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Styles, Techniques and Interpretations in the Creation of Bunraku Puppets

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Abstract: This paper starts with a short and stylistic incursion in the history of Bunraku puppets, from the Japanese tradition and the combined systems, to the derived modern European forms. The author looks further into the animation and decoration systems, the black cabinet and the adaptations and mix of construction and handling techniques in the traditional Japanese Bunraku theatre and the wayang rod system. The characteristics of the Bunraku theatre and its association with Nō theatre lead to an original and spectacular display of constitutive elements, with the plastic and dynamic functions of the anatomical elements, Europeanizing the forms of the Far East. Both the interpretation and the plastic structure of the Bunraku puppet show prompt the choice of a highly complex animation system for puppeteers and a strong commitment from both the director and the stage designer at the time of the structured design of puppets and adapting appropriate props. The study also details the anatomical and functional description of the Bunraku puppet, the proportions of the aesthetic and spiritual motifs, the space and temporal location of the origin, along with the plastic capacity of this impressive puppet. As a sculptor-scenographer, the experiences and information gathered during the documentation of the stage transposition of characters from the memorable performances *White and Black* (2012) and *Godot* (2018), directed by Ciprian Huțanu, are the author's motivation to synthetically re-iterate a particular style of puppet. The approach considers the construction technique, complemented by sculpture (modelling and grinding), painting (patina) and a discreet light-design that highlights well-articulated forms. Today, in the tumultuous world of globalization, the creative interpretation of the Oriental dynastic experience can bring to light new syncretic echoes of the language forms in continuous metamorphosis.

Key words: scenography, bunraku puppets, stage techniques.

Since the first half of the 20th century, the development of futuristic ideas of industrial design, along with the promotion of new aesthetic conquests of the avant-garde in currents and tendencies, produced “a considerable mutation of the concept of art and its role in modern society” (Pepino 1998, p. 172). The evolution of contemporary orientations in puppetry and “the fashion

of children's art or juvenile art, reconsideration of primitive art, naive painting, the interest in folklore" (Pepino 1998, p. 172) are influenced both by the significance of a "cultivated and creative public but also by theorists looking to reach the heights of intellectual speculation." (Pepino 1998, p. 172). At European level there has been "a generation's riot against a world they wanted to change from the ground", an idea underlined by Master Cristian Pepino.

An important theorist of fantastic literature, the sociologist Roger Caillois has launched the idea of "natural beauty" in art and the call to mythology, to the imaginary world of signs and symbols, towards a reality that could replace the monstrosity of world-wide flames for the human psyche. The support for the futuristic Manifesto created by the poet Filippo Tomasso Marinetti alongside the fascination for object and speed became the "exchange currency" for all that meant cultural tradition in France between 1909 and 1916; in Paris, it became the centre of the avant-garde, and in Italy, Milan, Moscow or St. Petersburg, expressed through divisionism, cube-futurism, or Chinese art in the '60s.

The evolution of the world and movement of objects through technology have progressively transformed the meaning of humans into tireless robotic features across different fields of activity.

Thus, the ways and means of building the relationship between the handler and the puppet have changed, through the brutal impact of shape and movement of an object on the image.

The relationship between the stage director - designer - musician - actor is the primary context that can finally lead to a show characterized by stylistic unity. (Ciobotaru 2006, p. 143)

We consider that the integration of the object in the dynamics of the stage has been an advantage within the diversified development of the animation theatre, but also an effect of the multiplication of the metamorphosis processes at all levels.

Definitive for the art of animation theatre is the puppet (plastic creation of various construction types: animated object, mask, puppet in multiple variants, marionette, bi-ba-bo, bunraku, wayang, figure for shadows, etc.) as an "expressive prolongation of the actor and main instrument of artistic communication..." (Bălăiță 2006, p. 82). The knowledge of the history of construction systems that evolved with the aesthetics of puppet theatre is one of the important conditions for unity between text, movement, system of handling, music and plastic conception. The discovery of the Bunraku Theatre by Europeans took place during the sixth decade of the 20th century, during international festivals.

The bunraku muppet is part of the traditional line of hand systems. “There are six bunraku-derived systems that are known”, (Pepino 1998, p. 16), with the same name for each and the muppet “[...] is handled by one, two or three animators and evolves approximately to the level of their arms” (Pepino 1998, p. 16). This system of manipulation originates in the Japanese tradition. It is an important source of inspiration both for the “modern system of the black cabinet, in which the muppet evolves in front of the viewer within the plan of light” (Pepino 1998, p. 16). It is also a source of inspiration for the subsequent innovations introduced in the case of a single handler: “Handling the muppet’s legs with rods attached to the feet of a handler sitting on a wheelchair” (Pepino 1998, p. 16). A traditional oversized bunraku is about 1.20 - 1.40 m; 1.30 - 1.50 m and is handled from the rear.

The transparent handling of muppets in the traditional Japanese puppet show determines a ritual dimension to the show, and creates a picture with multiple meanings and its staged evolution.

From a historical point of view, the form of bunraku puppet shows has been set up as a way of manifestation during ritual ceremonies - Sarakatu or Monkey Dance [...] archetypal dance and mimicking the actions [...] Ningyōjōruri. (Bujoreanu-Huțanu 2008, pp. 76-77)

The image becomes metaphorical and signifies the human condition. In some situations, the mysterious presence of the masters will lead to the acuity of the relationship between divinity and man or between the soul and the body. In other situations, the visible presence of the handler transforms the show into a game and develops the conventional character of the performance.

Amongst the animation and decoration systems in the bunraku theatre we can find the black cabinet. Within the black cabinet, the muppet evolves in front of the handler and at the same level as the light. Considered as a solution for gaining height on stage, the system favours the structuring of vertically dominant compositions. The specific stage technique involves creating a space where actors are not seen. They are completely dressed in black velvet, on the head wearing coats, and the garment of the stage is also made of a black material that does not reflect the light. Handling the muppet in the black cabinet allows for greater autonomy in height. The use of this innovation in the animation theatre was mainly projected in the construction and handling technique of the traditional Japanese bunraku theatre, and often combined with the rod system of wayang.

The richness of tradition and its preservation in puppet theatre are of particular importance in Japan, where the art of animation has real international reputation. Here, the ritual muppets we meet in every home coexist with ancient theatre muppets and are treated like sacred objects. Both

the attitude of conservation and the technique of building or handling puppets are preoccupations cultivated within many traditional schools. From wooden or clay chambers and nomadic puppeteers of Japan in the 11th century, to the famous Takemoto Gidayu, the ancestor of the 17th century Bunraku-za Theatre, Chikamatsu Monzaemon (prolific in the genre Jōruri and Kabuki, nicknamed “a true Shakespeare of Japan”) at Bunzaburo (the father of the Japanese puppet theatre), the “Land of the Sun rises”, historical steps were taken towards a high art, with “numerous performances on the Osaka and Kyoto stages” (Mărgineanu 1974, pp. 70-71).

The varied ways of bunraku puppet construction are determined both by size and number of handlers (from 1 to 3 for each puppet). From an aesthetic and spiritual point of view, the discovery of bunraku theatre represented a special influence for modernity. As a form of oriental puppet show, bunraku relates both to the stage technique and to the construction and animation system, remarkable through: “perfect beauty and [...] an amazing technique, [...] capable of opening the mouth, closing its eyes, having even eyebrows and mobile eyelashes” (Mărgineanu 1974, pp. 71-73).

The expressiveness of this type of puppet has reached its high levels and became important for subsequent interpretations because “the images embed in them the plastic, sonorous and kinetic dimensions” (Ciobotaru 2011, p. 80) and “colours, shapes, volumes and sounds insinuate one another, depending on body movements and attitudes” (Ciobotaru 2011, p. 80). By the end of the Middle Ages, the puppet played a special role in spiritual life, being considered sacred, trans-substantial images. The show became the method of invoking the gods, defending against evil forces and the process of gaining prosperity. Locating continuity about old theatre beliefs, currently in Malaysia and Indonesia (shadow and puppet shows performed at moments in the life of a family or community). Invoking the ancestors’ shadows in the ritual show finds congruences in the Japanese theatre Nō, a traditional form of Japanese theatre performed by Buddhist monks.

The Bunraku building system is part of the stage puppet theatre and metamorphosis in animation theatre because it was dedicated to the ancestral spirits who reborn in the Buddhist faith. A particularly solid motivation for continuity in the Asian space is the totality of the act of creation, specific to Nō Theatre (dedicated to spiritual enlightenment). The suffering and the illusion (from the shadow theatre), which are psycho-sensory processes due to the desire to enlighten the spirit, will often be subjects of great interest for the audience. Amongst the characteristics of Bunraku theatre is the relationship with the Nō theatre through the masks used. The differences between the two types consist of the means of expression and the expression of the bunraku,

represented by an oversized puppet, handled by several actors. Most of the BUNRAKU songs are tragedies; destiny plays a decisive role in Nō theatre. The examples of this are the SEKKZOBUSHI or KO-JORURI pieces with the same inspiration.

The style of the moves, borrowed from this theatre and the joining of the choreographic elements with a series of decoded passages, become the benchmarks to which the modern Asian inspirational theatre relates. The interpretations of this kind are expressed in the view that “the arts seem to merge, that is, to create a new art, dialogue and synthesis” towards a “tendency of stylistic interferences” (Ciobotaru 2015, p. 29 and p. 36). Among the common characteristics of Nō Theatre, we can name: the epic style – the style of movement (the movement – essentialized, typified, formalized); the enigmatic presence of the reciter near the stage where the puppet’s play unfolds; the conventional character of the show – the puppets show all the time; the main handler (the one who moves the right arm of the puppet and the head) has the face uncovered and is dressed in a sumptuous suit; (they handle the left arm and puppet’s legs), their faces are covered with black tattoos that turn them into mysterious scenic appearances, creating a sentient feeling for the viewer.

To describe the characteristics of the Bunraku puppet, it is impetuous to specify the complexity of this type in time. The construction and handling of the bunraku puppet can be understood in entirety and perceived as a true animation system. The figurative construction of the puppet’s body is absolutely necessary. The structure of it must be a whole body. It can perform all the movements of a man, realistic, natural movements, suggested by the text and the moments of psychological drama. The multitude and complexity of the mechanisms applied to the bunraku system are obtained by the styling of the human movement by the handler, who will draw attention to the synchronization between the three puppeteers with dexterity. Among these mechanisms we will find: the head – those that cause the movement or blinking of the eyes, eyebrows, jaw mobility; to the upper limbs – other mechanisms determine the robotic movement of the phalanges.

The movements of the character, made up of sequences taken from all Japanese dances, were also borrowed from Kabuki theatre actors, who moved like puppets. The influence of the effects obtained by techniques of handling the bunraku system has also irradiated the European continent. In *Commedia dell’Arte*, an actor creates the Burattino character and induces a movement similar to that of a puppet. The movement style performed by an automaton – a result of extreme stylization, even of plastic decomposition of the portrait in order to accentuate the character’s features, was introduced with great success

at the beginning of the 20th century in the burlesque comedy. “European puppets have been seduced by the play of images of geometric or strongly stylized shapes” (Ciobotaru 2015, p. 36). Bunraku is the puppet whose movements come closest to dancing. In contemporary interpretations there are a number of original qualities, such as “agility, mimetic character of the human gestures and the perfect symbiosis of the three puppeteers of this strange art” (Mărgineanu 1974, pp. 71-73). All these parts of the tradition have been interpreted non-verbally, with craftsmanship, through a modern plastic construction, specific to the puppet art. For example, the *White and Black* show in 2012 has received numerous reviews and has been described as “a show full of symbols, metaphors, characterized by simplicity that speaks of life and death” (teatruuage.blogspot.com, Lucian Parfene, *A Success Story, Interview with Ciprian Huțanu*). The *Godot* performance in 2018, after the text *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, at the choice of the same director, Ciprian Huțanu, also stage designer, sculpture Cosmin - Mihai Iașeșen:



‘All the joints are perfect, and all the human mobility you can find in such a puppet; the maneuver is done from the back. I promote this type of puppet because it is very mobile and very flexible and very willing to act aggressively’, adds Professor Ciprian Huțanu, ‘[...] we have used bunraku puppets because they are the most expressive and prone to total animation.’ (www.7iasi.ro, Lavinia Lazăr, *Godot from the Iași Faculty of Theatre*).

The bunraku puppet movement is a component of the syncretic performance, leading to a prevalence of dance in its entirety. Dynamic stimuli thus acquire a choreographic expressivity that causes ineffable, sometimes horrific sensations, obtained by emphasizing the artificial, in an antinomy with the rendering of the illusion of life. Styling, mechanization, and automation are characteristics that are due to the technical features of the beginning of cinema or new technological innovations in the sphere of robotics, yet another proof that the field has had a great development so far on the Asian continent. From the anatomical and functional point of view, the bunraku puppet has a painted wooden head and the genuine hair denotes the technical-material correspondence with the Nō mask (perfectly polished wood, covered with

lakes), manipulated with a longer gap than the wayang. The proportions of the bunraku puppet head represent 1/5 of the human body, and the palm tip exceeds the middle of the thigh – in the modern forms derived.

The role of the dowel rod here is very important: it supports the head; includes the mechanical systems that act on the following anatomical features of the face: eyebrows (male or demon only, suggesting anger); the mouth (lower jaw – the mandible moves, being cut along the line of success in physiognomy – Chinese science recognizing humanity from its external appearance.) Physiology refers to the appearance of the human body and its movements, the character of man, the lines that unite the extremities of the nostrils with the corners of the mouth); eyes (can move to the left and right).



The head of the bunraku puppet, in the traditional construction technique, is not articulated with the body of the puppet, but moves independently from the movements of the chest, with a special agility and without a mimetic character of human gestures. The puppet's body is soft and is actually a Japanese kimono – the Japanese national costume, made of a full, padded material to deform. Distinctively, on a case-by-case basis, it should be noted that female characters have no legs. The hands – treated wood (as with the mask) are removed from the kimono sleeves. Fingers – some puppets have them gathered on the sword handle, other phalanx variants are not mobile (the puppeteer sometimes grabs the objects with his hand, whether or not covered by the puppet's kimono sleeve). The legs of the masculine characters are handled by a third puppeteer, a very important role in the scenic transposition of battles in which the lower limbs must move rapidly, so they are in close harmony with the other movements of the body and its position, and the puppets continuously balance by placing in the centre of gravity. The situation is similar to the one in the theatre with the screen, where the mime hints at the materiality of a wall or an object. The complementary clothing elements are related to expressiveness – anatomy, plasticity. They will further amplify the sensation of artificiality, covering mystery among the receiving audience, identifying: the hair strand, the strident makeup, or the traditional costume elements, the cape.

The costume – for the main puppet, corresponds stylistically to Edo (1600-1688), a reference point in Japan’s cultural history, as Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu chose Edo as Japan’s new capital. The city has become prosperous and one of the largest urban cultural centres. Bunraku puppets were masked by muppets until the 17th century. The costume of the muppet in the traditional version is supported by a bamboo armour. Other details of the clothing detail are two pockets in the bottom of the kimono, made to give the impression that the character has knees, or steps. One of the skills that the handler has to acquire is the modelling of the clothing elements through deformation. In the limit of the natural human anatomy, the puppeteer bends the suit to suggest the existence of the legs.

In the bunraku systems handled by a single puppeteer, the body is supported in this case by a girdle that the puppeteer carries in order to keep it in balance and full control. “At first, the system of handling was simpler and only one man was needed to animate the puppets” (Bujoreanu-Huțanu 2008, p. 78). The legs are handled by the puppeteer. It is equipped with footwear with the previously extended sole to hold the puppet’s legs. From a dynamic point of view, the single-actor bunraku puppet poses a lot of complex problems regarding dance, intense rhythm, wide attitudes, all in perfect synchronization with the soundtrack. On the right side of the stage, the singer-songwriter (on the spot) sings and recites the text, accompanied by a string instrument. The bunraku puppet’s construction system has as its main feature a full representation of the human body on a large scale, which implies the execution of large movements in a team.

The plastic structure of the Bunraku puppet show in the black cabinet includes the following: colour treatment done by a stage designer, costume and wig (attracting the spectators’ attention to the character); strong contrast between puppet and background; puppets and other items subject to attention are painted in bright colours and illuminated by means of projectors equipped with special devices to produce a narrow light slit – that light pattern (in the curtain) in which the visible elements evolve – the possibilities of giving up the non-functional screen; pointing towards the whole of the puppet’s body in order to view the broken lines described by the members. Characters lose weight in this system, making it possible to translate scenically the idea of flying, and in fact, of the plan that takes on a particular weight. The composition of the black cabinet is similar to pre-renaissance or modern painting, characterized by the abandonment of the perspective.



The black cabinet from the bunraku theatre offered the possibility of characters composed of disparate elements. Over time, fragmentation of the character has also allowed movements of great expressivity and the treatment of the character as a collage (its composition from objects that have gained interpretations and other meanings). The decomposition and re-composition of the form of beings or objects then led to the metaphorical character. The metamorphosis of the character has facilitated moments inspired by surrealism. The phenomenon took place in a “blissful” way, in a synchronization of beautiful, public-friendly arts, when “plastic shapes evolved from care for detail to care for stylization and essentialization” (Ciobotaru 2006, p. 184). Neutral geometric shapes (circles, lines, spheres, triangles, cubes) make up the modern animation theatre and different characters, in a metaphorical suite.

In conclusion, the possibilities of this system’s dynamics are multiple. From fine, slow, nuanced movements to graceful or forceful movements. The broad field of assertion of the puppeteer’s ability to achieve expressive attitudes is related to the modelling of the device in order to obtain complex movements. The movement is thus stylized, dance-like and syncopated. For complex movements the following features need to be mentioned: the angles described by the puppet’s limbs (according to the rules of Indian sculpture); the alternating rhythms, the static moments or moments when movement is barely perceptible, with sudden changes in attitude; the suggestion of imponderability (the system allows for autonomy of height movement, the idea of flying); the decomposition of the movement (time expansion, drama, and metaphor). The Kabuki puppet theatre and dramatic theatre of the 17th century is currently only performed by actors and has correspondences in the interpretations of the three major Japanese theatre styles (including Nō theatre and bunraku theatre). The images become composite, balanced and dynamic, with a series of expressive plastic resemblances found in Japanese stamps.

The bunraku puppet proposes to deduce the actor through: perfect consciousness (the actor sees himself) and the perfect body (the puppet released from the body, physiology and weight). The use of Bunraku technique in the puppet show is another proof of the syncretic character of the animation theatre. Through the bunraku puppet, the actor is the witness of their creation, creator and spectator at the same time. The closed system of the puppet has thus become a compound plastic, where the oneiric has gained a special weight. Today, in the tumultuous world of globalization, the creative interpretation of the Oriental dynastic experience can bring to light new syncretic echoes of the forms of language in a continuous metamorphosis.

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