

WORKING METHODS AND VISIONS OF HAND THEATRE

1. From anthropology to theatre.

The hand is for the human like a second face. And after the face, it is the most expressive, the most representative and most readable part of our body. The hand in its wider office as the companion of human development has left its marks on our culture: from giving us the basics of our ten-based arithmetical system, foretelling our future through chiromancy (palm reading) into setting the main pattern of our technology, where nearly all instruments were developed as an extension of the biologic hand. With this rich curriculum, the hand has always been the main medium between human and the world around him, translating the human thoughts and feelings into actions in the material.

Giving this background of the position of the hand in our culture, one might think there are sufficient enough reasons to use hands as a theatrical instrument. But as a puppet theatre maker i dare say that there is still one matter that makes the hand the prime tool for telling stories on stage. The face, in the context of traditional drama theatre, is associated with the use of verbal language. The hand, on the other hand (!), does not speak but is subconsciously connected to our pre-historical background, to the period when humans were still communicating mostly if not only by body language. This is the reason why a hand on stage gets more easily through the curtain of intellect (which is bound to written and spoken language) and finds its way deeper to our feelings. The face has a reputation of an actor: it is consciously more controlled by the mind and has an ability to display certain selected expressions and to conceal others. The hand, however, is often more impulsive in its reactions and therefore is a better detector for the real feelings behind the mask. That is why spectators are more willing to believe the hand and movement than face and speech.

2. From the body to the stage.

From the modern puppet theatre point of view, the hand is a ready-to-use puppet. It was first liberated from its traditional roles in puppet theatre's back stage by Sergey Obrazov, who renewed the hand puppet tradition by introducing the puppet model of a bare hand with a ball on it. Removing the theatre custom (i.e. the glove puppet) off the hand has made the way for perceiving hand as a theatrical object by itself, without any additional props. Giving up the glove puppet theatre aesthetics has released the hand from performing in the limits of the booth's play board and gave new dimensions of using the theatre space. However, at the same time this move has given the hand new limitation: the need to separate between the performer and his hands.

What kind of character is the hand itself? Can it become at all free from the rest of the body, even for a short moment? What kind of stories does the hand tell when

it is separated from the body, what kind of unique dramaturgy is being created around it? Is the hand bound to play on themes from our culture or can it perform characters free from human context?

3. Training the hand-actor.

These questions kept us busy while making the show “Golemanual”. Our goal was to create hand theatre which is in dialogue with performance, with text based theatre, with visual and plastic arts. We set on a track of experimenting different methods of creating hand theatre. Our background in working with hands was in the frame of our study in the Turku arts academy’s puppet theatre department (the show was my graduation work from the department). Inspiration for making hand theatre was much found after a workshop given by Andrei Kniazkov, where we were first introduced to the genre and learned the basics of black theatre. Working experience with hands was gained also through workshop given by Martin Bridle on the more traditional style of glove puppets.

However, seeking different aesthetics and a more personal direction for our theatre, we opened ourselves to influences from areas that are normally less associated with puppetry.

One of these was sign language. Introduced also in the show itself the sign language taught us a lot about the possibilities for telling a story by hands. Each phrase in the sign language is made understandable from the combination of four main parameters: The position of the hand, the shape of the hand, movement and repetition - of forms or movements, and each parameter consist of smaller elements such as articulation, rhythm, direction and so on (we used the Finnish sign language, but a quick review has shown that these are quite universal qualities). The system mentioned above can be translated directly to puppet theatre, almost a “manual” guide for puppeteers. One should just replace the word ‘hand’ with the word ‘puppet’; but we did not need to do even that. Plenty of material was found by taking simple sign language phrases and transferring them into the hand-puppet on the stage, giving them new dramatic functions.

Another useful tool turned out to be Butoh. Butoh is often used as a form of examining the body’s physicality and its source of life. We borrowed various Butoh exercises created originally for the whole body and applied them to use with hands only. Here are few examples of practised exercises:

- A hand grows in turns sensory organs (eyes, nose, ears and tongue) on different spots and discovers its surroundings through these senses;
- A hand that changes the state of it’s structure - from flesh and blood to stone, into air, into hot or cold water, wood, metal etc.;
- A hand that grows on a tree like a flower, that turns into a fruit, that fall on the ground.

Into this frame of Butoh exercises we applied the method of character investigation, presented to us originally by Eric Bass during our studies. In this

exercise nothing is yet known of the characters qualities. While manipulating the hand-puppet, Fundamental questions were constantly asked: Does the hand breathe? What does it feed on? Does it have a heart, a brain and where are they located in?

These exercises that combine imagination with physical work helped us to verify and widen the field of action for the hand outside the traditional forms used, and to revive the hand characters with new inventive positions and shapes. We found both Butoh and sign language ideal for theatrical adaptation, because both lack forms of future and past, both happen only in the present tense, and on the stage there is only this moment, now.

4. Building the show.

After exploring these different training methods and coming to a common understanding with our hands about the working relationship between a puppet and its puppeteer, we set to build the actual show.

The main type of our puppets was a combination of a hand with small heads made out of rubber foam. We developed a very simple system that allows the quick change of characters with only one hand and one rubber foam head, by using gloves with attaching points for the heads on different locations. The combination of the living hand with the dead material (the rubber foam) and the symbolical visual quality of both has charged the puppets with an inner “built in” dramatical tension.

This combination has led us to working with objects: using “fake” hand we tested the illusion of life in puppet theatre – from the living hand to the puppet, and from the stage prop into a body part, a flesh and blood organ. We extended the work with using raw materials (flour, water, dough) which lack a steady form on and around the hand-puppets, thus making the border between the two realms, the alive and the dead material more obscure and giving more working space to the spectator’s imagination.

Working with scale was also an important tool in building the show. We used a visual repetition of the show’s main elements (hands and heads) in different sizes, which created a dramatical tension between the characters was also a tool of modifying the space (or, to put more precisely: the illusion of space). Space was defined by the minimal use of both scenery and light. The choice of minimal scenery was made in order to give the puppet the “technical” support in describing the world around it without taking from it the focus on stage. Light was also used very minimally, more hiding than showing. Using means of black theatre supported this form of hand theatre, where removing what is visually irrelevant and focusing on few symbolical elements gives space for telling a story of our hands from a new point of view. A story told in the collision between the strange and the familiar.

by Ishmael Falke