppet show, the Bread and Puppet Theater, took Dante’s *Commedia* and reworked it for a modern audience confronted with a modern moral dilemma. Satirizing both capitalism and the dubious aims and methods of the “War on Terror”, Schumann’s piece casts Santa Claus as a consumerist demon, incorporating that motif into the greater piece. The entire ensemble of actors, masked figures and puppets – in the frenzied production style Schumann has always employed – take part in the purgatory that is America’s new war, with the conspicuous inclusion of indefinite detentions, enhanced interrogations and torture. The critique of capitalism along with the systematic abuse of human rights has been a theme pursuant to Schumann’s views since the Vietnam War. With its Melian subplot of preemption and insane objectives, the “War on Terror” along with concordant institutions such as the School of the Americas (now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security

---

<sup>71</sup> Stefan Brecht, 163

Cooperation), Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Schumann says “...are not ‘rotten apples’, as [former president George W.] Bush called them, but are philosophically correct, pinpointable [sic] climaxes of the system, the cruelty of the capitalist system”.<sup>72</sup>

Schumann is certainly not the first artist to make the marriage of capitalism and war a central theme of his work, but his chosen mode of expression – live puppetry – “...an archetypal form of theater that has much deeper access to the human mind and soul...” makes his outspokenness unique.

A year earlier in 2007 Schumann exhibited a series of paintings in Boston and Burlington, Vermont with the intention of widening the consciousness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This exhibit followed a ten-day trip he had made to Palestine in which he met with ordinary people and had a chance to reflect upon their situations. The show entitled “Independence Paintings: Inspired by Four Stories” sparked outrage from organized Jewish group who branded the work “anti-Semitic” and “soft-core Holocaust denial”. His paintings, as he put it, were meant to protest the Israeli oppression of Palestinians, and were paired with passages from *The Wall*, a 1950 novel by John Hersey which detailed the plight of the Warsaw Ghetto Jews. Schumann was accused of comparing modern day Israelis with Nazis. Although that was not his intent, his stated theme – “oppressed people who oppress a people (Cook)” – had been perceived by some as crossing an acceptable line of discourse. “I’m not saying that what’s happening in Palestine is the same as what happened in Warsaw” Schumann is quoted in an interview from 2007, “...but it’s certainly a reminder (Picard)”.<sup>73</sup> As a redress and a chance to

---

<sup>72</sup> Cook

<sup>73</sup> Cook, Radio interview, Picard

explain his reflections on the consequences of his exhibition, Schumann told a radio interviewer in 2008

It's very hard for me as a German to take that kind of stand of being critical against Israel and its actions because of my particular fate of what Germany did to Jews during the Nazi Period (Radio interview transcript)

Unafraid to take a controversial issue and comment on it through his art, Schumann hit a nerve with his "Independence Paintings". Charges of anti-Semitism were leveled against him. Complaining that his critics misinterpreted his work but also "over-interpreted it" as well, Schumann commented at the time, "I don't understand how a people so terribly violated can now violate another people so badly".<sup>74</sup> Schumann had originally gone to Palestine to teach people how to turn their suffering into performance art – including the use of puppets. Although his controversial exhibition did not involve puppetry, in showing it he demonstrated his aptitude for taking a stand with art, a socially-minded, politically-motivated approach to expression.

---

<sup>74</sup> Picard

## Conclusion

Puppetry is simultaneously literary, visual, theatrical and musical. Made for audiences of all ages, puppet theater can simply be entertaining or provide the ideal artistic vehicle for the portrayal of a concept far deeper and more significant than comedy or the sentimental. Depending on the intent of the puppeteer, puppet theater may be used for propaganda, education or social agitation. While a puppet or marionette, once built, receives a personality entirely unique to it, its lack of consciousness allows a controller to manipulate it at will. A puppet is, therefore, an empty vessel that serves as a useful means to an end. Throughout German history, one finds puppets in the streets, the marketplace, in private estates and public theaters. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, puppets appeared on television and film.

Puppet theater microcosmically reflects the political and cultural history of Germany as well. For all but the last 140 years, Germany consisted of a loose collection of minor states, largely quarrelsome and united only by a common language and cultural denominator. Furthermore, for nearly 50 years of its unified history, Germany was internally divided along political and ideological lines – a familiar motif. While these centuries-old divisions affected all German peoples, puppet performers existed on the margins of society and often relied upon constant traveling for a livelihood. This sociological fact allowed them to experience the political divisions in *Deutschland*, but it also helped to create a cultural unity among Germans. While the laws and customs in *Großherzogtum Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach* differed greatly from those in *Württemberg*

and *Fürstentum Lippe*, e.g., the people in all of those localities likely knew of the buffoonish puppet Hanswurst and had seen the old puppet play of Dr. Faustus in the marketplace.

Puppet theater is a valuable and legitimate area of study in the field of *Germanistik* for its historical significance, especially the sociological experience of its performers and the varied and interesting makeup of its audience. Select areas of German philosophy concern themselves with puppets, at the very least on a metaphorical level. Perhaps most importantly, many great German literary, musical and artistic figures witnessed, loved and took inspiration from puppet theater. For example, no academic discussion of Goethe, Haydn or Hans Sachs would be complete without an exploration of the influence of and/or participation in puppet theater.

German puppet theater made great strides in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This work examines in detail the work of Peter Schumann and his relationship to the didacticism and theatrical innovations of Bertolt Brecht. Beyond those two figures, several others deserve a mention. In 1905, writer, director and puppeteer Paul Brann (b. 1873 – d. 1955) founded the Munich Artists Marionette Theater. What helped make its performances unique was that Brann considered the puppet to have an intellect separate from its manipulator. This allowed marionettes to improvise in a manner of speaking.<sup>75</sup> Between 1924 and 1926, the artist Lotte Reininger was the driving force behind *Die Geschichte vom Prinzen Achmed*, a project that combined stop-motion photography with shadow puppets. The marriage of puppetry with the new visual mediums of film and television would not end there. Walter

---

<sup>75</sup> Boehn, 157

Oehmichen founded the *Augsburger Puppenkiste* in the late 1940s. Presenting a wide range of traditional children stories with characters like Jim Knopf and Lukas, the fantastical *Lummerland* was brought to a wide audience through West German television in the 1950s.

In the academic world, the Ernst Busch *Hochschule für Schauspielkunst* was founded in East Berlin in the 1971. In southwest Germany, Albrecht Roser helped to create the *Figurentheaterschule* as part of the *Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst* in Stuttgart. Roser has been a performing puppeteer for over a half century and is greatly respected in the field, and counts the late Jim Henson as one of his admirers. *Figurentheater* is a fairly recent term used to denote puppet theater of a highly artistic nature distinct from carnival or street puppet theater. Even today, despite its advancements, “high” German puppet theater distinguishes itself from “low” varieties. If one takes nothing else from this study, take this: without the “low” there would be no “high” both in a historical and an existential sense. Perhaps the political and cultural divisions in Germany will one day fade into the distant past, providing an opportunity for the spiritual regeneration Peter Schumann strives for to take place.

