STYLISTIC CYCLICITY IN THE ANIMATION THEATRE

Anca Doina Ciobotaru, Assoc. Prof., PhD, Hab., "George Enescu" University of Arts, Iași

Abstract: The road between the magical dimensions of the object in a performance charged with sacredness and the animated object used for technical and aesthetical reasons overlap with the history of animation theatre. The issue of stylistic cyclicity is a topic open to all those interested in theatre anthropology, a source of information that capitalizes multiple aspects generated when cultural identity and globalization meet. The acceptance of the idea that Indian puppet theatre may contain the primary roots of this art sustains the discussion of this case study, which is representative for the concept of stylistic cyclicity. It is very useful for both academic teaching as it provides arguments for the use of some techniques used in the art of performance workshops and in theoretical presentations as well.

Keywords: Animation theatre, India, cultural anthropology, aesthetics, puppeteer

Animation theatre analyzed from the perspective of metaphorical communication act and a relation between autonomy and determination leads also to the identification of the relation *actor-object-character.* In fact, such a topic could appear in many volumes; each age having its own socio-cultural standpoint, the history of this art can also be approached in this way. We will just discuss some examples allowing us to argue for the idea of continuity of these essential coexistences for the art of puppet performance. The analysis of the use of a metamorphosed simple object transformed unto a space of play and/or actor has been our concern in order to show the need for interdisciplinary research in the field of theatrical pedagogy; the study of elements of the history of puppet theatre can get a practical end.

Archeological discoveries offer us multiple relics that picture the world of performance; these help us to observe notice existence inside a space of play with a relatively limited number of stage objects; this leads us to a hypothesis that at the outset of the performance art, the actor relied mostly on his interpretative skills (body and voice) and less on those of plastic nature, except for the masks and puppets. The atmosphere was built by combining the environmental and sound elements with the play of the actors and their positioning in relation with other stage elements. The most determinant factor was the emotional impact resulted from interpretative techniques, represented images and subjective relations of the presented topic. From this perspective, it draws our attention that in the world of puppet theatre, we can identify in time and cultural spaces some *symbol objects* that have both the role of a technical element and also that of stage elements; thus we see the *coffer*, *the chest, the basket* – used both for storing and as a playground. „The symbolism of coffer is based on two elements: the fact that a material and spiritual treasure is placed in it; the fact that its opening equals to a revelation. Placing in a coffer is an act of placing *Law Tablets* in the Ark of the Covenant of the Jews; Mirror of Amaterasu in Ise's chest; Kuvera's treasures in his pitchers; destiny in Pandora's box; also giving immortality rice and other symbolic objects in various bushels of the Chinese secret societies. The Treasure of Tradition is what is placed in the coffer, the instrument of revelation and its communication with the Heaven (...). The coffer can only be opened at the desired time of providence and only by the one who holds the key legally.."[1]

[1] Chevalier, Jean; Gheerbrant, Alain – Dicţionar de simboluri, vol. 2, trad. N., Editura Artemis, Bucureşti, 1995, pag. 194

BDD-V50 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 20:13:45 UTC)

Our research reassesses these meanings that are still preserved in the Indian and Balinese puppet theatre where the sacred and the playfulness found their special formula of expression being part of the cultural heritage. And still the modern puppet theatre performance (Asian or European) is marked by the presence of aesthetic and semantic destructuring of traditional and profane. Recomposing the route can be based on studies and testimonials that describe playgrounds and storage rooms for puppets; here we remind the research carried out for several years (1986 -1994) by Stuart Blackburn on the shadow theatre in the south of India, published in the volume **Inside the drama-house[2],** Miguel de Cervantes – **Don Quijote[3]**, Jules Verne – **Shrimp[4].**

Actually, contact with puppeteers that still use traditional forms of performance can become essential in understanding the relation between tradition and modernity. We have carried out a research trip to North India (New Delhi and Jaipur) where we contacted two puppet companies working with *Kathputli* type of puppets. Even though the cultural Indian space offers even today a high diversity of puppets, each region having its own representative type, the ritual roots are preserved especially at the language and conceptual level. Thus, in **Srimad Bhagavata,** God Almighty, was compared with a puppeteer who by means of three strings manipulates all beings created in the universe. Sanskrit language also offers a deeper image of the ethimology of the names of these inanimate objects; these are called *Puttalika* or *Puttika*, both ethimologically meaning *small sons.* Derived from the root „*Put*" (*Puttalika* or *Puttika)* are diminutives of the word *Putra - son.* „The ethimological meaning of *Puttalika* entered do deeply into the mind of traditional puppeteers so as usually these keep the box with puppeteers in their bedrooms, and when a puppet gets old and can no longer be used for animation, it is not rejected or thrown away. In a *mantra* song, the puppet is offered to the waves of a river."[5]

Regionalization of traditional arts created a large variety of puppets with strings which are still used by puppeteers: „*Kathputli* - Rajasthan, *Sakhi–Kundhei* - Orissa, *Kalasutri–bahulye* - Maharashtra, *Gombe-atta* – Karnataka, *Bommalatam* – Tamil Nadu and *Putla-nach,* in Assam. The most well-known are those from the northern region – the famous *Kathputli.* The neck, the head and the face of the puppet are sculpted from one piece of wood, often the head being sculpted in such a way as to suggest also the turban; the arms and body are made out of textile waste. The fashion style specific to characters go back to the Middle Ages, this explains the presence in performances of characters that remind of Mogul court: horsemen warriors, women dancers, acrobats, juggler with balls. They are associated with what puppeteers „magic puppets" – actually a puppet with two heads, one of a man and another of a woman, that appear successively and at the same time, giving life to two characters and, thus, surprising the performance. The control system is replaced with puppeteers` fingers, the number of strings varying depending on the complexity of movements specific to characters. In case of the *Bommalatam – dancing puppets* type, the control system is a ring placed on the head of the puppeteer, the strings being attached to the sides character`s head; the arms are animated by means of rods. In the same region, we find the system of animation with the rod in the head. The differences lie in the control system (by means of fingers, circular, with rods, a horizontal system), the manufacturing method of body's segments and used fabric, type of repertoire.

Most performances have an episodic structure, each scene can function independently or integrated in another performance; thus, the company repertoire becomes

[2] Blackburn, Stuart – Inside the drama-house, Ed. University of California Press, Berkley, 1996
[3] Miguel de Cervantes – Don Quijote, (vol. 3), trad. Edgar Papu, retrad. N, Ed. Minerva, Bucureşti, 1987
[4] Jules Verne – Prichindel, trad. Valeriu Mihăilă, retrad.N, Ed. Ion Creangă, Bucureşti, 1987
[5] Pani, Jiwan – Living dolls – story of indian puppets, Publications Division Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of india, Patiala House, New Delhi, 1986, pag. 4

BDD-V50 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 20:13:45 UTC)

richer, more adapted to performances ordered and presented in indoor spaces (hotels, public markets, and private spaces) with different occasions. In fact, the stage presentation of **Ramayana** is based in the structure of the seven *books/kands* so as the options are influenced by the freedom that such a structure offers to puppeteers.

The history has fictionalized resonances; even of the main topic is centered in building a recital meant to emphasize the life of a hero, stories being often inspired by the history of the XVII century. Dancers, clowns, knights build a cast which bring a specific atmosphere to mogul's courts; joined by the charming figure of the cobra charmer. Thus, the performance becomes a metaphoric journey in a space of long vanished glory. The ability to adapt to a viewer's – tourist consumerist psychology is a factor influencing the forms of stage expression, structure of characters; thus; thus, we were surprised by the appearance in an indoor performance (*The Court of Merchants – City Palace Museum*), seen in Jaipur, of a surprising character: Michael Jackson – a combination of a pop star body (dressed in a silver jumpsuit) and a head of a traditional wong mask; the type of accompanying music play was specific to the character of „the Chinese" though having the other character moves, obvious due to stylistic differences of the two characters. Ni matter how close to kitsch is such a character, it demonstrates a certain creativity and ability to identify the stars accepted by the target audience, the power to surprise. Globalization and cultural interferences impact the most surprising area of the animation theatre. Desecration appears as a consequence of the passage of time and competition that the puppeteer must face – technical elements used in modern performance, doubled by the temptation to approach new forms of spare time, in a more relaxed way; local heroes give away their place to modern stars.

The organization of companies can be identified both in the Eastern countries and in Europe, based on casts and family-based companies. This explains the multitude of interpretation techniques or stage tricks, the use of known patterns and traditional characters. Even of the manufacturing of puppets is based on regional features, specific to trades, the structuring of characters belongs to puppeteer's fantasy and skills. Puppet manufacturing is still a source of income for puppeteers, the complexity of puppets and the case with which these are manufactured are different and not in favour of buyers. Even so, this type of activity is a bridge to the public, a way for it to get closer to the traditional puppet. The use of puppets in families and in education can be found in Europe. The puppet behaves as a perfect instrument for sending messages connected with the history of culture and Indian civilization, moral values, understanding of life; performance adaptation is a consequence of the need of puppeteers to survive.

Coffer with magical powers was replaced by modern bags, practical which allows to pack quickly a small stage and the puppets, so as the puppeteers can play where they are invited, and reduce the set up time. Just the music of a wondering dalang remains the same.

The overlapping of the image of the puppeteer and the puppet in its traditional forms expresses the thought and the psychological profile of communities inside which it appears. The transformation of the elements of decor in the space of play of the puppets, used extensively in modern times, is an important factor and it brings the resources of expressivity but also problems of adaptation of handling puppets in unusual, unconventional conditions. The study of traditional forms of animation and the spaces of play are essential information for the education of a puppeteer. No tree grows without its roots – the understanding of tradition is the first step towards modernity.

The acceptance of the idea that Indian puppet theatre may contain the primary roots of this art sustains the discussion of this case study, which is representative for the concept of stylistic cyclicity. It is very useful for both academic teaching as it provides arguments for

BDD-V50 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 20:13:45 UTC)

the use of some techniques used in the art of performance workshops and in theoretical presentations as well.

The road between the magical dimension of the object in a performance charged with sacredness and the animated object used for technical and aesthetical reasons overlaps with the history of animation theatre. The issue of stylistic cyclicity is a topic open to all those interested in theatre anthropology, a source of information that capitalizes multiple aspects generated when cultural identity and globalization meet.

Bibliography

Blackburn, Stuart – **Inside the drama-house,** Editura University of California Press, Berkley, 1996

de Cervantes, Miguel – **Don Quijote**, (vol. 3), trans. Edgar Papu, Editura Minerva, Bucureşti, 1987

Chevalier, Jean; Gheerbrant, Alain – **Dicţionar de simboluri**, vol. 2, Editura Artemis, Bucureşti, 1995

Ciobotaru, Anca Doina – **Teatrul de animație între magie și artă,** ediția a II –a, Editura Artes, Iași, 2013

Verne, Jules – **Prichindel**, trans. Valeriu Mihăilă, Editura Ion Creangă, Bucureşti, 1987

Pani, Jiwan – **Living dolls – story of indian puppets,** Publications Division Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, Patiala House, New Delhi, 1986

BDD-V50 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 20:13:45 UTC)