

SOUL TALK

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

ACTORS & MARIONETTES



IT WASN'T UNTIL THIS YEAR that I became aware of the existence of the Czechoslovakian-American Marionette Theater that was founded in New York in 1990 by Vit Horejs who had come across a cache of antique Czech puppets in the Jan Hus church of Manhattan. With a reasonable number of patrons including children in the audience on opening night, the company recently reprised a 1997 production of *Hamlet* played in unusual mode of Czech puppet theatre, which called for the puppeteers to appear as actors alongside their puppets — something I had never seen before but then I am a rare frequenter of puppet entertainments. Besides having directed the production, Mr. Horejs also manipulated the Claudius, Laertes and Ghost puppets. Three other puppeteer/actors rendered the balance of the roles. All were costumed not in black robes and hoods, as are the manipulators in Japanese Bunraku puppet theatre, but in variants of conventional Shakespearean dress: tights and a shirt, a doublet, a gown, and a robe. They were well lighted and towered over their foot-and-a-half to two-foot high marionettes, with some as adorably small as 9 inches and strung Fortinbras. Through recitation of Shakespeare's lines, the actors provided voices for the marionettes in addition to providing their movement.

At times an actor would lay aside his marionette and play a scene straight up, as did Hamlet and Ophelia in the "Get thee to a nunnery" piece, most likely so that they could kiss unencumbered, which they managed several times in the course of breaking off their relationship. For the Gonzago-poisoning play-within-the-play scene, also known as "The Mousetrap" in which Hamlet intends to catch the conscience of the King, Mr. Horejs as King Claudius came offstage carrying his Claudius marionette to the front row of house, where he perched on my right knee before settling on the floor, resting his spine as well as Claudius the marionette against my lower legs, all the easier for both of them, I presume, to view the Gonzago-poisoning about to be enacted onstage. Since the actress assigned to Queen Gertrude was busy impersonating Ophelia, she was unable to come out and sit with her husband King Claudius, where normally Gertrude would sit in a conventional production. My preference would have been for Mr. Horejs to bring the Gertrude marionette with

him into the audience, since Mr. Horejs's gesture of reclining at my feet temporarily turned me into Gertrude. Now, Gertrude is a role I would be delighted to play under most circumstances, although doubtless not among a company of puppets, if only because I am a stranger to the skills of a puppeteer.

Based on the program credits, I would say that the four cast members of the Czechoslovakian-American Marionette Theatre consider themselves actors who have learned puppetry rather than puppeteers who have tackled acting.

Of the four, only Theresa Linnihan (manipulating a Harlequin figure named Kasperek not to be found in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) revealed the ability to integrate acting the role with manipulating the marionette. We could see the marionette Kasperek, we could see and hear the actor/manipulator Linnihan impersonating, and working the strings of, the marionette, and on some intangible level of spirit we couldn't see or hear or sense or feel an iota of separation between them, no matter that Ms. Linnihan is a lively woman of medium height and Kasperek was a goofy-looking man made of wood. In brash contrast the actor/manipulator of the *Hamlet* marionette wanted us to see him, more so than he wanted us to see the marionette, or for that matter to see Hamlet. He wanted us to admire his acting, but the very best we could do was extend our compassion to a person attached to a puppet who wished most of all to be noticed. There is an analogy here to traditional theatre. The marionette is to the manipulator as the character is to the actor. In the theatre, at least in the style of realism, we ought to be able to see the character as well as the actor behind the character, and we ought not to perceive any psychic separation between them.

In the film *Being John Malkovich* there is an opportunity to observe puppetry in which the manipulator does not perform side-by-side with his puppet, Czech style, but nonetheless is at one with his puppet. The film's opening sequence presents John Cusack as puppeteer Craig Schwartz rehearsing a piece in which the marionette, who is a Cusack look-alike, appears to recognize he has strings attached. He turns his head to gaze up at his puppeteer (as if he discovered the engine of the strings!) and then improvises a dance in which he confronts the limits of his marionette nature, ending in exhaustion. The Cusack-face of the puppet establishes parity between puppet and puppeteer, and, indeed, the film shortly reveals that the existential duress of the puppet reflects the condition of Craig the puppeteer.

Seen from an artistic perspective, the equivalence between puppet and puppeteer points to the essence of good puppetry or, for that matter, good acting, which is, absorption.

At times in the movies, we encounter a form of acting that ought to have been a form of puppetry. At times, it would have been better for the authenticity of a movie, if various actors had been asked simply to inhabit the costume and perform the action, while believable-sounding actors had delivered the lines. This dubbing scheme could have bolstered the credibility of various performances, particularly in action films.


Assuming that the sound of stilted speech is less common in legitimate theatre than in action movies, I would hope never to feel obliged to advocate for dubbing stage actors. Nevertheless, theatre history recalls the radical view of visionary designer Gordon Craig, (1872-1968) who proposed an uber-marionette to replace the actor. The avowed purpose of Gordon Craig's super-puppet was to eliminate star actors who tended to aggrandize themselves when they ought to have been creating a role in support of a unified production. What Craig most wanted was a non-hierarchical theatre, and if the ego of the actor insisted on domination, well then, ideally for Craig, let the actor be gone! It occurs to me that Craig's proposal of an uber-marionette was an intense war of asking the actor to subdue his ego.

I would like the actor to develop a contemplative practice through which he can directly experience the true nature of self, which is, in fact, illusory; and, yes, through which he may subdue the ego. How fitting that the actor, whose work is to create myriad roles, would understand himself as a creation! Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art* is testament that not only can the actor transcend self-centeredness and self-consciousness but that it is infinitely valuable for him and the art that he try to do so. The actor can get over craving admiration and get beyond "wooden line-readings." The actor can work with his mind. He can quiet his mind. He can cultivate a mind capable of absorption — as the puppet master is absorbed in the life of the puppet, as the master actor is absorbed in the action of the character. An irony of the profession of acting is that it seems to be ego-driven; but the very best acting, the most effective, moving and immortal acting, is surely born of the nonappearance of ego. ♦2002

A new column written expressly for "The Soul of the American Actor."

JOANNA ROTTÉ — is a writer, teacher, director and actor. Her books include *Scene Change* and *Acting With Adler*. As Professor of Theatre in the graduate program of Villanova University in Pennsylvania, she specializes in teaching Script Analysis, which she also offers in a Master Class at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in New York City. She regularly directs featured productions of the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, most recently a musical adaptation of *Präjna*, by the late Tibetan meditation master, Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche.

Her "Comments on Acting" can be found at www.homepage.villanova.edu/joanna.rotte.



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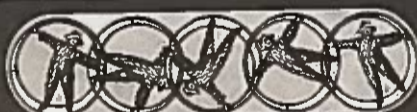
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