Women and Puppetry Theodora Skipitares

Origins

As I look back on the things I made as a child, I see myself as a stitcher. My mother and her 4 sisters were expert seamstresses, using skills learned in Greece. Either with a sewing machine, or a hand needle, I was always creating objects, mostly to wear.

My performances, from teenage years on, featured handmade objects that were related to a true story and had a connection to my body. I grew up in San Francisco during the sixties and the explosive changes that were happening culturally were so profound, that there was a tremendous freedom to experiment with everything: materials, form, artistic voice. In high school and later at UC Berkeley, I kept sewing and gluing together body coverings that I would take into the streets, trying out new ideas. These objects included a robe of 3,000 walnut shells woven together, a jump suit of 1,000 baby-bottle nipples, a 12-foot tall construction of tree branches and bark. My sister, who had gotten her driver's license before I did, agreed to secretly drive me every Sunday to Golden Gate Park where I would paint my face and arms and legs and put on a new creation to be tried out on an audience who happened to be in the park. Sometimes the performances would last 15 minutes and sometimes, if the ideas weren't working, I would run back to the car in 90 seconds. My sister was ordered to keep the motor running in case of a flop. We would drive back to our super strict Greek household while I scraped all the paint off of my body and arrived back home as if we had just gone to borrow books from the library.

By the time I went to college, the social fabric in America had been ripped apart, and as Leonard Cohen said later . . . ."There was "a crack in everything". I believe the cracked society was what gave me the freedom and the courage to try new ideas without fear. In college, I studied sculpture and theater. I was interested in the Dadaists, the Surrealists, the Beat poets.

My auto-geography (New York)

In 1969, I moved to New York to study theater design. I found myself living in the East Village, a few minutes from a new neighborhood called SoHo, that was a concatenation of dozens of storefronts and abandoned factory buildings. Every night, after my "official" classes at NYU, I would wander a few blocks downtown to SoHo, where, on any given night, there was a choice of dance, poetry, music and performance that was free, welcoming, and very innovative. This became my "night school", and probably was my real education. This was where I first saw Laurie Anderson, Vito Acconci, Gilbert and George, Robert Wilson.

After I finished my MFA, I worked briefly as a costume designer. I made a man's suit out of woven newspapers and a footman's costume out of hundreds of tiny pencils (which unfortunately punctured the actor who had to be rushed by the stage manager to the nearest hospital emergency room). My favorite was a dress made of glass which weighed 90 lbs. The actress who wore it had to be padlocked into it nightly by two assistants, and once dressed, she couldn't move. She had to be carried onto the stage. Slowly, I realized that stage design might not be my metier, and the directors I worked for were beginning to agree.
But I kept going to SoHo to see what artists were doing in their storefronts. At the time, I didn't understand that these experiments were truly groundbreaking cross-media projects. and that what I was becoming was an *interdisciplinary* artist.

New York City was officially bankrupt, and landlords had abandoned their buildings. I found a very cheap loft, got a job as a waitress and began making solo autobiographical performances, strongly influenced by this vibrant scene of visual performance art, which was driven in part by second-wave feminism. Women artists were creating stories about their lives in a variety of media: painting, drawing, sculpture, collage, and especially performance. In my solo works, the objects were the focus and the other elements of the performance

were built around them. The works were about the conflict of growing up as a rather flamboyant young woman in a traditional, strict Greek home; the tension between Greek and American culture, especially in terms of female sexuality; the heroic myths and the everyday realities of life. I thought about frecoes and murals. and I began to make my own walls. I moved across these walls, performing not as an actor but rather as a privileged stagehand: on stage, but invisible. Several years later, I would realize that this particular kind of stage presence: onstage, but not the center of attention, is a presence that most puppeteers identify with.

At this time, many artists, male and female, who didn't fit neatly into a genre, such as Carolee Schneeman and Joan Jonas were exploring solo performance. In a few cases, this exploration would lead them to puppetry: Pat Oleszko's inflatable objects, Dennis Oppenheim's motorized marionettes, along with Winston Tong's cloth dolls. Something else, however, was clear: for the first time, in this new form, women were as equally represented as men.

The First Puppets

I worked for several years as a solo performer. After a while, I felt alone onstage, and one afternoon as I looked across my studio, I saw leaning against the wall, the few dozen full body self-portraits I had made out of cast latex, from a plaster mold. I grabbed one of the self-portraits, took a saw, made a cut at the shoulder, and one at the elbow, and then stitched the pieces back together, so they could move in different positions. I tied a string to one of the fingers and then ran the string up to the ceiling and across the wall, so I could animate the figure remotely. I incorporated that figure, about 30 inches tall, into my performance. These realistic representations of myself, which I called “little Theodoras,” started to appear on stage with me in supporting roles and eventually took over the performance space. These small female bodies came to represent women, men and even animals (my puppet figures were gender and species fluid!). Soon I left the stage to become their director. What I didn’t realize immediately was that I had stumbled onto a kind of puppet performance.

Autobiography became less important to me, as I discovered that these “puppets” were innocent and neutral and therefore capable of telling the truth in a way that most actors couldn’t. They seemed a perfect match for documentary material, whether it was historical, scientific, medical or breaking news. The puppets in effect determined the texts, which were, not surprisingly, fragments of information, stitched together in a montage. Brecht's ideas about performing, or at least what I understood about them, were very interesting to me at this time.

It was during the 1980's that I first met other artists in New York who were working with puppets. Europe has always had a dynamic experimental approach to contemporary puppetry, but in the U.S., there wasn't yet a visible experimental movement of contemporary puppet theater. Mabou Mines, with *Shaggy Dog Animation,* Hanne Tierney with her string abstractions, Paul Zaloom, by way of Bread and Puppet Theater, with hundreds of everyday found objects, Robert Anton, Roman Paska, and Janie Geiser were part of the New York scene.

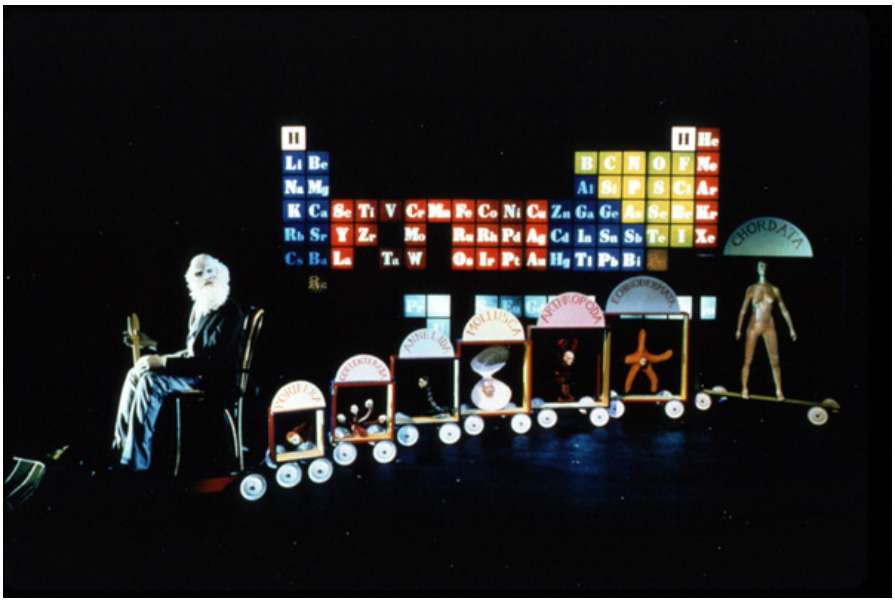
Some of us were knowledgable and trained in the craft and traditions of puppetry. Others, like myself, were discovering the complex world of puppetry for the first time. During this period, I was frequently traveling with my work to Europe, yet I was mostly presented in art galleries and experimental theater venues, so I did not encoounter a lot of puppetry. Neville Tranter's *Stuffed Puppet Theater* in Amsterdam was an exception, so was *Gioco Vita* in Italy.

This state of ignorance changed dramatically for me and many American artists a few years later. The Jim Henson family undertook to present a series of large-scale international puppet festivals from 1992 to 2000 that changed the landscape of puppetry in the U.S. As a result, during the 1990's puppetry experienced a golden age.

For a group of young and mid-career artists, this first festival and the subsequent ones would become practically a university course in the creative possibilities of making great theater with puppets and performing objects. One night in September 1992, I remember feeling that the area around New York's Public Theater had been transformed into a magical neighborhood where crowds devoted to puppetry were sticking around to see everything and to talk late into the night.
The first Henson Festival took place at one theater (the Public Theater) and featured 17 companies from around the world. From 1994 to 1998, the Festival grew in the number of invited companies to 26, and took place in 11 venues. Some of the visiting companies that Cheryl Henson and her team brought to New York represented important global events. For example, in 1994, just months after Nelson Mandela had taken office and ended apartheid in South Africa, we were introduced to William Kentridge and the Handspring Puppet theatre presenting WOYZECK.

At that time, I used a variety of puppet styles: shadow puppets, miniature toy theatre puppets, rod puppets, giant inflatable figures. I was creating large-scale

works every year featuring dozens, even hundreds of figures. I created life-size representations of Charles Darwin, Marie Curie, and Thomas Edison. I often rendered these iconic "characters" in a critical and satiric manner, but probably, I was inspired by having seen an animatronic Abraham Lincoln stand up, deliver the Gettysburg Address and then sit down again on a visit to Disneyland as a child.



My plays explored such subjects as the history of genetics, the history of food and famine, the history of women in prison, and the history of medicine. The texts were documentary, rhythmically arranged into a tapestry of sound and image. My work with found text, a sort of bricolage, continued in this way for twenty years, until 1999 and then reappeared in 2014.

In 1992, I began a relationship with Ellen Stewart's La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, where I have presented over 20 works. The backstage entrance of the theater is two doors from my front door, making it convenient to load in a show that has dozens of giant puppet figures.

India And After

From 1999 to 2000, I spent several months in India on a Fulbright Fellowship. Straight away, I met one of the most well-known contemporary puppeteers, Dadi Pudumjee. Under his guidance, I traveled to different regions, and experienced

a wide variety of ancient performance forms, which challenged and thrilled me with their esthetic and sacred intensity. Some forms of dance, theater, and puppetry are 4,000 years old. These performance forms are marvels of storytelling techniques, often dramatizing segments of the ancient Indian epics the Ramayana, or Mahabharata. I have since returned to India several times for inspiration and have noticed major changes regarding the status of women in puppetry, both in terms of traditional puppet families, where the women are experimenting with new roles within the family, and among younger artists, such as Anurupa Roy and Choiti Ghosh, who are creating highly innovative works that travel abroad.

When I returned home to New York in 2000, I realized that I was keenly interested in storytelling for the first time. I decided to go back to my own roots and examine the dramatic literature of ancient Greece. It's ironic that spending time in India led to a focus on Greece.

When I began looking at the Greek texts, it was mostly odd fragments that interested me, often myths that were told in several ways.These fragments led themselves to being dramatized by a variety of puppet forms, which were usually accompanied by film/video projections. Text was less significant than imagery, and music. Composers have always been critical contributors to my plays and they became more so during this period: Arnold Dreyblatt, Yukio Tsuji, and especially Sxip Shirey are some of those composers. My longtime dramaturg Andrea Balis has worked closely with me on most of my plays, as has Jane Catherine Shaw, a master puppeeteer and technical designer.

The Greek Plays

In 2004, I was commissioned by Ten Thousand Things, a remarkable company in Minneapolis that takes theater to local prisons and homeless shelters. The theater seeks out first-rate professional actors, uses no sets or lights, and brings plays directly into these institutions . I was asked to choose a classic play, (something I had never done). After some thought, I selected Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. For this project, I decided to create a new kind of puppet, a life size one-person puppet inspired by the Otome Bunraku Theater in Japan. Otome-bunraku is a style of performance in which a Bunraku-style puppet is manipulated by only one woman, rather than three men. The origin of Otome-Bunraku goes back to the doll performances played by young women in the early 1920s in Osaka. Traditional Bunraku, with its three performers was on the decline during this period, so a one-performer version with women was developed, both as a cost-cutting measure as well as a strategy to build up audiences. Most of the puppets were lost during WW2, and only a few women have inherited this traditional performance style. In 2000, I had seen an Otome Bunraku performance in New York's Japan Society as part of one of the Henson International Puppetry Festivals. I fell in love with this style of puppet, but little did I know that it would engage me for several years.

In traditional *bunraku* three puppeteers take hold of various parts of a puppet and share the weight, whereas in *otome bunraku*, a puppet is connected to a performer at four points of the body and a puppeteer carries the weight of the puppet as one would a child.. I worked closely with a Minneapolis artist Cecilia Schiller to realize a technical modification of this kind of puppet. This proved successful, with the connection points being at the head, the shoulder, the waist, and the arms. Additionally, some of the figures had attachments to connect the legs, but often these connecting points didn't work as well. The actor/puppeteer would be the voice of the character, not unlike the masked actor in ancient Greek plays.

I became fascinated with the Greek plays, particularly with the plays of Euripides, in connection with these new puppets. From that point on, I needed to work with actors who could speak these ancient texts as well as move with the life-size puppets. The puppets offered a flexibility in terms of gender. and the physicality

as well as the voice of the performer could produce surprising character interpretations that were not bound by the conventions of typical gender casting.

Even though I have created 27 full-length works, only the most recent ones are inspired by actual plays. My most remarkable experience with writing came in 2009, when I was creating a performance based on Euripides' *Trojan Women*. I had found parallels between the four characters of Euripides: Helen, Hecuba, Andromache, and Cassandra, and four contemporary international activists,: two from Zimbabwe, one from Kenya, and one from Afghanistan. As I researched these contemporary women, I realized that their lives were more compelling, more heroic, more urgent, than those of the Trojan women, and I wondered how I could emphasize that. I came upon the idea of creating 4 giant thirteen-foot puppets who were the contemporary heroes. These giants had tent-like bodies that the life-size Greek/Trojan characters could use for their entrances and exits. By making the four contemporary activists gigantic, I had automatically given their voices importance and power. They became the lens through which to understand Euripides' women. I had discovered the use of scale as a playwriting tool.

Performing Objects: Chairs, etc.

In 2014, I stopped adapting Greek plays and moved on to examining absurdist plays, perhaps because I had always been interested in Dada, and Surrealism, which are the roots of absurdism. I was especially drawn to Ionesco's *The Chairs*. Ionesco rejects a conventional story line, and depicts a world with mechanical, puppet-like characters who speak in non-sequiturs. Objects gain a life of their own, increasingly overwhelming the characters and creating a sense of menace. It seems a perfect play for the exploration of puppetry. Ionesco wrote that the subject of *The Chairs* was the furniture itself, "the metaphysical emptiness," nothingness "made concrete," as Ionesco expressed it in a letter to film director Sylvain Dhomme.

My adaptation of the play became more of a *response* to Ionesco, or actually a *demolition* of his play. I did away with almost all of the text and reduced the elderly couple to a 10 ft old woman. I created 26 unique performing object chairs, and instead of making the characters invisible, as Ionesco does, I gave each chair the story of a real life person, either someone that I had interviewed personally or read about. Judith Malina, a founder of the Living Theater, was the voice of the Old Woman. A female singer/musician, Alice Tolan-Mee, performed live music throughout the play. Three puppeteers brought the various chairs to life. When each chair "told" its story, two red ropes descended and pulled the chair up into the air. When the performance ended, there were 26 chairs suspended in the air, with 52 ropes, forming a special kind of universe. Some of the "chair-actors" were famous, such as Malala Yousafzai, Stephen Hawking, and Nelson Mandela, while others were ordinary people.

In 2015, I focused on Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author.* This multi-media work looked at the mystery of artistic creation, and challenged Pirandello's quest for identity as well as his definition of family. Once again, I set aside most of the play, and found contemporary connections to Pirandello's profoundly moving idea of a character yearning to be born through an author. I explored many visual styles in this piece, including puppets that had glowing heads with internal video projections, 3 giant Pinocchios who were fighting each other for survival, and video footage from the first reality TV show, *An American Family*.

Summer 2017

There has been a sense of urgency among artists since the election last November. For many artists, resistance means joining groups and going into the streets regularly. Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater, Sandy Spieler's Heart of the Beast, Great Small Works, and other groups have always been aware of the powerful potential of puppetry as a form of protest. I have always been interested in scale, and now more than ever I am exploring what that means in the streets.

Recent Reflections

This past year, two things happened:

First, I was struggling to express the stories of some of the men and women killed by police violence in the US. Pressing national dialogue has been sparked by citizens videotaping incidents and the release of police videos in the media and online.

Second, I took a bookmaking class. Within a couple of weeks, something clicked. I started making what I call “performing books,” objects (often of nontraditional materials) that unfold in time. I am at the edge of a major new phase of work, in which the actor/manipulator narrates the story while opening a 3-D animated book.

My most recent play, *There’s Blood at the Wedding*, uses six giant pop-up–book constructions, which offer reflections on the lives and deaths of six American victims of police violence: Sandra Bland, Sean Bell, Philando Castile, Justine Damond, Amadou Diallo, and Eric Garner. Sxip Shirey composes and performs original songs and music. Fragments of Lorca’s masterpiece connect a Circle of Mothers—the mothers of the American victims—with the grieving mothers of the classic Spanish play. I have made a transition into new territory, with new objects and new potential.

As I look back on the arc of my practice, I see a thread that begins with my own female body and connects to handmade objects, which develops into the use of surrogate bodies (puppets) to tell large-scale stories. My work was made possible by major cultural shifts that had lasting effects across several disciplines. The most important of these was second-wave feminism.

When I began studying theatre, rigid hierarchies were in place. The director, usually a male, was the absolute authority, and the rest of the team was subordinate. I know this well, as I began my career as a costume designer. In the 1970s, this hierarchical structure was breaking down. Expressive forms, such as visual art, theatre, music, and film, were expanding and blurring the borders between themselves. The focus on innovation, new approaches, and new materials shed a light on the possibilities of using performing objects and puppetry in radical ways. In this period of productive upheaval, women acquired power as creative makers. These women inspired and made space for younger female artists to imagine new territories for puppetry. This movement was also strengthened by the women who had been working all along inside the traditions of puppetry, often in the context of a family troupe. Because puppetry has become very popular among contemporary artists, radical interpretations exist alongside the traditional ones, and both strands are benefitting from this cross-fertilization.