

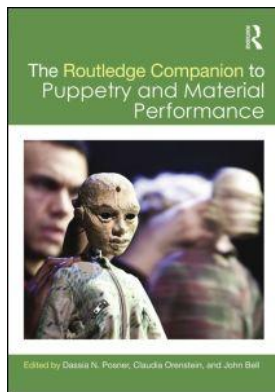
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Section II

Perspectives from Practitioners

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Visual Dramaturgy

Some Thoughts for Puppet Theatre-Makers

Eric Bass

Several years ago, at a conference on ensemble theatre, one participant proposed a workshop on physical dramaturgy to complement text-based approaches to creating and critiquing theatre. For many ensembles, “writing” a piece is actually the physical process of embodying the shapes, gestures, movements, and tableaux that suggest the thread or theme of the work being explored. Devising work in this way redefines what we mean by dramaturgy. In a world in which not all theatre is text based, the body’s “mind” may direct us. Physical impulse, rather than thought, may be the “writer.”

As a puppeteer, I responded to this physical theatre-maker that, if we are going to talk about physical dramaturgy, we need to talk about visual dramaturgy as well. He responded that they were the same thing. I do not believe this. He, by the way, also no longer believes this.

Physical impulses can certainly lead to visual tension. Look for a moment at Anne Bogart’s *Viewpoints* work. One of the first “viewpoints” that Bogart’s SITI Company teaches is spatial relationship, the tension between actors created by their stage positions alone (Bogart and Landau 2004: 11). In every spatial relationship, there is an implied story, a relationship: who dominates the picture? What position implies action or stasis? How might the spatial relationship suggest dialogue that is vertical – that talks to God rather than Man? *Viewpoints*-trained actors discover their characters as a result of physical impulses, rather than by text analysis. They are working within another dramaturgical realm, one that does not try to give the audience information but rather lets the audience discover the drama together with the actor.

This being said, visual dramaturgy is yet again a different approach.

All theatre-making is play. Serious play, many would say, but play nonetheless. The people we now call “actors” were in Shakespeare’s time called “players.” We make “plays,” although this word so often refers to something that is so rigorously set in text that it might be difficult to play with it at all. Physical play-making puts the play back in theatre. Visual play-making does, too, in a different way.

Some years ago we began work on a new piece. We had brought in a director for the show, a man with a very good sense of the texture and shape of materials but

whose forte was clearly physical theatre. In our first week of rehearsals, he witnessed the members of our company moving boxes and boards around the stage, making shapes and structures, playing with the materials. He asked when we would actually begin rehearsals. We replied that we had already begun. This was, in fact, rehearsing. We discovered that the materials created many different shapes that suggested rooftops. From this came the discovery of what this scene would be about and how we would “talk” about it. Rooftops suggested rooms, rooms suggested isolation. The visual dramaturgy in this approach opened up both the content of the scene and the dramatic tension in the elements from which the scene was built.

As puppeteers, the material of our theatre-making is material itself. Our shows might have characters in them, but those characters are made of materials that say as much about who they are as the words they speak. We cannot take for granted that they are human; indeed, even when they represent humans, they are of a different reality. When we begin work on a Sandglass show, the first question we ask ourselves is “Why is this character played by a puppet and not an actor?” If we cannot answer this question, it is probably because the character is too much like a human and should remain in that domain. On the other hand, a character who comes out of dream or memory, a character whose being embodies imbalance or fragmentation, a character who sees us as “other” – all of these (and more) beg to be played by puppets. Each suggests a world that could be other than ours.

The arrangement of materials onstage is a dramatic event. One of the exercises that we often use in teaching goes like this: alongside the stage (but outside the playing area) 12 objects are placed. The objects are of varying shapes, sizes, textures, and functions: a ladder, a window, a barrel, a wine glass, an umbrella, a rope, and a candlestick, for example. A team of “players” gets to place these objects onstage in the playing area. Each player can move only one object in his/her turn. When seven objects have been placed onstage, a turn might involve removing or replacing an object or simply changing its position. The task of the “player” is to increase the dramatic tension of the scene. Most important: do not try to tell a story!

This is the moment when the fun really begins. It is quite amazing how invested people become in their sense of drama and the placement of their objects. Any moment might be a cliffhanger, an exasperating moment in which someone’s move has completely changed the direction of a “piece.” These static pictures, made up only of objects, are exercises in play-making. They are without human characters (either actors or puppets), and yet they contain the elements of dramaturgy. Again, it is important to say that dramaturgy does not necessarily refer to “telling a story.” Creating dramatic tension might imply story, and the audience might find one, but that is very different from making storytelling an intent. In this case, it actually gets in the way of discovering dramatic tension.

Kermit Love, the creator of Big Bird and other characters for Sesame Street, as well as a designer for the New York City and Joffrey Ballets, once distinguished between the puppet and the actor in this way: when the actor comes onstage, he needs to make a statement; when the puppet comes onstage, it IS a statement. For the puppet, speech may be redundant. It is already speaking volumes by its materials, by its role as part of a stage picture, by its relationship to objects, even by its physical limitations. In terms of visual dramaturgy, how do we use these properties

to create? How do we use them to speak in a way that is as powerful as words? How do we use them to create tension with the text?

One of the problems in using puppets to speak text-based theatre is that the puppets are often reduced to vehicles for delivering language that is, in fact, the language of actors. This might be a powerful use of the puppet, in certain contexts, but only when it recognizes the inherent quality of the puppet as different from the actor.

Citing Bogart (2000) once again (who was herself quoting Friedrich Dürrenmatt, I believe), when what we see onstage and what we hear onstage are essentially the same, we have basically cancelled out the tension that we could have created among these dramatic elements. We have created mere illustration. Images have the power to stand alone as dramatic storytellers, but where text is also included, they have the power to act counter to the text to give the piece an added level of tension and complexity.

Let us look at two applications of visual dramaturgy in puppet theatre. In the first instance there is no text. We begin with an image. The image might be a dynamic still life, a stage tableau. The image contains materials, figures made from those materials, and a spatial relationship of those figures. Perhaps there is also a relationship between puppets and humans, an intersection of worlds. We look at the image. Where does it want to go? If it does not “want” to go anywhere, perhaps there is no tension in it to work with. So we move something, create imbalance. Now where is it taking us? What inspired this image? Perhaps it was a dream? Or a painting by Chagall?

An example of this is from a Sandglass Theater production, *Between Sand and Stars*, which we completed in 2005. The production was a puppet-and-aerial piece based on images suggested by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s 1939 memoir/novel *Wind, Sand and Stars*. Everything takes place in the mind and memory of a 1930s mail pilot who crashes in the North African desert. As he crawls endlessly in search of rescue, he dreams about the risks he has taken and in what way taking risks has given his life a sense of meaning and passion, whether it is the risk of physical adventure or the risk in making art. The puppet representing him is a ten-string marionette operated by five puppeteers, each about 10 feet away from it. This distance gives the puppet the autonomy it needs to seem to be alone in the desert. At the same time, the visible connections between puppet and puppeteers give the puppet its lifelines, which disconnect one by one as the puppet weakens and approaches death. The physical dramaturgy of the scene lies in the puppet’s effort to survive. The visual dramaturgy lies in the puppet’s dependence on the five manipulators. It does not recognize the puppeteers, but the audience feels the dramatic tension in this relationship.

The metaphor of the puppet dying as its strings are cut is an old one. Artists such as Henk Boerwinkel in the compilation piece *Metamorphoses* (1991), performed with his company Figuretheater Triangel, and Philippe Genty with his Pierrot puppet in the show *Round Like a Cube* (see Margaret Williams’s earlier chapter in this book) have used it to great power. In and of itself, it might be thought of now as a cliché. As visual dramaturgy, however, it can become fresh if it leads us beyond being an end in itself. The challenge of *Between Sand and Stars* was to animate empty space. The distance between the pilot puppet onstage and the aerialists in the air (his



Figure 4.1 *Between Sand and Stars*, a collaboration among Sandglass Theater, Gemini Trapeze, and Rob Mermin (2003) based on images from Antoine de St. Exupéry's *Wind, Sand and Stars*: as the pilot lost in the desert struggles to make his way through endless sands, the marionette's lifelines are visible. Photo: © Richard Termine, richardtermine@nyc.rr.com

dreams? ideals? ambitions?) had to be active. In essence, *Between Sand and Stars* was a piece *about* spatial relationship. It was a piece about *air*. Alone in the desert, the pilot is again surrounded by empty space, and yet he clings to something, some hope, some breath of life. That breath came from the five manipulators, shadows beyond the puppet's world yet breathing as one, giving a physical and visual sense of contact through space. In our scene, the puppet does not die or rebel against its manipulators. At the point of near disconnection, breathing through only one string, the pilot is rescued by the man he thought to be his enemy, an Arab camel rider.

Let us look at a second application of visual dramaturgy, this time in a piece with text. Not all text is dialogue. It is true that many puppets "speak," but not all do and not all should. How do we know? It is perhaps too easy to say, but I think we have to listen. Do we hear the voice? If so, is it the voice of the puppet's speech or its thoughts? Where does it come from? Puppets have a way of defying our intentions. They are not always built to do what we intend.

In this instance, what is the role of visual dramaturgy? One approach may be to separate the text from the visual scene we are staging. How can the scene exist in its own right, separate from the words? If the dialogue speaks of flight, can the puppets be made of stone, suggesting weight, so that our investment in the *need* for flight is enhanced?

In the process of visual dramaturgy, it is not always the text that comes first. Each of us has in himself/herself many dialogues, speeches, poems, songs, cries for justice, exclamations of despair. What words are we connected to when we arrange our stage elements in ways that trigger an awakening of these texts? Conversely, if we

begin with a text, what images or materials raise the stakes of these words? Sometimes we are inspired with a text as a starting point, but having created a visual expression of this text, the text itself becomes redundant. We have interpreted text not by speaking it but by embodying it in physical and visual elements.

Here, for example, is one of Hamlet's classic monologues from Shakespeare's great tragedy:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!

(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 2,
lines 131–136)

I am reminded of the work of a French puppet theatre artist, Émilie Valantin, who in her 1996 production of *Un Cid* made her puppets from ice.¹ They were pre-sculpted (and frozen) before each performance. In the course of the one-hour show, the characters melted before our eyes. What about the Hamlet text? Could this material unlock Hamlet's moment through visual dramaturgy? Could he literally thaw? Could we adopt this marvelous physical/visual effect to embody Hamlet's plea?



Figure 4.2 *Un Cid*, Compagnie Émilie Valantin (1996). Photo: © Hubert Charbonnier

As writers of dialogue, we put ourselves in the shoes of our characters to find their voices. As physical dramaturgs, we let our impulses lead us to discover the truth of a moment onstage. As visual dramaturgs, the space, our materials, the imbalance of our images, the actual transformation of our elements, all have the potential to contain dramatic tension (which is the same as comedic tension). Any and all of these can be the tools of our “writing.”

Puppeteers are not the only theatre-makers who create visually, but as a puppeteer, this approach is irresistible. In visual dramaturgy, it is the audience who brings psychological content to a scene. They identify with an implied situation, with a need to transform. The visual tension is for them the tension of an imminent life change. The images resonate metaphorically and contain the potential for transformation. What is physical for the performer, whether actor or puppet, triggers emotional and psychological states for the audience. The relation between the physical and the visual is just this: the dramatic visual image, sustaining a special tension, contains the need for an object (or puppet or human) to physically move. Such an image seems to demand that the actors, puppets, or objects fulfill a task in which their identity is at stake. They contain a *need* to transform: the need to achieve balance, for example, or to hold themselves together or to transcend the material of their creation.

In closing, I feel that this potential to move, this dramatic potential of objects, is beautifully captured by the contemporary Polish author Andrzej Stasiuk in his meditation on light, *Dukla*. Describing the dawn, the moment when darkness is poised to become light, he writes:

Already it’s bright enough to see fences, trees, trash, junk-filled yards, broken-down cars sinking into the dirt and disintegrating patiently like minerals; pickets, stakes, slim cold chimneys, shafts of carts, motorbikes with lowered heads, outhouses lurking around corners, telegraph poles festooned with cables that droop in mourning, a spade stuck into the ground and forgotten – all this is there, in its place, but none of these things yet casts a shadow, though the sky to the east resembles a silver looking glass; the brightness is reflected in it but remains invisible. This must have been what the world looked like just before it was set in motion; everything was ready, objects poised on the threshold of their destinies like people paralyzed by fear.

(Stasiuk 1997 [2011]: 3–4)

Stasiuk’s world is about to spring to life, about to become animated. It is tense with drama. Imagine walking into this world. What will happen here? What will happen next? We do not know, but something will begin, launched from the dynamic image into action. All we need is a stage and the artists to help it happen, the artists who are themselves curious where this will lead. Then we have visual dramaturgy.

Note

1 Valantin’s piece is an adaptation of Pierre Corneille’s 1637 play *Le Cid*. By substituting the indefinite article in her title, Valantin emphasizes that here the audience is witnessing the story of “a lord,” not “the lord.”

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