

## THE MARIONETTE DEEP INSIDE THE ACTOR

Article by Tim Dalton

In order to be able to understand clearly « The Actor's marionette » we have to see standing before us in all his splendour and squalor, the figure of an articulate being, with two arms, a torso, a head, two legs with feet....a being as yet without an identity or a personality other than that of a being in the shape of a human, he has no strings, no manipulations, but he is nevertheless a complete being, waiting for a signal, a sign, that he might at any moment be called upon to act.

This action might be to simply lift one arm slowly, or even only to make a tentative wave with his fingers without actually moving his arm into the well known, habitual position.

We may ask him politely to lower his head from the neck, to sink his chin to his breast in a gesture of sadness, or might it be to sulk, or in shyness or embarrassment to retire into himself.? If we ask him to stand on one leg, the raised foot dangling from the knee, it is to give him his real aspect of a marionette made of articulate parts; but if now we instruct him to offer slowly and with much apparent suffering his hand, raising it with the sensitivity of someone testing the sensation of passing his hand through a waterfall, suddenly that gesture takes on a myriad of possible expressions tied to apparent inner motivations which we cannot see - the quality of touch opens for us a kinetic language, and the spectator has the role of completing this sensitive action, by interpreting it with his own inner sensibility; By so doing he lets an artistic language, visual and emotive, take hold of his sensibility allowing the theatre to become an art that can speak of inner life through outer manipulation.

The questions raised here might be what is the nature of this sensibility? where in the human body is it situated? ? how shall it have grown there? These are question which need to be answered but due to the lack of space here they will be approached but later in our discussion. All that needs to be emphasised is this insistence on art in the theatre, that emotive meaning, emotion and temperament can be created by the fine control of gesture in the human body.

Let us return to our marionette...

A traditional marionette is a wooden creature, who, by careful manipulation can express love, jealousy, hate, sorrow or joy with a careful, caressing gesture; a position, a pose, that, without any contact, without stamping, gesticulation or tension, can touch our inner sensibility with the greatest economy. The extraordinary point here being that this richness, this infinite sensitivity of human emotion coming from an inanimate figure, has at the same moment an involuntary sensation of poverty, squalor and even death about it. However beautifully the marionette be made, he will resemble a man in an inanimate state, he will be fashioned of wood, canvas, hemp, nails and cords, cheap materials which bring to mind Bruno Schulz's « *Treatise on a Tailor's Dummy* ».

*« You give a head of canvas and oakum an expression of anger and leave it with it, with the convulsion, the tension enclosed once and for all, with a blind fury for which there is no outlet... »*

*or:*

*« Who knows how many suffering, crippled, fragmentary forms of life there are, such as the artificially created life of chests and tables quickly nailed together, crucified timbers, silent martyrs to cruel human invention... »*

(Already, before even drawing its first breath, the being has managed to express the antithesis - death and humour.)

\*\*\*\*\*

If we now ask our marionette to take one, two, three steps forward; the first steps of a dance the rhythm of which is as yet imperceptible, but the first signs of a purpose, an intention and a direction are given.

We do not see more than this, the will to move.

As yet all possible expressions are still latent, the figure, our double, has shown only that he obeys some urge, that to remain immobile does not seem to him a viable course of action. He moves. He lives.

In this insignificant moment he crosses the boundary between life and death, and re-crosses it, back and forth, again, and

again; without any clear design he teaches us the economy of meaningful action, he has danced the dance of life in three steps carrying death on his shoulders as a vast mantle of experience.

Immobility, patience and latency, are close relatives to apathy, torpor and lassitude.

\*\*\*\*\*

(Let us call for an illusion of life...why an illusion of life? Why not Life itself? Life in art is an imitation of life, an illusion of life can give us a better appreciation of what it means to live. An illusion that is a real illusion, that is to say one that is seen to be an illusion, can tell us more about loss of life than can the imitation of life by semi-realistic means. When we see what it means to have lost life we can see the importance of life. Such an illusion of life can be given by the dead because they can see life from both sides of the mirror. It is they who can tell the difference between life and the illusion of life, and they can instruct us by performing plays that until now we had seen only in the light of the living actor. But our marionette, is he living or is he dead?)

(We must attempt an illusion of life that is a manifest illusion, with nothing hidden, no construction upholstered, no sham walls that are not clearly a sham, no realistic gestures, nothing that is its right size. It is important *not* to give way to stories that attain their natural endings, only stories within stories, each a sham behind which is hidden another which in turn hides others. In this way we can hope to approach the reality of life, by its fractured parts.)

*« There are so many unborn tales. Oh, those sad lamenting choruses among the roots, those stories outbidding one another, those inexhaustible monologues among suddenly exploding improvisations!...Before the oldest known legend there were others no one has ever heard.... »*

Bruno Schulz; « Spring ».

Tales within tales, Massioth Betokh Massioth as in the stories of Rebbi Nachman, where every word is a tale, the fable inside the

story, the legend begotten by the fable, the dream buried inside the dream.

Our marionette moves, walks and, at a simple level has shown us that he can dance

too. The question arises, is what he shows us life, or the illusion of life?

To imagine....The liberty of the human spirit lies in the freedom to imagine...(even if the body is imprisoned the spirit is free to imagine). Our marionette can not as yet imagine the importance of his simple actions. The sensitivity of the marionette's gestures are assured by references to qualities in life, qualities of human life, to be alive, to hear, see, feel, touch, to imagine...but also by qualities of natural inspiration, the waterfall in the first gesture we demanded of our marionette, but also a thousand other images which we can ask him to evoke with the help of his wooden limbs and his memory.

(A marionette, has no memory! we have entered unwittingly the human domain:)

Imagination, the key to creation...and if we put this imagination into the body parts of our marionette?

(not into his brain, this would only confuse him and involve him too early in the problems of choice, the problem of interpretation, the problem of make-believe, and ultimately in all the problems of being an actor-)

...if we were to install a sensitivity of movement and grace into the wooden limbs of our marionette... each area of the body living its own imagination, the head, the torso, the arms and shoulders, the groin and the legs and feet.... each separated and steered by the hidden threads of imagination....

...what a dance! and what possibilities! what images! And the control. Through careful selection of images and sensations we can send the different parts of the body into action, slowly at first, building movements brush stroke by brush stroke. First the feet, the walk, a thousand sensations of contact with the floor, sand, ice, thorns, mud, dust...this is changing the attitude of the knees and the hips and thus of the spine.

The steps of our marionette become a flora of sensitivities and rhythms - ask him to

walk on broken glass and his knees bend to absorb sudden weight shifts, the souls of the

feet contact the floor as flat as possible, the tentativeness of each step, of each toe...ask him to walk on soft green moss and his whole attitude changes, and the softness can be seen in the spine as well.

He is learning fast to absorb a suggestion, to assimilate it and to send its sensation down into his wooden limbs...in fact he is no longer a marionette but a dancer, a dancer who allows no other intention to disturb his sensitivity than the precise task in hand, the precise image of the moment. Effectively he is doing no more nor less than pulling his own strings in order to manipulate his actions...we ask of him now only that he finds his own tasks, his own imagination, that he finds a flow and a gently changing rhythm for his movements....

...and he becomes..... autonomous.

\*\*\*\*\*

We must keep him on the straight and narrow. Not too much freedom, just enough to enable him to co-ordinate his movements without losing contact with any of his parts. The more he works, the easier it becomes to assimilate more complicated combinations of tasks.

We can now give his mobility a face, a mask, several masks, - the attitude of the head has become a fluid transformation of inner tasks, the muscles of the face can in a similar way pass a multitude of tasks and sensations to arrive at one that complements or opposes the tasks for the body.

The dances that ensue are dances of transformation, of metamorphosis, fascinating in their concentration, in their unseen intentions, in their silences and sudden engagements.

These dances are dances of life but always close to their origins in immobility, in inertia, in a state resembling catalepsy and even death.

These are dances as yet without concrete meaning - they are fascinating forms that engage us with their grace, their ugliness, with their dynamic, with their similarity to sacred dances or to meditation-like movement. They are as yet without identity or theatrical content and clarity.

But their sensitivity leaves these dances with a volatile nature, they seem at each moment to ignite images and echoes inside us, the spectators. We are the receiver, the vibrating element that associates gestures to concrete

images. This is an inner process, an involuntary one at first, an inner vibration similar to the one we may have in front of an abstract painting or sculpture, or standing before an architecture of magnitude, or a landscape. It is essentially a musical sensitivity. But dance has not yet become theatre.

For this to happen we must appeal to another part of our sensitivity, one which demands the presence of a prosaic element....a certain depth in the marionettes gestures which suggests a personality. Habits, idiosyncrasies, everyday movements, banal in themselves, which nevertheless go to make up a composite identity.

In order to usher our marionette in this direction we need other tools than we have needed up until this point.

It is essentially here that our marionette can no longer be constructed of wood and canvas, we can only give such a creature an expression and then leave him with it. We admit at this point that what we have been searching for all along has not been an obedient servant to human design and willpower, but an autonomous being, whose strength and frailty lies in his will to act for himself!

We will have recourse here for other inputs of a more complicated nature; Words, song, music with its inspiration of time and place, rhythm and energy, light with its ambience; illuminous or tenebrous.

We have altogether need for a being which combines at once the will to act and a special subservience to mechanism of his body's movement. This is of the greatest importance because in order to continue he has to get used to listening to two sources of inspiration, his own body and its fluctuations, and another external voice, that of an external eye who hears and sees another world of associations. Images that are part of a search for a character, a story and a dramaturgy.

We may have an image of our marionette at this moment as a somnambulant being, walking in a dream following the directions of an unseen source. We cannot see

these sources, we are left to interpret the visible part, the movements we see developing and mutating before us. What we see is an organic process.

Our reaction must also be organic. We must allow ourselves to freely interpret what we think we see. This will be different for each of us in certain moments, while at other moments our interpretations will coincide strangely. We must not be afraid to be an unknowing spectator, looking through a pane of glass at these often strange gestures, and to let them speak their language of ephemeral impressions.

And yet our somnambulant dancer, dancing with his body and with his spirit has need of an external eye.

The artistic eye that can give these gestures a clear sequence and imagery; to transform them into clear actions without losing their sensitive and volatile qualities. They can become, in this way, the actions of a characterisation, and can speak with the economy of movement that becomes a marionette.

The external eye is the stage director whose role it is to possess a very specific discipline. He must let the ephemeral language of gesture speak freely with its associations to intentions and emotions and their conspiracy to action.

He must help the actor-(because it should be clear by now that we are talking of the presence of a real actor)- with renewed tasks for his corporal imagination, searching to pull on invisible threads of imagination, that gently aim at the core of the task in hand - the characterisation.

Having been a collection of dances, the actor's work becomes characterisation. But still it maintains the greatest flow of dance-like liberties creating a precise work that nevertheless could take any one of twenty different directions before ending in a defined role.

\*\*\*\*\*

Our marionette has put on a costume of gestures. He has tailored a combination of forms and positions, rhythms and impulses, which fit over his body like an over-coat.

It is this that speaks to us. It is this mantle of movement that is the actor's marionette.

...We have entered the theatre by a back door...