

# **DANCE OF DOGS:**

## **THE RADICAL HERITAGE OF FOLK PUPPETRY**

By Brian Deller

“Art is not a mirror, but a hammer in which to shape reality”  
Bertolt Brecht

“Our rage is our culture. Our art is not some idly sought for indulgence, nor selfish grasping for possessions. Yes, they might have purchased our products, but the true art is in our souls. The treasure within, the ultimate weapon with which to disarm those who believe that power is measured in material values. Our art, our culture and our love are a torch of hope passed from generation to generation”  
Penny Rimbaud

## *INTRO*

They can be found in basements, public spaces, cafes, drinking holes and amidst protests today just as they have been for hundreds of years. They can be a hundred feet high or the size of your finger. You can take years to create them with an extravagant budget or make them in mere minutes with found objects. Despite the incredible advancements of technology, they are often quite similar to what they have been for ages. Perhaps this is why they're dismissed as out of place in a society upon the cutting edge. Yet, I've seen them adapt to technology without losing their innate wonder. In the right hands they can be a very dangerous weapon.

I've wondered why puppetry has fascinated me. Perhaps it has something to do with the intersection of this art form and my own "radical" visions for a better society. Folk puppetry addresses how humans envision their world and themselves. Before the cinema and television, puppetry was a widespread mode of expression. It is the precursor to today's mass entertainment. In the early industrial age mobs came to witness such shows at seasonal fairs across Europe. At times it was even a force for justice, a weapon of the weak. It is and was a tool for the disenfranchised to express complicated political ideas in very simple images. This kind of puppetry is something we know more from police records than documents of canonized culture. It has served many causes. Its subtleties are well suited to rebelliousness. Somehow it still exists out there, finding a niche instead of being relegated to the past. But as with a lot of old art forms that don't die easily, puppetry has significance. The history of radical puppetry is a living one whose heart beat can still be heard. What struck chords of amazement in the hearts of people in heydays of radical puppetry stirs something in mine today.

Puppetry is evocative. It is multi-layered symbolism that is hard to resist. Many wanting a voice to change the world adopted it to do so. Live performance has qualities that technology cannot duplicate. Among these are the timbres of impassioned voice, the almost emphatic honesty of bodies in motion and the soul to soul transmission between storyteller and receiver. The near spiritual experiences inherent in performance are part of why puppetry persists in enthralling audiences. But one question remains. What is it about puppets that makes us pay attention? The answer to this question is the reason it persists today.

“Puppetry is a form of ecstasy, just as music is. It is caused by an overthrow of muscle-power and brain activity and by an urgent happiness that can’t be held back, that has to manifest itself. The most evident fact of our life is; we are surrounded by sky, wrapped in weather. Stones speak, hills laugh, worms sing. The great beauty of the universe makes us dizzy. Puppetry is a simplification to make these incomprehensible riches accessible. Or, puppetry is a form giving technique that makes it possible to respond to creation.” (Peter Schumann, 1985, 78)

Puppets are a wily force across cultural traditions. They can be found in every nook and cranny of civilization. They are the archetypal tricksters, the clever yet plebian heroes. It’s no wonder that the Polcinella character spread across Europe to become Petrushka in Russia, Polchinelle in France and Punch in England. Even in Turkey and Greece we find popular characters that are not dissimilar from the cantankerous and bawdy Punch.

Much like Coco Fusco and her use of performance to explore the legacies of imperialism, I wanted to tie my academic work at OSU into a broader, more public context. In Fusco’s article “The Other History of Intercultural Performance” she outlines public performance art that she and Guillermo Gomez-Pena did countering 1992’s Quincentennial events celebrating Cristopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas. Their public spectacles, where they posed as

undiscovered Amerindians from an overlooked island off the coast of Mexico on display in a golden cage in front of Natural History Museums, demonstrated satirically the issue of “otherness” and the racist paradigms of discovery and commercial multiculturalism (Fusco, 38). Like Fusco and Gomez-Pena, I wanted to “embody” my research on radical puppetry. Using the grants awarded to me through Ohio State University I formed a puppetry troupe and constructed my own show. Researching the history and evolution of radical themes in folklore puppetry wasn’t enough. I wanted to use this opportunity at Ohio State to add to the heritage of radical puppetry and continue the tradition of this counter-hegemonic vein.<sup>1</sup>

This experience was an opportunity to become part of the legacy of radical puppeteers. This paper is only part of the finished project. The other part was the show itself. Our troupe took our show on the road for two weeks. Our tour performed everywhere from bars to libraries to basements. This thesis project was not only an opportunity to explore the trends toward radical discourse in puppetry. It was a way to put out counter hegemonic discourse of my own and communicate our troupe’s ideas of class struggle and the pitfalls of employment in an absurd, entertaining way. To create a show and take it out into the world was not just an experiment to write about. For me this show is as important as the knowledge of radical puppetry. The ideas and themes of *The Dance of Dogs* portrayed something in my own life I don’t communicate with enough people. Our hope was that we might inspire those who would see our performance, or at least let them know that they are not the only ones out there that don’t like the way that the world is. This project was conducted because I believe that we can all be living in a better world. Though puppetry will not bring that about directly, it is vital to put forth ideas that resist the lies of those who unjustly

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<sup>1</sup> Hegemony is a modern analysis of power theorized by the Italian left communist Antonio Gramsci. It defines the controlling class’s ability to manipulate government, economy and cultural elements to elicit consent. Hegemony encompasses ownership and rule, and includes social and cultural dominance (Maistas, 30). It was a redefinition of Marxist theory for an emerging consumerist society in 1930’s. Gramsci’s ideas of how the powerful have adapted to maintain their power without seeming authoritarian still remain valid, if not prophetic today.

control. It is important to create popular culture of our own, stories autonomous from the mass media's official interpretation of events. It's one step toward social transformation and this project is part of that movement.

The term "radical" is used often in this paper and I wish to contextualize this concept that is the soul of this project. As an anarchist I see that governance in the world today lies not in popular democracy but in money and power. I believe war, poverty, racism, greed and other problems that have plagued humankind are not human nature. They are a byproduct of societies based upon hierarchy and coercion. Domination of the many by the few is the cause of human grief. Erase these conditions and people will have no reason to fight, steal or hate. Such change must be made by those who need it most. Change from above is not change at all. "Radical" in this paper refers to the desire to see an unjust society transformed. "Radical" change is not more freedom under oppression. It seeks complete freedom from oppression. Radical opinions are not passive disagreements. They are a desperate need for destruction and creation. They do not seek for the powerful to change their ways, they seek for a new way to be created without the powerful. Radical is not always revolutionary, and in the case of the Punch puppeteers, their shows tended to be a way to blow off steam, expressing dissatisfaction, instead of overtly challenging authority. Most specifically "radical" will refer to class and the critiques of society by lowly men who played with puppets in the 19th century. Though "radical" notions can be found in various puppet traditions around the world, I focus on the Punch puppeteers in this paper. Punch's attitudes transcended societal institutions of church, state and morality. The way Punch dealt with these problems through direct action in his shows typifies radical discourse.

This project is a multi-part entity. Throughout this journey into the heritage of radical puppetry I have gotten closer to the heart of what makes puppetry a tool for radical ideas. Puppetry's ability

to persist is tied up with its power to grasp attention and sway minds. In this paper you will find a transcript of the play, an itinerary of tour dates, photographs, and promotional material. The first half of this paper explores the history of radical discourse in puppetry. I focus on the puppetry coming from the subordinate classes of Europe during the industrial revolution. This is an important turning point in folk puppetry, which I define in this paper as puppetry as popular entertainment, based in traditional formulas. The industrial revolution was a time period of puppetry revival in which populist puppet hero archetypes developed. The second half of the paper deals with our puppetry tour and experiences as we attempt to don the mantle of radical puppeteers. Here, I try to explain the conditions of using puppetry as a tool of radical discourse in a world that is a lot different than that of our street showmen of the 19th century. I look at the changes in puppetry that have affected our attempts to perform puppet plays to as wide an audience as possible. Finally, with my knowledge of the current conditions of radical puppetry and its heritage I elicit reasons for its continued existence and what makes it a useful tool for radical voices. This project is an exercise in participant observation. In the next 30 pages I become historian, artist, subject and ethnographer. These are masks that combine so I take you on a trip into the past and across the American Midwest, all convened for the sake of sharing with you my passion, radical puppetry. This is a story about a story. It's a tale about hegemony and counter hegemonic forces. It is about the role of co-option in this dialectic of power and the interplay between forms of popular culture and mass culture.

### *A BREIF HISTORY OF RADICAL PUPPETRY*

Puppetry that most of us are familiar with comes from a folklore tradition of the underclasses. The industrial age ushered in unprecedented changes in the social relationships in Europe. The creation of a new class of workers, the urban proletariat(those who migrated to the growing urban centers to seek livelihoods), created the conditions for vast cultural change. With the rapid

changes such as urban unemployment, new living conditions, need for entertainment and social stratification, these urban centers were boiling pots of discontent. It was at this time that puppetry took on a new face to reflect the changes that were occurring in society. Before these socio-economic shifts puppetry was an art form that had representation among many rungs of society and didn't have a central theme. It wasn't until the formation of the new industrial underclasses that the conditions were ripe for radical puppetry. The development of Punch and Judy glove shows and their bawdy carnivalesque street performance tradition appeared.<sup>2</sup> Puppetry became a popular cheap form of entertainment that reflected the experiences and values of the times. For some it was a safety valve against the harshness of the day and for others, like the revolutionary troupes in Russia, it was a tool toward social revolution.

Puppetry existed in many forms leading up to the industrial revolution. Not until the changes brought about with industrialization can radical trends in the West be singled out as significant. The most recognizable and widespread types of folk puppetry of this trend starred an archetypal puppet named Punch. He is important because as entertainment trends changed in 18th century puppetry, he along with his derivative cousins, went on to become the unofficial voice of the people across Europe. George Speight traces the origins of the Punch shows to Greek puppet plays from as far back as 500 BC (1990, 231). European traditions included religious puppet shows based upon church mystery plays and minstrel shows based on folk traditions. The 18th century was dominated by traveling troupes that performed marionette performances at seasonal

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<sup>2</sup> Carnivalesque is a concept developed by Mikhail Bakhtin that situates the marketplace as a public sphere for open discourse by the lower classes. Bakhtin posits in *Rabelais and His World* (a study of Rabelais's folk humor inflected novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*) that lower classes could subtly use folk traditions such as humor, street performance and festivals as a mediation to openly critique their superiors (and even the structure of society itself) without consequence. Festival times like Carnival, hence the name, were the epitome of this phenomenon in which symbols of authority could be theatrically inverted. The street puppetry of the industrial revolution falls within this framework of transgressive opinion expressed through public folk tradition.

festivals. Not until the 18th century did the ubiquitous Punch, who first appeared as an Italian *commedia dell' arte* character, become popularized as a street performance (Ibid, 182). As this trend developed, Punch became a hero of the people in the form of a glove puppet. The shows were simplified for street performance and the range of motions possible for a one man glove puppetry. The themes changed to reflect an audience that was different from that at the fair where the marionette Punch was previously found. Punch is important to focus upon because he is the epitome of the radical themes coming out of puppetry at this time. Not that he alone reflected and commented on the changing socioeconomic relations of the time, but he is the best barometer since much has been documented about his show. Punch's interactions with the other peripheral characters show the sentiment of the lower classes of the day who watched these shows and whose humor it was tailored for.

Prior to the 19th century, puppetry was a very widespread art form enjoyed by all classes. In 1642, the English civil war had been won by Cromwell and his Puritans. Because of the power theatre had over the minds of the people, they banned it, fearful of its revolutionary potential. In place of live performance then, puppetry came to the fore as a central means of entertainment at this time. It flourished, escaping through a loop hole. For 18 years the roving puppet theatre was the most visible performance in England. The theatre of human actors continued but very underground, not as open as puppeteers could be with their art (Ruby). Up until the middle of the 19th century the most common place to catch a puppet performance was at the fair. It was here that all sorts of entertainment was to be found, including puppetry. Traveling troupes would perform at these seasonal fairs that were tied to the harvest and agricultural commerce. With the ushering in of the industrial shifts in the 19th century these fairs lost their relevance. The fair had been a time of simultaneous commerce and entertainment. The entertainment industry began to carve out its own niche with the shift toward industrialization. With their economic centrality waning, the fairs

evolved into events solely based upon entertainment. The development of an emergent entertainment industry along with new forms of leisure time activity meant puppetry's popularity dwindled. Middle class audiences' interests shifted from puppetry to new spectacles including shooting galleries, cinemas, dance halls, menageries, portable theatres, waxworks and automatons (Kelly, 31).

New entertainment options were not the only changes in the 19th century. More importantly the century ushered in a new awareness of social class. Stemming from these economic shifts in Europe, facilitated by events like the Enclosures Acts in England, which consolidated land ownership in the hands of the few, greater differences between the rich and the poor emerged (Crosby).<sup>3</sup> The ideas of high and low culture began to be recognized at this time (McCormick, 9). Marionette puppet shows and fixed theatres garnered a middle class and at times a high class reputation and were more expensive to view. Glove puppet shows were viewed as low and sometimes not even recognized as legitimate forms of expression. Folk theatre was not viewed as art, but as entertainment. These attitudes were even held by the showmen who considered themselves "skilled tradesmen" or "showmen." Such titles were taken to avoid the stigma of poverty associated with identifying as puppeteers (McCormick22). Puppeteers led a life on the margins in which they were grouped together with bandits and gypsies(as a legal order from Prague in 1802 stated) (Leach, 117).

In England, the Fairs Act of 1871 banned fairs across the country for fear of their chaotic and riotous nature. This was a pivotal turning point in the development of a radical puppetry of the

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<sup>3</sup> Between 1750 and 1850 there were approximately 4,000 Enclosure Acts of Parliament. The enclosure movement was the cause of one of the greatest changes in the landscape of rural England. It was the process whereby the system of communal exploitation and regulation of the arabic land, open pastures, meadows and wastes (uncultivated land) was gradually replaced by a system of private land management. It involved both a legal change and a physical change. It created the conditions for the creation of a mass of workers without a means of livelihood who would supply the labor needs of emergent industrialists(Crosby).

subordinate classes. This brought conditions in which showmen would be relegated to the street in order to perform and make a living. The stage on which their puppetry plays became subsumed with everyday life for workers in England. Robert Leach contends that the end of the 18th century ushered in an era that “Sprouted, awkwardly and haphazardly, what may legitimately be called a working class culture”(163). Punch had a second coming and he took on more populist themes. England was not alone in this trend. The radical restructuring of Europe due to industrialization corresponded to concurrent trends in puppetry. You could say that Punch and his cohorts were sweeping Europe as fast as industry was. The major areas of puppetry activity corresponded with the more industrialized zones (McCormick, 12). This included much of industrial Italy, Germany, France and Belgium. One such area was the “4th quarter” of Antwerp also known as Saint Andrews, a working class ghetto that was at the time characterized by appalling living conditions. This section, the poorest neighborhood of Antwerp was also known as “the stronghold of puppetry”(McCormick, 59).

Punch wasn't always the “the people's unofficial truth” as theatre scholar Scott Shershow dubbed him (62). Before Punch became a popular icon of street showmen in the 18th century as a glove puppet, he inhabited the theatre, breakfast rooms and the parlors of the upper class. As Punch's popularity waned for upper class audiences and the fairs changed, it would seem he was to fade away. However Punch was reborn, co-opted from below. He was appropriated and reformatted by itinerant street performers. These Punch street showmen expressed the anxieties of the audiences that were dominated by the new strata of society, the industrial worker. Punch was a vehicle for their common identity to solidify around in his transcendence of the limitations imposed by the police, church, and middle class morality. British historian E. P. Thompson suggests that Punch embodied “Brechtian values of fatalism, the irony in the face of established homilies, the tenacity of self-preservation”(59). Typical glove puppet Punch shows at this time consisted of a series of

interactions between Punch and a rotation of stock characters. The showman kept Punch on his right hand and visible throughout the performance. As characters on his left hand continually interrupt Punch, they are dealt routine thrashings. The shows were unscripted and improvised, relying on practiced parameters. Despite improvisation, the shows tended to be predictable throughout the course of this incarnation of Punch. Aesthetics was not the cause for the informal structuring, but necessitated by context. The shifting street audiences that came and went as their interests waned lended itself to a plotless series of encounters. These street shows were more akin to stand up comedy than actual plays. One could pick up at any point in the play. Reinterpreted from memory, these shows were based on formulaic structures akin to folk narratives. Punch was going to encounter his nagging, shrewish wife, Judy, and dispatch her through violence. The same would happen to the constable, the beadle, the doctor, the hangman, the devil and even his own baby. The plot usually started with him killing his wife and then dealing with his crying baby by launching it out the window. The police would arrive in the form of the constable and beadle to take Punch in. They would of course be unsuccessful against his cudgel. Sometimes Punch was taken in but he would trick the hangman, Jack Ketch, into putting his own head into the noose. Punch would then merrily pull. The shows ended with our hero in judgment from the Devil. In the 18th century Punch was damned but in the 19<sup>th</sup> Punch triumphed over the Devil. There were 14 other stock characters. Those listed above were by far the most popular (Speight, 1979, 85). James Twitchell states that Punch “Strikes out against family, state and church and is thus dangerously subversive... concerned with freedom from oppression and a fierce assertion of disobedience”(83) . Peter Linebaugh suggests Punch “Expressed class rage against family, police, couriers, physicians and householders” (404).

The anti-social nature of Punch’s carnivalesque rebellion often slipped into xenophobia and sexism, typical sentiments of the mostly male worker audiences. Mirroring views of this audience,

it's not surprising to find these shows reflecting resentment toward marriage. One literary text of a Punch show demonstrates the sentiment as Punch sings,

Joan you are the plague of my life  
A rope would be welcomer than such a wife  
Joan, Joan, Joan, has a thundering Tongue,  
And Joan, Joan, Joan, is a bold one  
How happy is he,  
Who from wedlock is free;  
For who'd have a wife to scold one  
(Speight, 979, 169).<sup>4</sup>

Shershow states that "It is not hard to see an element of wish fulfillment that might appeal to men of a class in which divorce was virtually impossible"(167). Many versions of Punch shows also contained a black servant character commonly referred to as "the nigger." He was usually characterized as vaguely Eastern or African and could only pronounce a single word, "Shallaballa." He was unceremoniously thrashed for no other reason than his otherness. Shershow suggests Punch and Judy shows "Express an impulse of undifferentiated aggression and thus reproduce the impulse of domination against which it otherwise seems to rebel"(70). There is much debate over what role Punch really played at this time in the streets. Shershow contends that Punch was a bridge to the upper class culture. He suggests Punch became an excuse to further stereotype the working class as violent, wife beating and chaotic, thus in need of order. Was Punch's anger a tool for the self justification of the social order he defied? Critics view this and other forms of the carnivalesque as nothing more than a safety valve to let off steam for seething anger and thus a pacification of class angst. The most dominant view expressed by scholars tends to frame Punch as "The "unofficial" popular voice of the newly formed urban proletariat trying to define themselves and express their views of society"(Shershow, 61). In the end, Punch is an unlikely hero that the audience identified with through their social realities. He

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<sup>4</sup> Joan was another name in which Punch's wife was known as besides the more popular "Judy".

was not a socialist hero, as his Russian cousin, Petrushka, would become. Punch was the eternal clown of the angry underclass who felt trapped by their circumstances. He could say and do things that those he represented couldn't normally achieve. He was able to transcend all of the cages of society most riotously. Two of the most famous literary versions of Punch shows preserved end in Punch crying out after triumphing over the devil, "Satan is dead!... We can do as we like!" (Shershow, 171).

At this same time a very similar character was making a name for itself in the streets and public spaces to the east. In Moscow and other cities across Russia the Polcinelle marionette shows of traveling Italian puppet troupes were reinterpreted as they were in England. Whereas in England he became known as Punch, here he was to be known as Petrushka. Petrushka was very popular with street showmen at the time and could be found everywhere during the 19th century. Petrushka played a very important role as well during the Soviet upheaval at the end of the 1910s. During and after the civil war traveling performance troupes toured the land. Their goals were to spread the message of the socialist upheaval and to raise morale of the revolutionary soldiers. These groups used live actors and adapted traditional folk entertainment like puppetry. These agit-prop popular theatre groups primarily consisted of member of the intelligentsia, students and young people who had preserved an enthusiasm for and had recognized the power of the fairground, street and circus spectacles since childhood (Kelly, 191). They did not have backgrounds of traditional showmen. They co-opted Petrushka just as he had been co-opted and brought to Russia. These groups used a variety of popular entertainment forms in their shows including Petrushka. The largest and most important troupe was the Sinyaya Bluza (blue blouse movement). Other groups included Narodnaya Komediya (popular comedy) and the Red Petrushka collective. These troupes preferred to use glove puppets and highly portable stage apparatuses that could be easily assembled, disassembled and transported. Their shows consisted

of a mix of political satire and educational themes. To really know Petrushka we must know how he came to be so prolific. Petrushka didn't appear until the 19th century during the Punch street revival across Western Europe that was happening. He had a penchant for malice and was characterized by traditional folk humor and physical violence. His original home was the street show and fairground known as the *balagan*. The fairground was a place that was scorned by dramatists of the theatre and the literary elite. They were a place for peasants and workers and not associated with notions of high culture. Much like their counterparts in Western Europe, The Russian fair and carnival were places of drunkenness, thievery and general unruliness of the underclasses. Petrushka was a staple of these events always presented as a glove puppet. In his shows he had confrontations commonly with the policeman, the devil, his wife and clergy. The diffusion of the Italian Polchinelle spread and inspired the cultures that it came into contact with. In the Mediterranean a similar puppet character existed that is very reminiscent of Poichinelle, Punch and Petrushka. Grown from their own puppetry traditions a puppet known as Karagoz in Turkey and Karagiozis in Greece filled a similar role for the subaltern classes of these societies. Where glove puppetry flourished in the working class neighborhoods of Europe, shadow puppetry was the specific art of the Turkish and Greek tradition. Karagoz and Karagiozis provided an outlet for the peasant populations to define themselves and criticize the higher classes, or in the Arab world, Turkish occupiers. Kevin Smith states, "Karagoz's aspirations for a better place in society, a beautiful wife, and the power to rule over the upper class characters gave the audience a sense of power. The play acted as a powerful forum where the lower classes of Turkey could say this is who we are to those in authority, the Ottoman state and the Islamic clerics"(190). Karagoz was a member of the lower classes and audiences often identified with the comical aspirations of the character. He was surly and harsh to those around him and in typical Karagoz plays of Turkey he attempts to gain power over the educated, rich and powerful. The tactics he used were much like those that Punch employed: slapstick violence and trickery. He had a foil in the character of Havicat who represented middle class timidity and ineffectiveness. Karagoz

usually treated Havicat roughly; for example he typically killed him. These shows were performed entirely by a single showman and were improvisational. Karagoz spread to Greece during the occupation by the Ottoman Turk Empire. Here he became known as Karagiozis and Havicat was called Hatziavatis (Smith, 191).

Every culture had its puppet everyman. There was Punch, Petrushka, Polchinella, Karagoz and Karaghosis of course. In France there was Pulcinelle as well as the home grown Guignol. In Germany there was Kasper and Kasperek in Czech. Greece later evolved their own hero Kantsandonis who fought a puppet sized Ottoman occupation. In the Netherlands there was Jan Klaasen. Denmark had Mester Jakel and Spain produced Christovita. These are to name but a few of the more popular figures. Each region and sometimes each town had its own unique puppet hero that acted out folk narratives. They could usually be found satirizing and cleverly defying the rich and powerful by inverting the social order and obscenely making a mockery of canonized forms of expression. George Speight sums it up quite succinctly in his book length study of Punch and Judy,

“The heroes that we have examined may differ between themselves, there are certain characteristics that unite them all. They were all of the working class. In their practical jokes, their pretended stupidities, their avoidance of danger, their lack of heroics or indeed of any civic sense, these puppet characters reflect the inarticulate sentiments of the common people. In their farcical adventures, their audience, too, could get their own back on nagging wives, on mother-in-laws, on policemen, on sergeant majors, on tax collectors, on busy bodies, on landlords, on money lenders, on foreign invaders, on the “boss”... We may say that these folk- heroes of the European puppet theatres incarnate the people of Europe, and in their crude dialogues and little voices, in all the tongues and dialects of our continent, the people of Europe spoke” (1979, 145).

The puppetry that we have discussed serves a dual function. It comments upon the human condition of the people who fashion it, their position in society and their assessment of current events. It helps create a common identity, a bond, among these people, the subordinate classes. The anti-narrative of the folk puppet show eschews the “Official stories that the establishment tells about itself” as Sabra Webber points out about folk literature” (36). Whether a battery of nihilistic fury or radical vision cloaked in coarseness, puppetry was a weapon of the weak against the powerful and their control over the official story of itself.

### *THE DANCE OF DOGS*

A- Aaron, sitting at a desk (on which rests a xylophone, sampler and light control box) at the corner in front of the stage of the stage playing “himself” and the instruments.

S- Sock puppet, a cantankerous fellow and a narrator throughout the play, also played by Aaron

G- Guy, the timid husband, played by Brian

L- Lo, the apprehensive wife, played by Val

B- The Boss, the golden effigy of all that is wrong in the world, played by Doug

#### Introduction

*While everyone is sitting before the stage talking ready for the show the Boss puppet pops out from under the curtain and greets the audience meanly. He welcomes them to the show and tells them to turn off their cell phones. Sometimes he does a weird call and response routine with the audience. This part is completely adlibbed by Doug every night*

*Curtain is down. A light comes up on Aaron and the Sockpuppet*

S- Hey buddy, yeah you, did you read the newspaper today?

A-Huh? Uh no

S-There was this article that you wouldn't believe.

A-What happened?

S-Ah, nevermind you wouldn't be interested.

A-What? C'mon, what are you talking about?

S-You don't seem the type to care *hawks a spit*. This world is shit, I don't know why this stuff interests me, you're probably just rolling in it like everyone else and don't want to hear another sad story.

A-Hey what's your problem?

S- *sigh* Uhh, sorry man, it's just that I heard about this man, he thought he was a dog. The dog catchers found him and now he's in the pound, rotting away.

A-Holy shit!

5- Yeah, he hasn't been claimed yet by anyone, probably gonna be put down soon.

A-But he was a man once, right?

5- Was.. .was a man once, doctors came and gave him an inspection. Even they said he was nothing but a mutt.

A-Whoa, that's crazy.

5- Hey buddy.

A-What?

S- You looking for a pet at home? Someone to fetch your slippers? HAHHAHAHAHAHAH!

*Musical interlude with Aaron playing the theme song on xylophone, curtain raises, Guy and Lo puppets dancing in the darkness and then lights come up on them, theme song ends and couple end their waltz tiredly*

G- Life has been hard my dear, but tonight we dance. It's all we can do sometimes. They say it's better to laugh and dance the night away than fill it with sorrows.

L- Oh Guy, but what about tomorrow when we wake and must move to the city? The world will not have changed no matter how fucking dope our dances are tonight.

G- I know my love, but we will make it I promise. I will work hard for you. I will do anything, anything. Our love is stronger than the world. I..

L- Shhh...*they kiss most emphatically, so emphatically they are on the ground kissing in a most provocative manner....*

G- Ahem, maybe we should draw the curtains next time, don't know if the neighbors wanted to see that...

L- Guy, my (psychic advisor/some asshole/my cousins/some dude/????) told me that many jobs have been created since the first of the month. But let's not talk of that now, let's dance...

*Theme songs begins again and Guy and Lo dance as the lights go down*

## Scene One

S-Scene One! In which Guy and Lo pack up their things and move to the city to seek a new life in a land that is ever changing. Guy finds difficulty finding employment in the newly constructed factories, strip malls, fast food restaurants, gas stations or whatever.

*Florescent lightbulb sound sample begins playing softly, lights come up on Boss in his office at his desk, stroking his desk placard and writing memos. Guy enters.*

B-Didn't you read the sign? There are no openings.

G- Yes I read it. But don't you have anything for me?

B-If it says there are no openings, there are no openings! Now leave boss is a very busy and man he has lots of work to do.

G- Of course, of course, but don't you have anything for me, they promised there would be jobs here.

B-No, not for you not for the president.

G- Okay, okay.. .but one more thing before I leave.. .don't you have anything? C'mon I'm begging you.

B- Not for your brother, not for your sister, not for your aunt or your uncle, or your uncle in law, or your step uncle or your uncle's friend, or your uncle's sister-in-law's aunt's friend named Brian. Okay, do you get? Now get lost!

G- What about a lathe operator. You must need a lathe operator?

B- A lathe operator? Your hair will get stuck in the machine?  
G- *flipping hair back protectively* What about a secretary?  
B- You're too ugly to be a secretary!  
G- Well what about an errand boy? I could be an errand boy.  
B- I wouldn't trust you to fetch my slippers.  
G- Well then what about a mechanic?  
B- What? No! will you beat it already. I said NO!  
G- *smugly* Well what about foreman?  
B- Haha... foreman? You think you're funny. The answer is no. Do I have to call security?  
G- Nightwatchman! Nightwatchman! Even if it is just a nightwatchman. C'mon what do you say?  
B- Well now that I think about it the nightwatchman's dog never showed up to work last night.  
Say, do you know how to bark?  
G- Lathe operator?  
B- I said do you know how to bark?  
G- Uhh. . . .mechanic? *getting down on all fours*  
B- Do you know how to bark?!  
G- Bricklayer!!!!?? *Shaking head, on all fours*  
B- There are no openings! Do you know how to bark?!?!  
G- Boooowoo aooooowooowooooowoo!!!  
B- Very good, we'll give you ten dollars a day, a dog house and you're own food. *pets Guy on head as he shakes head back and forth dejectedly* Good dog! That's a good dog!  
G- Arooww. *utters a defeated canine sounding sigh*

## Scene Two

S- And so guy finds employment as the new nightwatchman's dog at the (????????) dog food factory. He returns home to tell his wife about his new job.

*Clock ticking sound sample begins softly. Lights guy up on Guy and Lo arguing in their apartment. Scenery includes kitchen table with checkered table cloth.*

G- But they promised me as soon as the first guy would retire, die or be fired, they would give me his job. Hey its not that bad, ahwooooooo, c'mon baby amuse yourself, grrrrrr!  
L- Is the dog house too small for you?  
G- I can't stoop much.  
L- Does it crowd you?  
G- Yes, a little. But I'll get used to it. Hey its better than no job, right?.. .right?  
L- *silent looks away*  
G- Hey, it's a start, I got my paw...I mean my leg in the door.  
L- What did you say?  
G- Hey look, things will improve, I'll move up...but for now I'll eat the dog food they give me to save money. And baby, you can all the rest, ok, you deserve better.  
L- fine okay.  
G- Good.  
L- Good. *sarcastically*  
G- Good!

*Lights dim to signify time lapse*



S- One night at work Lo surprises her husband at his post at the doghouse in front of the factory gates. She brings a tasty snack for him to enjoy. Guy dozes away in his dog house as she approaches and knocks on the outside.

*In the darkness there is a big white doghouse with Guy sleeping away in it, making snoring noises. Cricket chirping sound sample begins. Yellow flood light hanging above dog house comes on*

L- He will be so surprised when he sees what I made for him here. Knock, Knock, Knock...

G- *Guy flies out of dog house barking on all fours. . .RAR RAR RAR RAR!!!*

L- AHHHHHHHHH!

G-Oh crap! Honey what are you doing out here? You're not supposed to be out here. Oh honey I'm so happy to see you. Oh godangit! I need to quit falling asleep like that. Boss is going to catch me one of these days and that's going to be it. I'll be dogmeat! Geesh, Honey, what's wrong? how are you?

L- *Visible distraught and shaking.* I brought you some soup and deserts out here for you. You're favorite,eeeeeh.

G- Oh, Lo. You're too good for me. *Begins licking her face then realizes what he just did and stops awkwardly.* Ummm, yeah, haha. I love you...

L- I thought I would surprise you, I know its getting colder out here these days. I thought you shouldn't be eating just dog food, even if it is free from the company while you work. It can't be healthy...

G- But we're saving money this way...

L- I DON'T CARE! Even if you must be one for us to survive, you're not a.. .not a .. .*shaking head back and forth.*

G- What? What is it?

L- Nothing, I just love you. I care about you. Here have this. It'll make you feel good inside.

G- Thank you Lo. *Takes bag from Lo and begins rooting around in it with his face on all fours while she pets him.*

*Lights go down*

Scene Five

*Lights go up on boss' office. Wu-Tang Clan sound sample is playing and Boss is dancing on desk. There is a knocking and Lo walks in on Boss.*

B- *startled.* Ahem...Uh...If you're here to find work, you should just leave now. There are no openings.. .I already have a secretary. *chuckles*

L- Actually, I've come here about my husband.

B- Oh yeah, that guy, uh. . . Well I'm sorry to hear about your loss, ma'am. But here at the (????) Dog Food Factory we pay current employees only so we are not required to...

L- My husband's not dead

B-.. .He's not?

L- No, not yet, but with a salary like his it won't be long before we starve to death! That's what I've come to talk to you about.

B- Factory workers' wages are based on seniority and...

L- Oh yeah, what about the dog position?

B- Oh, its not bad. Yeah, uh. . .I like it *chuckles*

L- No! I mean my husband is the night watchman's dog!

B- Oooh, that guy, Guy, guy. With the hair. . . bouffant guy.  
L- Yeesss, does he get paid the same amount as a factory worker?  
B- Why should he? He's a dog.  
L- You're a dog!  
B- *mocking*. No you're a dog.  
L- No you're the dog!  
B- No you are  
L- Ahhh! *Getting impatient* Listen, I came here to see if you can help us at all. We're really struggling. He's been eating dog food!  
B- There is nothing available. I can't promote your husband.  
L- Can't something be arranged? *seductively*  
B- Like what lady?  
L- . . . Aren't you open to.. .creating new positions?  
B- Yeah, yeah...! think I could be open to that. How about we start with that dog position you were talking about?  
L- It hasn't been filled, has it?  
B- Not yet, but I can take care of that right now... *Curtain begins to roll down*  
B- You smell good.. .Oh yeah... .Yeah!  
L- That's gold too!  
B- Hahahaha.. . uhhh.

*X rated sex noise sample begins playing interspersed with dog barking kennel noises. Curtain is down.*

#### Scene Six

S- Dog food tariffs are lifted. Prices change on the international market and the economy takes a hit. Times get tougher for our couple.

*Curtain comes up. Lights come up on Guy and Lo 's apartment with them in mid argument. Guy is on all fours and now has a dog ears on his head.*

L- Of course 450 dollars won't be enough for us to pay the rent!  
G- Look.  
L- What!?  
G- Look! Just shut up for a second. I have an idea, ok. Since I got the dog house at work, I'll stay there and you can move into the room with four or five other girls. You have friends don't you Lo?!  
L- Is there no other solution?  
G- *looks down shaking head*  
L- It's one thing to be shit upon, its another to say it is roses falling upon our heads. All the radio says is that prosperity is just upon the horizon with the tariff agreements. What has the boss said Guy? When will it come, huh? When? You still haven't made fulltime. Besides the boss pulled me aside just today and said some new positions were made last night! Maybe I'll get one of them Lo.  
L- *silent*  
G- What?  
L- Nothing!  
G- We just have to wait. Ok, I can't quit now.  
L- *getting upset*

G- Look, my salary is enough for us to eat, ok. And plus, that dog house seems to be larger these days. It is like a mansion to me. You should check it out sometime. It's not as small as you would think. And another thing. Dog food tastes great, okay. It's nutritious. Just look at me. And one more thing okay, one last thing. You know walking on all fours, walking on all fours. It ain't that all that different than walking on twos. *He 's practically screaming* You're still moving forward!

L- GUY!

G- WHAT?

L- *she begins crying*

L-Guy, there's going to be a baby on the way.

G- what?

L- I'm afraid.

G- *Standing up like a human* What? I'm going to be a father?! Were going to family? Holy crap! Were going to be a family! Quick get the wine! Call the neighbors! Email the relatives! Put on that Wu-Tang Clan tape! It's time to celebrate. This is a joyous moment in our young lives. Baby lets dance! *Tries to embrace her*

L- AHHH! Don't bite me!

G- *leaps away from her back onto all fours again* Lo, I wasn't going to bite you. I love you...! I was just going to try to kiss you.

L- *crying* I'm afraid Guy. I'm afraid of what has happened to my husband.

G- What are you talking about?! What's happening to your husband?

L- I'm afraid he is turning into. . . into a DOG! *Wailing*

G- No.. .No!. . .N000000! AW000000WOWOWOWOWOWWO!

*Guy turns tail and runs away offstage as Lo weeps and lights go down*

## Scene Seven

S- Guy has gone totally bonkers! Guy is running the streets of \_\_\_\_\_ wild. He's foaming at the mouth, chasing cats, rooting through garbage, peeing on fire hydrants, licking his own balls! Whooo, hahaha. He not only thinks he's a dog, he is a dog! This scene the dog catcher captures him. I'll let you in on a little secret. The dog catcher is actually the boss in different clothes. CRAZY MUSIC!

*Scene is bare and lights come up with A crazed and maniacal Guy running on all fours from stage left. He is now adorned with velcro dog ears. The lights are all flashing wildly and the siren sound sample and the barking dog samples begin to play loudly. Aaron madly plays the xylophone cacophonously. Guy is barking madly looking for a way to escape. The dog catcher enters yelling at Guy "get over here" and "I'm gonna get ya" and "Here doggie doggie ". Guy barks fiercely at him and yells things such as "I'm not a dog!" and "Get the fuck away from me!" and "N00000!" but it is barely audible over the din of this crazy scene. Guy tried to run but then the dog catcher throws a dog bone out at Guy and lures him closer with it. He then tackles Guy by the throat as Guy screams shrilly. The dog catcher cackles maniacally as he drags Guy below the stage in a head lock. The curtain goes down. The xylophone begins to taper off and the sound samples fade into the barking dog kennel sample as Guy is placed in the cage at the foot of the stage. That sample fades into a hospital noises sample. The curtain goes up and we are greeted with a scene with abnormally bright lights. The Lo birthing puppet which looks like a gown with pair of legs and a cavernous vagina is perched upon a platform resembling a hospital bed. Over Lo hovers a nurse who is actually the boss puppet again in a different costume. The lights flicker as the "nurse" shouts "PUSH... PUUUUSH!" "We want puppies!" and the like. Lo makes wheezing and gasping Lamaze style noises as she is in labor. To the surprise of the*

*audience a bang sounds and a stuffed newborn puppy puppet rockets out of the puppet vagina from our pneumatic potato gun and into the crowd in an explosion of red confetti. The nurse laughs triumphantly and declares “Congratulations!... it’s a puppy!” and Lo begins to cry loudly. Guy howls from his dog cage at the foot of the stage. The curtain goes down on the scene and we hear Lo continues to cry. We hear the sock puppet laughing maniacally and it drowns out Lo ‘s cries. A light comes up on the sock puppet and Aaron.*

S- Did you like that Kid? Haahaahahaha!

A- What the Fuck man, that was fucked up! He turns into a dog! She gives birth to a puppy!

FUCK! Why did you tell me that?! That was horrible

S- Hahaha. What can I say Kid, the world is shit. A big stinking pile of shit! Dog shit! Hahaha

A- Shut up! SHUT UP! Stop with that *shit* shit. One more time and I’m going to sock you! Ahhh! just c’mon and stand up and tell me what this all means. You can’t just leave me hanging like this all depressed. You can’t send me home thinking that the world is hopeless. I need something.

What I am supposed to get from this. Just stand up and say something.

S- Sorry kid I didn’t know it touched you so. I never really thought about it much. Well, I don’t know, let me think. Hmmm... I guess if there is any wisdom I have to impart onto you for all of this is that the only boss worth listening to...is Bruce Springsteen.

*Light goes down on Aaron and Sockpuppet. The theme song on xylophone begins anew but this time with Doug playing the second half of the arrangement with an electric organ. The curtain comes up to a clear stage and all the puppets, including the vagina puppet, give a bow before the end of the song one at a time. The curtain goes down as the music ends.*

THE END

## *AMATEURS*

When I was 18 I went to Cincinnati to see my then favorite band play in someone’s basement.

Opening for this group was a puppeteer troupe on tour from Bloomington, Indiana. I don’t remember what they called themselves, but I do remember their story. It was a narrative about an evil scientist named doctor Monsanto and his nefarious genetic experiments on vegetables. He had a hunch backed corn/human hybrid lackey. The hero of the play was a country bumpkin farmer who rallied the townspeople to fight the evil doctor and his creations such as a ravenous killer tomato. Other characters included mutated television news anchors. The characters were glove puppets crafted out of paper mache. The show utilized a collapsible PVC pipe stage and rotating painted cardboard backgrounds. It used foul-mouthed humor to tell a story that revolved around the evils of genetically modified food and the corrupt corporations that engineer them.

This was my first encounter with radical puppetry. I was enthralled the moment I laid eyes on their show. Since then but before working with the group that made *The Dance of Dogs* I was able to have some experience with puppetry. I was the Santa Maria, the ship that carried Christopher Columbus to America, in a giant puppet pageant for the 2003 anti-FTAA protests in Miami, Florida. The pageant was comprised of over forty people and some really gigantic puppets. It was performed a few times during a workers march from Ft Lauderdale to Miami and then taken into the streets for the direct action on the day of the FTAA summit. We used our puppets strategically in the street to hold street corners and confuse the police. I was a volunteer in a *Bread and Puppets* performance in Chapel Hill, North Carolina the same year. The show they performed was entitled “The Victory Over Everything Circus.” I was a French grasshopper, a zebra of consumer confidence and a sword-fighting businessman. I also attempted, with a few friends, a bicycle mobilized puppetry tour with a portable show about globalization. We attempted to play on the street and on beaches down the coast of Florida. It wasn’t very successful. In fact it was a total failure.

Originally this puppetry project, done in conjunction with my undergrad thesis project, was going to be very different. I had a different group of collaborators interested in the show. One idea was Osvaldo Dragun’s “The Man Who Became a Dog” which would go on to be the framework for “The Dance of Dogs.” For various reasons my original collaborators withdrew and I gave up in frustration. I got a job making pizzas for yuppies and accepted my fate that I would never make it as a puppeteer. Sometime later an acquaintance of mine approached me at my place of occupation, Columbus’s North Market. His name is Aaron Hibbs and would frequently stop in to get ice cream from Jeni’s. He had known about my puppetry project from a mutual friend who was a TA for my faculty project advisor, Sabra Webber.

“So Brian, you still doing that puppet show?” He asked me.

“Well, no. All my collaborators quit on me. I’m not doing it anymore.” Aaron looks at me taking a lick of ice cream, smearing it in his beard,

“Do you want to do it still?”

“Huh?” I replied

“I’ll help you do it, what do you say?” I really didn’t give it much thought. I usually don’t in situations like this. I just go with what I feel at the moment

“Ummm, ok.” I couldn’t believe what I was saying. And so the puppetry was back on track.

Here on out the show bloomed into something bigger and better than what I expected. Aaron and I began consulting and developing ideas. I presented him the script I had adapted from Dragun’s one act play. I gave it a new title, “The Dance of Dogs.” We began constructing puppets, making a mess in the gallery space he and his roommates had in their living room. Aaron’s roommate, Doug Johnston, expressed interest in our show and asked if he could be involved. He had all sorts of ideas for the show after reading the script and was probably more excited about it than I was. The only thing we needed was someone to play the female lead. Aaron and I decided that we needed a woman actor. I had tried some friends of mine that were artists or into puppetry but everyone I asked was too bogged down with work schedules. In the end we recruited one of Aaron and Doug’s friends named Valerie Glenn. She was conveniently unemployed and was looking for something to do. She worked perfectly with us and our troupe was complete. I began booking the two week tour and construction of the show intensified. Doug was laid off from his job, Aaron did contracting work sporadically and I had a very flexible schedule at work that would allow me the time off. The adrenaline pumped nonstop for weeks on end as I worked full days of food service and full nights of puppetry construction. *The Dance of Dogs* was on its way. Our troupe was a good mixture of experience and expertise. We were all artists in some sense of the word. What brought us together was the loose-knit community that we were all associated

with in Columbus. It's hard for me accurately to depict these things because they are so elusive. We all knew each other through the underground music and art scenes and activist circles overlapping in Columbus. I wouldn't go so far to say we were all part of an "artist community" because that would be an exaggeration of what we are. Most of our efforts and skills are amateur and self taught in nature. Our art is done for the sake of doing and not as a means to a career. Part of it is ideology and part is our own marginalization. Aaron is a noise musician, performance artist and has been involved with the now defunct BLD warehouse that sustained art and music shows in Columbus. Doug is a sculpture student, who came with knowledge of electrical and lighting systems and carpentry and was involved with the BLD scene as well. Val is also a musician and all around creative person. She helped with writing and adapting the script. I was the only one with experience in puppetry. I came with much contact with the local and regional punk scenes and local anarchist activists. I would do much of the writing and construction of the actual puppets. Everybody brought with them different skills that filled out the composition of the show. None of us was very skilled at anything, but we all had enough working knowledge and enthusiasm to make a pretty decent puppet show. The troupe was assembled from an intact social network that previously existed. I guess that creative people that are willing to focus their energies on endeavors like this tend to gravitate to one another. It all came together with relative ease.

### *ROUGH HEWN BLOCKS OF STYROFOAM*

On a muggy July evening I borrowed my housemate's car. I had a mission to see to that was intrinsically important to my current project. Earlier that day I was tipped off at a garage sale concerning the location of an unlimited supply of thick polystyrene sheets. At the warehouse hardware chain they were going for \$20 a piece. Pulling behind the secluded structure which was in fact the OSU west campus art department building, I tried to make this as discreet as possible. I

bounded for the huge pile of pink boards and loaded up the back seat of the car until I couldn't see out the rear view mirror anymore. These hunks of polystyrene made their way back to Doug and Aaron's where our show was being constructed. As it turned out the "free" polystyrene used to be the insulation of the Wexner Center contemporary art museum. It had recently been replaced in that spring's renovation and was crafted into puppets for our show. I relished the irony of it. What used to literally be the walls of an officious arts museum was transformed into the implements of our rowdy modern folklore. I think it fit well with the spirit of radical puppeteering and it sure beat coughing up the money for it. This little story reflects a lot about the nature of creating art independently. Found objects and everyday items become the materials out of which our show was created. Most puppeteers like us don't have access to grant money like we did. The process of folk creation is every bit as important as the actual performance of the shows. It's not just serendipitous utilization of found objects. It's also the use of everyday relationships that sustained our puppetry project. Everything had to be set up on our own. We had no booking agents, special craftsmen, no professionals to hire, or established arts communities to rely upon, just friends with a common vision. The completion of our show and tour was an effort that involved all of our talents and connections. It turned into something in which a lot of people around us became involved.

While we were putting to use duct tape, wine corks, eyehooks, picture frame hanging wire and spackle to create our puppets, another group of people was helping us in ways that would never be seen during our performance. Friends came out of the woodwork to lend their special talents. A seamstress sewed miniature clothes for our puppets, a co-worker lent a tour van, someone did screen printing of T-shirts and posters for us, someone else drew a tour poster, another sewed all the draperies for the stage and yet another engineered and consulted us on potato guns. Though there would only be four of us behind the stage performing *The Dance of Dogs* upwards of ten people were truly involved. The ideas contained in the actual show touched on ideas and

emotions all of us deal with and feel strongly about. As much as this is an artistic expression of a few individuals, it's a group effort from the specific confines of Columbus, Ohio. I'd like to equate it with folk art for these reasons.

The unprofessional, but by no means unskilled, nature of the way we went about the whole undertaking is indicative of the heritage of folklore puppetry we were upholding. Unlike our predecessors it was not something to do to make some quick cash. Though not part of any local handed down tradition, we took up the art, its radical legacy in mind, for our own rebellious ends. Puppetry is an art which has been utilized in a similar way to the way we wished to use it. We used our imaginations and adapted some of its traditional structures to our modern context. To us the message and the act of performance was most important. It was a chance to entertain and inspire people, to challenge them. Everyone added what they could to the show based upon what working knowledge we had of electronics, sculpting, acting and puppeteering. One of our main goals was to perform for as many people as possible. On our tour we barely broke even after gas, food and work on the van, even after grant money and T-shirt sales. You must go with what you have even if it is \$3 a gallon gas and a big yellow guzzler. If it wasn't for the grants this show would have never happened. There are a lot of entertainment options out there. Our wish was our puppetry would be something different from what people were used to. We hoped they would like the difference.

Before any of that could be done we needed to construct our show. The most time consuming element was the actual construction of the four puppets. The process took about a month to complete altogether. It was haphazardly done. The design was based on Japanese Bunraku puppets and traditional rod puppet designs found in *The Complete Book of Puppet Theatre* by David Currell. Some parts such as the cork and eyes hook joints were of our own invention. Puppetry as it turns out is a lot more than just puppets. We constructed a collapsible stage out of a

folding six-foot table and PVC pipes. This allowed us, with our homemade draperies made from thrift store bargain bin fabrics, an easily transportable stage that looked impressive. The design was created by us but inspired by the diagrams also found in Currell's text. We were creating this show keeping in mind that we wanted to do a tour with it. The foam puppets would be light and cheap to produce as would a PVC stage. It was a better choice than using wood which none of us had experience with. In the end everything looked really good.

We wanted a captivating experience from our show, something that people would pay attention to. A lighting system would be necessary. It was created from scratch from tomato sauce cans from my work, a wooden holding apparatus from scavenged lumber and our own homemade sockets. It was all rigged up and controlled by a box that Doug constructed with dimmer controls. When all set up it definitely looked homemade but its effects were dazzling. Different lights could be cued at different parts of the show easily from the control box. It consisted of three spotlights at the foot of the stage, a spotlight for the narrator, an "office" light on top and a "streetlight" on top. The lighting system added much grandeur to the show making our stage seem like a miniature theatre. As well as lights we incorporated two musical instruments and a sampler into the show. The sampler was run through a small 30-watt practice amp placed at the foot of the stage. It was used for dog barking, clock ticking, florescent light humming, sex noises, a Wu-Tang Clan song, factory noises, cricket chirping, hospital noises and a police siren. The two musical instruments, a xylophone and an electric organ, were used to play the show's theme at the beginning and the end of the play. We already owned all of the musical equipment while the lighting system supplies were bought.

All of this and we had not even practiced. The work that goes into the actual construction is easily overlooked and undervalued. We spent a lot more time making the show than actually performing it. For this tour to take place there was another necessity besides construction and writing. The

process of booking a two week tour ourselves is probably the most amazing

### *PUPPETEER UNDERGROUND*

When Aaron and I started to construct the show, I quickly began booking the two-week tour. It was about two months prior and I used as a model for the process my friends' punk bands experience in setting up gigs. I started asking people that I knew in other cities that did booking for shows if they would set up one for our puppetry troupe. Many people that I asked were my personal friends. I had set up shows for their bands or had met them while traveling or through trading punk zines. I have booked many shows for friends and friends of friends' bands and now it was paying off. Other contacts I asked were referred to me from these friends. This underground network of independent musicians not exclusive to punk, was instrumental in my ability to book two straight weeks of performances. Aaron, who is very involved with the noise music scene, which shares similar underground ethics in show promoting, helped fill out our schedule where there were gaps from my contacts. This phenomenon is known in the varying music scenes that it unites as DIY (Do-It-Yourself). The network resembles a hard to map, constantly fluctuating web of houses, independently run venues, individuals and bands. Blossoming on a large scale in the early nineties hardcore punk scene it became more and more established and a resource through which anti-commercial bands booked tours. It was a movement to eradicate the commercialism that punks saw destroying the meaning and quality of their music. It sought to foster creative communities to be in touch with each other and exclude those who wished to exploit music for profit and success. Since its beginnings in hardcore punk its ideas have diffused and influenced much of how underground musicians and their fans interact with each other. It's an international phenomenon. There is much intersection within this network with radical political organizations, activists, independent businesses and other types of non-

music performance artists.

Among this DIY network, there is already a precedent for puppetry. As with the show in Cincinnati where I witnessed such a troupe, there have been many puppetry groups within this web. It was at such a show made possible by this cultural movement, that I first became acquainted with radical puppetry. When asking for shows for our tour, I was surprised by the acceptance and enthusiasm that people I tried had for a possible puppetry performance. Many commented on how they like having non-musical performance at their show spaces. Conscious that this tour was being booked using our affiliations with music subcultures, I took steps to book a few shows out of that specific circle. For Cincinnati I cold called a café where I used to hang out when I was high school to see if they would let us do a show there. After many phone calls and persistence I convinced them to let us play there with compensation in food and alcohol. We're puppeteers, we have to play in at least one café! In Bloomington my friend got us a show in a room at the downtown public library. Somehow through luck and helpful friends we got ourselves on the bill at one of the largest cultural events in New York City every summer, the east village arts festival, also known as the Allen Ginsberg "Howl" festival. In Columbus we played at a city park in a gazebo.

We used this music network to bring our show to different audiences across the eastern United States. It was the only way we could set up shows for ourselves since puppetry is marginalized as a form of "real" entertainment. Our use of this network goes to show that puppetry today is tied to counterculture instead of working class culture. Though there is much intersection between the two, it is important to differentiate. Though there were traveling puppeteer troupes throughout the 18th and 19th century in Europe, they were professionals. We, on the other hand, were distinctly amateur. We could not support ourselves though puppetry even if we tried. Our tour was a success if we broke even. Heck, it was a success if it even happened. Through my research into

the puppetry during industrializing Europe, I found similarities with our context. In the neighborhoods described previously in Antwerp during the 19th century puppet shows were commonly held in basements of private residences. These were known as “Posejellen (pulcinella) cellars”(McCormick, 60). Landlords were wary of such practices as puppet shows were regarded as potential sources of disorder, noise and nuisance. Many such theatres lasted one or two years. There was some concern over them by local residents who were concerned with safety and the possibility that youthful audiences might be exposed to immorality (McCormick,60). This is similar to the types of places we performed on tour. Many of the homes we played in followed suit with their transitory nature, concern from neighbors, and basement performance spaces.

## *SHOWTIME*

Our play was a mixture of sources. We started with a script written by communist playwright from Argentina in the 1970s. We restructured it and added new scenes and new elements. It would be hard to guess, though, that *The Dance of Dogs* was in fact a rip off of *The Man Who Turned Into a Dog*. We injected American pop culture references, too much sexual innuendo and farcical dialogue. We updated the language and themes that needed updating. The show didn't rely on any puppetry traditions per se but much of the spirit of art couldn't help but bleed through as we developed the show. The performance was rife with profanity, bawdy humor, and puppets being violent to each other. This was not high art theatre we were trying to make. Though we wanted to be relevant, we also just wanted to have fun. We were going for something to catch and hold peoples' attention. We let our perverse senses of humor run amok. So we went all out for the lowest common denominator, something everyone could relate to. Sex, violence, anger. Our play was more cartoon than theatre. We wanted them to laugh. We wanted to dispel initial suspicion that there was serious heavy socio-political rhetoric behind it. We wanted to entertain and of

course agitate in our darkly humorous absurdist kind of way. In the end I hope we got people to think.

The show had three main characters. Guy, the husband in search of work, is an everyman but not at all like Punch or Petrushka. Guy is a weakling. He clings to faith in a system that is exploiting and making life a mockery of him. I consider him the everyman for the 21st century. Like too many who struggle, he is tricked into loving the bars of the cage he is in. Guy believes he can make it if he works hard enough. In reality he is only aiding in his transformation into a “real” dog. Lo, his wife, on the other hand is not a weakling at all. She is the counterpart and foil to Guy. She has a bold consciousness and can see throughout the lies of the situation they’re in. Lo goads her husband throughout the show to no avail and acts at a time that is too late. She sells herself to the boss, in the dog position, just like her husband. The boss’s role is pretty obvious. He doesn’t have a gold complexion for nothing. He sums up everything that is wrong with the world. He is crass, insensitive, exploitative, greedy, rich, powerful. He is an authority figure, a symbol of the controlling class that ought to be destroyed, but Guy and Lo dance to his tune. The boss is nameless. He is the system. Guy and Lo eat out of his hand(literally) and their fate is sealed. Tragedy ensues. Is there anything else we can do but listen to Bruce Springsteen and cry into our beer?

I feel we were more agitators than part of any sort of movement. I like to situate what we did as modern predecessors between the surly, nihilistic shows of the European street puppeteers and the revolutionary Russian troupes. We are only dimly aware of the past of this art form. Our troupe was learning every step of the way, and that was exciting. Could we be a pinprick in the viewers’ consciousness to unmask unhappiness about modern life? We intended our show not to be dogmatic or tackle any specific political issue. Our themes resonate in most peoples’ lives. Everybody has had a boss they hated, right? Guy and Lo are the everyman and everywoman, dependent and dominated by the wealthy and their system for a livelihood. No matter how many

dog biscuits they may have, our couple know they are not in control of their fate. They cannot extricate themselves from the web of exploitation and absurdity that has them trapped like dogs.

The Dance of Dogs is an allegory of what not to do. It's a tragedy. It's a fantasy. A man transforms into a dog before your eyes and a woman births a puppy. It contains much slapstick, cheap humor, satire and populist imagery. Though the themes are heavy and the ending dark, the show was lighthearted and comical. The ideas are scathing and blunt in nature but we felt their relevance is grounded in the uncritical acceptance of inequality in everyday life. The meaning of this show was sharpened for me with my horrible work situation at the time that made me constantly angry and hateful. Though this is puppetry, I feel just about any person could watch our show and get something out of it. As we performed our show to a startling variety of people, their reactions confirmed that, naturally, I wasn't the only one with a bad boss.

One question needs to be addressed at this point, "Were we successful and why?" Just getting this enterprise in the van and on the road was enough for success for me on one hand. In regard to our rebellious vision quest, there are five instances that that allowed me to hope that we are able to do this puppetry thing on the other hand. Many of our shows would be at venues where people would be receptive to puppetry and radical ideas. What I wanted to see in people was not simply enjoyment but thought. The first experience that made me think that the show was turning out to be a dynamic and thought-provoking entity at least for some occurred in Minneapolis. Some time after our performance a young man came up to Aaron with a confession. He told my cohort, "Your performance has made me realize things about myself that I haven't thought about in a very long time." The details were not very specific but he wanted to thank Aaron and us for making him reflect upon his life and what entails a "good time" besides getting drunk. Perhaps critical thought can be as satisfying as getting loaded on a Friday night. Two days later in Detroit

a similar interaction occurred. Halfway through the performance a woman left her seat and went outside for the remainder of the show. Later on we were hanging out with her drinking vodka and she explained why. She explained how she was going through a lot of the same things depicted in our show. It struck something within her. Working at a crap job the violent situation enacted by our puppets was too much for her to watch. The third hopeful sign came about the next night when we performed at a coffee shop in Cincinnati. We played to a crowd unsuspecting of the puppet craziness we were about to unleash. Most were there with a date to drink coffee on a Monday night. We had our work cut out for us playing without amplification over the din of a packed café. If we could hold this audience's attention, we could play anywhere. It was a challenge we were successful enough at. Throughout the show I peeked out to count the pairs of eyes on us. They were there. This was also an important show for me personally. Sitwell's Café was a place that I hung out at when I was a teenager. It was nice to come back and perform in a place I had many fond memories of. My family was in the audience as well and despite the obscene nature of the show they liked it. My father asked me afterwards, "Brian, I'm not sure if I have a human or a dog for a son, I mean those barks were awfully convincing." The fourth instance happened later on tour in Kingston, New York. There was a mix up in the booking of the show. They thought we were expecting us to play the following month, and we were left without a show. Down the block there was a concert by a soul/funk/jazz jam ensemble going on in a swanky bar. Aaron went down to the bar and somehow convinced the owner and the band, known as The Foundation to let us perform at their set break. We played to an audience that was even less expecting puppetry than in Cincinnati. At the culmination of The Dance of Dogs we received a standing ovation. The last instance happened at our very last show of the tour. At the end of this performance there was a spontaneous discussion among the audience and ourselves. We discussed why we do puppetry, our interpretation of the show and other topics. Of all places for something like this to occur it was no real surprise it was at an anarchist bookstore/meeting space, The Brian McKenzie Center in Washington D.C. The audience was made up of activists and

radicals who shared much of our motivations. This was a good reflective end to our tour. The more general indicator I used to measure the effectiveness was audience response, whether afterwards or during our show. Though I'll never learn all of what people took from us, response was a partial barometer. At every show, except the Howl Festival (where the only person that talked to us wanted something for a class project), several people talked to us afterwards and told us what they thought of the show.

### *YOU CAME JUST TO BE ENTERTAINED?*

When people hear that there is going to be a puppet show they usually ask "Should I bring my kids?" or something along those lines. As if puppetry were only meant for kids. This happened quite often in the course of this project. The other comment that I heard more than once that actually surprised me was "Is there a plot?" Of course there is a plot. Did they know about the traditional fluid folkloric structure of the Punch street show? One of the best traits of puppetry is the vast diversity of the art's medium. It can be for kids, for adults; very narrative or purely symbolic like the work of Basil Twist.

A huge problem with puppetry today is the legacy of co-option that it has experienced in the west. The co-option in Europe and the US made puppetry into a commercial tool for pedagogy, advertisement and entertainment for children. Figures like Punch become prime communicators for transmission of middle class values for children. The themes and content of Punch were whitewashed and changed when taken out of its carnivalesque context. A level of acceptance into the theatre occurred and puppetry became to be recognized as a legitimate art form and part of the culture where before it was lowly entertainment for the lower classes. No longer was Punch the surly rabble-rouser killing off all symbols of authority; he was a docile mouthpiece of society.

The issues of class, anti-clericism and authority become conspicuously absent. These changes coincided with the beginnings of mass culture forms in the west. Puppetry through the 20th century would go on to become synonymous with the likes of Jim Henson's Muppets, Sesame Street and a teaching tool for educators.

The appropriation of Punch that turned him into children's entertainment stemmed from the same conditions that forced him into the street. Their shows were their livelihood and thus a market commodity. They took their show into the street because that was where they could make money. Punch descended from the theatre to the streets and then back again. The history of Punch is one of constant appropriation. These same showmen also commonly got gigs playing their show around holidays to children of the bourgeoisie. These endeavors were quite lucrative compared to a day of playing in the street. Scott Shershow posits that Punch's "Working class rebellion became an amusement to pacify children"(173). During this era the developing notions of "childhood" were emerging among the more well to do classes. In Lille, France, factory work began between the ages of eight and twelve(McCormick, 78). For the bourgeoisie a distinction existed between childhood and adulthood, thus a subsequent need for education and moral guidance fueled the demise of Punch. At these parlor shows, the traditional formulas of Punch shows were altered to fit the desires of those that contracted the performers. The excessive violence, transgressive dialogue, Punch's baby being thrown out the window and unrepentant nature began to evaporate. Punch quickly became a vehicle for the reproduction of bourgeois and middle class(who emulate those directly above them) values in their progeny. Even the devil was replaced at this time by a crocodile or "bogymen." Where previously Punch had triumphed in the end over all his adversaries with the violence of his cudgel, now he had to atone for his transgressions. With a new audience, he was an example of how not to act. Once again he was a morality lesson as he was before the radical heyday of the 19th century. Rarely did he triumph over fate as he moved more from the street and into the homes of the upper classes. Punch again

demonstrated “A broad spectrum of bourgeois values-education, moral improvement, aesthetic reform, and disdain for the low”(Shershow, 179). J.M. Barrie in the 1890s said of Punch, “Oh, shame on Punch for to do the wicked deed. He will be caught in the end, and serve him right”(442).

Petrushka experienced similar changes but from a different source. In Russia, it was the Soviet state that sanitized the subordinate classes’ Petrushka. A new cultural hierarchy was put in place by the new Soviet government, that despite a difference of appearance resembled the prior authoritarianism of the Tsarist regime. Many in the intelligentsia believed that popular forms of expression that existed under the Tsarist system would be out of place and redundant under the new “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Leaders like Trotsky thought that the proletariat should be raised up with “higher forms” of culture like literature and theatre. Many Soviet authorities had contempt for pre-revolutionary folk culture. They wanted mass culture from above to replace the homegrown popular culture from before. Post revolutionary period efforts were enacted that cut down on the existence of street puppetry. In 1927 an order banned street performance in Moscow. Trade fairs, which were one of the most common sites for Petrushka puppeteers to perform, were abolished in the early 1930s. Cultural elements like circuses and puppeteer performers were centralized just like the economic infrastructure under the new leaders. Official “folk festivals” replacing fairs and puppeteers were organized under the state. Professional puppeteers became sponsored by the Central State Puppet Theatre in Moscow. These centralized forms served as mouthpieces for Soviet ideology. The content of the new shows had little resemblance to the pre-Revolutionary forms. They illustrated only state sanctioned proletarian values. The Bolzeviks never cared about the proletariat and peasant’s culture or art. It was about hegemony. Petrushka, a popular cultural idiom, was used to dupe those who created him into trusting in the new regime.

The Soviet revolution had killed off the rebellious Petrushka that belonged to Russia.

The censorship and sanitation of Petrushka in the post-revolutionary era was a bitter irony. The efforts of Petrushka puppeteers helped the rise of Soviet power. When the efforts of the blue blouses were successful their art quickly became subservient to the Soviet state. Perhaps it was co-option in the first place considering these revolutionary performance troupes were not comprised of traditional Petrushka showmen, but of the intelligentsia, students, artists and revolutionaries. Some instances are documented of Petrushka street shows existing after the centralization with traditional symbols of authority being replaced by Red Army officers and Soviet officials. An Italian journalist, Vero Roberti, who had the chance to witness some of these underground shows that persisted into the 1960s commented, “Petrushka is Russia’s Punch and not the Soviet Union’s, because the Soviets, being communists, have no imagination and do not know how to laugh”(179).

The two “different” systems appropriated the traditions of folk puppetry for very similar means. One was through the centralization of arts by the state to inform correct values in a socialist system. The other was for correct values through mass entertainment in a socially stratified market system. In both puppetry was channeled for pedagogy of orthodox values, whether for obedient middle class or obedient workerist ones. Both co-opt folk puppetry forms from decentralized popular or folk culture for mass culture. Switch the wording of the rhetoric and the values are surprisingly similar. Despite these concurrent trends to sanitize folk art to the values of the powerful, puppetry has resisted to be docile. The 1960s were a time of resurgence of puppetry for radical discourse spurred on by rising social movements in the west and beyond.

## *ENTERTAINMENT*

Where does one do a puppet show? For a reputedly outdated and childish type of performance, there is always the problem of performance context. Once we got the audiences attention, I liked to believe the audience was all ours. Live performance is the secret to puppetry's lifeblood.

Without it, its magic evaporates. Live performance is something that people like, and it's a way to catch people unsuspecting.

As indicated our venues included bars, cafes, public libraries, front yards, back yards, attics, teen centers, rock shows, warehouses, art galleries, festivals and parks. If we were to keep doing more shows what sort of crazy places would we end up playing? Every night we had a show and every day we had a drive. We took turns driving and stayed with friends at night instead of hotels.

When it came time to play, we could set up our stage and show in about 15 minutes and break it down even faster. It was conducive to the music gig format which most of the shows were. The nights we played with bands were a lot of fun. In Minneapolis we played to upwards of 70 people. Many folks remarked that they liked seeing something different from bands. It's encouraging to think that people really did like to see our art form mixed into this context. I suppose it can't be that surprising since puppeteers are coming out of our music-based subcultures these days.

Playing music gigs was good because it meant that we got gas and food money for the next day. We also sustained our travel with posters, zines and screen printed t-shirts of our poster design and a "only boss worth listening too" Bruce Springsteen image I designed. All of these were handmade by us. Live music still remains to be a favorite choice of entertainment for lots of people even with all the forms of entertainment technology out there to make it easy to stay home. I guess it comes down to the spectacle of live entertainment and peoples' desire for socializing.

Maybe it's just about drinking in public, but I am glad for it because it gives us a place for us to introduce our puppet show. And plus, drunk people make a better audience in my opinion.

As far as the different types of live performance go, puppetry has more breadth than music to elicit, invoke and demonstrate ideas. Puppetry as a genre is multilayered. It's sound, it's theatre, it's poetry, it's music, it's art. It's a whole crazy combination of numerous creative elements. It can be huge, complex, breathtaking, heavenly, imposing or small, humorous, irreverent, solemn. It's story telling with many different options open to its creator whim. Puppetry is an art form I feel is very reflective of the creators' personality. There are so many elements to be arranged together in a myriad of styles. You have a lot to work with in this form. People don't know what to expect from puppetry and are not disappointed because there are few expectations. This is a very powerful situation that we puppeteers can exploit when we want to express our ideas through art.

Puppetry in my eyes, or any art for that matter, is best when it is a punch in the face. All forms of disseminating political ideas through art such as literature and song lyrics can be rhetorical and heavy handed. Puppetry's manipulation of images with effective humor has a better chance of being explicit and disarming at the same time. Puppetry might also be rhetorical and heavy-handed, but it's combination of symbolic storytelling and humor is a way to get around this. This is where the true power in radical puppeteering lies. It is part of why it persists as an art form that radicals like to employ. Controversial social and political issues can be distilled into seemingly harmless symbols and images that clash with each other for your attention. Humor is a very powerful tool. The rudimentary nature of the puppet's gestures and humor can make the viewer forget the very pillars that they thought upheld a "just" society are being called into question. A fiery of tirades against the system can fall upon reluctant ears. What is needed is something to

cleverly demonstrate these ideas. What is needed is a story. When acted out in miniature, an audience can participate, cheer, identify with the characters, be dazzled by, forget their misconceptions for a moment. When this occurs our art can succeed. We are just storytellers filling a role that has existed since humans could artistically communicate. Just look at the wild success of the hegemonic use of the television. Storytelling, through careful presentation and manipulation of images, however it is presented, is a perfect for education and persuasion.

### *PUPPETEERS VS. THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY*

Puppetry's legacy of co-option was something we had to contend with. Puppetry always existed somewhere in the exchange system whether from street showmen who considered it their skilled trade, to permanent theatres or touring companies. Examples of its co-option and sanitization include shows like Sesame Street, Mr. Rodgers and the fact that most books in the OSU stacks on puppetry are about childhood education. Throughout our tour we would deal with people used to this type of puppetry and not familiar with our adult use of the art. This was especially true outside the centers of underground puppetry. Entertainment, that to me is an institution constantly co-opting new forms of expression for its profit, touches all corners of society. It has changed how we interact because when we seek entertainment we think that it is something that is only purchased outside of ourselves. Something that, like the rest of society, is a commodity to be passively consumed in the right context and not interacted with. Our troupe wished to break this spell with our story. The vast consumptive options that exist to purchase a good time are startling. Sometimes we forget that fun can be free or that we can part of our "entertainment." When presented with forms of entertainment that fall out of the commodity/currency exchange system, the reactions are unsettling. People, in my experience, react to something like street performance with suspicion, contempt, disbelief or not at all. Perhaps it's the entertainment industry's effect on our behavior or the restructuring of cities for car culture, suburbs and evaporation of public space.

What is true is that it's not so easy to just set up a puppet show on the street and expect people to watch. Maybe in other places where there is more public life it is different. In Columbus, the carnivalesque isn't so easy. We don't have a tradition of street performance, or of public gathering places outside of commerce or impromptu public performance.

A few of people likewise assumed that our puppetry performance was going to warrant possible injunction by police. Such was the case with our promoter for the Cincinnati show. Similar sentiments were echoed at a bar in Athens, Ohio but in a different light. The open stage coordinator who wanted us to play proclaimed similar sentiments but instead as something that was positive to the crowd. Maybe I'm wrong in assessing puppetry as inoculated and relegated to children in the popular consciousness. Before knowing anything that our show consisted of, these two to equate our art with subversion. Perhaps puppetry has come full circle back to its radical roots in this new century. Have radicals have carved out a niche for their style of puppetry today in conjunction with other commodified and "safer" forms? Has the resurgence of radical tendencies in puppetry diffused themselves into a broader consciousness?

Whether it's good or not for us to be assumed "subversive" I'm not sure. I always liked the element of surprise when performing our shows. We never promoted our show as "radical" ever. Our thinking is that this would only pigeonhole ourselves and scare away those who didn't already consider themselves radicalized. What I didn't want was a label which will allow us to be marginalized, dismissed or condemned. I want for it just to be called "puppetry" pure and simple and let the stories stand for themselves. Let the audiences wonder what is going to come next. And let them draw their own conclusion of the meaning of the show. That's how we change minds, when the viewers least suspect it. I wanted this art to be a Trojan horse. That's why I liked the really awkward shows like at Sitwell's in Cincinnati where we had to fight to hold their

attention against the noisy din. Afterwards, Valerie said to us all, “Yeah, if we can play here, which we did alright, then we can play anywhere.” I can imagine trying to capture the attention of even more difficult crowds but I wholeheartedly agree with Val. These challenging venues are satisfying for me to play. It is not like preaching to the converted at the punk show in Minneapolis. Though those shows are most fun to do, this tour wasn’t all about garnering praise and accolades from our peers. It was about trying to spread some kind of message. The Cincinnati promoter was really enthusiastic about our show, but was just a bit paranoid about the notorious Queen City police. I don’t think that they are that repressive to root out and shut down some tiny puppet play in a café. I don’t know what he imagined we might do there that night--start a revolution, our puppets leading it armed with the pneumatic potato gun vagina perhaps?

After it all, I was pleased with how tour turned out. It became something that people who had never seen an adult puppet show enjoyed. Months later after tour I ran into someone from Minneapolis who had seen our show. He informed me that people had talked about it for many weeks afterwards. My only complaint is that by setting up the tour by using our underground arts contacts the accessibility of the shows tended to be very small. We were playing the “circuit” if you will and usually to a specific crowd with whom we shared many artistic and political beliefs. Though this suits me for now, I would like to get this art out of the “radical ghetto” and to a broader audience. The best way to reach the consciousness of the broadest spectrum of people has been and will always be (until there is no more remaining public space) through the carnivalesque. The spontaneous street show and festival shows will always be the best suited context for our brand of political performance. In the future I would like to be strategic and determine the most opportune places and times to unleash the puppets upon the pavement. Maybe we’ll play ComFest next year, who knows?

## *WHAT WILL THEY DO NEXT?*

I didn't really understand the magic of puppetry until long after the tour was over and I was left with a body of first hand experience to digest. Puppetry attracted me and I went about trying to use it to express my ideas and creativity in an entertaining way. I didn't really stop to think why I started in the first place until I took upon the task of writing about it. Puppetry is an old art form that utilizes characteristics special to performance. They are partly to do with why puppetry still can capture attention in a time so saturated by technology.

The puppet show is an extended metaphor. It presents a barrage of symbols to simultaneously digest. It is layered storytelling. In *The Dance of Dogs* we utilized a variety of media to enact our story of the ill-fated lovers. There were the puppets that were designed and painted with symbolic intention in mind. The most obvious example is the golden tone of the boss. We tell a story using dialogue and movements which reinforce their lines. There is music, sound effects and narration all before a backdrop of the stage design and decoration. All of these elements--script, music, poem, art, light, tone--reinforce a point we are trying to elucidate. It's a story come to "life" which relies on symbolism to insinuate itself into the viewer's consciousness. All this gives much room for the puppeteer to suspend disbelief and create "reality." They are all layered in service to the puppeteers' message to the viewers. The viewer is drawn into a world in which anything is possible and the "truths" displayed are self evident. The waking world is suspended for a moment to be enveloped by the puppeteer's tale

Puppetry's delightful nuances are best suited for the live performance. When recorded and replayed it loses a lot of its most important characteristics. What gives puppetry an edge over other forms of mass communication storytelling, like film, television or radio, is its live, interactive qualities. It thrives on audience dynamics and our best shows were the ones where

viewers engaged and participated. The puppetry that I was exposed to before I started this project descended from the street style shows of Punch and Judy. They were funny, simple and addressed the audience. It was not passive entertainment. During our tour the shows that we agreed were our best performances were the ones where the crowd became part of the play. This happened in a variety of ways. There were parts in which our puppets would address the audience when making certain statements. At other times audience members would blurt out comments to which we had to react and spontaneously make something up in return. This was done because the disturbance was so distracting we couldn't continue with our lines because nobody would hear them and other times because it gave us a perfect opportunity to add to the story. It happened often and I started to wonder why people talk back to the puppets. Don't they know they are talking to an inanimate object? I sense that their words are every bit as much a conversation with themselves as with us. The reactions are addressed to all the participants in the performance. They have something important to say just like our puppets. Surely their comments wouldn't be the same to a live actor or a projection on a movie screen. The mediation of the puppet creates a space in which audience members' ideas are expressed with less reluctance and more interesting consequences. The puppets are a vehicle to enable the expression of sentiments where face to face interaction would be intimidating. The puppets mediate communication creatively. We are creating the world in miniature, a temporal public sphere, to debate and create alternative reality.

This is not just a show but something bigger I began to think throughout the tour. Just as the paradigm of the punk show is not just a show but a gathering to collectively debate and articulate opinions, so is the puppetry performance in this likewise intimate context but with more explicit images, room for spontaneity and words that can be made out above the noise. A performance is not just a live rehearsal of the script; it is a conversation. All these ideas seemed so unconscious and it made me think "how do we know to act, to interact like this?" Somehow on a cultural level, from the art's dispersion in society and our previous experience with its forms, it's appropriate to

interact in such a way during a puppetry performance. No one told the audience to talk back. They just knew to do it and this proves to me that somehow the traditions of puppetry must still be flowing. Because of it we all had a more enjoyable show. This audience response happened most strongly in Minneapolis and Chicago. Both of these cities foster teeming underground arts scenes in which puppetry is no uncommon occurrence. I know that these cities have their own puppeteers like Minneapolis with Bare Bones, Bedlam Theatre and In the Heart of the Beast.

Improvisation was the heart of our puppetry. All of the interaction described previously is based upon embracing improvisation. Puppeteers are tricksters at heart. The thing about tricksters is that you never know what they will do next. And neither do they. Improvisation has played an important role in puppetry way before our troupe came onto the scene. On our tour we had no choice but to improvise to rowdy audiences. As we practiced our show and became better at it, improvising lines was something we did without consciously deciding to do so. It just felt right with puppets in our hands. It was to keep ourselves from being bored with the show. Saying the same lines again night after night might have become boring if it wasn't for us trying to throw new things in to keep it interesting. We did this for ourselves at first, trying to trip up each other. It became a game within the troupe. It also came from trying to improve the script so hastily adapted. Not knowing lines and forgetting them only to come up with better ones was another factor. We knew we would forget lines during the actual shows so we practiced to make up lines when we forgot. The script was a sketch. Improvisation was a way to work out the kinks and make a better show. By the time we finished our tour the show was very different from when it started. Extra scenes and clever jokes were added. The transcription of the show included in this paper is but one example of a performance that changed and adapted every time we played. Sometimes Val or Doug would go on minute long dialogues that they completely made up off the top of their heads, driving me irate. My puppet would react whacking them or cutting them off at

the first chance. This practice made us all very good at reacting to audience participation. It made the show more realistic and less rehearsed because it was literally not a lot of the time! The script was an outline for what was to happen each night. It is misleading to read as a true representation of the live presentation. The lines flowed simultaneously with extra conversational banter and grunts. We also had a practice of adding in “local color” to the show at each venue that we played. The best example of this is that the narrator for the show had a line in which he mentioned the name of the factory in which the main character, Guy, worked. Aaron would take a name of the street we played on or a local monument and use it as the title of the factory. In Columbus it was the “Milo-Grogan dog food factory” because that was the name of the neighborhood that we played in. The script included has many sections left blank where the line was usually changed each night.

Puppetry has a long history of improvisation. It was used to subtly critique the powerful when it was very hard to do so. It was a means to escape persecution. In a study of the modern day puppeteers of the Bhat caste in India, Jeffrey Snodgrass discovered how these low-status bards were able to use improvisation to take advantage of wealthy sponsors who wished to use their art for their own means. The Bhat performers sabotaged the state-run bank who commissioned them to perform plays meant to instill values of financial responsibility and saving in the lower classes. They did so by subtly altering the meaning of the scripts approved by the bank through clever use of verbal improvisation and manipulation of the puppets in live performance. They turned the bankers’ message upon its head and used their sponsorship to subvert their own message. This and humor were injected into the shows to point out the discrepancy between the sponsors’ message and how the Bhats really felt about it. During one show entitled “Your Daughter’s Wedding” bank manager puppets preach the evil of dowries while another puppet character remarks that this bureaucrat’s family offers the biggest dowries of all (Snodgrass, 72).

Throughout the play bank managers who are meant to be demonstrating to the peasants how to

save their money and support state reform are continually “Portrayed as being ill at ease among the rough villages, ill at ease in settings other than their urban office, and ignorant of agricultural affairs”(Ibid). The Bhat’s corruption of words and images creates a juxtaposition. It demonstrates hypocrisy which undermines the credibility of their solution to the peasants’ poverty. In the eyes of the peasants, the bank managers are already viewed as corrupt. At one point during the show a Bhat puppeteer recites, “The state bank of India embraces everyone(74). Shortly afterwards the phrase is repeated again but “embraces” is changed to “throttles.” The difference between the two words in Hindi are slim—“lagaya” and “dabaya.” The clever substitution suggests that the state bank is in Snodgrass’s own words, “A hair’s breadth from a rapacious state”. The voices used for the managers is wheedling and conniving to much laughter of the audience (70). It all adds to the mockery of the themes that they meant to be made acceptable for the target audience of the shows. These puns and poetic reversals provide their oppressed audiences with an understanding of their own subjugation emerging out of their own local traditions of poetic and narrative forms (80). Much like our performance, the magic is beyond the script.

The Bhats are a modern example of how puppetry resists the powerful in creative and entertaining ways. Much of Arabic shadow theatre dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14th century was based purely in improvisation and local traditions of rhyming verse and prose. Like the Bhats, Arabic puppeteers relied on puns, evasive wordplay and double meanings to get their intentions across. These plays, like those recorded of Ibn Damiyal, dealt with issues of poverty, ignorance and the corruption of powerful religious and political leaders. One symbol used in one of his plays is the peacock, “dik al-habash,” which can either refer to the proud strut of a girl or a soldier. According to Ghada Siada, “The shadow plays in general depended a great deal upon improvisation and interaction between the people and the play itself. Thus the written text was no more than a preliminary scenario which took its ultimate shape in the live performance”(55). This is

reminiscent of what scholars say of Punch and our own experience. We must also remember that the reason that very few puppetry scripts exist today from these time periods is not just because the art fell outside of canonized forms of representation. They weren't recorded because relying on folk narrative formulas, there, was rarely ever a need to even have much of a script. These shadow shows were against the hegemony of the Ottoman Empire and its cultural apparatuses. Siada goes on to say, "This rebellion against established literature naturally came to represent criticism of and resistance to the grim reality of a society where little social justice existed"(Ibid).

These are the strengths that have brought puppetry into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I think the unique experience of the live performance is why people were excited to see our puppetry tour and decided to come out instead of to watch TV. In a world that is saturated with images from mass communication, it isn't all about what we are saying and showing as puppeteers. Remember we chose to use puppets in the first place for our message. This choice allows for metalinguistic options not available in other media genres. Would as many people have showed up and enjoyed our show as much if we just showed a videotaped version of our play or if we had not improvised with the audience? The performance context, the interplay between audience and performer, the uniqueness of every performance through spontaneity, the extended metaphor through layered symbolism, and the room for creativity are the mechanisms for this weapon of the weak. With ammo for ideas, this is what makes puppetry important to this day, thriving in the cracks of society.

### *THE RADICAL HERITAGE*

During the Republican National Convention in 2000, Puppeteers from across the world converged upon Philadelphia. Their goal was to create art in resistance to Republican candidate Bush and his alliances with world financial institutions of the International Monetary Fund and

the World Bank. During a week long open workshop on puppet making and street theatre, undercover cops infiltrated and served as agent provocateurs. Fearing that these puppeteers would inspire something akin to what happened a year earlier during the IMF/WTO demonstrations of Seattle that stunned the world with their disruptive success, the police preemptively struck. On August 1st, the eve of the demonstrations, 180 Philadelphia police officers surrounded and entered the puppet workshop to arrest all those inside. Three hundred puppets and one hundred banners were smashed and destroyed (Bell, 4).

If puppetry is an outdated, quaint art form, than how was it powerful enough to threaten the State in such a way in the year 2000? There was popular power embodied in the puppets in Philadelphia. Enough power to warrant repression from authorities who wished to see the status quo maintained. The rebellious puppetry tradition is worldwide. Cities that have hosted conferences of international financial bodies whose policies are believed to hold more power than governments, have witnessed huge popular resistance. From Seattle, New York, Philadelphia, Prague, Miami, Thessaloniki, Genoa to Buenos Aires, these cities have been are shut down in protest with help from the puppets. This is where I and many others got our start in radical puppeteering.

The radical heritage has waxed and waned throughout history. It did not spring up today spontaneously as it might seem. It has been a rebellious undercurrent throughout the 20th century. Radical puppet theatres thrived in working class and immigrant neighborhoods in the U.S. during the heady and volatile days of 1920s and 30s class struggle. Waves of European immigrants brought with them radical political beliefs and old traditions of puppetry. One example was The Modicut Puppet Theatre from New York City. This radical Yiddish hand puppet theatre satirized current affairs and culture with their shows. They addressed serious political issues using a fusion

of East European folk humor, American Jewish culture, radical politics and avant garde art (Portnoy, 107). Revolutionary puppeteer troupes also played a role in the Spanish Civil War, performing anti-fascist plays for Republican soldiers and citizens (McCartney, 44).

The 1960s was a time of renewed interest in the puppetry arts as a means of artistic and political resistance. The old traditions were taken up anew by the activists and eager radicalized artists of the youth-dominated new left. From out of this era The Bread and Puppet Theatre surfaced. This group, founded in New York by German sculptor Peter Schumann, was originally a street agit prop group. In the 1970s they moved to a farm in Glover, Vermont and created the great institution they have become. For nearly 30 years they held their annual Domestic Resurrection Circus on their land for thousands of people while finding time to do international tours. Their efforts have inspired many and are a huge factor in the appearance of large scale protest puppetry in the anti-globalization movement today. Another similar group somewhat overshadowed by Bread and Puppets and In the Heart of the Beast. Started in the early 70s by activists they have been producing dynamic puppet theatre ever since. Today you can still catch their giant puppet pageants in Powderhorn Park on May Day.

The inspiration from these groups can be seen in the new theatres and puppetry festivals that have sprung up in recent years. There is The Spiral Q in Philadelphia whose members organize several small festivals called “puppetry uprisings” every year. The Wisefool Puppetry Collective in Berkeley has been in existence for over ten years bringing puppetry to protests and organizing the annual PuppetLove fest. In Pittsburgh the Black Sheep Puppetry Festival showcases every October a variety of radical and alternative puppetry. There are many puppeteers out there whose names are not known who perform and tour with their art. They do it not as a living but as a way to creatively inspire and challenge people with their humor, politics and art. Those that I was in the right place to witness were the RPM Collective from Boone, NC, Toronto’s Stranger Theatre,

The Flying Rutabaga Cycle Circus from St. Louis and that nameless troupe from Indiana that I saw in a basement so many years ago. Many of them are amateurs whose art doesn't reach a lot and may not lead to careers. But to those who get a chance to witness it, like those we crossed paths with this summer, I think they'll remember and might be the next to carry on our rebellious tradition.

### *IN CONCLUSION*

Christian theologians knew that there was power in performing objects. Up until the 15th century puppetry was banned and rooted out every few centuries by the church (Ruby). There was a power within those inanimate replicas of human kind that was unsettling to the powerful. Like puppets, objects imbued with sacred meaning have sway over people's consciousness. Puppetry also distills the entire world into a series of moving pictures for eyes to imbibe. As Peter Schumann explained "Puppetry is a way to make these incomprehensible riches accessible"(Schumann, 1985, 10). Through participation and interaction, the audience plays a part in shaping the images before them in their imaginary consumption of the world. The viewer knows that there will never be another feast exactly like this one again. When the images are digested they continue to live on. Sometimes they do not sit well in the bellies of those who have partaken and action must be taken to do something about the disgust.

Puppets say and do things that humans cannot. The coarse symbolic power that the art is capable of separates it from more realistic technologically mediated forms of communication. The familiarity of the themes that puppets represent and embody to humans is what makes them so dangerous to authorities. The wonder of being able to touch a miniature representation of the world and have the ability to interfere with its story is vital to the experience of puppetry.

Audiences can interact with the world in miniature during a puppetry performance. A space is created in which the truths of the world, no matter how brazen, can be articulated by a puppet where humans are silent. These performing objects become living avatars of the cosmos and heroes of the collective consciousness. They are more than mere toys. Somewhere between wonder and trick is where they reside. There is a power in puppets. In it is the reason we still find it today as rebellious as ever.

Peter Schumann, founder of Bread and Puppets has this to say,

The arts are political whether they like it or not. The arts, support the status quo, which is in itself highly political, Or they scream and kick and participate in our century's struggle for liberation (Schumann, 1985, 14).

We must remember that art is an essential facet for social transformation but it will not do it alone. The anarchist punk band Crass, criticizing the futility of their own musical efforts to inspire resistance in the face of a pointless war and a far right prime minister stated "Actionless sloganeering is just another Punch and Judy show"(Crass). Our art is important to us but we owe something to each other and our puppets who don't want to whack each other until the end of time. Puppets can't change the world with their stories alone. They need us. It would be a disservice to become complacent with our creativity. I'm not content just being a puppeteer. Puppet shows have crafted their own narratives against those of power throughout centuries. We don't have to be passive observers in the audience our whole lives when our bellies are full of disgusting images and the answers are on the tips of our tongues.

## *DANCE OF DOGS tour itinerary*

Columbus, OH- Milo Arts Center- Aug 14- Sarah Bernat's BFA show and "a good death" parade  
Ann Arbor, MI- The Neutral Zone-Aug 15- (teen center)  
Bloomington, IN- Monroe County Main Public Library- Aug 17  
Milwaukee, WI- The Corn Club (house)- Aug 18  
Minneapolis, MN- Mala's (performance space)- Aug 19  
Chicago, IL — The Beauty Shoppe (house)- Aug 20  
Detroit, MI — Trumbleplex (performance space)- Aug 21  
Cincinnati, OH — Sitwell's Café- Aug 22  
Lexington, KY — Lucy's front yard- Aug 23  
Athens, OH — The Wire (community center)- Aug 24  
Philadelphia, PA — South Philly Athenium (artist warehouse)- Aug 25  
Kingston, NY — Back Stage Productions (bar)- Aug 26  
NYC, NY — Crowospace (house)- Aug 26  
East Village Howl Festival (huge festival)- Aug 26  
Washington, DC — Brian McKenzie Center (anarchist info shop)- Aug 27  
Columbus, OH — Goodale Park Gazebo- Sept 30

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