

Puppet Theater in the German-Speaking World

by

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## ABSTRACT

This work begins with a brief history of puppet theater in Germany. A look at important social aspects, pertinent philosophical discussions and the significance of puppet theater in the German literary tradition follow. The final chapter looks at Peter Schumann, a German puppeteer and artist who lives in America. In *Germanistik*, German puppet theater deserves a devoted place in the field of legitimate study in terms of its history, content and influence.

Puppet theater's historical development in Germany represents the larger evolution of Germany. From ancient times up to the present day, this artistic form of representation has enjoyed an audience in the German-speaking regions. The evolution of puppet theater parallels Germany's quest for legitimacy as a nation and desire for cultural unification.

A study of puppet theater thematizes the issue of popular cultural history. For most of its existence in Germany, puppet theater served as popular entertainment. The conception of folk art and folklore – which includes puppet theater – by the German Romantics led them to believe that folk artists possessed a mysterious authenticity inaccessible to Classicists and their narrowly-defined world of high art. Much German literature and thought from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward shows a fondness for the *Volk* aspect of puppet theater. Puppet theater and its reception in German Romanticism helped to shape literary and philosophical themes that would lead to further recognition of puppetry as an art form and an integral aspect of German culture.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, puppet theater took on bold new forms. Adapting to film, television, academia and the avant-garde, respected proponents of puppet theater brought the art form into the light of day. No longer did it merely consist of vulgar or mildly artistic street performances or as a vehicle for Romantic-era nostalgia. German puppet theater in the 20<sup>th</sup> century moved into the realm of mass culture with film and, more effectively, with television. It also gained footing in academia, eventually becoming a fully-recognized field of study as well as a performance medium with infinite possibilities.

One can only hazard a guess as to where puppet theater will go in the future. The ability of the art form to uncannily reflect the human condition is well known. How the human condition will change and how the performers of puppet theater will respond remains to be seen.

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## INTRODUCTION

Beginning with a brief history of puppet theater in the German regions from the Early Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the focus of this work is puppet theater as it relates to specific areas of research including social aspects, philosophical implications and literary influence. The final chapter explores the work of Peter Schumann, a German puppeteer and artist residing in America. Schumann's use of the *Verfremdungseffekt* in his 'live puppetry' performances brings the theories of Bertolt Brecht into the discussion. Finally, the text argues that German puppet theater deserves more than a cursory mention in the field of *Germanistik*. While puppet theater or *Figurentheater* enjoys a higher level of prestige in German academic institutions, today, America largely does not share a correspondingly high regard for the representative art form.

The historical development of puppet theater in the German regions is representative of the larger evolution of Germany as a whole. From the first millennium B.C., when puppet theater first crossed the Alps, to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the representational art form has found an audience within the cultural and linguistic borders of Germany. While neither the puppet nor its theater are German inventions or even European ones, their historical path takes them through the land of *Dichter und Denker*. The people there received it, both with open arms and hostility, depending on the socio-political climate. The German-speaking regions provide the perfect backdrop for an in-depth look at the social and economic evolution of puppet theater. A sequence of historical events transformed puppet theater from a fragmented collection of isolated troupes into an

institutionalized cultural force. Similarly, the German-speaking regions existed for centuries without a central identity before settling on a common cultural denominator. By the time of the *Gründerjahre*, Germany had finally become a modern nation state. From the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the founding of Germany in 1871, puppet theater gradually became part of the cultural heritage. A performance medium continually seeking acceptance and a lasting identity, the evolution of puppet theater paralleled Germany's long quest for legitimacy as a nation and desire for cultural unification.

A study of puppet theater also thematizes the issues of popular culture and cultural history. From Roman colonial times in the first century A.D. until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was no legitimate notion of popular culture amongst Germans. The notion that the poor had a culture of their own grew out of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanticism and led to the distinction, particularly strong in Germany, between low and high culture. For centuries, puppet theater served as a broad-reaching form of popular entertainment, intended largely for the common people. With this cultural reaction came the need to reexamine the definition of art and to exclude nothing, especially those forms previously deemed low and uncouth.<sup>1</sup> Writers, thinkers, poets and artists helped to craft a new concept of 'the people' or *Volk* that celebrated their traditional forms of expression. The "discovery" of folk art, including puppet theater, by the German Romantics led them to a belief in the naturalness and authenticity of the people who carried on the tradition. This was diametrically opposed to the inauthentic contrivances of Neoclassicism. The movement of Romanticism arose in part as a counteracting force to rationalist

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<sup>1</sup> Fischer, 53

Enlightenment principles as well as the aristocratic ideals of Classicism. Ironically, the Romantics were, according to Ernst Fischer, the “...true children of the capitalist bourgeois world” (58). In elevating folk art to the level of *Kunst*, it became an institutional commodity. Despite their intentions, this development contradicted the views of most adherents to the movement.

Romantics argued that the unselfconsciousness, immediacy and spontaneity of so-called low or folk culture imbue it with a mysterious authenticity. Puppet theater was a lark, the type of popular entertainment that was good for a laugh and a welcome break from daily life. For puppeteers, traveling theater meant a meager livelihood. For the Romantics, however, puppet theater was attractive because of its immediateness and its lack of a deliberate notion of its own cultural significance. Considered to be a homogenous form of folk art, puppet theater was, for them, entirely organic. Important German literature and philosophy from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward reflects a cultural fondness for the *Volk* aspect of puppet theater. Writers, thinkers and artists including Goethe, Theodor Storm, Heinrich von Kleist and E.T.A. Hoffmann experienced and/or produced puppet theater of their own, and it influenced some of their seminal works. Puppet theater and its reception in German Romanticism helped to shape literary and philosophical themes that would lead to further recognition of puppetry as an art form and an integral aspect of German culture.

Finally, this entire work concludes that puppetry and its study opens a wide horizon of diverse historical and literary perspectives. In essence, puppet theater deserves more recognition for its importance in all of its forms. It is a valid field of cultural and



literary studies that can yield valuable insights into the currents of German history as well as the lives, work and interests of many of Germany's cultural luminaries.

## A DEFENSE OF PUPPET THEATER

From ancient times through the Roman Empire, puppets have existed in nearly every cultural context. One finds evidence of puppets on all inhabited continents. For as long as human beings have sought self representation they have utilized the puppet to do so, in the West from the time of the Athenian democracy and in the East from the Chinese Han dynasty, approximately 200 B.C. onward. T.C.H. Hedderwick argues that the doll is “one of the oldest monuments of human ingenuity we possess” (Hedderwick xi).

Puppetry likely began as one aspect of a performer’s repertoire, but exactly “how and when the puppet-play came to Germany we do not know; perhaps...the introduction of this art was due to the jugglers who followed the Roman legions over the Alps” (Boehn 50). After the fall of Rome and its centralized society, puppet theater lacked the support of the social infrastructure of cities and marketplaces in which to find an audience.

In the Early Middle Ages, puppetry survived as a traveling attraction, a crude nomadic art form. A fixed livelihood was not possible for puppeteers or any other performer.<sup>2</sup> Their performances were not splendid, nor were they recognized at the time for their potential for high art: “Considering the miserable conditions of the wandering entertainers whose bread and butter depended on these shows, we may well assume that all the stage arrangements were as primitive as could be” (Boehn 52). A resurgence of puppet theater began around 800 A.D. with newly-granted tolerance by the theocratic empire. Early Christians had abhorred the vestiges of pre-Christian art and visual

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<sup>2</sup> Currell, 8

expression of which they considered puppetry a part. Before the ascension of Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans in the beginning of the ninth century, western Europe was a collection of warring factions – a situation not conducive to the nurturing of the arts. By uniting a large part of the continent, Charlemagne helped begin the process of centralization and urbanization anew while encouraging the “visual representations of religious and secular themes” (Jurkowski 53). This reflected the changing aesthetic attitudes of the day. From that time onward, Western Europe gradually became reintroduced to the puppet as both a court novelty and a wandering attraction found among the likes of singers, poets, musicians, mimes, jugglers and other skilled entertainers. Puppetry as a specific artistic skill or even a profession was not yet defined in the Early Middle Ages, and those early performers almost certainly did not enjoy a high status.<sup>3</sup>

During the High Middle Ages, puppets were a means of visual representation primarily religious in nature. With the gradual rise of towns and cities in the High Middle Ages circa 1200 A.D., puppetry ascended into the realm of culture. Stories of heroism were popular, as were morality plays. *Meister Hämmerlein* was an ugly character who delivered moral justice “to all his adversaries by means of hammer blows” (Jurkowski 62). This puppet archetype preceded a familiar Baroque character epitomized by Italy’s Pulcinella. While puppetry had some status in society, “puppetry as such belonged to the lower forms of entertainment” (Jurkowski 93). Court performers of all types jealously guarded their positions and sought to differentiate themselves from wandering

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<sup>3</sup> Jurkowski, 53-4

performers. The term puppeteer was not yet in use. Lumped in with lowly-regarded performers, the German names *Spielman* and *Fahrende Leute*, meaning vagrant folk, were common.<sup>4</sup> Puppet theater was indeed extremely popular among the common public, but its position outside the status quo kept puppeteers poor and branded as vagabonds. In the period of the High Middle Ages, puppet theater gradually moved away from exclusively religious themes and adopted instead a more secular approach to entertainment. This evolution foreshadowed developments in puppet theater during the Renaissance and Baroque eras.

In Absolutist Germany, puppeteers often had difficulty moving between regions owing to the vast number of sovereign German states. If puppeteers wanted to venture forth to find new audiences or to perform outside the influence of their town, they had to “...gain the protection of a Duke, Prince or Cardinal, the only route to success and safety” (Jurkowski 99). Considering the numerous duchies, fiefdoms, principalities and palatinates within Baroque Germany, it was no easy task for puppeteers to move freely among them. As soon as jurisdiction changed so too did the rules by which he must abide.<sup>5</sup> Puppeteers often had to request permission from the local authorities to present their shows, and only then under strict rules dictating performance times and content.<sup>6</sup> The hundreds of different jurisdictions comprising the German-speaking regions made

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<sup>4</sup> Jurkowski, 55

<sup>5</sup> Jurkowski, 161

<sup>6</sup> Jurkowski, 100 - Only ten kilometers away, the governing laws might be the complete opposite of the neighboring jurisdiction.

continual adaption and adherence to differing rules the standard of the day for traveling performers.

Towards the end of the Baroque era – a transitional period between feudalism and modernity – the Age of Enlightenment penetrated every facet of social and cultural life, puppet theater included. During this time, Kasperle – a self-determined, puppet representation of the urban everyman – replaced Hanswurst, a buffoonish characterization of the feudal peasant. Also at this time, the shadow puppet play, the use of automata and a new type of mechanical theater known as *Theatrum Mundi* became popular.<sup>7</sup> The Enlightenment encouraged a new perspective on the intellect, science, the arts and culture. With the rise of the urban middle class in the late Baroque period, puppeteers sought to distance themselves from the wandering performers with whom they were formerly categorized.

Although “the Age of Enlightenment promised respect for every human life, and freedom to seek self-fulfillment” (Jurkowski 246), it was not always so in practice. Citing the need for a popular German theater governed by reason, classicists actively sought to discredit wandering puppeteers by claiming they perpetuated old superstitions and demonstrated poor taste. The moralists agreed that puppet theater was too adulterated, considering it an impure form of expression. Together, opponents encouraged the censorship of puppet theater ostensibly “...to improve artistic standards” when really they “intended to get rid of shows which were improvised, and which might contain

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<sup>7</sup> Jurkowski, 175

indecent language and unwelcome comments on current problems” (Jurkowski 253). For example,

In Bavaria and Austria from the 1790s authorities attempted to ban puppet theater 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. (McCormick 3)

Under enlightened Absolutism during the late Baroque, authorities undermined the free, often unpredictable nature of puppet theater. Considered subversive when outside of a controlled venue, puppeteers faced prohibitive measures that effectively forced them into the fringes of society. Once marginalized, the authorities could more easily justify the hard line they took. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, puppet theater changed in terms of the nature of the characterizations and popular performances. Despite the slow movement towards the democratization of politics, information and culture, puppet theater still faced many of the same prohibitions. What differed was now the authorities based their censorship on reason rather than divine right.

The late Baroque was not bad for all puppeteers. By the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, dedicated puppet theater began to be a fixture of Baroque court entertainment – most notably in Austria under the patronage of Nikolaus Esterházy. Known as a generous benefactor who greatly enjoyed music, the Hungarian prince frequently attended marionette operettas produced and composed by Franz Joseph Haydn, the prince’s *Kapellmeister*. Haydn’s “interest in puppetry was born much earlier, at least from the period when he was visiting England and saw English puppets” (Jurkowski 131). Some of the puppet operettas he produced included *Der krumme Teufel* and *Dido*, a parody of

the Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*.<sup>8</sup> Esterházy and his courtesans delighted in the prince's puppet theater, as did the Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa, who invited his performers to her palace at Schönbrunn. Her enjoyment of courtly puppet theater notwithstanding, Maria Theresa issued restrictions limiting improvised puppet performances.<sup>9</sup> In Prussia, too, limitations were placed on performers. During the Baroque period, puppet theater became important in terms of aristocratic patronage. Under Absolutism, those performers who gained an aristocratic audience found easy passage between different German regions as well as more freedom to perform locally. A performance at court gave legitimacy to a puppeteer that translated practically into more freedom of movement between jurisdictions.

In the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a burgeoning concept of folk culture began to arise, and puppet theater, perhaps as much as the *Märchen*, embodied the conception of *Volkskultur*.<sup>10</sup> The period of Romanticism proved a boon for puppet theater in the German-speaking world. The Romantic theorists helped to rekindle interest in puppet theater and other folk art, a medium largely invented in the minds of the Romantics themselves. The luminaries of the day such as Goethe and Mozart took an active interest in puppet theater. The age gave birth to the notion that commoners and the poor had a valid culture all their own. *Volkskultur* was often contrasted with the pursuits of the Neoclassicists and the scientifically-minded elite. The Romantic movement inspired at

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<sup>8</sup> Jurkowski, 131

<sup>9</sup> Jurkowski, 161

<sup>10</sup> Jurkowski, 246

least a topical adoration of puppet showmen and their ilk. Puppet theater became popular with German Romantics precisely because it was socially and economically outside the status quo or existing structures of power.

German puppet theater in the 19<sup>th</sup> century benefitted from the interest of the Romantics. Puppet theater epitomized the conception of folk culture which arose at this time. Most of the puppeteers themselves, like the majority of the population, experienced the disillusion resulting from the failure of the Enlightenment to truly usher in an era of change. This disillusion fed the subjectivism of the Romantics and led many of them to turn away from the present and seek truth and authenticity in the past. There are few biographies of German-speaking puppet showmen before the 19<sup>th</sup> century since most puppeteers did not have the means or inclination to leave records. Two puppeteers, however, defied obscurity. Georg Geisselbrecht (b. 1762 – d. 1826) won acclaim all over the German-speaking world during the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with his marionette shows. Various traditions have Geisselbrecht born in Vienna, Switzerland and Hanau, Germany. In addition to the masses of popular viewers of puppet theater, luminaries such as Goethe knew of Geisselbrecht. He would later be immortalized by Theodor Storm in his novella *Paul the Puppeteer*.<sup>11</sup> In Bavaria, the puppeteer Josef “Papa” Schmidt transformed a donated theater into a performance space for puppets. From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until his death in 1912, Schmidt was beloved by people of all ages, and his theater was a cultural icon.<sup>12</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, puppet theater became,

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<sup>11</sup> Boehn, 79

<sup>12</sup> Boehn, 88-9



conceptually speaking, characteristic of the authenticity and mystery of the Medieval past explored by the Romantics. Few puppeteers, however, achieved the success of Geisselbrecht and Schmidt. The major advancement of puppet theater was in the recognition it received as a legitimate if less appreciated form of expression.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, puppet theater became respectable. The newly-created mediums of television and film brought many opportunities for puppet theater. Eventually, the academic world welcomed puppetry into the realm of scholarship. This development helped thrust certain modes of puppet theater into the world of high art. In 1905, director and puppeteer Paul Brann (b. 1873 – d. 1955) founded the Munich Artists Marionette Theater. Brann considered the puppet to have an intellect separate from its manipulator. This attitude gave the performance a certain measure of improvisation.<sup>13</sup> During the Weimar Republic, the shadow puppet artist Lotte Reininger helped to create *Die Geschichte vom Prinz Achmed*. This stop-motion film featured a minimum of 100,000 photographs of shadow scenes devised by Reininger. This project was innovative not only in that it utilized the relatively new medium of film, but that a woman was the driving force.

In the period of National Socialism, most puppet theater found difficulty in finding performing venues. Considering the complete ideological transformation of German culture during the Third Reich, it is reasonable to suppose that any puppet theater sanctioned by the government towed the party line. In 1933, Max Jacob (b. 1888 – d. 1967), founder of the *Hohnsteiner Puppentheater* in the 1920s, had to leave the castle

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<sup>13</sup> Boehn, 157

Hohnstein where his ensemble performed in order to make room for a concentration camp. In occupied Paris, his troupe later performed for German soldiers. After World War II, Albrecht Roser of Stuttgart emerged in the 1950s with his famous marionette, Clown Gustaf. *Die Augsburger Puppenkiste* also became famous in the 1950s with its television programs for children. In 1983, Roser helped establish the *Figurentheaterschule* as a department of the *Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst* in Stuttgart. In East Germany after 1949, the state generously supported puppet theater. At its height, over a hundred private puppeteering troupes enjoyed state-sponsored legitimacy. Finally, there is Peter Schumann, a Silesian-born resident of Vermont and founder of the *Bread and Puppet Theater*. Stefan Brecht names Schumann as one of the great American puppetry success stories – Jim Henson being the other. An entire chapter on Schumann completes this work. German puppet theater in the 20<sup>th</sup> century made great strides in film, television, academia and in the avant-garde.

As a reflection and representation of German culture, puppet theater is a legitimate field of scholarly and literary study. From its infancy to its maturation, the travails of puppet theater mirrored those of Germany as a whole. It was both entertainment for the masses and fodder for the philosophically-minded who saw in it a deeper significance and useful allegory for the human condition. It is undeniable that the age-old puppet theater left its impression on the young minds of many of Germany's literary masters. Great works of German literature such as Goethe's *Faust* and Theodor Storm's *Paul the Puppeteer* took inspiration from puppet theater. Ultimately, it was the artists who told the stories, yet the influence of puppet theater is apparent. For these

reasons, the field of *Germanistik* is arguably incomplete without the inclusion of puppet theater and its many implications in German history.

## SOCIOLOGICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY IMPORTANCE OF PUPPET THEATER IN THE GERMAN-SPEAKING WORLD

The long and complicated history of puppets and *Puppentheater* in Germany clearly deserves more scholarly attention. The scholarly literature in the field today reflects three different yet complementary areas of research including the social, philosophical and literary. Each approach uses different theoretical tools and gleans new insights into the role of puppet theater in German history.

Given the public nature of puppet theater, its inherent social aspects are unmistakable. Evolving from disparate, unorganized individuals or troupes that wandered the land scraping together a livelihood into localized theaters was only possible as population centers grew and the social fabric became more complex. At once visual and literary, puppet theater combined language and histrionics in a unique way that rivaled the actors' theater. At the same time, puppet theater perturbed the authorities with its spontaneity and penchant for irreverence. Its social nature combined with its philosophical and literary implications helped to eventually transform German puppet theater into a cultural staple.

Scholarly literature on puppet theater is almost entirely from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Helen Joseph's 1920 publication entitled *A Book of Marionettes* provides a detailed if uncontroversial look at the puppet plays of Germany. More of a digest than an in-depth analysis, Joseph's work nonetheless represents an early attempt to bring puppet theater into the field of serious scholarly discussion. Henryk Jurkowski's *A History of European*

*Puppetry* from 1996 delves far deeper into the subject matter. While Jurkowski does not focus entirely on the art form in Germany, he explores puppet theater in successive historical contexts from its introduction into the Germanic regions through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jurkowski's work looks at puppet theater from many angles – from the social, religious and political aspects that shaped it to its longstanding cultural significance. Another valuable source is John McCormick's *Popular Puppet Theater in Europe, 1800-1914*, a work that not only focuses on a specific time period, but also narrows its scope to the sociological and economic conditions of puppet performers and their audiences. In addition to the scholarly works, Heinrich von Kleist's essay *On the Marionette Theater* and Theodor Storm's *Paul the Puppeteer* from 1874 serve to illustrate the use of puppet theater within famous German literary works.

An examination of puppet theater from a sociological perspective and a look into the impact of puppetry on German philosophy and literature leads to a discussion of modern puppetry and to Peter Schumann, a Vermont-based artist of German origin. Stefan Brecht's *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater* is a massive biography of this extant artist. Stefan Brecht credits Schumann with being one of the few contemporary artists to fully grasp and utilize the theatrical vision of his father, Bertolt Brecht.

## SOCIOLOGICAL EVOLUTION OF PUPPET THEATER

Mirroring the evolution of the Germanic world into present-day Germany, puppet theater likely started out as a component of the light entertainment repertoire of buffoons, acrobats, jugglers and other ancient showmen. After the decline of the Roman Empire in the late fourth and early fifth centuries until the Carolingian Renaissance that began during the ninth century, puppetry, like all figurative representation, was distrusted if not condemned outright by the church. It "...seems reasonable enough to assume that the tradition of puppet theater was kept alive through the Early Middle Ages by wandering entertainers" (Currell 8). Puppeteers, like mimes, poets, musicians and singers, were artists before such a conception existed. In the social reality of their day they were merely poor wanderers in search of a livelihood. During the 1000-plus years following the collapse of Rome Germans were geographically, politically and linguistically divided as well as culturally divergent. While the experience of puppet theater and its performers may have reflected these divisions, it is arguable that their traveling shows actually represented an early model of cultural unity among Germans. By the time of the first publication of *The History of Doctor Faustus* in 1587 – a wildly popular *Puppentheaterstück* – puppet theater in the German-speaking world had developed to a point that brought it closer to cultural recognition, but even that was epistemically impossible given the absence of a conception of culture at the time. In its early stages in the German-speaking world, puppetry was merely a component of wandering shows, not a discipline or art form in itself.

The Protestant Reformation brought about a social change for puppet theater. Around the beginning in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, there arose a conflict between the clergy and live actors. The antagonism of the church presented great opportunities for puppet theater. Given the iconoclasm of the Protestant authority, their anti-actor stance propelled puppetry into favor with the common people who found themselves with no other entertainment outlet. For the new Protestant churches, the portrayal of religious themes by live actors offended the clergy. Martin Luther even went so far as to ban dramatic theatrical performances in church, putting the actors out of work.<sup>14</sup> The prohibition of dramatic representation had far-reaching consequences for puppet theater. The Protestant church unwittingly gave center stage to a form of representation far more irreverent than the live theater could ever be. Thanks to Luther's decree, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century the puppet theater became more popular than the live theater. Joseph explains how Luther's judgment forced actors to become readers for puppet plays:

Consequently the [actors' theater] fell into such disrepute that the number of regular theaters rapidly decreased and troupes were disbanded, while the humiliated and neglected players were forced to join puppet companies and read for the marionettes to earn a living. (Joseph 123)

This reversal of fortune was a direct result of the decision of the Protestant authorities to ban actors from performing in churches. Whether intended or not, it benefitted puppeteers tremendously. The decline of live theater following the Protestant Reformation in Germany created a vacuum. Puppeteers along with their marionettes and other *Puppen* quickly filled the void created by the Protestants. Luther and his followers' reforms

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph, 123 – Incidentally, it was Charlemagne who, over 700 years earlier encouraged the very same dramatic portrayal of religious themes.

helped to raise puppet theater to prominence. By stifling the ability of live actors to perform, the Protestants accidentally raised the social respectability of puppeteers and their shows.

By the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “the undisputed predominance of puppets upon the German stage gradually subsided...as..[t]he actors assumed their own place in the theater [and] the Puppet returned to a more modest sphere. But they continued to be popular” (Joseph 126). Without the censorship of the Protestant church which inadvertently favored puppet theater, puppetry may have never experienced such popularity during the preceding century.

The marketplace and fairgrounds were the natural locales for the puppet theater as performers easily found an audience. However, performers often had to have approval from the authorities. According to Jurkowski, “[w]hen permission was awarded to a player, the municipality imposed severe terms, threatening punishment and the withdrawal of the license if any of these were disregarded” (100). Police in some localities had the right to censor puppeteers’ script or prevent them from performing at all. The attempts of civic authorities to control artistic production were as blatant with puppet theater as with any other popular form of expression. Under extreme circumstances, mistrust of puppeteers was especially high. In Saxony in 1793, for instance, the Elector, responding to the fallout from the French Revolution, issued a ban on all puppet shows.<sup>15</sup> Being that each locality possessed its own set of rules and standards to impose on traveling performers, acceptance was hard to gain for those

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<sup>15</sup> McCormick, 27



puppeteers whose livelihood depended on moving from town to town. Despite the ever-present threat of closure or arrest, puppeteers presented the darkest taboos or the most ridiculing satire on the stage. In Cologne, "...any person in the vicinity who had made himself unpopular was sure to be caricatured. Neither rank nor age was a protection" (Joseph 128). The ability of puppet theater to instantly incorporate recent events of the day into their shows undoubtedly increased its popularity – much to the chagrin of the authorities. The farcical puppet Hanswurst (later Kasperle) mocked anything he desired with impunity, much to the delight of the audience "...who thronged into the show, which [could be, depending on the audience] as vulgar as possible" (Joseph 128). Later, in Prussia, the severity of the licensing authorities extended to direct censorship of the texts –

...the decree issued by Friedrich Wilhelm III, the...king, [gave] police the right to impose censorship. Each puppet player, from 1809, was obliged to present the text of his show to the local police station to get it accepted. This decree caused endless trouble for the players who were normally illiterate and whose texts had never been written down. (Jurkowski 253)

The average puppeteer barely made a living and left few traces of his existence while living on the fringe of society. Others took great measures to separate themselves from the rabble. Some performers considered themselves cultural heralds in addition to being entertainers. In their dress, their mannerisms and their correct dialect, they espoused and embodied the values of the bourgeoisie. In addition to appearing respectable, these pretenses were made to distance themselves from vulgar performers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> McCormick, 23

Thanks to elite patronage, select puppeteers were able to avoid the difficulties in obtaining a license to perform publicly.<sup>17</sup> Despite the low economic status of most performers, some were able to transcend social divisions and find an audience among more refined members of society, and with it a better living.

The rivalry between actors and puppets arose again at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and on this occasion it involved none other than Goethe himself. In 1804, as director of the court theater at Weimar, Goethe was overseer when Johann Falk, a Romantic-era writer of puppet plays, had granted permission to Georg Geisselbrecht to perform his play, *Die Prinzessin mit dem Schweinerüssel*. Falk wrote for Hanswurst a closing soliloquy mocking the court actors' more contemptible qualities, especially their pride, vanity and shameless behavior. The actors demanded that Goethe ban the puppet play, a move he resisted but ultimately undertook. In an account that has taken on legendary status, Goethe attempted to soothe the actors' wounded pride by recalling that the theater had long possessed satirical elements and that the ability to laugh at oneself is a greater attribute than conceit.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, Goethe supported the ban, but only begrudgingly. As he indicated in his memoirs, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, "[puppet theater] made an especially strong impression on [me], which lingered and became a great, lasting influence" (Goethe 24). As for Geisselbrecht, "[t]he Weimar episode helped [him] to an even higher level of popularity" (Jurkowski 259). This story serves to illustrate two things. First, there was a very real feud between puppet performers and actors. Second, it

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<sup>17</sup> Jurkowski, 253

<sup>18</sup> Jurkowski, 259

indicates that puppet theater was held in a higher regard than other forms of dramatic entertainment precisely because satire and farcicality were intrinsic parts of every performance.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, puppet theater in the German-speaking world had experienced both prominence and ill-repute. Critics at this time dismissed puppet theater as low culture, as *Theater der Armen*.<sup>19</sup> In 1800 most players were still poor subsistence performers. They continued to attract unfavorable attention from the authorities who felt that public performances disturbed the peace and kept their workers up late hours thereby inhibiting the next day's work.<sup>20</sup> The power of the police to censor performances was ostensibly geared to eliminate vulgarity, but this was often only a pretext for the censorship of subversive political content. The criminalization of puppeteers was not uncommon either, but "in practice, the worst 'crime' of most puppeteers was their economic status" (McCormick 21). Grouping puppeteers together with gypsies, vagabonds, beggars, and thieves, the police had ample excuse to enforce their punitive measures, for, as Jurkowski notes, "the police seem to have been the guardians of various interests of the middle class" (254). Historically, the German-speaking regions were politically and culturally fragmented. German puppet theater experienced the effects of this fragmentation throughout its own tumultuous history.

Puppet theater in Germany gradually evolved from an indistinct component of a performer's repertoire into its own artistic discipline. At the low end of the socio-

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<sup>19</sup> McCormick, 9

<sup>20</sup> Jurkowski, 254

economic order, puppeteers had constant difficulties dealing with religious and governmental authorities. Still, puppet theater was always popular among the people as well as within select intellectual circles. Despite the censorship they faced, puppeteers managed both to entertain and help to maintain a sense of cultural unity among the very diverse German population.

#### PUPPETRY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL METAPHOR

The comparison of human beings to puppets occurs throughout Western philosophy, practically from the beginning. Puppets thematized the question of free will. There is hardly a better artifice to illustrate the control under which humankind labors than the marionette, a lifeless doll attached to strings, brought to life and action only through the manipulation of an omnipotent being. The use of the puppet as a symbol to represent the actions and motivations of the human being begins with Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. Plato alludes to the existence of sublime forms, comparing what humans can perceive to shadows cast upon a wall, the true form of which they cannot know. In the dialogue, objects of various shapes and sizes – animals, men, etc. – are held before a fire thereby creating the shadows humans see. At the same time, while representing objects of human perception, the shadow puppets of Plato's allegory stand behind the shackled onlookers. Backlit by the fire of sublime truth, puppets are closer to it, while those who carry the wood and stone figures move like concealed puppeteers behind a curtain. They

are privy to the deceit that fools the onlookers but participate in it willingly. In terms of representation, the objects – the puppets – are not the true forms either, making the shadows representations of things which are themselves only representations. Scott Shershow, in his *Puppets and “Popular” Culture* takes this idea further:

For Plato the puppet serves as a secondary metaphor within a philosophical parable, but that metaphor itself depends on the puppet’s material existence as an iconic (and performing) object: an artifact of stone or wood embodied or invested with a particular histrionic identity. Thus, the puppet, a “figure” in both senses, becomes a peculiarly clear paradigm of all representations – which are, in Plato’s famous formulation, mere copies of a copy, at “three removes” from truth. (15)

Shershow philosophically examines the definition of the puppet and its theater as belonging to low or popular culture within the discourse of categorization. “...Plato’s hierarchy of representation finally corresponds to the assigned lowness of puppet theater within a hierarchy of cultural and social distinction” (15). Plato’s negative use of puppets illustrates the marginalization of puppetry as an experience of lesser worth than the legitimate stage.<sup>21</sup> Describing the philosophical significance of puppets and puppetry was not the aim of Plato’s allegory, but their inclusion in his dialogue bespeaks an underlying importance not yet realized at the time.

In the German tradition, Arthur Schopenhauer cites a similar comparison of puppets in his work *The World as Will and Idea*, likening man to a puppet compelled to act not through an outside force, but by the motion of an “internal clockwork”, what the writer sees as the manifestation of the will-to-live.<sup>22</sup> In keeping with the metaphor, expert

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<sup>21</sup> Shershow, 6

<sup>22</sup> Schopenhauer, 114

manipulation of a marionette does not require the puppeteer to control every last movement; rather, he must only manipulate it in such a way as to allow the puppet's own character and motion to come into being, its will to live. According to Schopenhauer, the string-puller – the will – is a tyrant. A man "...is such and such a man, because once [and] for all it is his will to be that man" (Schopenhauer, *On Human Nature* 57). The will allows man to entertain the illusion of personal freedom while actually being a predetermined puppet. Humans have just enough spontaneous movement to justify their illusion of free will. Unbeknownst to them, though, in reality they are controlled by the puppet master that is their will.

Heinrich von Kleist's famous essay from 1810, *Über das Marionettentheater*, influenced the use of the puppet as a philosophical motif as well as the art of puppetry itself in the German-speaking world.<sup>23</sup> Kleist strongly influenced both the theory and the practice of drama in Europe.<sup>24</sup> On one level, Kleist's essay is a philosophy of grace, with the marionette – as opposed to the actor – being the truest representative of that attribute. The puppet, argues Kleist, never loses its center of gravity and is "not afflicted with the inertia of matter". The human, on the other hand, too often finds his soul "located...in his elbow". Boehn argues that the essay is, in actuality, not about the puppet theater at all, but rather a veiled criticism of the Berlin actors and dancers of his day.<sup>25</sup> The story, in a sense, foreshadows Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch* in that it hints at the need

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<sup>23</sup> Jurkowski, 264

<sup>24</sup> Shershow, 184

<sup>25</sup> Boehn, 78-9

to overcome one's own self consciousness in order to achieve a purer state of consciousness. Regardless of the interpretation, Kleist's piece serves as an example of the use of the puppet as a philosophical motif. Kleist argues that a puppet is an empty vessel, yet it is the will of the puppeteer that infuses the otherwise lifeless object with a particular spirit. Kleist's essay persists as one of the most lucid examples of the puppet as a vehicle for the expression of something more significant than what a doll attached to strings immediately presents. Despite its subtle message, *Über das Marionettentheater* became a literary staple, especially among the Romantic poets and intellectuals of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano who "believed that the puppet theaters had a connexion [sic] with the old mysteries" (Boehn 76).

In Kleist's essay, the narrator runs into an old friend, a man whom he has seen on separate occasions taking in a public marionette performance. Displaying the incredulous attitude of an aesthete, the narrator is at first "...astonished at the attention [his old friend] was paying to this vulgar species of an art form". Such a dismissive attitude is concordant with the earliest views of the puppet theater. The old friend counters that an actor could learn something from the marionette, for "[the marionette] would never be guilty of affectation...[which occurs]...when the soul, or moving force, appears at some point other than the center of gravity of the movement".<sup>26</sup> This center of gravity, possessed intrinsically by the marionette, enables it to move almost of its own accord in a dance of which the puppeteer is not in direct control. Kleist's literary dialogue concludes with the old friend explaining to the narrator how grace "...appears most purely in that human

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<sup>26</sup> See Heinrich von Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*

form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god”. Kleist implies that the rivalry between puppet theater and the “legitimate stage” contains philosophical implications. *Trying* to be graceful or genuine as the actor does shows a deficiency in *being*. The actor learns how to be graceful, but the greater his knowledge, the greater his inability. Kleist intimates that going beyond knowledge of grace is necessary to achieve gracefulness. For a human actor, this is impossible when relying solely upon knowledge. A puppet has no knowledge of grace or anything else, yet it is precisely its lacking that enables it to be graceful. Humans are conscious of their actions, but Kleist argues that it is this consciousness that inhibits an actor in form. Kleist uses the example of the marionette to illustrate how an utter lack of consciousness brings a performer closer to the reality they portray.

Kleist argues that the freedom of the puppet allows it to explore the dark side of humanity, the taboos that would otherwise be off limits to an actor.<sup>27</sup> “The marionette is naught but the expression of the artist’s idea; the actor is always a man, and only too often his personality seems to place an obstacle in the way of true expression of a thought” (Boehn 143). Puppets convey a personality all their own separate from the agency that moves them. While some actors are certainly capable of becoming an empty vessel, fully embodying the character they portray, a puppet is always so and requires no preparation. Kleist asserts that the puppet’s lack of knowledge is precisely its strength. Imbue it with any emotion, attribute or disposition, and the puppet will not fail to become what was intended. It is not, however, due to any particular skill that it does so; rather, it

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<sup>27</sup> Currell, 2



is the puppet's infinite emptiness that makes it the perfect candidate for representation.

The puppet is free both in terms of its uninhibited representative ability as well as having a personality all its own, animated by yet distinct from its operator.

The English theater critic and innovator, Edward Gordon Craig (b. 1872 – d. 1966) is philosophically linked with Kleist in his assessment of puppet theater. However, whereas Kleist considered both actors and puppeteers artists, Craig disagrees, writing:

Acting is not an art. It is therefore incorrect to speak of the actor as an artist. For accident is an enemy of the artist. Art is the exact antithesis of pandemonium, and pandemonium is created by the tumbling together of many accidents. Art arrives only by design. Therefore in order to make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of these materials. (55-6)

It is not that Craig disdains actors, only that he believes actors are incapable of making art. His essay entitled “The Actor and the Über-Marionette” begins with a quote from Eleonora Duse: “To save the theater, the theater must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of the plague.”<sup>28</sup> For Craig, puppets and their theater might again come into fashion, evolving into something newly appreciated. This is evident as Craig continues:

There is something more than a flash of genius in the marionette, and there is something in him more than the flashiness of displayed personality. The marionette appears to me to be the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of a past civilization...all puppets are now but low comedians. (82)

A suitable replacement for the stage actor, Craig opines, would be what he terms the *Über-Marionette*. Inspired by Kleist and by Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, the new representative is “...a descendant of the stone images of the old temples...a rather

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<sup>28</sup> Craig, 54 – This quote the author himself quoted from Eleonora Duse.

degenerate form of a god” (Craig 82). Only such a character ideally represents the artist’s thoughtful design. As opposed to the actor’s attempt at the reproduction of life, the *Über-Marionette* strives to go beyond it.<sup>29</sup> Craig’s views are a philosophical extension of Kleist’s regarding the marionette’s advantage over the live actor. Reinterpreting both Kleist and Nietzsche, Craig sees in the marionette not only a relic of a lost civilization, but a more faithful means of realizing the thoughts and conceptual aims of the artist. Rather than compete with life, the artist can move beyond it.

Moving on, a discussion of laughter is pertinent to any discussion of puppet theater. In his work, *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin (b. 1895 – d. 1975) focuses on the nature of Medieval and Renaissance laughter in folk culture as directly contrasted to the seriousness of official culture.<sup>30</sup> While Bakhtin does not focus per se on puppet theater, he sees three important features of laughter: its universalism, its freedom, and its relationship to the people’s unofficial truth.<sup>31</sup> This relates to the history of puppet theater in Germany as a mostly unsanctioned form of expression. Through his analysis of the works of Rabelais, Bakhtin conveys the power and importance of laughter for the average person during the Medieval to Renaissance periods with great implications for puppet theater.

Thus carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a peculiar quality of all comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages. (Bakhtin 8)

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<sup>29</sup> Craig, 84

<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, 5-6 – See his introduction

<sup>31</sup> Bakhtin, 90

Carnivals, festivals, and marketplaces were the temporary homes for the puppeteers, and it was in that setting that laughter held sway. Given the uncontrollable nature of laughter in its purest form, attempts to rein it in, corral it and make it respectable are synonymous with the history of puppet theater in the German-speaking world.

Laughter is universal in that it mocks the very things the established order takes seriously. It makes exception neither for the lay world nor the sacrosanct. No theme, person or ideology is exempt from characterization or ridicule upon the puppet stage. Laughter is freedom, if fleeting, in that it provides a voice to the marginalized. Diverse audiences share common ground, while laughter gives those accustomed to drudgery a break from routine as well as an outlet for their frustrations. Laughter represents an unofficial truth, simultaneously exclusive and inclusive. It is exclusive in that it resists ownership of itself while paradoxically belonging to all members of society. Bakhtin argues that laughter in the centuries preceding the Enlightenment and the birth of Romanticism was universal in its object, was free to be oriented in such a way and served as the unofficial truth of the people. Counterbalanced with the official truth of the church, laughter in general and puppet theater in particular offered a form of sanctioned gaiety and ribaldry to ease the pressure of the prohibitive, strictly religious and ordered status quo.<sup>32</sup> Similar to the fool, the puppet expects the audience to laugh, but implicit in his idiocy is a profound superiority, the freedom to say and do as he pleases. While the authorities may ridicule, censor or condemn it because of its lowness, it is precisely because of such lowly status that puppet theater was able to appeal to a universal

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<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin, 88-90

audience, offering freedom – if only temporarily, while unofficially speaking truth to power. Puppet theater perfectly reflects Bakhtin’s concept of laughter in folk culture in that it embodied an unofficial truth distrusted and censored by the authorities. Puppet theater brought elements of the carnivalesque and the grotesque as well as the presence of festivity to common audiences. Of all, laughter was the basis.

The puppet is philosophically important in German intellectual history in its negative connotation, namely that it serves as a useful metaphor for demonstrating that human beings have no will of their own. This negative use of the puppet started with Plato and continued through select works of Arthur Schopenhauer, for whom the will was a tyrant. Like a puppet master, the will controls each individual, most of whom haplessly believe themselves to be acting of their own accord. Puppet theater as used in philosophy is not, however, all negative. Heinrich von Kleist described the virtue and grace of the marionette, a thing lacking consciousness. Because it has no consciousness, the marionette is free of all affectation and capable, like a god, of demonstrating true grace. Both the English critic Edward Gordon Craig and the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin contributed to the philosophical discussion of puppet theater as well. Inspired by the Kleistian idea that the puppet’s lack of consciousness places it closer to the infinite consciousness of a god, Craig combined it with Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch* and imagined a day when the *Über-marionette* would return to the stage and assume its rightful place as the purest embodiment of an artist’s ideas. Finally, while Bakhtin did not speak specifically of puppets, his philosophical discussion of laughter includes puppets. Like laughter, puppet theater is universal, free and the representative of unofficial,

unsanctioned truth. As an art form, it belongs to all yet is owned by none, hence its philosophical significance.

## LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE OF PUPPET THEATER

Puppet theater reflects Germany's long experience of religious intolerance, class struggle, censorship, and political disappointment. A major aspect of its socio-economic reality from the Middle Ages through the period of Romanticism was its association with the poorer classes. Philosophically speaking, questions often posed by German thinkers including those of free will, the nature of representation, and the tragedy of existence reflect a particular experience of reality. Kleist's famous essay as well as *Die Nachtwachen des Bonaventura* – published anonymously in 1804 – are characteristically Romantic literary works with philosophical implications that include puppetry as a thematic element. Most famously, Goethe's *Faust* revisited an older work played out frequently through preceding centuries upon the puppet stage. Goethe, it is known, witnessed and was inspired by the performance of the Faust puppet play. Theodor Storm's *Paul the Puppeteer* stands as an excellent example of puppet theater as motif in a German literary work. The literature inspired by puppet theater in turn helped the evolution of puppet theater from low, popular culture into a highly regarded art form.

*Die Nachtwachen des Bonaventura* bridges the discussion of the philosophical and the literary as it applies to puppet theater. In the story, the protagonist encounters a

puppeteer who hires him as his clown, the previous one having “died laughing”. The two immediately set forth and perform a puppet show in which Judith decapitates Holofernes thereby causing such uproar among the audience that they storm the residence of the local bailiff to demand his head. In defense of the bailiff, the clown implores the crowd to be reasonable. A wire controlled the puppet king’s head, the clown explains to the bloodthirsty mob, and his hand controlled the wire. Beyond this point, the “governing power no longer can be determined” (Bonaventura 225). The narrator informs the people that they too, like the marionette, have strings attached. Freedom, it seems, is not what they think it is; it is only the perception of it – or lack thereof – that moves them to act, however unreasonably. The innocuous yet inflammatory spectacle of pantomimed decapitation is no mere literary invention but was a popular aspect of certain puppet plays as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> In Hamburg in 1472 a public announcement proclaimed the upcoming performance of *The Public Beheading of the Virgin Dorothea*, a grotesque exhibition of puppet theater greatly enjoyed by the marketplace denizens.<sup>34</sup> The ability to stir the passions of an uneducated audience seems to validate the censorship handed down by authorities in some localities. In *Bonaventura*, puppet theater plays only a minor role, a literary representation of a philosophical motif. This is to say that *Bonaventura* as a literary work reflects the philosophical predicament of mankind, namely that humans ultimately have no control over their actions.

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<sup>33</sup> See Joseph, 115

<sup>34</sup> Joseph, 115 – Evidently, the popularity of this performance – besides the spectacle of pantomimed death – was due to the ever-changing and elaborate methods by which “Dorothea” lost her head.

While philosophy and literature intersected in *Die Nachtwachen des Bonaventura* with puppetry as a thematic vehicle, puppet theater helped to influence the greatest German poem ever written. In the year 1587 the Frankfurt-based publisher Johann Spies put to print the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*.<sup>35</sup> Only six years later an untimely death would befall Christopher Marlowe, and in the year 1604 his own *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* was published in England. It is a matter of some debate, then, as to which came first. Clearly, the date of the German publication precedes the English, but matters become complicated. The Faust story in the German world was, before its printing, a familiar part of the puppet players' repertoire just as Marlowe's tragedy graced the stage before his death. Hedderwick, introducing *The Old German Puppet Play of Doctor Faust* argues that

A puppet-play of "Faust" appears to have been not only well known but actually to have entered upon its decline, in [England], before we hear anything of the Puppet-play in Germany. The precise date when "Faust" was transferred from the theater to the booth may now be impossible to ascertain. (xxix)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (b. 1749 – d. 1832) was inspired by both versions of the story to craft his own *Faust*. Goethe confirmed his fondness for puppet theater in his memoirs *Wahrheit und Dichtung*.<sup>36</sup> Hedderwick also claims that Goethe "is the only German critic who appears to have formed a just estimate of Marlowe's genius from his *Faust*" (xlviii). The influence puppet theater had on Goethe is further evidenced by the fact that he wrote plays during the *Sturm und Drang* period for puppets and actors.<sup>37</sup> One

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<sup>35</sup> Currell, 14

<sup>36</sup> Hedderwick, xvi, xvii & Jurkowski, 251

<sup>37</sup> Jurkowski, 250

such work, *Hanswursts Hochzeit*, written between 1774-5, satirizes overly-formalized social mores, with the ageless buffoon Hanswurst as the mocking protagonist.<sup>38</sup>

“In 1781 Goethe got a shadow theater built in Tiefurt, he himself and [Friedrich von] Einsiedel (author, lawyer, b. 1750 – d. 1828) preparing the *libretti* for the performances” (Boehn 115-6). Boehn goes on to say that, although there is no comparing the puppet-play of Doctor Faust with the majesty of Goethe’s tragedy, the puppet performances of the piece garnered the largest audiences.<sup>39</sup> Hedderwick accredits to the German writer Karl Simrock the statement that “next to Goethe’s “Faust”, amongst all the poems to which the Faust saga has given birth, the old “Puppet-play” has the greatest merit” (Hedderwick xiv). The theme of a pact with the devil may be a universal concept in the Western world dating back to ancient times. Hedderwick makes no claim as to this original source, but does state

That the German Puppet-play was either directly or indirectly derived from Marlowe’s tragedy; and further, that nearly every change that took place in the representation of “Faust”, upon the stage in England, was followed by a corresponding change in Germany. (xxxix)

He adds that, “for its preservation we are indebted to Germany” (Hedderwick xiii).

Whatever the origins of the Faust myth may be, puppet theater versions undoubtedly had a profound effect on Goethe. Entertaining and inspiring him, the old puppet play is at least partially responsible for his *Faust*. Goethe’s timeless poem stands as the best example of the influence puppet theater had on German writers.

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<sup>38</sup> Williams, 140

<sup>39</sup> Boehn, 70 – Theodor Storm fictionalizes this claim in *Paul the Puppeteer*, as it is the puppet play of Doctor Faust that Tandler first performs.



Whereas Goethe took inspiration from puppet theater for his *Faust*, the most effective use of puppet theater as the dominant theme in a novella is Theodor Storm's *Paul the Puppeteer*. This novella from 1874 fictionalizes the life of Geisselbrecht, the ubiquitous puppeteer who figures prominently in both history and fiction. The character Joseph Tandler, a traveling puppet player from Munich whom Storm modeled after Geisselbrecht is the central character of this story.<sup>40</sup> As with other works by Storm, there is a deeper significance that touches on the social changes during the transitional period of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the novella, Storm masterfully reflects the reality of the changing socio-economic order in Germany of the *Gründerjahre*. At an interpretive level, the story portrays the beginnings of the institutionalization of puppet theater, looking at a player who represents the last of a kind – the traveling showman. As the title character, Paul recounts to his apprentice his encounter with the puppeteer Tandler – Storm's familiar story-within-a-story framing device. Paul describes the old guild where the performance took place, a literary allusion to the old, dying world.

The guild had shrunk to just three members...the old two-storeyed [sic] house was neither lived in nor used by anyone; wind-shaken and run-down, it stood there between the well-kept neighboring houses. (Storm 82)

With frequent references to some of the more well-known characters, plays and the general nostalgia associated with it, Storm infuses his story with an accurate reflection of puppet theater in Germany. "A glance at the stage took me back a thousand years" (Storm 84) recounts Paul, the narrator, an indication of the rich history of puppet theater in the German-speaking world and the collective memory of it. Timeless characters and stories

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph, 121

– all with historical antecedents – receive a mention as the narrator tells of his childhood experience with the puppet theater: Kasperle, Hans Wurstl, and ‘*Doctor Faust’s Journey to Hell*’. Storm’s novella intertwines a specific feature of German cultural history, puppet theater, with the larger narrative of the *Gründerjahre*. Storm effectively weaves historical elements of puppet theater into his novella. They function as a literary motif in the story and serve to indicate the changes in German society during Storm’s time.

Storm hints at the philosophical and sociological implications of puppet theater, alluding to Kleist when the narrator recalls that “...there was uncanny life in these small figures” (84-5). Remembering the precarious social position of the traveling puppet players through the centuries in the German-speaking world, Storm crafts his story intending to portray the traveling show-people as truly respectable, who save their money and take care not to offend their patrons.<sup>41</sup> The narrator speaks of old Tandler, a characterization of Geisselbrecht, as being “...tired of traveling; indeed, since it had exposed him to the danger of being confused with the worst vagabonds, his long for a settled home had only grown stronger” (Storm 115). Storm remarks on the entirety of puppet theater in the German world, describing performers as people seeking a place in society, traveling only because they could not find a home. Just as old Joseph Tandler wearied of constant traveling, Germany, too, in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century was a land in need of definition. At the threshold of a national identity and industrialization, Germans could not hold onto the old world but still felt anxious about embracing a new one.

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<sup>41</sup> Storm, 102 – Within the story, the narrator remembers his father commenting on the respectability of the Tendlers – the puppet players

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, puppet theater had evolved from a nomadic, carnivalesque spectacle into an established cultural attraction. Further institutionalization would occur throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the academic world to the mass dissemination made possible by television and film, puppet theater continued to be an important aspect of popular culture while reaching a more refined audience in the universities. The Romantics developed their concept of folklore in Germany in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and puppet theater fit their designs perfectly. This led to a division between high and low or popular culture in Germany. Jurkowski speaks directly about the unique bridge between the two cultures in Germany:

The most notable modification in the relationship between high culture and popular culture happened in Germany...The first was the general belief in folklore as the probable basis of German national culture, a belief which created a better climate for puppet theater. (250)

This statement provides a summary of the cultural evolution of puppet theater in Germany throughout its history into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## PETER SCHUMANN AND THE REBIRTH OF RADICAL PUPPET THEATER

Peter Schumann, a German-born resident of Vermont, has spent almost the entirety of his professional artistic life creating masks and larger-than-life puppets while focusing on political agitation. Peter Schumann is no mere entertainer, but rather an artist. The difference between art and entertainment is a theory, an ideal to which the creator of the work aspires. In the opinion of Stefan Brecht, son of the German didactical playwright and artist Bertolt Brecht, Peter Schumann is one of the great artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stefan Brecht (b. 1924 – d. 2009), himself a poet, critic, and theater scholar, believed Schumann to be one of the few artists to successfully implement the theories of the theater developed by his father, Bertolt Brecht. Unifying and popularizing the methods of Epic Theater, which included near-journalistic succinctness and Greek-like choruses, Bertolt Brecht held that an audience should never lose sight of the fact that it is watching a play. Theatrical illusion, while evincing the dramatic, leads to escapism which does not inspire the audience to politically change their reality. Changing the views of the audience is or should be, according to Bertolt Brecht and later Peter Schumann, the aim of art. The function of art, according to the literary critic Walter Benjamin, is always political the instant it ceases to serve ritualistic needs.<sup>42</sup> Peter Schumann is paradigmatic as an artist in the Brechtian tradition because he has successfully implemented the method of ‘alienation’ into his puppet shows.

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<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, section IV

Born June 11, 1934 in Silesia, Peter Schumann is first and foremost an artist. He has honed his craft for more than fifty years, at first in Germany from the mid 1950s until 1961, at which time he emigrated to the United States. Stefan Brecht, son of Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel, in his two-volume tome *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater*, perhaps best describes Schumann and his work, saying,

[He] is one of the great artists of this century...He has invented a magnificent new medium, the 'live puppet' show or 'puppet masque'. He has been one of the few directors to develop and consistently to use 'alienation'. He has dealt with the issues of his age. His work – moral theater – is a major statement from the Left and presents the interest of an effort to carry on a large enterprise outside of the money economy. (Stefan Brecht preface)

The assertions made by Stefan Brecht highlight the artistic efforts made by Schumann to create radical puppet theater in the Brechtian context. Schumann's work eschews trite sentimentality, and his public performances are not pasquinades. While he represents the evolution of German puppet theater, Schumann's work draws from pre-historical antecedents of shamanism and ritual. He tries to make art that serves a real function in human life rather than exist in a rarefied enclosure, a controlled commercial venture serving the tastes of the elite or appealing only to the base instincts of the masses.<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that Schumann does not recognize the value of the marketplace puppeteer whose hand moved the Kasperle puppet to the delight of the onlookers. Of paramount importance to Schumann is the purpose puppet theater serves and for whom it is intended. This aligns him more with the nomadic puppeteers of medieval culture and

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<sup>43</sup> Ryder, 1 – Summarizing a quote from an earlier interview cited in this text.

their art rather than with the status-seeking puppet players of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>44</sup>

Schumann takes great care to manifest his ideal not merely in his productions but in his life as well. Schumann's artistic *raison d'être* is as simple as it is profound, aiming for "...the spiritual regeneration of the Germans and ultimately all mankind" (Stefan Brecht 19). His ambitious pursuit is better understood within the context of how he defines puppet theater. Writing in *The Drama Review* in an article entitled The Radicality of the Puppet Theater, he states:

Puppet theater...is...by definition of its most persuasive characteristics, an anarchic art, subversive and untameable [sic] by nature, an art which is easier researched in police records than in theater chronicles, an art which by fate and spirit does not aspire to represent governments or civilizations, but prefers its own secret and demeaning stature in society, representing, more or less, the demons of that society and definitely not its institutions. (Schumann 75)

Combining Schumann's own pronouncements with the views of Stefan Brecht, his work is moral, spiritual, and anarchistic in the sense that it does not aim to represent the institutionalized culture – the antithesis of the direction puppet theater took during the preceding centuries – but represents people and an ethos of the decentralization of political, economic, and spiritual power.

Paramount to Stefan Brecht's exploration of Peter Schumann's *Bread and Puppet Theater*, the performance vehicle Schumann founded in New York City in 1963, is Schumann's use of the *Verfremdungseffekt*. Stefan Brecht's father, Bertolt Brecht, developed this theory during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Schumann notes five

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<sup>44</sup> Stefan Brecht, 22

aspects that free puppet theater from the limitations of theatrical representation: freedom from seriousness; redefinition of language; the evolution of acting; music as music; and puppet theater as sculpture.<sup>45</sup> Especially as the five aspects relate to the theoretical framework developed by Bertolt Brecht, they form a picture of Schumann's artistic vision – unconventional and anti-materialist in both theory and practice.

At its core, Schumann's puppet theater tries to create a dialogue between society and the individual struggling within it. According to Schumann, puppet theater is exempt "...from the seriousness of being analytically disciplined and categorized by the cultural philosophy of the day" (Schumann 75-6). Inspiring both laughter and reflection, the historical (and to some degree, current) marginalization of puppet theater has been, for Schumann, its "saving grace", allowing it, as a consequence, to evolve unencumbered by the demands of the consumer economy. The attempts to market puppet theater as serious art fall flat. Paradoxically, Schumann's puppet theater is serious art, but it is precisely because it does not take itself seriously that it can be taken seriously. The freedom from seriousness Schumann speaks of contrasts with German *Figurentheater*, or the academic renaming of puppet theater. Highly interpretive and serious in its scope, Schumann sees it as "...a grand solution to the social-status problem of puppetry...so that nobody will find them guilty of complicity with Kasper, Punch, or Petroushka" (Schumann 76). Because puppetry is unbound by an expectation of seriousness, its effect when used to inspire serious reflection is more pronounced precisely because it is not expected. According to Schumann, puppet theater is free from the serious categorization that binds other

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<sup>45</sup> Schumann – The Radicality of the Puppet Theater

expressive art forms. The marginalization of puppetry throughout most of its history has helped it remain fresh and free of commercial expectations.

The second aspect noted by Schumann concerns the redefinition of language. As this pertains to puppets, their language is not merely comprised of strung-together lines from a script. Rather, puppets communicate through gesture. *Gestus*, an acting technique developed by Bertolt Brecht, relates the social position of a character with his behavior, not only with personal, emotional motivations. Mirroring real-life relations between social beings, "...puppets need silence, and their silences are an outspoken part of their language" (Schumann 77).<sup>46</sup> Just as gesture is an important communicational device, so too is silence a necessary feature of language. The absence of words can, at times, invoke thought or emotion in an audience. Schumann dispenses with the illusion of the fourth wall and sometimes walls altogether for his 'live puppet' theater. His is an interactive and communicative art driven by the notion that there is something spiritual and noble in people to which he can appeal.<sup>47</sup>

Schumann says that puppet theater "...exists as a...new and daring art form...not in the sense of unheard-of newness, but in the sense of an uncovered truth that was there all along but was so common it couldn't be seen for what it was" (Schumann 76). Instead of implicating his audience in a staged situation, he includes them in his narrative.<sup>48</sup> In practice, his performances are not closed off to the audience. Masks may be available for

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<sup>46</sup> Ryder, 1

<sup>47</sup> Stefan Brecht, 22

<sup>48</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 37



audience members to don. In unstaged street performances, not only do people see a show they neither expected nor paid for, the line between performer and spectator is blurred if not erased. Using puppetry, Schumann employs the power of silence and gesture to communicate his artistic intentions. As a substitute for traditional dialogue, Schumann's performances create a narrative that implicates performer and audience alike in the sense that they both bear some responsibility in the unfolding of events.

Puppetry represents an evolution of acting. In his writings on the theater, Bertolt Brecht defines his Epic Theater, the essence of which is "...that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things" (Bertolt Brecht 23). For Brecht, the spectators are not passively engaged in the act of watching, nor are the actors transformed before the audiences' eyes into the reproduction of a character. Brecht challenges the audience to actively observe and study the text, as the "...actor [is] allowed to enjoy his art as an art of faking, and with that be liberated from the self-possessed art of acting" (Schumann 78). Speaking on the presence of alienation in Chinese theater, Bertolt Brecht says of the actor: "he expresses his awareness of being watched...The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place" (Bertolt Brecht 92). The dramatic, non-Brechtian actor aspires to reveal the soul or essence of his character "...with facial and vocal gymnastics aimed at a most naturalistic pretending of something unreal [sic] and intangible: the ghost of a reality that is not there but insists on our acceptance of its existence" (Schumann 78). The puppet's soul is revealed only through its movement and function, not through a purposeful display of

what the puppet is supposed to represent.<sup>49</sup> What the puppet reveals through its gestures and action is its intangible self, whereas the live, non-Brechtian actor is concerned with the representation of a different self. The intangible self of a puppet is its essence, its own true self. The different self that an actor embodies is not the true actor's self but, at best, a great characterization – truly that other person. At worst it is a pantomime.

In Schumann's theater, puppets and masks serve as unchanging gestures or pure manifestations of a spiritual condition. This translates into a demonstration against war or oppression. What takes place in a makeshift theater or on the street is not a dramatic reenactment of an event, but a momentary portrayal of a moral idea. Schumann reminds his audience that they, like him, must choose to stand on one side of an issue or the other. Schumann's theater moves beyond its traditional milieu, trading the stage for an open space and replacing acting with embodiment. Puppetry has the potential to transform acting. Schumann's puppets reflect the unselfconscious grace detected by Kleist, Craig's desire for a return to ritual, and Brecht's Epic Theater. Taken together, it is not acting for the sake of pretending, but acting genuinely. The empty vessel of the puppet supplants the self consciousness of the actor and replaces it with supra-consciousness. While unaware of the nature of its material existence, the puppet evinces an essence and intellect more real than expected given its lifelessness.

The fourth aspect of puppet theater that frees it from traditional, theatrical representative forms is the notion of what Schumann calls music as music. As he sees it, music should be "...sound production in its own right, operating in its own sphere,

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<sup>49</sup> Schumann, 79

parallel to and not governed by the visual theater” (Schumann 79). Practically speaking, this translates into the creation of music as an end in itself on the stage. Drums, horns and other noisemakers create a cacophony of sound that converges in unforeseen ways. To call it improvisation suggests technical training which is not the case. Uninhibitedness is more appropriate. Once more there arises a relationship between his views and the precedent set by Bertolt Brecht. Brecht speaks of music in the Epic Theater, noting that “its most striking innovation [lies] in the strict separation of the music from all the other elements of entertainment offered” (Bertolt Brecht 85). Brecht and Schumann are in agreement that there should be a space reserved for music within yet detached from the theatrics.

Whereas Brecht disparages the impossibility of reaching an audience politically or philosophically solely through the use of music – that is, when music is emotionally tied to the action – Schumann complains of “...the misuse of sound for the purpose of vision, which keeps music from acting as music for the benefit of the larger scheme of collaborative production” (Schumann 80). Writing on the effects of concert music felt by an audience in his witty, hyperbolic style, Brecht says:

We see entire rows of human beings transported into a peculiar doped state, wholly passive, sunk without trace, seemingly in the grip of a severe poisoning attack. Their tense, congealed gaze shows that these people are the helpless and involuntary victims of the unchecked lurchings of their emotions...[Music] seduces the listener into an enervating, because unproductive, act of enjoyment. (89)

Schumann sees the use of music in popular theater and film as playing an exploitative role, utilized not for its own sake, but in order to buttress and/or complement something visual.<sup>50</sup> The role of music is effectively subordinated to theatrical action.

For Schumann, music is separate and powerful in its own right. In a written piece by Schumann from 1962 referred to by Stefan Brecht as his ‘manifesto’, he says of music:

Forget the notes. Don’t waste your hearing on training... There can be no other relationship to music any more than this: to lower it to the status of an ordinary activity... For we are now making a useful music, a music whose order is the order of music, a music for the new world. (Stefan Brecht 100)

Both Bertolt Brecht and Schumann desire a new world, but Brecht wants the human being to face himself, to alter himself. While Schumann wants the same, he would use spirituality to accomplish this, while Brecht would opt for science and politics as the driving forces. Schumann argues that if music is a manifestation of the spiritual aspect of humankind, of the collective ‘self’, it must be more than the sum of its parts played in harmony. The commercial venue is too exclusive, too orderly, and too controlled to express that essence. The puppet theater offers a better stage upon which to truly make music simply because it provides the opportunity for music to come into being free of any restraints.

Schumann argues the final freeing characteristic of puppet theater concerns its function as what he calls “socially embedded sculpture”. Since ancient times, sculpture in the public sphere has been emblematic of cultural and political power, bronze castings

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<sup>50</sup> Ryder, 1

and stone-set idols that "...have long ceased to represent public heartbeat and yearning", the meaning of which "...has long been connected to its expense, and with that, to its sponsorship" (Schumann 81). Schumann wants to transform the power of sculpture from a socio-political function into a spiritual function. He argues that puppet theater as sculpture functions as a narrative, revealing the inner spaces of the human consciousness that are able to foster a regenerated spirituality, a conceptual story with a moral rather than a functionless – if avant-garde display of pure concept.<sup>51</sup> According to Schumann, puppetry is essentially an unwelcome participant in culture, yet one that impugns the hegemony of current cultural mores.

Puppetry is conceptual sculpture, cheap, true to its popular origins, uninvited by the powers-that-be, its feet in the mud, economically on the fringe of existence, technically a collage art combining paper, rags, and scraps of wood into kinetic two- and three-dimensional bodies. (Schumann 81)

All of the elements of Schumann's ideal – an art form stemming from and serving people, speaking truth to power, welcoming the poverty of its existence, and made from a hodgepodge of materials that are close to garbage apart from their whole comprise this statement. Puppet theater is art, yet art should not simply be the exercise of its own self-importance. Schumann asks:

Does the idea of doing with art more than art still exist? Are the arts interested in more than themselves? Can puppet theater be more than puppet theater by giving purpose and aggressivity [sic] back to the arts and make the gods' voices yell as loud as they should yell? (Schumann 83)

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<sup>51</sup> Schumann, 81

Of course, the answer to all of the rhetorical questions he poses is *yes*, but they are merely the outline of his theory. In practice, he has boldly undertaken by making puppets and puppet theater.

The five aspects of freedom possessed by puppet theater – as averred by Schumann himself – confirm Stefan Brecht’s conviction that Schumann is a great artist. Revisiting Stefan Brecht’s claim, namely that Schumann is the inventor of a new medium, that he is one of the few to use the *Verfremdungseffekt*, that he has dealt with the issues of his age, that his work is profoundly moral and that he has consciously practiced his art outside of the money economy are put to the test in the context of the practice of his theory. *Why* he has chosen puppet theater should be clear; *what* he has done and *how* he accomplished it follows logically.

The new medium that Stefan Brecht credits Schumann with inventing, known as the ‘live puppet’ show, consists of the combination of various-sized puppets, some with visible operators, others operated invisibly, with masked and un-masked performers where “...the performance itself is the thing” the doing of which “must not be obscured by Things” (Stefan Brecht 152-3). Schumann conceived of his puppets as live, not in the sense that they were powered by an invisible agency, but that they were themselves agents of some purpose.<sup>52</sup> Schumann’s invention is puppetry as sculpture, figures infused with aliveness as opposed to inanimate, monolithic fixtures. Schumann appears to have abandoned puppetry, or what is customarily thought of as puppetry: the artificial movement of an inanimate thing manipulated by an operator. Instead Schumann’s art is

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<sup>52</sup> Stefan Brecht, 303

live and alive. His performances are free from any conflict between the audience's knowledge that the puppet is just an inanimate object and the illusion of its independence.<sup>53</sup> Schumann redefines puppetry, using a variety of types, from masked figures and rod puppets to larger-than-life puppets operated from within. Schumann's art is alive with purpose. In the opinion of Stefan Brecht,

Schumann seems to have conceived of the theater he was trying to create as a combination of sculpture and dance, i.e.: of the sculptural abstractions of expressions of his puppets and masks with the gestural [sic] abstractions of their movements. He seems to have had in mind a theater substituting body movement – or rather the combination of sculpturally abstracted facial expression, body presence and of gesture formalized as in dance – for speech. (Stefan Brecht 322)

The use of masks neutralizes the human performer in Schumann's performances, but for Stefan Brecht, the mask is the crux of a *Bread and Puppet* piece.<sup>54</sup> Abstract, misshapen, and often cobbled together from other masks, the lack of sophisticated technical execution "...is an essential part of the *Bread and Puppet* performance style" (Stefan Brecht 288). The mask represents the mysterious, concealing the performer, an anonymity which gives him superiority. "A puppet, to a greater or lesser extent, takes on its animator's life...A mask, on the contrary, gives its lack of life and its identity to the wearer of it...The puppet borrows from its operator; the mask gives to its wearer" (Stefan Brecht 309). Schumann's art fuses together the charm and aliveness of puppetry with the anonymously foreboding power of mask to create a carnival of the representative, distinct

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<sup>53</sup> Stefan Brecht, 306 – "The tradition within which to view Schumann's puppet theater, then, is really not that of the puppet theater, a folk and children's entertainment on a small stage...but that of masked dance and drama, one of the oldest of all art forms, going back to pre-agricultural shamanistic and totemic ritual...(Stefan Brecht 317-18)"

<sup>54</sup> Ryder, 2

and free from the expectations of ‘high’ culture. It identifies with traditional forms, yet it imitates nothing save for the original ecstatic and ritualistic uses of puppets and idols in the ancient world. His art is a ceremony engaged in by performer and audience alike, “... something...invented as part of a transaction between [them]” (Stefan Brecht 288). The performance is the ceremony, and one sees it for what it is. His invention is the adaptation of ancient ceremony to the modern world, a dance of life and death.

Stefan Brecht claims that Schumann is one of the few artists to utilize the *Verfremdungseffekt* and draw its political and aesthetic ramifications. Like Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theater, which aims to disassociate emotionally and narrate a picture of the world to an audience, Schumann’s use of ‘alienation’ attempts to hold a picture of the world up like a mirror in the face of a non-audience, for those not intending to see a theatrical performance. The audience does not identify with the characters but is confronted. Bertolt Brecht intended to interpret the world but also to change it. Likewise, Schumann’s ultimate ambition was the regeneration of all mankind. However, Schumann’s synthesis arose from a foundation of spirituality whereas Bertolt Brecht used science and politics as a vehicle for his expression.

Revisiting Schumann’s manifesto – as delineated by Stefan Brecht – the necessity of art is of paramount importance: the doing of it rather than the imbibing of it. Stefan Brecht effectively sums up Peter Schumann’s mission statement:

[The manifesto] stipulated the kind of art that everybody ought to be creating: a response to life, and thus to the actual historical situation people find themselves in; bypassing or transcending, not expressing individual peculiarity; helpful to others; not borrowing the forms of or reproducing art of another age; not response or attempt to contribute to existing contemporary art, to the given art being done



and recognized as such or as good; not application of technique and independent of technical skills (Stefan Brecht 97)

Schumann recorded his ideals just as he was making the transition to puppetry in the early 1960s, and therefore it is reasonable to assume he saw in puppetry the means to embody them.<sup>55</sup> Schumann's first puppet exhibition entitled *Burning Towns* he performed in August and September of 1962 in upstate New York and New York City. Advertised as a "dance production with life-size puppets", it presented the theme of war's sudden descent upon a peaceful community, one to which Schumann would return.<sup>56</sup> The action consisted of slow, gestural movement, with written messages and simple drawings scrawled upon hastily hung curtains and backdrops. The performance featured puppets of various sizes in their traditional milieu – behind a curtain. This wall between performers and audience was fluid, included at times and disposed of at others. This combination, says Stefan Brecht, "...is achieved with an ostentatious lack of neatness" which "...is alienatory [sic] and incites to creative apprehension" (Stefan Brecht 105). Schumann played with the fourth wall, both using it and discarding it, bringing the audience into the action, removing the illusion that they are witnessing an intimate scene by addressing them directly and purposefully.<sup>57</sup>

Concerning a later production entitled *The Story of the World*, one reviewer placed the play directly in the Brechtian tradition, noting "...its starkly simple action,

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<sup>55</sup> Stefan Brecht, 98

<sup>56</sup> Stefan Brecht, 105 – From the recollections of a Schumann associate.

<sup>57</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 136 – From an essay entitled *Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect*.

interplay of character and actor, and dissonant music...” but goes on to say it is “farther out” than Brecht.<sup>58</sup> Bertolt Brecht said of the artist that his “...object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience” (Bertolt Brecht 92). Schumann’s simplistic production style combined with the narrative and the oddity of his presentation shows his courage as an artist. In another sense, it validates the claim that his art is an offspring of the Epic Theater, where what the exhibition represents rather than its form matters. Bertolt Brecht tore down the walls of dramatic reenactment and sought to alter the audience, to reshape the world out of the discord, but still depended on the stage. Schumann stepped off of the stage, confronting his audience at eye level, seeking to reshape them as well, but on a spiritual level rather than an intellectual one. People, for Schumann, though “...by and large...base- and or mean-spirited...[possessed]...a residue of simplicity of spirit and innocence of heart that could be appealed to, opening them to address of corresponding form, and potential for spiritual regeneration through such address” (Stefan Brecht 22). Like Bertolt Brecht, Schumann does not intend for his audience to identify with his characters. He inquires into the historical situation in which his audience finds itself and offers them an alternative, arousing in them a desire for alteration. But unlike Brecht, Schumann’s simplistic and intentionally crude method aims to show the fundamental simplicity of life, one in which the most profound truths appear in the most ordinary ways and make room for the possibility of spiritual rebirth.

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<sup>58</sup> Stefan Brecht, 112 – From a review of a show performed in March of 1963 at the Harvard College Adams House.

Stefan Brecht credits Schumann with dealing with the issues of his age, most notably, the legacy of the Third Reich, mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century American imperialism, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He calls Schumann's work 'moral theater' rather than Epic Theater. These assertions relate directly to one another in that the issues of his age posed a moral dilemma, and he chose to confront them. His opposition to religious and moral convention is also necessary, paradoxically, to make moral art. Humanity, as he sees it, is in need of spiritual rebirth, so to follow the same conventions that have led humankind to its current predicament would be self-defeating. Schumann makes art not simply to astound, to innovate, or to beautify his conceptions; rather, he aims to challenge the conventional thinking that leads human beings to their soul- and life-destroying actions. He does it largely removed from the institutional sponsorship of the arts that rewards persons who validate the status quo, or at the very least make art oblique enough to be ignored. In dealing with the issues or trauma of his age, Schumann consciously opts for the moral position rather than the immoral or amoral one. Working outside of the money economy that has largely consumed art was necessary in order to confront highly-politicized issues from a moral stance.

The final three assertions of Stefan Brecht regarding Peter Schumann are entirely intertwined and mutually dependent. Looked at from another standpoint, the content and scope of Schumann's puppet theater reflect the three strands of political and historical critique previously explored: sociological, philosophical, and literary. In a microcosm, Peter Schumann's artistic pursuits are the culmination of the entire history of German

puppet theater condensed into one unified vision and are representative of a return to its earliest antecedents.

Born in 1934, Peter Schumann grew up in the midst of the Third Reich, too young to fully understand what was taking place around him, but nevertheless surrounded by it. He understood his nation's past by looking backwards and reflecting on its recent history – precisely what many Germans a generation or more older than Schumann were unwilling to do. He came into life after Hitler's rise to power and could only reflect on its ramifications after the fact. His past was neither burdened by a sense of helplessness nor collaboration during the period, so he could approach it with a clean slate. Before his emigration to America, from the mid-1950s to 1961, Schumann pursued sculpture and dance in Germany. Although his artistic vision began to form during this time, namely that his "...art was to be not just indulgence, nor just entertainment, but [a] means of salvation: for the artist and for his fellow men" (Stefan Brecht 30), Schumann had yet to find a political purpose. Schumann's creative period in Germany from the late 1950s up to 1961 is notable for his early attempts at sculpture and dance – elements he would later employ in America for the conception and performance of his *Totentanz*, an interpretive work. Stefan Brecht explains Schumann's antecedent:

The Dance of Death, in literature and frescoes going back to the early 15<sup>th</sup> and perhaps the 14<sup>th</sup> century, probably a French invention, is a double Christian allegory, rooted in the notions that death is God's wages for our sins, and that it exposes us to his judgment: allegory of dying...and of life. (42)

Schumann himself, in a 2007 radio interview, spoke of the mystery cycles of Catholic rite, also a 14<sup>th</sup>- and 15<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon, as not only the inspiration behind his own

Domestic Resurrection Circus but also the origin of puppetry itself. According to Schumann, the allegorical, church-sanctioned performances retold important passages from the Bible, serving as a kind of morality play for a public audience. Eventually these shows became too outrageous to be tolerated by the church and were subsequently banned, which in turn gave rise to the marketplace puppet show.<sup>59</sup> One must remember that Schumann's aim was the spiritual regeneration of mankind. The public puppet show was a byproduct of church censorship, and considering his Christian upbringing, it is not surprising that he would cite such an antecedent. Schumann's formative attempts at interpretive performance in his native Germany fell flat not because they lacked vision, but because his countrymen wanted little to do with polemical, spiritual art.

It may be a stretch to suppose that Schumann's *Totentanz* was an outcome of the naïve reflection and "...his growing awareness of his nation's Nazi past" (Stefan Brecht 40). Described by one American critic as "...a ritual dance of death, performed by young men and women and one or two children, all in black garments...they circle about and leap...until one by one they are symbolically dead" (Stefan Brecht 86). It was naïve in the sense that he experienced it through the filter and innocence of his earliest childhood, although it was no less real for him. Stefan Brecht insists that "Schumann has in his art never dealt with National Socialism" (Stefan Brecht 484), but he does not fail to mention that Schumann saw the era and the subsequent war as the killer of the German soul in much the same way that he would later see the Vietnam War affecting Americans. In Stefan Brecht's opinion, what troubled Schumann about his native country's past was its

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<sup>59</sup> Schumann radio interview

collective silence despite the apparentness of its actions.<sup>60</sup> In 1950s Germany Schumann found no struggle, only a growing consumerist mindset and decidedly apolitical populace. Speaking of his motivation to make interpretive art in Germany, Schumann says "...it didn't seem to make sense...we didn't know what for, when we did it...In Germany there were no politics – no visible politics" (Stefan Brecht 24). Bertolt Brecht wrote "...for art to be 'un-political' means only to ally itself with the 'ruling' group" (Bertolt Brecht 196). Schumann averred his intent was to make "socially-minded, politically-motivated theater" by "stepping out of the art circles" to make "theater in the streets (Schumann radio)". In Germany of the *Wirtschaftswunder* he was an artist making political art for an audience that didn't want to think about politics. He failed to reach an audience in Germany, but he did not have a polarizing political issue with which to work. Life in America and the Vietnam War would change that.

Among the movements in America during the 1960s – the Youth Movement, the New Left, the Black Movement and the Counter Culture Movement – Schumann found little to which he could relate. To quote Stefan Brecht regarding one such phenomenon:

Hippie culture in the East Village, flower children and all, must have been positively repulsive to [Schumann] during the 60s: diametrically the opposite of his work cult, sobriety and esteem for sobriety, responsibility and esteem for it, respect for the monogamous family and its life. (478)

Schumann needed a cause, and although apolitical in the sense that he did not espouse one view over others, he nonetheless required a polemical force within society which to address, and he found this in the Peace Movement.<sup>61</sup> This movement centered on the

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<sup>60</sup> Stefan Brecht, 484 – Undoubtedly a recurrent theme among Schumann's contemporaries

<sup>61</sup> Stefan Brecht, 478

apparent senselessness of the Vietnam War. Whereas the other movements relied upon radicality and the occasional ‘freak-out’ of mainstream values, institutions, and behavior, “...the Peace Movement had respectability which the other...movements did not have – it was white, middle-class, academic, and moralistic and law-abiding” (Stefan Brecht 471). What he did not find in Germany he found in America as it entered into the quagmire of the Vietnam War: a factionalized, politically-divided populace engaged in open struggle. Taking up the cause of peace through the medium of puppet theater focused Schumann’s attention and his will and provided him the impetus to make art – not art for art’s sake, to perfect a technique, or to celebrate his own ingenuity, but rather “to render services to humanity” which gave his work a social imperative.<sup>62</sup> His audience was, for him, ideal, for they were not seated in a theater; they did not come to see his show or any show for that matter, nor were they particularly disposed to his views. They were, however, in desperate need of agitation.<sup>63</sup>

The *Bread and Puppet Theater* was not protest theater. It aimed to bring the spectacle of war into the sights of the average war-supporting American: distorted, ambiguous masks worn by solemn marchers holding representations of dead babies, signs indicating the number of murdered citizens of Vietnam, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki.<sup>64</sup> Others were ghoulish hand-and-rod puppets and masks depicting a sword-wielding Statue

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<sup>62</sup> Stefan Brecht, 480

<sup>63</sup> Stefan Brecht, 488

<sup>64</sup> Anti-nuclear armament marches were part of his repertoire. To the suggestion that he had a repertoire he would undoubtedly disagree.

of Liberty and a demon-like effigy of Uncle Sam. In an interview with the *Tulane Drama Review*, Schumann says of his invention:

We've had our best – and sometimes our most stupid – performances in the streets. Sometimes you make your point because our point is simply to be there in the street. It stops people in their tracks – to see those large puppets, to see something theatrical outside of a theater. They can't take the attitude that they've paid money to go into a theater to 'see something.' Suddenly there is this thing in front of them, confronting them. (Stefan Brecht 483)

Schumann referred to the performance as 'stupid'. In the same interview he said, "You don't make your point unless a five-year-old girl can understand it". By 'stupid' he means the intensity of the spectacle, not a thematic stupidity or triteness. Stefan Brecht notes two antecedents from which Schumann drew inspiration: processions of Palm Sunday in the Christian tradition and American Fourth of July parades. Interestingly, Brecht mentions another German who utilized the spectacle of the parade and rally, albeit for a very different purpose: Adolf Hitler.<sup>65</sup>

In dealing with the issues confronting the age in which he lived – and which confront him still – Schumann has chosen to take a moral stand against injustice. Communication has been the centerpiece of his medium, the live puppet show. In order to stand up to something perceived as wrong, he must explain his reasons for doing so. Maintaining his communicational, moral stand outside of the world of high art has always been his intention. He never made art to sell. In the 1960s, he lived with his family in Manhattan's Lower East Side, then an area of town known for its poverty, crime and generally miserable state. Schumann performed his theater to bring a message to people

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<sup>65</sup> Stefan Brecht, 489



away from the traditional theatrical venues with no mind to climb the artistic or social ladder. Part of his systematic approach to his moral art was to minimize what proceeds he took in from performances to meet only the needs of basic sustenance.<sup>66</sup> It is cliché to speak of an artist ‘selling out’ or not, but Schumann chose to live his art, to esteem that function of his own poverty that allowed the spirit of artistic authenticity to exist. In that sense, Schumann lived the Romantic ideal of the *Hungerkünstler*, the starving artist, resurrecting it in the context of the 1960s and 1970s countercultural movement. Surrounded by despondency and economic misery and bearing witness to the domestic effects of American foreign policy sharpened the righteousness required for his creative vision. His proximity to destitution further intensified his goal of making socially-minded statements that were motivated politically and kept outside of the “art world”.<sup>67</sup> To succumb to the temptations of the high art establishment would have not only taken him out of the context he required to remain motivated, but it would have neutered his message. In that sense, he did not ‘sell out’ his art to become, as it were, a businessman. He has remained an artist to this day, confronting issues he sees as morally outrageous and definably wrong.

In 2007 Schumann exhibited a series of paintings in Boston and Burlington, Vermont with the intention of widening the consciousness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This exhibit followed a ten-day trip he had made to Palestine in which he met with ordinary people and had a chance to reflect upon their situations. The show entitled

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<sup>66</sup> Stefan Brecht, 161

<sup>67</sup> Stefan Brecht, 163

“Independence Paintings: Inspired by Four Stories” sparked outrage from organized Jewish groups who branded the work “anti-Semitic” and “soft-core Holocaust denial”. His paintings, as he put it, were meant to protest the Israeli oppression of Palestinians, and were paired with passages from *The Wall*, a 1950 novel by John Hersey which detailed the plight of the Warsaw Ghetto Jews. Schumann was accused of comparing modern day Israelis with Nazis. Although that was not his intent, his stated theme – “oppressed people who oppress a people (Cook)” – had been perceived by some as crossing an acceptable line of discourse. “I’m not saying that what’s happening in Palestine is the same as what happened in Warsaw” Schumann is quoted in an interview from 2007, “...but it’s certainly a reminder (Picard)”.<sup>68</sup> As a redress and a chance to explain his reflections on the consequences of his exhibition, Schumann told a radio interviewer in 2008

It’s very hard for me as a German to take that kind of stand of being critical against Israel and its actions because of my particular fate of what Germany did to Jews during the Nazi Period. (Radio interview transcript)

Unafraid to take a controversial issue and comment on it through his art, Schumann hit a nerve with his “Independence Paintings”. Charges of anti-Semitism were leveled against him. Complaining that his critics misinterpreted his work but also “over-interpreted it” as well, Schumann commented at the time, “I don’t understand how a people so terribly violated can now violate another people so badly”.<sup>69</sup> Schumann had originally gone to Palestine to teach people how to turn their suffering into performance

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<sup>68</sup> Cook, Radio interview, Picard

<sup>69</sup> Picard

art – including the use of puppets. Although his controversial exhibition did not involve puppetry, in showing it he demonstrated his aptitude for taking a stand with art, a socially-minded, politically-motivated approach to expression.

The following year Peter Schumann used his live puppet show as the vehicle for political expression pertinent to current events. Two distinct yet related issues – the “War on Terror” and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – were the subjects of two different exhibitions. Schumann’s *Divine Reality Comedy*, an offshoot of his live puppet show, the Bread and Puppet Theater, took Dante’s *Commedia* and reworked it for a modern audience confronted with a modern moral dilemma. Satirizing both capitalism and the dubious aims and methods of the “War on Terror”, Schumann’s piece casts Santa Claus as a consumerist demon, incorporating that motif into the greater piece. The entire ensemble of actors, masked figures and puppets – in the frenzied production style Schumann has always employed – take part in the purgatory that is America’s new war, with the conspicuous inclusion of indefinite detentions, enhanced interrogations and torture. The critique of capitalism along with the systematic abuse of human rights has been a theme pursuant to Schumann’s views since the Vietnam War. The “War on Terror” along with concordant institutions such as the School of the Americas (now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation), Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay Schumann says “...are not ‘rotten apples’, as [former president George W.] Bush called them, but are philosophically correct, pinpointable [sic] climaxes of the system, the cruelty of the capitalist system”<sup>70</sup>. Schumann is certainly not the first artist to make the marriage of

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<sup>70</sup> See Cook’s article from [The Boston Phoenix](#) online

capitalism and war a central theme of his work, but his chosen mode of expression – live puppetry – “...an archetypal form of theater that has much deeper access to the human mind and soul...” makes his outspokenness unique.

## CONCLUSION

Puppetry is simultaneously literary, visual, theatrical and musical. Made for audiences of all ages, puppet theater can simply be entertaining or provide the ideal artistic vehicle for the portrayal of a concept far deeper and more significant than comedy or the sentimental. Depending on the intent of the puppeteer, puppet theater may be used for propaganda, education or social agitation. While a puppet or marionette, once built, receives a personality entirely unique to it, its lack of consciousness allows a controller to manipulate it at will. A puppet is, therefore, an empty vessel that serves as a useful means to an end. Throughout German history, one finds puppets in the streets, the marketplace, in private estates and public theaters. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, puppets appeared on television and film.

Puppet theater microcosmically reflects the political and cultural history of Germany as well. For all but the last 140 years, Germany consisted of a loose collection of minor states, largely quarrelsome and united only by a common language and cultural denominator. While these centuries-old divisions affected all German peoples, puppet performers existed on the margins of society and often relied upon constant traveling for a livelihood. This historical fact allowed them to experience the political divisions in *Deutschland*, but it also helped to create a cultural unity among Germans. While the laws and customs in *Großherzogtum Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach* differed greatly from those in *Württemberg* and *Fürstentum Lippe*, e.g., the people in all of those localities likely knew

of the buffoonish puppet Hanswurst and had seen the old puppet play of Dr. Faustus in the marketplace.

Puppet theater is a valuable and legitimate area of study in the field of *Germanistik* for its historical significance, especially the sociological experience of its performers and the varied and interesting makeup of its audience. Select areas of German philosophy concern themselves with puppets, at the very least on a metaphorical level. Perhaps most importantly, many great German literary, musical and artistic figures witnessed, loved and took inspiration from puppet theater. For example, no academic discussion of Goethe, Haydn or Hans Sachs would be complete without an exploration of the influence of and/or participation in puppet theater.

German puppet theater made great strides in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This work examines in detail the work of Peter Schumann and his relationship to the didacticism and theatrical innovations of Bertolt Brecht. Other 20<sup>th</sup>-century German puppeteers include Paul Brann, Lotte Reininger, and Walter Oehmichen who founded the *Augsburger Puppenkiste* in the late 1940s. Presenting a wide range of traditional children stories with characters like Jim Knopf and Lukas, the fantastical *Lummerland* was brought to a wide audience through West German television in the 1950s.

In the academic world, the Ernst Busch *Hochschule für Schauspielkunst* was founded in East Berlin in the 1971. In southwest Germany, Albrecht Roser helped to create the *Figurentheaterschule* as part of the *Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst* in Stuttgart. Roser has been a performing puppeteer for over a half century and is greatly respected in the field. *Figurentheater* is a fairly recent term used to

denote puppet theater of a highly artistic nature distinct from carnival or street puppet theater.

It remains to be seen what the future holds for puppet theater in Germany and throughout the world. Undoubtedly, puppeteers will continue to revisit old forms, adapting and arranging them to suit current themes and ideas. *Figureentheater* presents endless opportunities for new generations of performers to explore bold avenues of avant-garde expression. Owing to its successes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, critics and aesthetes will continue to take notice of puppet theater in all of its potentialities both in terms of performance and evolving philosophical implications. To speculate for a moment, the currents of the transhumanist movement may make comparisons between the puppet and the artificially-augmented human-like being or *transhuman* inevitable. In a sense, artificial intelligence is analogous to a puppet in that its being requires manipulation and intervention by an outside force. Rather than a human hand, it is technology that pulls the strings. If the singularity takes place – the moment in time that artificial intelligence surpasses and is thenceforth unpredictable to human intelligence – the puppet may one day become the puppet master.

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