

## Death to the inanimate object!

Deconstructing the art of puppetry and the Old Trout Puppet Workshop production  
of *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*

Jessica Ruano

April 17, 2009

---

In the Old Trout Puppet Workshop production of *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*, spectators are persuaded to rethink not only the relationship between human beings and puppets, but also their general assumptions about life and death. By looking at death through the eyes of inanimate beings, this production is encouraging a re-evaluation of what is commonly believed to be true about mortality; it is an undermining of truth, as occurs in a deconstructive reading of text. This is especially interesting in terms of this Calgary-based company because ideas surrounding life and death are not only the subject of this particular work, but also the *vehicle* for presenting the work. The company chooses to create work that utilizes and is inspired by puppets, which are defined by theatre practitioner Steve Tillis as theatrical figures perceived to be objects, yet imagined to have life. Tillis explains that while spectators understand that they are watching objects, and not live actors onstage, still “for the duration of the performance, [the audience] chooses to imagine, at least to a certain degree, that the objects presented before it onstage have life” (46-7). This essay will examine the dual nature of puppets in the theatre and why this makes them ideal candidates for a discussion about death. Through an examination of the archetypal puppet in relation to a number of binary opposites – including life and death, being and non-being, and presence and absence – this essay will deconstruct the art of puppetry with a special emphasis on the Old Trout Puppet Workshop production. This deconstructive reading of puppetry in general and *Famous Puppet Death Scenes* in particular will reveal the various and often contradictory truths about puppet mortality.

Deconstructionist critic J. Hillis Miller states that “deconstruction is not the dismantling of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself” (Leitch 193-4). This is comparable to the theories of puppet scholar Henryk Jurkowski, including what might be called “the deconstruction of puppet theatre” in which “the elements of the performance are atomized, and none can be identified as being in the service of others” (Tillis 73-4). While certain puppet specialists might state that one theory about puppetry is more correct than another, the ‘deconstructive movement’ follows the belief that “each pole of an opposition can be used to show that the other is in error but ... the undecidable dialectic gives rise to no synthesis because the antinomy is inherent in the very structure of our language, in the possibilities of our conceptual framework” (Culler 39). For this reason, instead of discussing only one point of view of puppet mortality in this essay, a number of theories will be presented, especially those that appear inconsistent, ambiguous, or paradoxical.

When one considers the title of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop’s production of *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*, a twofold irony immediately becomes apparent. In the first place, there are no famous puppet death scenes: as it is very rare to find actual scripted puppet theatre, these scenarios were constructed entirely by members of the company and inspired by different genres of live-actor theatre (Morrow). Secondly – and this is the main reason why there are no puppet deaths found in the canon – puppets cannot actually die, at least not in the sense of staying dead. Puppet researcher Eileen Blumenthal notes that puppets “survive indefinitely without normal biological aging but can also die and come back to life again and again” (11). In *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*, the puppet-opera singer Norto Frot falls victim to a giant fist, only to return once again a few scenes later, and a few scenes after that; on one occasion his squashed head – the result of another fist attack – inflates back to its original state in the presence of the audience (*Famous*). This concept is similarly played out in a short film, also featuring members of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop, entitled *The Execution of Margot Rumebe*: a

puppet resembling Adolf Hitler attempts to murder a puppet-woman who somehow manages to survive the electric chair and numerous lethal injections. In his last attempt, the puppet-Hitler hangs the eponymous character from a rope, and she falls through a trap door: from the video, it is unclear whether or not she is actually dead, and this encourages the viewer to ponder once again whether or not puppet death is possible (*Rumebe*). Another example of puppets defying death can be found in the legendary children's puppet show *Punch and Judy*. Unapologetically violent, Punch battles with countless characters, staying alive even when it is most implausible: "Punch then comes up against the ultimate challenge, the character Death. In some versions, he parries and negotiates with Death to a draw; in others, he whaps Death to death" (Blumenthal 154). Since Punch is one of the most recognizable figures in Western puppet theatre, he could be seen as representative of the common puppet, a theatrical figure that cannot die in any real sense. Of course, in plenty of these scenarios, Punch takes great pleasure in murdering, or at least severely harming, many of his fellow puppet-actors. Blumenthal suggests that "one reason puppetry so often waxes violent is that it can... When live actors play the same stories, they generally use stylized, symbolic action to present the carnage or else have narrators describe it. Stunt puppets also handle spectacular deaths... including full and partial decapitations" (143). Audiences often find this reckless violence humorous rather than offensive because puppets are not required to follow the same moral codes as human beings: "the puppet... being nothing more than a theatrical 'object' cannot be construed as having the 'living' responsibility even of the actor, and so the successive murders of a dozen or so characters become a cause for laughter, and not concern" (Tillis 34).

However, Blumenthal offers a rather different take on puppet violence, providing some insight into why audiences are sometimes deeply affected by this theatrical experience:

Puppets' brutality can be surprisingly unnerving, and not only because puppets can play more appalling atrocities. Knowing that the performers are not alive, audiences do not activate emotional defenses, the mental filters that screen out or distance what would be unbearable to see. Nonetheless, viewers do suspend belief and buy into the stage reality. So the full horror that puppets can muster may catch spectators unaware, without the armor they would have donned for similar episodes in live-actor theater. (144)

Founding member of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop, Judd Palmer, essentially sums up the contradictory nature of puppet death, which can be taken both lightly and seriously at once: "We realized there was something absurdly compact about the act of a puppet dying; it can be funny, tragic, offensive and absurd, all in one blow of the hammer" (Morrow). Unlike human death, which is terminal, the puppets all return the next night, completely unscathed, prepared to be killed all over again. As Palmer states – though speaking through the voice of his puppet, Nathaniel Tweak, who narrates the production – in a 2007 interview, puppet death is "more metaphysical because puppets are between the living and the dead, but that doesn't mean [death] isn't a painful experience" (Ruano). Taking a puppet's exceptional positioning between life and death into account, Blumenthal suggests that puppets are an ideal casting choice for productions that explore ideas surrounding death: "This alive/dead bi-valence is puppetry's unique charge... Straddling mortality, puppets have often been the performers of choice for plays that cross the life/death divide" (209). Following this train of binary opposites, puppet master Michael Meschke also comments on puppetry's conflicting nature: "Why attempt to tell about something as contradictory as puppet theatre – an art form that is, at the same time, restrictive and free, dead and alive, sensuous and sexless, coarse and sublime?" (13).

This series of seemingly mutually contradictory adjectives begins to touch on a definition of the puppet. As Tillis demonstrates in his lengthy explanation of what a puppet is *not*, pinpointing the exact characteristics of a puppet is no easy task. For example, a puppet need not be necessarily inanimate, as might be assumed: it is possible for a human hand to play a character and be construed as a puppet (18).

Tillis concludes that a puppet possesses two very important aspects, that of being an object and that of having life. He explains that “a constant tension exists within this double-vision created by the puppet: each of the puppet’s aspects is inescapable, and yet each contradicts the other” (64). This is reminiscent of a statement by deconstructionist Barbara Johnson, who explains that “Instead of a simple ‘either/or’ structure, deconstruction attempts to elaborate a discourse that says neither ‘either/or’ nor ‘both/and’ nor even ‘neither/nor,’ while at the same time not totally abandoning these logics either” (Murfin 188). Puppets are not entirely viewed as objects because they are imagined to be alive, but they are not completely alive because they are recognizably objects; and yet they can be described both as objects and as having life. As reviewer David Ng notes, “the art form, it seems to say, consists merely of inanimate objects brought together by dexterous hands and the audience’s willingness to suspend disbelief” (Ng). Acknowledging this dichotomy and the illogical logic of the terms, Tillis offers this comprehensive definition of the subject in question:

The puppet is a theatrical figure, perceived by an audience to be an object, that is given design, movement, and frequently, speech, so that it fulfills the audience’s desire to imagine it as having life; by creating a double-vision of perception and imagination, the puppet pleurably challenges the audience’s understanding of the relationship between objects and life (65)

As this definition suggests, the audience plays a very important role in the coming to life of puppets. In order for a puppet to sustain this dual-nature of object and life, it is imperative that “the audience accepts the puppet as if it were a live actor, just as the live actor is accepted as if he or she were the character being represented; thus, the puppet-as-live-actor is accepted as the represented character” (Tillis 48). This describes not only the fundamental nature of a live actor as compared with a puppet actor, but also the objective of each: “while the pretense of the actor is to be a particular character, that of the puppets is to be alive” (Tillis 68). That an audience can be fooled into believing that a puppet has life is not so incredible: the willing suspension of disbelief is a common convention in the theatre and one to which the audience adapts very quickly. In fact, in some ways, it is easier for an

audience to adapt to the conventions of puppetry because – unlike human actors that are of a different nature than their theatrical setting – puppets, being theatrical figures, are perfectly at home onstage: “the puppet intrinsically conforms to the artificiality of the theatre, wherein, by convention, the audience is willing to imagine the puppet as having life, just as it is willing to imagine the theatrical environment to represent the play’s reality” (Tillis 50). Furthermore, there is no chance of the audience having any sort of non-theatrical relationship to the puppet, external to the stage environment. With live-action theatre, an audience member might well be acquainted with an actor, or at least with his work, and this could affect the way this spectator views his performance. An audience member’s relationship with a puppet, however, is unique because it comes, as it were, with no strings attached.

Speaking of strings, it is important to discuss also those forces – not only the audience’s willingness to imagine objects as having life, but also the staging elements – that bring puppets to life onstage. When asked if there exists a puppet god, Nathaniel Tweak, as interpreted by Palmer, replies: “Puppet gods have their hands up the back of me at this very moment. This is proof that the gods are fallible” (Ruano). Of course, the puppet is referring to his puppet master, a human being. As Marjorie Batchelder states, “no one misses the analogy between the puppet dominated by man, and man dominated by forces greater than himself” (Tillis 160). In recognizing this hierarchy of relationships, the audience can make connections between what they see onstage with regards to the puppet and the puppet master, as well as the dominant forces in their own lives, religious or otherwise. It becomes apparent that just “as the gods endow life in, and exercise control over the lives of humanity, so humanity endows and controls the puppet’s life” (Tillis 52). However, when offering a deconstructive reading of any text, it is important to question hierarchies, especially the ones that seem set in stone: “a deconstruction involves the demonstration that a hierarchical opposition, in which one term is said to be dependent upon another conceived as prior, is in fact a rhetorical or metaphysical imposition and

that the hierarchy could well be reversed” (Culler 183). While it appears that the puppet master is in full control, Tillis argues that “the puppet-artist may in some way control the god, and the puppet, in some way, control the puppet-artist” and that “the puppet-operator’s role is to show humility in the presence of his or her creation” (162). He explains this statement by pointing out that the best way to animate the puppet is to understand the figure’s movements, much like an actor wearing a mask will discover its character by taking cues from the shape and feel of the object.

Another reason why puppet-artists and spectators might treat these figures with reverence, especially in this Old Trout Puppet Workshop production, is that the puppets are demonstrating what will eventually happen to all human beings: we are all going to die. This show, explains Palmer-as-Tweak, does not “deal in false comforts, nor in bad faith” but it is intended as a “therapeutic rehearsal for death” (Ruano). By endowing puppets with human consciousness and aspects of the human condition, the company is putting forth a number of complex ideas. First, it is illustrating Jacques Derrida’s principle of *différance*, which has a threefold meaning: “(1) to differ – to be unlike or dissimilar in nature, quality, or form; (2) *differre* (Latin) – to scatter, disperse; and (3) to defer – to delay, postpone” (Leitch 42). Canadian theorist Northrop Frye’s application of two parts of this principle to what is written on epitaphs can be directly connected with puppets: “stop and look at me; I’m dead and you’re alive (difference), but you’ll soon be dead too (deferral)” (Fortier 75). Similarly, in a puppet show, spectators are watching these figures onstage that are different from themselves because they are inanimate, and yet puppets represent the ultimate fate of human beings, that of being no longer animate. It offers a glimpse at what could be referred to as “life’s absence” (Fortier 77). Fortier illustrates this same idea using the example of a skeleton costume on Halloween, another opportunity for a type of performance, or dressing the part: “the skeleton costume is both innocuous – the person is not really dead – and tellingly macabre – death is already there inside, and someday it will be revealed behind the façade of

the flesh” (76). Furthermore, as non-humans with characteristics of humanity, puppets possess a unique advantage when it comes to philosophizing on various topics that might not be accessible to mere mortals. Since puppets are given an acutely human consciousness when animated, they have the opportunity to reflect on what it means to be a puppet; they can also engage in puppet like activity, without forfeiting the audience’s sympathy (Tillis 129). With the gift of movement and of speech, narrator Tweak openly shares his thoughts on the puppet condition and what he knows about the puppet afterlife: “eventually we return to the state we once were: a block of wood” (Ruano).

The Old Trout Puppet Workshop has a reputation for its members wearing puppets on their heads and, in general, for appearing onstage with the puppets (Morrow). This is unlike some forms of puppetry in which the creators strive to conceal the puppet artists at all costs, and perhaps even hide all evidence that the puppets are being animated by external forces. The members of this company, however, have no qualms about showing themselves onstage, and, indeed, the presence of the actors adds a lot to any puppet performance. American theatre theorist Herbert Blau talks about the concept of ‘ghosting’: “the idea of immediate and unmediated presence is an illusion and the body is always ghosted with words – indeed performance seems written even where there is no text” (Fortier 78). This is especially poignant in puppetry because, of course, a live actor’s performance is also mediated by the presence of the puppet, and the puppet’s performance is mediated by the fact that it is being controlled by a puppeteer, whether he is present onstage or hidden in the background. In some cases, the puppeteers give voice to the puppets, speaking through them to communicate ideas: is the audience meant to interpret this as the voice of the puppet or the puppeteer, and how does this affect the audience’s response to the text? Tillis finds this relationship between the puppet and the puppeteer quite significant, and suggests that “without the visible presence of the puppet-operator, the two aspects [life and object] of the puppet will not be held in tension” (61). When considering the binary opposites of absence and presence, it could be asked which of these terms applies to the puppeteer and

which applies to the puppet. Is the puppeteer 'present' onstage because he, unlike the puppet, is made of flesh and blood, alive, and in control of the action onstage? Or perhaps the puppeteer is the absent one, not playing any particular role in the theatre piece, except as the mechanic that enables the puppet – present onstage as character, as speaker, as imagined to have life – to tell the story. Does the presence of the puppeteer make the puppet seem less life-like, or is the effect altogether different? Reviewer David Ng notes that sometimes having the spotlight on the puppets instead of the puppeteers results in a role reversal: “odd as it may sound, these puppets often seem more recognizably human than the humans they are meant to imitate” (Ng).

It has been debated whether or not puppets should strive to imitate human beings. One approach that could be considered 'conceptual' argues that puppets cannot possibly achieve verisimilitude and therefore uses “abstract signs of life of varied quality and limited quantity, realizing that true simulation is impossible” (Tillis 44). The other 'imitative' approach also recognizes that it is impossible to fully replicate a human being, and yet still attempts to simulate life as closely as possible so that the audience can formulate its own distinctions. As Tillis notes, “it should be recalled that, within such theatrical limitations, the imitative puppet can provide pleasure not only by the verisimilitude of its imitation, but by its very act of imitation, including its failures of verisimilitude” (42). At certain moments during a puppet show, spectators may be amazed by how much these puppets might resemble human beings; in other cases, they may be startled to realize that these are only puppets when, for example, they make reference to themselves as objects. Referring to *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*, Ng notes that “we soon learn through a macabre series of events that things are hardly what they seem and that fooling the viewer is an important, if not fundamental, part of puppetry” (Ng). This observation accounts for the fact that in this show, specifically, the audience's assumptions are often completely turned upside-down: for instance, when a pair of puppets legs are seen hanging from the

ceiling, spectators are meant to assume that a puppet has hung himself, when, in fact, he is simply hanging from ceiling, very much 'alive.' In a broader sense, the audience is fooled into believing that what they are seeing onstage is real.

Much has been said about a puppet's resemblance to a human being and that "the puppet itself can be taken to be a metaphor of humanity" because "it inherently provokes the process of double-vision, creating doubt as to its ontological status" (Tillis 159). Still, Tillis reminds us that "the major difficulty is that to animate something means, in the root sense of the word, to give it the breath of life. As a metaphor, this has great resonance for puppetry. But non-metaphorically, it is absurd, for, of course, the puppet does not actually live" (22). This brings us back to the seeming impossibility of puppet death: puppets cannot die because they are not alive, and death necessitates its subject to be alive first. And yet *Famous Puppet Death Scenes* is a play about puppet death. What Tillis seems to suggest with his definition concerning the puppet's dual nature is that the audience's willingness to see the puppets as alive onstage, at least for a certain amount of time, and keeping in mind that they are still objects, permits the puppets to have life only long enough for them to experience death. When Alexandre Bakshy states that "the puppet can never live unless it acts," he might as well amend the statement by including the phrase "or die" to account for the fact that neither life nor death can occur for the puppet, except in a state of action (Tillis 83). Again, this is reminiscent of deconstruction, which is "interested in the 'eve' because it is a time when a new age has been announced but has not yet arrived and because it marks a marginal or liminal state when one thing is in the process of turning into its opposite" (Fortier 75). Over the course of *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*, an inanimate object becomes its opposite – something that is animate; and, from there, this animate being, now possessing life, transforms once again into its opposite – something that is dead. It is an ongoing process of

metamorphosis, ending only when the puppet performance has ended; the puppet is then stripped of its theatrical signs and has ceased to exist (Tillis 83).

“Whenever someone endows an inanimate object with life force and casts it in a scenario, a puppet is born” (Blumenthal 11). This dual nature of the puppet is essentially what makes this theatrical figure so unique. In performance, the audience perceives the puppet as being an object and yet imagines it to have life. As with deconstruction, the established binary opposites of life and death, being and non-being, and presence and absence, are questioned to such an extent that it is debatable whether a set similarities and differences can be ascertained. Since, in performance, the puppets are provided with aspects of humanity, a complex relationship is formed between the live actor and the puppet actor, and this permits the audience to reconsider this relationship, any potential hierarchies, and what they might have assumed about puppetry and humanity in general. Even though spectators are aware that it is impossible for a puppet to have life and that it is also, consequently, impossible for it to die, still the Old Trout Puppet Workshop has taken liberties with what has been considered possible in their production of *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*. It is feasible for the company to do so because it is using puppetry as its medium for exploring some often unorthodox ideas about mortality; and puppetry is an art form that is, as we have seen, full of inconsistencies, exceptions, and contradictions that challenge what people believe to be true. As Michael R. Malkin states, “puppetry has played a vital role in the development of what can be called the dramatic concept of the *plausible impossible*... the link between the world of the real and the realm of pure fantasy” (Tillis 37).

## Works Cited

- Blumenthal, Eileen. Puppetry: a world history. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2005.
- Culler, Jonathan. The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction. Itaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Execution of Margot Rumebe, The. Dir. Simon Dekker. Perf. Peter Balkwill, Robert Hall, Steve Kenderes, Judd Palmer, and Stephen Pearce. DKR Pictures, 2003.
- Famous Puppet Death Scenes. Dir. Tim Sutherland. Perf. Judd Palmer, Peter Balkwill, Pityu Kenderes, and Mitchell Craib. Old Trout Puppet Workshop, 2006.
- Fortier, Mark. "Theatre, Life and Language: Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction." Theory/Theatre: An Introduction. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.
- Kubik, Jeff. "A good death: Old Trout Puppet Workshop's new show is hilarious, beautiful and macabre." FFWD WEEKLY. 16 March 2006.
- Leitch, Vincent B. Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- Meschke, Michael, and Margareta Sörenson. In search of aesthetics for the puppet theatre. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1992.
- Morrow, Martin. "Lethally funny: The Old Trout Puppet Workshop laughs in the face of death." CBC News. 24 October 2007.
- Murfin, Ross C. "Deconstruction and *Heart of Darkness*: What is Deconstruction?" Heart of Darkness. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996.
- Ng, David. "Old Trout Puppet Workshop's 'Famous Puppet Death Scenes': The Canadian group visits Orange County with a lively bunch of puppets contemplating mortality." Los Angeles Times. 20 March 2008.
- Ruano, Jessica. "Even puppets fear: Magnetic North: Famous Puppet Death Scenes." Ottawa XPress. 7 June 2007.
- Tillis, Steve. Toward an aesthetics of the puppet: puppetry as a theatrical art. New York: Greenwood Press, 1992.