

## Introduction

In the early nineteenth century, travelling marionette theatres were an established feature of everyday life in much of Europe, and the main form of theatrical entertainment for many people. Street shows likewise were a key element of urban culture, most notably in Italy, and these provided a type of amusement that cost even less and came to wherever the audiences were. The growth of towns and industry led to a much greater concentration of puppet activity in certain areas, especially in the period between 1860 and the First World War. In Brussels in the 1890s a score of theatres, mostly seating under a hundred people, were entertaining some 1,500 to 2,000 nightly,<sup>1</sup> and by 1900 the town of Liège could count some fifty active puppet theatres. In Sicily the numerous ‘teatrini’ of the back streets presented nightly episodes of chivalric adventure and were closely integrated with the popular life and culture of Palermo and other towns, whilst, in contrast, Milan and Turin possessed elegant ‘bonbonnières’ seating over a thousand spectators. Olaf Bernstengel counted some 200 families travelling the roads of Saxony in 1900,<sup>2</sup> whilst advertisements in the *Era* (a trade-paper for entertainers and precursor of the *Stage*) after 1860 reveal the existence of numerous companies with portable theatres active throughout Britain, justifying what George Speaight calls the ‘Renaissance’ of the English puppet theatre.<sup>3</sup> By 1914 a decline had set in and, except in Sicily and Greece, puppetry ceased to be a significant factor in popular culture.

Nomadic bands of entertainers had been part of European life for centuries. In the Slav lands, from the middle ages on, the Skomorokhi travelled widely in large companies, and, in Renaissance Italy, the Commedia dell’Arte created the first fully organised companies of actors, who then spread out to France, Spain, England, the Low Countries and the German-speaking states. From the end of the Elizabethan period, English showmen travelled widely, some going as far as Bohemia. It was quite usual for these actors to perform with puppets, which, especially

[1]

during the Thirty Years War, were sometimes more acceptable than human actors. In the eighteenth century, large troupes of actors-*cum*-puppeteers travelled through the German-speaking lands, but after 1790 live actors and puppet-players separated, with the consequent marginalisation of the latter, who were now thought of as peddling an inferior kind of theatre. One of the most celebrated travelling marionette proprietors of the early nineteenth century, Georg Geisselbrecht (1762–1826?), the model for Theodor Storm's novella *Polepoppenspüler*, presented marionette plays followed by live performances of one-act comedies by contemporary authors.<sup>4</sup> In Holland there are several examples of companies who performed both with puppets and actors, some continuing as late as the 1860s.<sup>5</sup>

Small theatres devoted to puppet performances became quite common in the eighteenth century. Martin Powell opened one at Bath in 1705, and by 1710 was established in London, and Stretch's theatre lasted from about 1720 until 1765 in Dublin. The booths of the fairs of Saint-Germain and Saint-Laurent in Paris hosted puppets or even substituted them for live actors when the bigger theatres objected to the infringement of their monopoly. In eighteenth-century Italy there was an aristocratic fashion for private marionette theatres where the splendours of baroque opera could be indulged in on a small scale. Cardinal Ottoboni created such a theatre in Rome and in 1706 appointed Filippo Juvarra to design scenery (later this became the Fiano theatre). The young Carlo Goldoni had some of his first experience of theatre in the Casa Grimani marionette theatre near Venice. When Carlo Perico brought his show to London in 1770, it was situated in Panton Street and fashionable society flocked to see it. Like many subsequent marionette showmen, he claimed that he had performed before crowned heads. The status to which marionettes could aspire is indicated by the five Haydn operas specially composed for the Esterhazy private theatre in Hungary, and by certain Mozart operas. Today an idea of such aristocratic marionettes can be gained from the Borromeo family collections in their villa on the Isola Madre on Lake Maggiore.

Showmen of the eighteenth century frequently exhibited moving figures, though not all of these could be defined as puppets. For roughly a century (1750–1850), these showmen, known as 'Mechanikuses', travelled through Europe, from Spain to Russia, often with quite large companies, presenting a great variety of attractions, including puppet shows. At fair time they occupied the large booths of Paris, Hamburg, St Petersburg and

3 / INTRODUCTION

elsewhere. At other times they performed in inns, private houses, or even their own portable booths. By the second half of the nineteenth century, smaller family troupes had become the norm, and they focussed their attention on bringing a repertoire of melodramas and variety to more outlying, or poorer, audiences. As the towns developed, the old fairs were moved to the outskirts or closed down, and many disappeared. The nomadic way of life also became marginalised and increasingly difficult to sustain. With some exceptions (in Bavaria and Bohemia), even the travelling companies performed mostly in the towns, whose industrial workforce, drawn in from the surrounding countryside, or even further afield, provided new audiences of wage-earners rapidly becoming conscious of their class identity, and acquiring limited spending-power and a consequent need for leisure activities. The entertainment industry developed in response to the growing notion of leisure, and puppeteers, as always, were amongst the entertainers.

In approaching the question of popular puppetry in Europe in the nineteenth century, it rapidly became apparent that any attempt to give a chronological account of its development would be relatively meaningless, since so much is dependent upon a combination of social, economic and political circumstances in different countries. Developments happened at different rates and for different reasons in the various countries of Europe. In some cases there was a lack of development or real evolution, but this simply reflected the fact that, in popular culture, aesthetic forms can continue unchanged over a very long period of time, whereas, at a more sophisticated urban level, 'high culture', or at least fashion, is in a state of constant evolution. Part of the interest of the nineteenth century is the overlaying of forms of puppetry that had been prevalent in the eighteenth century, if not earlier, with new puppet cultures that sprang up in areas which had not previously known more than the occasional passing show. Whilst it is dangerous and simplistic to assert that the English Punch-and-Judy show began with Piccini or that the Liège tradition of Tchantchès originated with Conti, the fortuitous presence of a particular puppeteer in a particular place at a particular time could act as a catalyst.

In Bavaria and Austria, from the 1790s, the authorities attempted to ban puppet theatre from the towns. This pushed many showmen onto the roads, divorced them from contact with urban culture, and forced them to develop as entertainers of smaller rural communities. The Napoleonic wars occasioned hardship, especially in poorer regions such as the north of Italy, and resulted in even more than the usual number of displaced

persons seeking a means of earning a living. Some of these exhibited puppets and some carried their skills abroad. The disappearance of the frontiers of many smaller states made travel easier for itinerant showmen, and, as the century progressed, railways and improved modes of communication made the transport of marionette shows easier, but also placed many rural populations within reach of urban distractions. Large portable theatres were a feature of the second half of the nineteenth century, but this was also the period of the rise of puppet theatres in industrial urban areas. It is hard to make any meaningful blanket statement. In Hamburg, puppet theatre as adult entertainment was already a thing of the past by the 1860s, whereas in Saxony this was the beginning of a period of prosperity for the travelling puppet theatres which served its industrial population. In Sicily, the great tradition of the *Opera dei Pupi* took off in the 1860s (and died very suddenly in the late 1950s) and Greek *Karaghiozis* became significant only after 1880, but remained a major form of folk culture until after the Second World War.

A major problem has been one of definition of what may be considered a puppet and what may not. Large-scale street figures such as the Portuguese *gigantones* or the *Fallas* of Valencia have been excluded from the discussion as seasonal celebratory figures, used in a processional rather than a dramatic mode, whose performances were seldom of a commercial nature. There is a grey area which covers automata, wax-works, cribs, peepshows and panoramas, all of which were exploited by showmen from the late eighteenth century onwards. In some cases a whole section of the programme of a travelling marionette show was a display of scenery and scenic effects, a display parallel to the popular panoramas of the day, inspired by scenic artists from Louthembourg to Daguerre. An 1822 bill of Joseph Schütz of Potsdam devoted part of the programme to 'Transparent presentations', in which he showed 'In addition to the most splendid play of colours, the most noble Royal castles, gardens, prospects, temples, suns, flowers and other decorations in brilliant light',<sup>6</sup> and later he added romantic views, comets and volcanic eruptions. Pötau, on his Baltic tour of 1858, included in the programme a section described as 'Cloud pictures, Chromatropes, Phantasmagories and Colour-play'. A whole new vocabulary was coined by the showmen to advertise their latest quasi-scientific presentation. The incorporation of moving-pictures into the programme of many puppet theatres in the last decade of the nineteenth century was only a very natural development. The Venetian-born Gaetano Maggi brought a company to

Warsaw and Moscow in 1820 and advertised both marionette performances and 'kinetozographia'.<sup>7</sup> On his 14-foot stage he showed scenes of local relevance with effects of storm, thunder, lightning and hail, and to enliven this included *Teatrum Mundi* figures. The *Teatrum Mundi*, which usually consisted of flat mechanically operated figures in a landscape, remained very popular in the German-speaking countries, and in the early 1900s Albert Wünsch in Saxony still described his show as a marionette theatre *and* *Teatrum Mundi*.

Automata and mechanical figures had fascinated the aristocracy in the eighteenth century. Some showmen acquired them and exhibited them to rather wider audiences, often as fairground sideshows, and they were also acquired by proprietors of marionette shows.<sup>8</sup> A reference to automata or a 'mechanical' theatre might, however, be no more than an attempt to make a puppet show sound more impressive.

From the middle ages, figures have been used to teach the scriptures. In Spain, the reredoses or *retabula* of fifteenth-century churches depict the human figure in a dramatic attitude and the word 'retablo' was used in Spain to indicate early puppet shows. Throughout the Roman Catholic German-speaking states, cribs could be found, and some of these had a degree of animation to add interest and wonder and were operated manually or by a more or less complicated mechanism. As they moved out of the context of performances in convents, churches and palaces, and into the hands of entertainers, cribs joined the ranks of peepshows and other attractions and, whilst some remained a hybrid form, others evolved into full-scale puppet theatres.

In eighteenth-century Spain, animated cribs were known as 'maquinas reales' (royal machines), and this subsequently became a term to designate a puppet show. In Madrid, in 1760, José Garcia Moya built a 'machine' provided with figures to present the birth of Christ, but there were also figures that could draw swords, take off their hats and perform dance steps, and he claimed that his theatre could do plays from the ordinary theatre, and perform interludes and sketches.<sup>9</sup>

Marseille, Aix and Toulon developed their own tradition of the 'speaking crib'. Many remained mechanical theatres, but some had become puppet shows by the first decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> In 1808, a certain François announced his show as a 'play in verse embellished with songs' and his rival, Plancard, referred to his as 'mechanical statues accompanied with words', indicating in his request for a permit that it was a show with 'fantoccini', similar to the one seen the previous year at the

Grand Théâtre. Laurent mixed topical elements into his show, including Napoleon, the journey of Pope Pius VII to Paris, and warships shooting their guns to greet the Christ child. After 1815, Napoleon disappeared from these stages, but a more dramatic repertoire developed, with short scenes, such as a fight between a miller and a chimney-sweep, which ended with the miller becoming black and the sweep white. In Lyon in 1824 one showman offered a programme beginning with the crib, the adoration of the kings, and, as appropriate to the season, the massacre of the Innocents (or the throne of King Herod), the scene with the woman of Samaria, and, after all of this, a melodrama or other play, a rope dancer, other dances and metamorphoses, the sacrifice of Abraham, etc.

By the mid nineteenth century, the 'jesle' (crib) of Prague had a programme in three parts, first a biblical narrative, then scenes from the everyday life of the people of Prague, and, last, a romantic play from the medieval or brigand repertoire. The jesle had a special status, and it therefore became an acceptable way of performing with puppets in a town where puppet shows were generally forbidden.

In Poland, Rumania, Russia, Bielo-Russia and the Ukraine, the crib, known as the 'szopka' or 'vertep', was taken to houses by seminary students or minor clerics as a way to earn a little money, but gradually became more commercialised and fell into the hands of showmen.<sup>11</sup> Itinerant szopka presenters were still travelling around in the first decades of the twentieth century, carrying the stage on their backs, and the dolls in a small wooden valise.

In more rural areas of the Carpathians and adjoining territories of southern Poland, Hungary, Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia, the crib was associated with mumming and carried from house to house by men or boys of the local community disguised as Herod, Roman soldiers, Angels, Death and so forth, who performed a live Herod play. Here too folk tradition shades off into a way of earning money. In Wallachia and Moldavia, where the crib was known as the 'viclaim' (Bethlehem) or 'jocul păpușilor', which became a generic name for a puppet show, the showman was often a professional who was accompanied by mumming groups. He organised a group that could be quite large. In 1860, Petrarche Grigorie, with a team of sixteen boys, was granted a permit on the proviso that the performance should be 'without costumes imitating those of the army and clergy, without drums and only till twelve o'clock at night'.<sup>12</sup> These restrictions were because of the ease with which the performance moved towards satire of the clergy, army and known individuals.<sup>13</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, ‘ombres chinoises’ (shadow theatre) were included by many puppeteers in their programme. A book on the Amsterdam fair, published in 1801, mentions a puppet show which ended with a ‘chinese’ shadow play.<sup>14</sup> Geisselbrecht presented ombres chinoises as a section of his show, along with other optical entertainments such as panoramas and magic-lantern slides.<sup>15</sup> In Munich, between 1790 and 1820, shadow shows were tolerated, whilst other forms of puppetry were not. In Spain, and particularly Catalonia, shadow performances were a noted element of entertainment during Lent, when they were the only form of theatrical activity, and were generally given by professional showmen in private houses. In Greece, a major shadow tradition flourished after 1880 with the Karaghiozis theatre and virtually obliterated other types of puppetry.

Amateur activity reflected the extensive puppet culture of the nineteenth century. It falls outside the terms of reference of the present study only because its practitioners, mostly the middle-class or the young, rarely earned their living by it. There were distinguished examples, such as Maurice Sand’s puppets at Nohant or the private shadow theatres in Barcelona. The first set of puppets for the Munich Marionette Theatre came from the private-house theatre of a distinguished military man, Carl Wilhelm von Heideck, himself an artist of ability and member of the Munich Academy, and this may account for their exceptionally small size. Countless house theatres were to be found in Bohemia where, towards the end of the century, several factories, such as Meizner, produced stages, scenery and six-inch rod marionettes which were used to perform the plays of the traditional and melodrama repertoire. In Eastern Europe, crib theatres were often presented by amateurs, in much the same way as the toy theatres and domestic puppet theatres of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> In England there were the toy (paper) theatres produced by Green, Skelt and Pollock, whilst Denmark was famous for Jacobsen, and Germany for Schreiber.<sup>17</sup> To this might be added the range of shadow theatre material and galanty shows for home performance. Nineteenth-century prints sometimes show puppets for sale on market stalls, an indication of their importance in the culture of many children.

The main types of puppet in use in nineteenth-century Europe were the glove-puppet and the marionette. The glove puppet is placed directly on the hand and operated from below. The marionette is operated from above by rods, wires or strings. Terminology can be confusing, since, for example, the word for both types in French is ‘marionnette’, and the

Italian word 'burattino' can mean a glove puppet, but is sometimes used in a vaguer sense. On top of this, the name of a popular puppet figure sometimes becomes a generic term (e.g. Guignol, Polichinelle, Kasper), and this can cause further confusion when a name, such as Guignol, which belongs to a glove puppet, is used to refer to marionettes.

The distinction between the two forms is more than a technical one. Many glove-puppet performers were more akin to jugglers, conjurers and buskers who displayed their skills in the street for a few coins, and often operated without any sort of stage. Their 'repertoire' consisted of little more than knockabout fights, or a series of burlesque scenes, usually between a male figure, his wife and the devil. The marionette showman, on the other hand, was surrounded by an aura of mystery – the figures looked more like humans (and the credulous sometimes believed that they were). In addition, marionettes had a degree of social respectability conferred by aristocratic and middle-class patronage.

The difference in status persisted through the nineteenth century. However, the issue is clouded by the fact that many puppeteers worked with more than one type of puppet. Some used a glove-puppet show as a come-on for the 'real' show performed by marionettes and placed a glove-puppet stage in front of their booth, just as drawers of teeth and sellers of quack medicines had done in the seventeenth century. Heuserman, the puppeteer recorded by Strindberg in *Gamla Stockholm* in the 1870s, operated with both marionettes and glove puppets.<sup>18</sup> The Cullen family (Ireland) possess both marionettes and glove puppets; Janus Kabalt was not only the celebrated Jan Klaassen performer on the Dam Square of Amsterdam, but also performed with trick marionettes. Henrik Kemény (Budapest) uses a dual-purpose stage, half the show being the glove puppet, Vitéz László, the other half being a marionette performance.

Glove puppets are associated with the streets and a more casual audience, marionettes with indoor performance. By the nineteenth century there is plenty of evidence, however, of marionette performances taking place in front of poverty-stricken audiences in slums, and of some glove-puppet showmen beginning to give more elaborate productions with scenery like the 'real' theatre, several manipulators, and a clearly middle-class audience. Marionettes continued to be tagged with a notion of 'high' culture, and some showpeople emphasised this by referring to their 'artistic marionettes', whereas glove-puppets remained relatively free of such associations.



Concepts of ‘high’ or ‘low’ culture are problematic in a discussion of traditional puppetry, and in the present study they are used fairly broadly as convenient labels rather than absolute categories.<sup>19</sup> The distinction between ‘high’ culture and ‘low’ culture is a particularly nineteenth-century phenomenon and corresponds to the growing awareness that the poorer classes had a culture of their own which did not necessarily correspond to that recognised by the governing classes. The French Revolution had focussed attention on this cultural divide and in many countries the authorities were nervous of any assertion of popular culture. The Napoleonic administration formally divided theatres into official (subsidised), secondary (commercial) and ‘petits spectacles’ or ‘spectacles de curiosités’, where puppets were lumped in with every other sort of fairground attraction. This reflects not only the prejudices of the authorities, but also the difficulties they experienced with entertainment that did not fit clearly into any category. In 1864, legislation in France allowed anyone to obtain a permit to run a theatre, but puppets were specifically excluded. In other words, puppeteers were still perceived as showmen – not actors. Attitudes to entertainment were affected by social snobberies and this further contributed to the marginalisation of the puppet theatre. In Austria and Bavaria the growing separation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture placed it emphatically in the latter category.<sup>20</sup> Theatre journalism of the early nineteenth century restricted itself to those theatres purveying ‘high’ culture and seldom had much to say about the more popular melodrama houses, let alone such minor forms as the puppet theatre. For this reason, most of the shows passed unrecorded and seldom attracted the attention of critics, except in a rather patronising way. Puppets were sometimes banned outright or forced to fight to survive. Most puppeteers lived at, or below, subsistence level, and the existence of many is not recorded, for the good reason that they left no traces whatsoever.

Theatre of the poor, ‘teatro di quattro soldi’, ‘théâtre de quat’sous’, ‘theater der armen’ are amongst the many terms used to refer to the puppet theatres of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. This was poor man’s theatre, but not exclusively so. Compared with actors’ theatre, it was cheap (and could be free if you avoided making a contribution to a street show), but it too had its hierarchies and the proprietor of a big marionette fit-up or larger fixed theatre perceived himself as a bourgeois, not to be associated with a vulgar street Kasper or Pulcinella.

In the introduction to what is, effectively, the first major study of puppetry in the context of cultural history, Gerd Taube makes the point that the study of puppet theatre is not primarily a branch of literary studies or of art history, but rather of social and cultural history. It is with a similar objective in mind that the authors of this book have embarked on their study. Historiographically speaking, a cultural-historical approach to the subject is relatively recent. Some of the best research has been published in journals of folklore, sociology and anthropology, but this places the puppet in a particular light. Within theatre studies, leaving aside a very few exceptions, puppetry does not receive major attention. Many books are (still) written by journalists, local historians and amateurs. In many attractive books, the performance aspect is forgotten and there is an undue emphasis on the figures as decontextualised artefacts. Only a few studies, such as Catriona Kelly's recent book on Petrushka, or Linda Myrsiades's work on Karaghiozis, attempt to situate puppetry in a well-balanced socio-cultural context.

Some of the best collections of puppets are to be found in museums of folklore, such as the ethnographic museums of Antwerp and Liège or the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris. Comparatively few are to be found in theatre museums. One consequence of the association with folklore rather than theatre has been a tendency to think in terms of national cultures and notions of ethnicity, often summarised as *Volkskunde* or *Volkstumkunde*.

Many puppet festivals today are given over to so-called 'traditional' work. The term awakes a nostalgia for a past that has disappeared and conjures up ideas of Punch and Judy shows or Sicilian rod marionettes ('pupi') clattering round in heavy suits of armour. It was only with the folklorists of the mid nineteenth century that 'traditional' puppetry began to be perceived as culturally significant. Hobsbawm speaks of the invention of tradition at this period, a notion that seems to be appropriate to most forms of puppetry covered in this book.<sup>21</sup> In examining popular puppetry from the particular angle of what is today thought of as 'traditional', certain tendencies emerge. There are variations from country to country, but one is struck more by the similarities than by the differences, and also by the fact that certain developments happened at different times, or in slightly different ways, because of historical or social circumstances, such as the date or nature of urban or industrial expansion.

Concepts of 'national tradition' have only limited application and the whole idea of national puppet types is questionable. The archetypically