

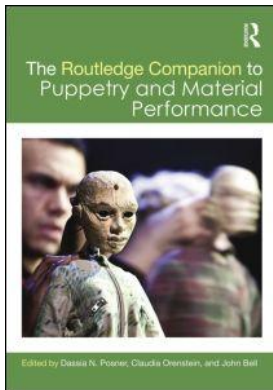
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“A Total Spectacle but a Divided One”

Redefining Character in Handspring Puppet Company’s *Or You Could Kiss Me*

Dawn Tracey Brandes

In 2010, fresh from the sweeping success of *War Horse*, the National Theatre of London and Handspring Puppet Company from Cape Town, South Africa, teamed up again to produce a new work for actors and puppets entitled *Or You Could Kiss Me*. Unlike *War Horse*, an epic drama about a boy and his horse during World War I, *Or You Could Kiss Me* told an intimate story on a more human scale. As Handspring’s artistic director Adrian Kohler wrote in the program for the play’s premiere at the National Theatre, “The territory we now wished to further explore, was the puppet as human in a naturalistic piece devoid of fantasy. Could a puppet handle this task? Would the audience ask whether this could have been done more simply with actors?” (cited in Bartlett 2010: 11) In other words, what can puppetry bring to a human narrative? In this chapter, I will argue that the puppetry in *Or You Could Kiss Me* enables a distinctly postmodern approach to subjectivity that complements and complicates the quest for self-understanding explored in the narrative. By expanding the notion of character to encompass actors, puppeteers, and puppets, the play stages a simultaneous unity and fracture between various fragments of the same character, emphasizing the instability of the self without deconstructing it altogether.

At its core, *Or You Could Kiss Me* is a simple play about two men. Mr. A and Mr. B meet in 1971 on a beach in Cape Town at the ages of 19 and 20, respectively. Sixty-five years later, as Mr. B’s health and memory simultaneously fail and Mr. A struggles to care for his ailing partner, the two attempt to come to terms with the knowledge that the next time Mr. B checks into the hospital, he will not be returning home. The text spirals through time, interweaving the past, present, and future of A and B’s relationship as a series of overlapping vignettes culled from the memories and imaginations of the two characters.

The flexible chronology of the narrative is further complicated by the double- and triple-casting of puppets and human actors. Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones perform (sans puppets) the present-day, middle-aged A and B, respectively. They also provide

the voices for the young and old puppet versions of their characters – Young A, Young B, Old A, and Old B – and often (but not always) participate in the manipulation of these puppets. Four other actors – Finn Caldwell, Craig Leo, Tommy Luther, and Mervyn Millar – act as a kind of chorus of assistants, manipulating the puppets when necessary, physically performing other characters in the story as needed, and conversing with the present-day A and B. The MC, played by Adjoa Andoh, serves a similar function but does not herself operate the puppets. Rather, the MC guides the narrative, instructing other characters on how they should interact with one another and encouraging the various incarnations of A and B to alternately reflect on the past and move through the present.

The puppets, designed and constructed by Kohler, are “five-sixths of life-size” (Kohler cited in Bartlett 2010: 13). While the detail of their carved wooden heads is astonishing, particularly in the older characters whose faces sag with age, the chisel marks remain visible, as do the joints of the puppets’ fully articulated limbs. The puppets are not strictly naturalistic in their construction – there is no attempt to conceal their mechanics – nor are the puppeteers hidden. In the intimate black box of the National’s Cottesloe Theatre, the audience surrounded the narrow alley stage on three sides, making it even more difficult for the two or three performers manipulating each puppet to recede into the background. Two stage managers and an accordionist were also visible to the audience, the former adding and subtracting minor set pieces and props from the relatively bare stage as needed, the latter providing musical accompaniment and, at times, the exaggerated inhalation and exhalation of the puppet characters’ breathing through the use of the instrument’s bellows.

By representing A and B in triplicate, *Or You Could Kiss Me* unsettles the notion of character as a unified entity that exists in a clear one-to-one relationship with the actor portraying it. This unsettling of character is a staple of postmodern theatre as understood by Elinor Fuchs in her seminal work *The Death of Character*. Fuchs writes that, just as postmodern philosophy declared its suspicion of metanarratives and stable subjectivity, so too did postmodern theatre reject character-driven representations of a seemingly autonomous subject, emphasizing instead fragmentation and exteriority. To quote Fuchs: “Nothing ‘out there,’ no one ‘in here.’ The interior space known as ‘the subject’ was no longer an essence, an in-dwelling human endowment, but flattened into a social construction or marker in language, the unoccupied occupant of the subject position” (Fuchs 1996: 3).

Thus, the postmodern character, if such a thing can be conceived, is one of division and construction, surface and masks. Rather than striving for a representation of coherent subjectivity, postmodern theatre argues that no such coherence exists and revels in the play of layer upon layer of fiction.

Fuchs’s notion of postmodern theatre as one in which “the human figure is no longer the single, perspectival ‘point’ of stage performance” (Fuchs 1996: 12) is an important step towards defining this difficult model of theatre, but a caveat must be introduced. There is a danger in reading trends towards fracture, displacement, and exteriority too apocalyptically – that is, in sounding the death knell for character too hastily. As Patrice Pavis sagely suggests, “The character is not dead; it has merely become polymorphous and difficult to pin down” (Pavis 1999: 52). In his book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann makes a related point when he cautions

his readers against assuming that postmodern¹ theatre has lost interest in the human being. He asks:

Is it not rather a matter of a changed perspective on human subjectivity? What finds articulation here is less intentionality – a characteristic of the subject – than its failure, less conscious will than desire, less the “I” than the “subject of the unconscious.” So rather than bemoan the lack of an already defined image of *the* human being in postdramatically organized texts, it is necessary to explore the new possibilities of thinking and representing the individual human subject sketched in these texts.

(Lehmann 1999 [2006]: 18)

Resisting past models does not eradicate character altogether, nor does it attest to a decreased interest in subjectivity. Rather, as Lehmann and Pavis imply, postmodern theatre offers a new approach to character, allowing the constructedness of identity and the slipperiness of subjectivity to be foregrounded rather than erased.

The written text of *Or You Could Kiss Me* gestures towards this slipperiness by dramatizing the desire to construct a stable sense of self, as well as depicting the impossibility of such a task. Old B’s failing memory is emphasized throughout, and his attempts to recall his youth are often met with frustration. In one early scene, Old B desperately tries to reconstruct his past by searching through a box of photos while the other characters look on. The pictures prompt some memories but not without contradiction and uncertainty. As Old B rummages through his photographs, the MC lectures the audience about various kinds of memory loss, and Old B exhibits each in turn, appealing to Old A and the assistants to fill in the gaps left by the photos. When one of the assistants asks what Old B is trying to accomplish, B replies:

B: Trying to remember. To remember the first time.

ASSISTANT A: The first time what?

ASSISTANT [B]: The first time they – (*made love*)?

B: The first time he *knew*. The first time it felt like they were ...

(Bartlett 2010: 37)

As with much of the language throughout the play, the text of this exchange relies heavily on unspoken words and unanswered questions. The italicized “*made love*” is the most blatant example of this; the words appear in the printed text to clarify the subtext for the reader, but onstage the meaning of the sentence is only implied by the actor’s delivery of the first half of the line. Old B is searching for one concrete moment that defines his life: a moment that no one is able to name. However, it is also a search for himself – one that comes up empty handed. When he asks those around him to identify a face in a photograph, Old A and the assistants assure him it’s “You, when you still had your brown hair” (Bartlett 2010: 44), but Old B fails to recognize this image from his own past. Ostensibly, it is Old B’s memory loss that prevents him from answering his own questions about who he is and who he was,



Figure 22.1 *Or You Could Kiss Me*, National Theatre, London (2010) presented in association with Handspring Puppet Company: written and directed by Neil Bartlett; Basil Jones (left) and Adrian Kohler (right) animate Old B and Old A. Photo: © Simon Annand/Arena PAL

and at the climax of the play, the memory that Old B appears to be searching for – that is, the first time A and B made love – is reconstructed, with the assistants narrating the action and A and B wielding the Young A and Young B puppets. Read on its own, it is possible to see the reconstruction of this memory as the climactic restoration of the coherent subject.

There is an additional layer of fragmentation present in this production that needs to be addressed in order to fully grasp the extent of the postmodern character's instability. Thus, we turn now to the role of puppetry in the construction of postmodern character in *Or You Could Kiss Me*.

The connection between puppetry and postmodernism is an obvious one. Puppets are objects, after all, inherently devoid of interiority. In other words, if postmodern subjectivity can be likened to a series of masks under which no essential core can be found, then the puppet seems to be its perfect receptacle. Indeed, during recent years, puppetry in the West has tended to emphasize rather than conceal the fragmentary nature of its design. In an article tracing modern trends in European puppetry training, Cariad Astles suggests that over the past 20 to 30 years, puppetry training programs have transformed from a puppet-centric model to what she calls a "puppetesque aesthetic" (Astles 2010: 23). In the older model of the mid- to late twentieth century, "all focus and attention [was] on the puppet, which was the core of action, character, narrative, and plot" (Astles 2010: 23). More recently, the focus has dispersed, leaving the puppet as merely one element among many others contributing to the so-called "visual dramaturgy" (Astles 2010: 25) of the piece. Importantly, Astles does not explicitly align the puppetesque with the postmodern anti-character. However, by associating a visually undivided character with the puppet-centric model, the

article implies a polarity: At one extreme, traditional puppet performances (particularly in the West) conceal the puppeteer and strive to create the impression of a unified character anchored in the puppet body. At the other, object theatre focuses instead on the transformative capabilities latent in the objects and matter, “suggesting that all things and all matter can be live, can have movement, and can interact with other elements” (Astles 2010: 31).

Astles’s notion of the puppetesque supports my claim that contemporary puppetry, through its de-emphasizing of character and accentuation of fragmentation, has the potential to address uniquely postmodern themes. Like Fuchs, Astles defines a useful polarity (in this case, between traditional, puppet-centric puppet theatre and the contemporary, puppetesque aesthetic) without describing the space between the poles. While an extreme version of the puppetesque aesthetic might eradicate character altogether, an intermediary form might present an unstable but identifiable notion of character while retaining the same level of fracture and fragmentation espoused by the puppetesque aesthetic. One excellent example of this model of puppetry can be found in Roland Barthes’s writings on Japanese *bunraku* puppet theatre, to which I now turn.

Barthes is interested in *bunraku* because of the tension resulting from the distance between the puppets, the puppeteers, and the chanter. An art dating back to the seventeenth century, contemporary *bunraku* utilizes puppets manipulated by three puppeteers. A chanter (*tayu*), accompanied by a samisen player, narrates the story and supplies all the character voices, from a small, separate side platform² The division of character across so many elements has the potential to challenge the illusion of character as something that is unified and coherent, and yet the subject or character is not done away with entirely in this model. As Barthes (1970 [1982]: 55) suggests, *bunraku* is “a total spectacle but a divided one” in which the aesthetic is “not destroyed but somehow broken, striated” (1970 [1982]: 54). A kind of autonomy exists in the multiplicity; it is only a matter of understanding a character who is at once divided and complete, or striving towards completion.

This notion of a compiled character, made complete through pastiche, is crucial to the performance of *Or You Could Kiss Me*. In a promotional video for the show entitled “Choreographing Thought,” Jones beautifully describes one way in which this style of puppetry affects the construction of character in the production. When the play’s director/playwright Neil Bartlett asks the cast of *Or You Could Kiss Me* about their experience of manipulating a puppet in consultation with two other puppeteers, Jones answers:

There’s a sense in which ... the three people working together kind of mirror a real human being better than an “ordinary” actor onstage in that we always have several trains of thought working together in our heads. Some that are about our immediate physical environment, others ... we are so complex, really, in our minds, that we are able to have several [bodies at once]. And the fact that also our body is sort of “thinking” in a way. We’ve got an arm that’s thinking and feet that are thinking. It’s kind of a little bit more like a real human being than a real human being. Or certainly it highlights certain aspects of that multiplicity that is [in] us – the corporeal

nature of thought. So “what are you thinking?” is a huge question for a group of three puppeteers because there is an amazing congruence of thought and separation of thought.

(May 2010)

Jones’s attention to the multiplicity of thought present in puppet performance echoes Barthes’s notion of the striated-but-complete nature of *bunraku*. This connection is hardly surprising given Handspring’s aesthetic, which is often inspired by *bunraku* techniques. Their puppets, designed and created by Kohler, almost always rely on more than one manipulator, who is often, to varying degrees, visible to the audience. And yet, as Jones’s comments make clear, the presence of three manipulators (even visible ones) never demolishes the puppet-centric model that Astles associates with an early twentieth-century version of puppetry. On the contrary, skilled puppeteers can use their visibility to direct focus even more powerfully to the puppet. As American puppeteer Bruce Schwarz once wrote:

I keep the mechanics out in the open because I don’t want people to pay attention to them. ... My theory is that watching me move the puppets with my hands will become dull after a little while. When it does, the puppets will be more interesting than I am.

(cited in Tillis 1992: 132)

Jones’s comments suggest a multiplicity *within* the character, not the breakdown of character as such. Watching the puppeteers in “Choreographing Thought” crawl awkwardly along the floor and contort their own bodies in order to invest their puppet with realistic movements, it is difficult to imagine a more puppet-centric model. All three puppeteers focus intently on the object they manipulate, and the audience is encouraged to do the same. What Jones is emphasizing here is not quite the split focus touted by Barthes but rather a rich character life that includes physicalized contradictions.

In *Or You Could Kiss Me*, these tensions and contradictions between the various iterations of each character form an essential part of the production. We see this in the opening moments of the show, when Old A and Old B enter for the first time. Encouraged by the assistants manipulating the puppets, A and B move hesitantly towards their older puppet selves, exchanging glances as they take up the controls of their respective selves. As Old B smokes his cigarette, Jones moves the arm holding the cigarette to the puppet’s lips, inhaling a ragged breath. On the exhale, Jones blows the swirling smoke from the tip of the cigarette, a gesture that serves both to mimic breath (and therefore life) in Old B, but also to unite B and Old B as one character across time, while still maintaining the distinction between puppeteer and puppet, observer and observed, caretaker and patient. The *character* of B/Old B seems to exist somewhere between the two, in the smoke billowing from the cigarette.

This opening moment emphasizes the connection between the two versions of B. Elsewhere in the show, disjuncture is foregrounded. As Old B’s failing memory takes center stage, it becomes more difficult to unite B’s variously striated parts. In one flashback scene, for instance, Young A and Young B play squash, deftly wielded



Figure 22.2 Basil Jones animates Old B. Photo: © Simon Annand/Arena PAL

by A and B with the help of the assistants. But when a janitor catches the two young men in the compromising position of what could have been their first kiss, A and B disagree on the order of events. A remembers B fighting back verbally, but B insists that he simply walked away. Old B and Old A, themselves puppets, mutely watch the debate from the sidelines, struggling to piece together these events that, for them, occurred over 60 years earlier. In the closing moments of the memory, Young B waves goodbye to his squash partner, who will become his life partner. The stage direction reads: “*B transfers the gesture of waving goodbye from Young B to Old B*” (Bartlett 2010: 64). The passing of the wave between three incarnations of the same character unites the past, present, and future of this single character, briefly collapsing time and space even as A and B struggle to get their stories straight. Did Young B confront the guard as A suggests? Or is B telling the truth when he says that he placidly walked away? Does the wave goodbye arise from a memory, or is it a performance on the part of B, retroactively attributed to his younger self and unknowingly adopted by his older one? A is similarly inscrutable in this scene; while reconstructing his side of the conversation, the stage directions tell us that “*A has had enough of this – he passes the line to an ASSISTANT to say*” (Bartlett 2010: 64). Character is not lost in this exchange; we continue to understand A and B as discrete individuals, but there is a degree of instability at the heart of these characters. Rather than bringing us closer to an essential core or a verifiable truth, these recollections and reminiscences raise more questions than they answer and remind the audience that such goals may be ultimately unattainable.

The simultaneous unity and fracture between these many pieces of the same character is even more apparent in another flashback sequence, in which Old B

recalls his life before meeting A. At a party, Young B waits nervously to be approached by one of the other men at the end of the evening. The assistants, as the other partygoers, narrate an inner monologue – perhaps their own but perhaps Young B’s: “come on come on come on somebody choose me” (Bartlett 2010: 54–55). Jones manipulates the Young B puppet alone, holding it aloft so that Jones’s face is largely concealed behind its body. With its feet hovering off the floor and one arm dangling at its side, the puppet seems more like an object than ever before, especially when surrounded by the crush of non-puppet guests. Unlike the careful union of breath linking B and Young B in the opening scene, here the puppet seems more like a shield behind which B hides, protecting B from a memory that must be experienced by a surrogate rather than entered into. Thus when Jones utters the climactic line “Somebody please touch me” (Bartlett 2010: 55), it is unclear to whom the voice should be attributed. The voice seems to reach across all three iterations of the character (B, Old B, and Young B) as each one watches or participates in the unfolding action.

The elusiveness of subjectivity is not only apparent in the performance itself. Bartlett reveals in his program note that the script grew out of intensely personal stories shared between Kohler, Jones, and himself early in the collaboration, “encounters with the unspeakable” that he intertwined to create a story (Bartlett 2010: 10). The autobiographical nature of the creation process naturally leads to questions of veracity, as Bartlett acknowledges and cagily addresses:

[S]everal people have asked me, as the project has developed, whether the characters A and B are “really” the performers whose initials they share in



Figure 22.3 Basil Jones lifts Young B. Photo: © Simon Annand/Arena PAL

the cast list of the first production. I can only answer by saying that all the events of this play, both those which take place in the past and those which take place in the future, are true.

(Bartlett 2010: 10)

Bartlett swears authenticity while cleverly undercutting his own claim by insisting that the future events depicted are also “true.” Bartlett’s definition of truth is therefore called into question. Does he mean that all of these events happened, but not necessarily to Kohler and Jones? Or that the events depicted in the show, like losing a loved one or facing your own mortality, are predictable and inevitable?³

A photo included in the program further piques the audience’s interest in the potentially autobiographical nature of the text: a full-page, black-and-white photograph reveals a young Kohler and Jones standing on a beach, with a caption that reads, “Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones in 1971. ‘This did happen.’” The last three words echo the phrase “This is going to happen” (Bartlett 2010: 45), a line repeated by the MC character many times during the play. As the text weaves its way through the memories of Old A and Old B, often encountering contested recollections that destabilize the audience’s understanding of what is true and what is false, this photo seems to imply that at least one component – the first meeting of Young A and Young B on a Cape Town beach – is true. But we shouldn’t be so quick to accept its veracity; after all, when Old B rifles through his own box of photographs in search of a concrete memory, he comes up empty-handed. This reproduced photo is similarly elusive: it may provide a kernel of truth from within the layers of memory, fiction, fracture, and play, but it also draws attention to the gaps that remain. On another level, the photo is an object, not wholly unlike the puppets onstage. And like the puppets and bodies onstage, the photo re-extends the boundaries of character, incarnating not only a Young A and Young B, but also a Young Adrian and Young Basil. Put another way, the photograph slyly suggests that despite the contradictions, misdirections, and split focus plaguing the fictional characters in the play, a stable core exists in the real-life models of the story being told. “This did happen” – a statement of certainty. But this is all we get: a single photograph attesting to a connection back to something “real.” There is a truth to these characters, the photograph seems to imply, but it is an essence that is not fully attainable.

Notes

- 1 Although Lehmann coins the term “postdramatic” to describe the avant-garde theatre to which he refers, his criteria align closely with Fuchs’s description of postmodern theatre. For further discussion of the similarities between these two terms, see Karen Juerr-Munby’s “Introduction” to *Postdramatic Theatre* (Lehmann 1999 [2006]: 13–14).
- 2 It could be argued that the samisen player, who provides musical accompaniment to the performance in tandem with the chanter’s narration, offers another potential site onto which the character may be grafted, but Barthes is less interested in this connection.
- 3 Bartlett is slightly more forthcoming about the inspirations for the piece in a platform event for the National Theatre. I am interested, however, in the questions that the play and its supplementary program notes raise, leaving aside information gathered by the audience after the performance has ended.

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