

Puppetry as Community Arts Practice

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Abstract

This project/workshop report introduces the ways Matt Smith and PickleHerring Theatre approaches community puppetry. The report emphasizes the group experience, the participants' play and the levels of creativity in the workshops/projects. The efficacy of puppetry as an important form of community arts practice is given in the summary.

Keywords

puppetry
participation
environment

A class in a rural primary school present a series of short improvised scenes with puppets made from recycled materials. One of the groups of children in the class presents a scene that involves a satire of the teachers and headmistress. The caricatures are cruel and comic. The teacher watching is nervous as one of the puppets depicts the class teacher being sacked by the headmistress. The tension and excitement in the classroom is palpable. How dare the children make fun of the teaching staff and the school system? As the workshop leader, I am nervous to see how the teacher reacts and whether the children's work will be criticized as offensive. The teacher does not reprimand the children for their very cutting scene about the school. Possibly the children felt safe in making such a daring piece of drama because they were communicating their cruel comedy through puppetry. The unusual art form of puppetry and unique workshop style adopted in this example gave the children participating the freedom and the autonomy to present their *risqué* material. The practice and participation encouraged in this workshop was influenced by open and irreverent methods, developed over years of similar practice explored further in this reflective report.

The puppet workshop described above is community arts practice in which I have worked for the last sixteen years as a professional artist. The potential of puppetry as community arts practice has grown over this sixteen-year period, with many other companies besides my own developing workshop programmes in the UK.¹ Many scholars and enthusiasts have discussed the roots of puppetry as a popular art form performed in communities across the globe.² From the magic of the Shaman bringing dead things to life to the violent, dangerous slapstick of Punch and Judy, there is a rich history of puppetry in a myriad of cultures. Throughout this history puppetry has remained at the boundaries of performance between the popular and the artistic.³ Although still very popular, puppetry still operates at the borders of cultural activity for the most part in the UK.

In this report my experience of puppet workshops and projects will be explored to convey the potential of puppetry as community arts practice.

1. To develop a picture of UK puppetry companies 'animation online' is a good resource: www.puppetcentre.org.uk/animationsonline.
2. A very well researched history is Jurkowski 1998, and a visual history is Blumenthal 2005.
3. See Allen and Shaw 1992 for a fairly recent description of how puppetry struggles for acceptance in the UK as a serious form.



Figure 1: A girl with her junk puppet, Jonathon Purcell.



Figure 2: A junk puppet workshop, Jonathon Purcell.

The displaced voice of the puppet, the power of puppetry as spectacle and the issues of participation will be highlighted as key aspects of the practice. The process of how the puppet can speak the unspeakable, animate community narratives and offer a creative avenue to various groups and individuals will also be presented, with reference to a wider field of study.

In the workshops and projects that will be described in this report, the type of puppetry involved does not use traditional methods and reflects contemporary trends in puppetry, for example, the visible puppeteer. Important and relevant to this report are the contexts described and this will give a sense of the variety of applications of puppetry in communities. Three areas will be considered; the children's puppet workshop, the sexual health project and puppetry as large-scale performance.

Children's puppet workshop

There is great scope for children to gain confidence in expressing themselves publicly through opportunities to present dialogue through a puppet. The attention is diverted from themselves towards the puppet who therefore acts as a support mechanism.

(Hogg 2005: 18)

Puppets have powerful and stimulating meanings for children. In all the work I have conducted with children, I have very rarely worked with a child who does not feel excited by the prospect of making their own puppet. In this section a description of the elements that make my practice with children in puppet making workshops efficacious and relevant to community arts practices will be considered.

In most settings I have worked in with children in education, or in less formal settings like festivals, youth centres, playgroups or unusual places like hospitals or shopping malls, the design of the puppet workshop takes a similar format. The children make a rod puppet from recycled materials using quick fixing methods with sticky tape. There is no design process or previous experience of puppetry needed. The children start by assembling objects together and only an intuitive creative energy to make a puppet is necessary. The activity is open and not reliant on any level of craft or technique. The goal of the workshop process is that the child can bring the puppet to life in a short performance or play. The aesthetic value of the puppet as visual artefact is not as important as its function as performer, as the intention is not to display the puppet on a wall. The puppet-plays and performances devised and improvised by the children at the end of the workshop are spontaneous and without too much structure. The only instruction that is given to the children with regard to their performance is to make sure the show has an ending, as most children will continuously play until instructed to stop, even when an audience is watching.

So what value does this children's puppet workshop display in relation to community arts? There are three ways the puppet workshop offers potential as a tool in community arts practice: the vocal possibilities; the visual quality; the way participation is encouraged. With the child speaking lines through the puppet, the displaced 'voice' of the puppet gives the children a chance to vocalize in the performance, even if they are not used



Figure 3: Two children performing with junk puppets, Jonathon Purcell.

to performing. Even shy children find performing with a puppet possible because the audience's focus is on the object and not the child puppeteer.⁴ Giving individuals and groups the chance to find ways of putting across their voice has been part of the discourse and history of community arts and this form of puppetry develops this positive action. The puppet is potentially visually more exciting than an actor and engages the participant's imagination on a different level. This visual quality is a key element in the popularity of puppets in child-based community groups. The puppet workshop offers a flexible level of participation in which all children can achieve success in the art-making process. The making and performing are not coded as specialized or difficult and are offered as a completely free moment of creative expression. Everyone can be a puppeteer in this workshop and this reflects the democratic ethos at the roots of early community arts. A sense of equality is evident in the puppet making, as all the children achieve the same results of making a puppet and bringing it to life through performance.

4. I have found powerful positive results with autistic children who seem to be liberated by the form of the displaced voice in puppetry because they are communicating through an object and not directly with a human being.

Sexual health project

During a residential workshop in Wales, a group of four young male participants are carving foam into the shapes of giant penises; there are two adults, a youth worker and myself in the role of artist. As the penises are being formed from the foam the conversation is free flowing and relaxed. I describe my own experience of testicular cancer and the young men listen to this respectfully and inquisitively. Later on one of the young men describes to the rest of the group a very embarrassing sexual health issue that was resolved many years before the workshop. The young man's testimony is listened to with the same respect I was afforded by the group. All of this is happening as we participate in cutting and making foam penis puppets.

Later, after the workshop, the youth worker shares his sense of awe at how the young man seemed to feel safe enough in the environment to disclaim such personal information. The strange and ridiculous content of the workshop, my explanation of sexual health issues and the bizarre activity of making the puppets seemed to create a space that allowed him to open up. The act of making the puppet of a penis gave him the stimulus to explore and, importantly, displaced his voice to some extent so he felt secure in speaking out. He was not as self-conscious about what he was saying when he was making the puppet. This moment stands out in relation to my experiences of sexual health projects using puppetry. This moment shows that not just in the act of performing with puppets but also through making puppets, individuals and groups can develop important dialogues about sexual health issues.

Perceived as the 'artificial lover' the puppet contests the truth of the sexual act, emphasising its 'representative' aspect which sometimes becomes a parody with little to do with corporal experience.

(Jurkowski 1988: 97)

The way puppets 'parody' and are 'representative' of the human sexual act has been a feature that has been exploited in this work in sexual health

projects with teenagers. Performing with puppets as ‘representatives’ of sexual acts, teenagers feel safer and more confident to tackle embarrassing material. The teenagers can ‘parody’ the sexual health problems in their society and environment through the puppet show. The sexual health information is very important and relevant in the shows, and the medium of puppetry creates an effective conduit for the messages about safe sex to be relayed.

The work described above was with a group of young men who were struggling in the education setting but were invited by the Youth Service to create a peer education project. In this project, puppetry would form one aspect of a workshop that the young men ran in schools and youth centres. As well as the foam penis puppets, they performed a shadow puppet show using digital photographs of their own locality through a power-point slide show back projected onto a shadow puppet screen. Most of the show and workshop was devised during a three-day residency. The young men had very little confidence or self-esteem and struggled to create the programme of work. My role was to develop the creative performance side and introduce the techniques of both rod puppets and shadow puppets. During the devising the ‘information giving’ was a key aspect to accomplish in both show and follow-up workshop. The visual and performance aesthetic of the puppet show was rough, even though the messages were clear. The puppets offered the young men the chance to communicate through performance what is usually unspeakable and not to feel foolish in the process.

The confidence the puppetry developed in the young men influenced their ability to run and facilitate as leaders of the workshop about sexual health issues that followed the puppet performance. The efficacy of this project as a peer education programme collaborating with the Youth Service and as a piece of compelling community arts was clear, through the work produced and participants’ feedback. The young men developed confidence, communication skills and self-esteem from the puppetry. In this project, success was achieved through the process of the puppet show opening up participation and debate before the forum of a more detailed workshop exploring the themes and information around sexual health.

I have also worked on a similar project with young women and found similar levels of success. Puppetry has much to offer in developing the communication of sexual health information across the globe and has already achieved this in the African continent for example. Communities can use the form of puppetry to discuss these issues as part of a workshop programme. Martha Aebes (who delivers AIDS awareness programmes in Namibia) shares my enthusiasm about the potential of puppetry in this environment.

Puppetry is a wonderful art. It is very effective in conveying a message in a non-threatening way – very much like animation but with more life. It’s now part of me, and I would like to do more. My hands want to tell my people some stories.

(Aebes in McIntyre/UNICEF 1998: 19)

Puppetry as large-scale performance

A group of schoolchildren arrive at a disused train station in their village and watch the arrival of a strange train made of junk. The train is stuck because there are ghosts on the line. The children must move along the tracks and on



Figure 4: Children performing under the Dancing Bridge with junk puppets, Jonathon Purcell.

the way, they meet weird and wonderful puppet characters and animals made from rubbish. They descend under the disused railway line into the giant arch of a railway bridge known locally as 'The Dancing Bridge'. They meet a masked performer who dances the eerie dance of the woman who fell from the bridge and is now a ghost (A local legend). The children frighten this apparition away and then perform their own puppet shows under the bridge. The event is rounded off with everyone dancing a jig, which is purported to have happened roughly a hundred years ago, hence the name 'The Dancing Bridge'. This is one example of PickleHerring's Marlsite⁵ projects and gives a sense of how the company engages communities in large-scale puppet shows.

In this example of puppetry in the community setting, the dialogues the participants conduct through their puppets are with and about the environment. Since 2000, PickleHerring has created large-scale, site-specific puppet events using a multi-discipline approach. Puppets made in the children's workshops out of junk become part of the bigger scale events created during one-week residencies. The shows created by the children who attend the event at the end of residency are performed as an integral part of the larger shows. For example, in a piece that celebrated a new footbridge the children's puppets were sent across the river on a ferryboat with a giant effigy of a ferryman: this symbolized the history of the original ferryman on that stretch of river. In another example, the puppets performed under the giant girth of a canal horse sculpture as part of the event.



Figure 5: Children performing under and celebrating a giant horse sculpture, Jonathon Purcell.

These examples of practice use puppetry in a unique and dynamic style, but more importantly offer local people a way to participate in their heritage and environment through performance. The shows and workshops are short-term in the temporal sense but are very effective as community celebrations of particular sites. The children process and walk through a series of large-scale interventions framed through a dramatic stimulus. The larger puppets built by the artists are usually constructed from rubbish and waste found around the site and accompanied by junk instruments. Narratives are explored but with no sense of historical authenticity. Instead, there is playfulness with local stories, myths and legends. The messages that are played out through both the weeklong process and short one-hour performances are about a heightened awareness of the environment through recycling and appreciation of landscapes. The groups participate through the parade, puppet workshops and their own performance, and this forms a deep mix of stimuli, especially for children. In this practice, puppets offer ways to convey community narratives, and a dialogue about our environment, history and heritage.

Puppets and community arts: a summary

In the short space of this report, a glimpse into a style of puppetry practice has been described. There can be no doubt that puppetry appeals to the imaginations of communities and groups, especially children. Many



Figure 6: A community junk puppet workshop, Jonathon Purcell.

individuals in communities are not confident to perform as actors and the role of puppeteer offers these individuals the opportunity to perform. Puppetry can bring to life narratives in communities for both children and adults. Through my own work as a freelance artist and Artistic Director of Pickleherring, the potential of puppetry is developed in a variety of communities and the level of engagement and joy that has occurred in these performances is significant. This body of work has gone some way in showing the efficacy of puppetry as community arts practice. Puppetry is popular with the potential to teach, shock and inspire all ages when used as a tool that groups can adopt. These groups are functional participants in the process of making these puppets and performing with them.

...participative features of theatre, performance and creativity in general are increasingly called upon to foster involvement by people in different settings and to meet various developmental, educational and change agendas.

(Preston 2008: 127)

The way puppets are used to encourage participation as described in this report is the most important and potent feature puppetry has to offer community arts. Puppetry involves people in both educational and non-educational settings and can be used to involve people very effectively in agendas about health, literacy and ecology.

In the three locations described above of schools, sexual health programmes and outdoor spaces, the puppet offers unique potential in bringing information and skills to communities. In the puppet workshop, the methods employed allow a democracy of making/creating for the participants and an opportunity for all to be involved. This is a valid approach in community arts practice and not just particular to puppet workshops. There is a vast array of other possible successful applications for puppetries in communities are and puppetry will continue to have a rightful place in the field of community arts.

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Contributor details

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