SCHOLARSHIP

The Power of Puppets

Professor Kenneth Gross explores the theatrical power of puppets to "bring a part of us back to play."

Interview by Husna Haq

PUPPETRY ISN'T SIMPLY CHILD'S PLAY. While American audiences may be more familiar with hyperactive *Sesame Street* characters and a "Disneyfied" version of Pinocchio, the puppet in societies across the world has played the role of provocateur, historian, clairvoyant, and keeper of the faith, says Kenneth Gross in a new book, *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). From re-enacting sacred texts in Balinese shadow puppetry to mocking authority in England's raucous Punch and Judy shows, puppets are masters of metamorphosis and often, mirrors of ourselves.

"They are what we project onto them," says Gross, professor of English at the University and an admired scholar of Shakespearean and Renaissance literature. "They also project onto us."

During a year abroad in 2007–08, Gross traveled to Italy, Germany, Switzerland, France, Israel, and Bali in order to study puppet theater. He talked with a wide range of artists, traditional and experimental, exploring literary incarnations of the puppet from Plato to Kafka. The result is an elegant, poetic meditation on the inanimate objects that we invest with life and meaning, in an attempt, muses Gross, to tap into buried pieces of ourselves.

How did this book come about?

I love writing about all kinds of theater, and there's something very elemental about theater that puppets are able to show; there's something very raw and immediate in watching their movements, gestures, and artificial life on stage, a life both assertive and secretive. I also liked the effect of writing about it, what it did to my language. I found that in order to do justice to this kind of theater, I had to simplify and loosen up, make my own writing more poetic or expressive. I had to think more like an essayist.

Were there memorable performances?

There was one theater in Berlin I used to go to a lot. It was the former GDR state puppet theater, a remnant of the Communist era. It was like returning to a small piece of the former East Germany. This was in a grim and bereft part of the city, a very small theater space, and I remember seeing things that ranged from creepy children's shows to a remarkable version of *King Lear*—a solitary human actor as the king among a world of puppets—with a mixed audience of young artists, children, and old inhabitants of East Berlin. When a show started, you felt suddenly removed from this strange space of the city, caught up in the show. What I remember as much as particular plays is that experience of being completely removed, transported from the environment by the show. Something similar happened in watching shadow plays in rural Bali, performed at night on a cinema-like screen, but here the larger environment never disappeared. I stayed intensely conscious of the exotic place, the tropical air, the sounds, the gamelan music, people coming and going during the show.

> "Puppet" comes from the Latin *pupa*, for little girl or doll… For me, it's such an odd-sounding word, like a child's word.

What insights does the etymology of the word offer on puppetry and its history?

"Puppet" comes from the Latin *pupa,* for little girl or doll—that says something. The Latin term is still used in entomology to describe the middle stage of an insect's metamorphosis. For me, it's such an odd-sounding word, like a child's word. The word was used in Renaissance England as a term of abuse for prostitutes or courtesans. Iconoclastic Protestants would call Catholic statues of saints "puppets." There is sometimes an element in the word of something trivial or unserious, or that carries contempt—as in "puppet government" or "puppet ruler." But such contempt often pushes away a strange power that people feel in the puppet.

You introduce a sense of morbidity to puppetry, writing that puppets are "the closest thing we have in the ordinary human world to the transmigration of the soul."

In some cultures, for instance in Bali, puppets spring from death, revivifying departed souls, ancient heroes as well as gods and clowns. In a sense, they mediate between the living and the dead. Puppets were often used as a means of communication with the dead. They could bring the dead back to life, give form to spirits or ghosts. They belong to a kind of being that's neither quite living nor quite dead. They're like spirits themselves.

As objects whose "words or actions are more able to slip under the radar of official censorship," are puppets also a means of protest, or satire, even subversion?

They have a sort of natural gift for comedy, satire, mockery–it's a talent that puppets have. Often they're amazingly poignant and serious, as in that version of *King Lear,* but there is a certain bent toward the grotesque or satirical. It's part of the uncanniness of puppets. Remember that in the original book from 1881, Pinocchio smashed that moralizing cricket with a cobbler's mallet. There is also a tradition of overtly political puppet theater, exemplified by a company that's been running since the '60s, the Bread and Puppet Theater, now based in Vermont. They did amazing grotesque morality plays using oversize puppets and masks as part of Vietnam War protests, and they recently did a show in New York on behalf of Occupy Wall Street.

You write, "To find life in objects returns *us* to life." What do you mean?

That part of us that finds life in objects is an aspect of the child's imagination and instinct that is later hidden or sometimes let go of in adulthood. It's something children are indeed more adept at, finding life and voice in objects. Puppets awaken that part of us. They bring a part of us back to play. ®

Husna Haq is a Rochester-based freelance writer.

ZENTRUM PAUL KLEE

UNCANNY LIVES: “They are what we project onto them; they also project onto us,” says Gross, whose new book explores the roles that puppets—like these by artist Paul Klee—play in human imagination.