



Portrait of the Puppeteer as Author Writing practices for puppets in Western Europe (17th – 21st century)

2nd international PuppetPlays conference

Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

23rd – 25th May 2023

After *Literary Writing for Puppets in Western Europe (from the 17th to the 21st century)* (Montpellier 14th – 16th October 2021) the proceedings of which are in the process of being prepared for publication, the European research programme (ERC) *PuppetPlays* is today launching the call for papers for the second international conference, *Portrait of the Puppeteer as Author (from the 17th to the 21st century)* which will be held at the Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 from 23rd to 25th May 2023.

The ERC PuppetPlays programme

PuppetPlays – Reappraising Western European Repertoires for Puppet and Marionette Theatres (ERC GA 835193) is a research project funded by the European Union within the framework of the research and innovation programme Horizon 2020, and directed by Didier Plassard, Professor of Drama and Performance studies at the Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3.

The main objectives of *PuppetPlays* are the following:

- ◆ to bring together a representative corpus of Western European puppet plays (from Germany, Austria, Belgium, Spain, France, Great Britain, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland) from the 17th to the 21st century.
- ◆ to identify the characteristics of theatrical writing for puppets and the way these characteristics vary according to different periods, cultural spheres, conditions of production and target audiences.
- ◆ to highlight the contribution of these repertoires to the construction of a European cultural identity.

The principal outcomes of the programme will be a concluding monograph, two doctoral theses, the publication of the proceedings of the two international conferences, academic articles and a digital platform comprising a data base (2,000 references) and an online anthology of 300 unpublished or rare texts. This platform is currently under construction but is already accessible at the following address: <https://puppetplays.eu>

Presentation of the conference

For the puppet theatre, as for so many other forms of performance which have long been considered “minor”, the history of the theatrical text is not that of dramatic literature. It is rather a history of stage practices which have developed outside institutions and spheres of recognition, in a great variety of social and cultural contexts according to the logic of very different repertoires.

The works performed in these contexts, whatever their method of elaboration and transmission, have difficulty in finding a space within the greater story which makes up the historiography of Western theatre, at least in as far as it is established from categories of literary history. If the contribution – either fantasized or real – of certain writers to the dramaturgy of puppeteering can be examined in the light of baroque, romantic, symbolic, modernist or post-dramatic aesthetics, it is rarely the case for works produced by the puppeteers themselves to whom this second international conference of the *PuppetPlays* project will be exclusively devoted. Traditional texts, adaptations and variations, collective creations, writings during the rehearsal process - another logic is at work in their production, other instruments of analysis need to be invented when we undertake to examine them carefully.

To give an account of this logic, to develop these instruments of analysis, several methodological shifts must first of all be made.

The first of these shifts concerns the figure of the author. Because his profession is not writing, the puppeteer who himself composes the texts that he is going to perform is not concerned by the methods which define the “author function” as described by Michel Foucault (“What is an Author?” 1969): the legal and institutional dimensions of this function, its modern construction, the contract thus established with the reader or the spectator, the way the author is present in the text – all these categories are not particularly relevant in the context of puppetry. The fact that the texts are rarely published (or only as “documents” and not “monuments” to take up the distinction formulated by Jacques Le Goff) has long prevented the artist from being completely recognized as an author. But the difference is not only symbolic, and attempting to widen the application of this status to include the puppeteer would be to miss the essential point. Indeed writing for puppets is not always defined as an original creation: it can be shaped from revivals, spin-offs, additions, cuts, or modifications of other texts, in such a way that each performance does not enable us to hear the voice of one author, but that of several collaborators who or may not be anonymous, without the contribution of each one being recognizable. The manuscripts, where several layers of writing can be identified, often bear the mark of it. The figure of the author in the puppet theatre has many different facets: one has to take into consideration intergenerational transmission, collective creation, different ways of being present in the text from conception to performance, and not omitting the construction of the puppets and the stage materials.

The second shift, arising directly from the first, is that of the very notion of text. Up until about the middle of the 20th century, puppeteers did not establish a definitive version of the works they performed. Very much aware that these were not original creations, they did not keep written copies unless as an aid to memory, or if they were necessary for subsequent revival or transmission. Dozens or even hundreds of these texts would be kept by families who were puppeteers over several generations. The texts were less works to be staged than stories to be adapted according to the context of the performance or the target audience and its reactions. In a profession where transmission is still carried on by example and oral tradition, the text is less important than the telling of the tale, the detail of the dialogue less important than the dramatic core of the piece. In this respect, the history of texts written by puppeteers is first and foremost a history of tales or fables and their circulation in space and their inscription in time.

A third shift concerns the very definition of the gesture of writing which can be particularly felt in contemporary creation, but already present in outline in older productions. Indeed the art of the puppeteer is always characterized more by the decisive role played by the instruments of the dramaturgy. Closely combining the plastic qualities of these instruments (materials, construction, animation techniques) with the recounting of the fable, the act of writing is plural: both verbal and visual, as the pieces composed by Philippe Genty and many others have long shown, it can also be based on music or rhythm. The process of creation, reception, transmission and the conservation of traces are considerably modified to the point that the very idea of a repertoire can be set in question.

Questions

Particular attention will be paid to the following questions:

- Texts without an author? Too many authors? Writing for puppets is often plural: texts transmitted from generation to generation with additions, suppressions, modifications; texts composed collectively from improvisations; texts elaborated through dialogue with other collaborators on the piece. How does the definition of authorship affect the puppeteer’s practices of composition? Does this extend to other components, particularly material components (construction) of the piece?

- What are the writing methods? Is the text written before or during rehearsals? After the performance? Is it fueled by exchanges with the puppeteer's construction workshop? Is the text fixed or does it evolve during the course of the performances? Is it determined – and if so, how? – by the choice of instruments?
- How is the writing fueled? Is it influenced by a pre-existing work, adapted and re-written? From documentary research? From collective improvisations? From the expressive potential of puppets and the materials? From rhythmic patterns?
- What is the composition based on? A written text? A story-board? A musical score? A video recording? How are the different languages used on stage?
- What trace survives after the show has run its course? A final version of the text? An audio or audiovisual recording? A score? A mere canvas or a summary? What differences can be observed between the performance and the traces that remain?
- How can the repertoire of the puppeteer be preserved, revived and become part of theatrical heritage? How are movements notated? What role can institutions play? How can they help to enhance the value of the repertoires?

Proposals for papers and calendar for submissions:

Proposals for papers, which should last for 20 minutes, should be sent by e-mail by 2nd January 2023 to the two following addresses:

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They should include a summary of the paper in French or in English of 300 to 500 words, a bio-bibliographical note and the personal details of the author.

Papers may be presented in French or in English.

In accordance with the principles of open science, the proceedings of the conference will be published on a free platform accessible to all. Furthermore they will be published in paper form in the series “Arts de la scène” by Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée.

Scientific committee: Sarah ADAMS (Gand), Jean BOUTAN (Zurich), Jo Ann CAVALLO (New-York), Alfonso CIPOLLA (Turin), Sophie COURTADE (Montpellier), Francesca DI FAZIO (Montpellier), Carole GUIDICELLI (Montpellier), Yanna KOR (Montpellier), Sandrine LE PORS (Montpellier), Anna LEONE (Montpellier), Paul PIRIS (London), Didier PLASSARD (Montpellier), Giuseppe POLIMENI (Milan), Lars REBEHN (Dresden), Toni RUMBAU (Barcelona), Gert TAUBE (Frankfurt), Pauline THIMONNIER (Poitiers), Christine ZURBACH (Evora), Jean-Claude YON (Paris).



The *PuppetPlays* project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement ERC 835193.

