

**PUPPET ON A STRING: PARADIGMS,  
PROCESSES AND PRACTICES OF THE FINGER  
PLAYERS**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.



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Soumya Varma

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## *Summary*

Puppets have been used in theatrical performance around the world and throughout theatrical history. Contemporary mainstream and experimental theatres in many countries have grasped the potential of puppets and performing objects and are making use of their theatrical value in innumerable ways. The Finger Players are unique in Singapore for the use of puppets and objects in their theatre and have utilised them in their creative work in a sustained manner. This thesis aims to understand the influence and significance of the use of puppets in contemporary theatre in Singapore, by studying and analysing the performances and the theatre-making process of The Finger Players. It examines the concurrence of performing objects and human actors in their oeuvre. It analyses the meaning conveyed and the impact achieved when puppets and actors share the stage by studying the design, movement, and acting of the puppet and actors and assessing “what happens”, perceptually and experientially, when we see this kind of performance.

This study examines the work of The Finger Players within the larger discourse of puppets, puppetry and theatre with puppets from around the world. The attempt is to analyse The Finger Players’ past and present performances using a combination of process oriented, product oriented and event oriented analysis (Balme 142-43). Process oriented analysis focuses on the way a production is created, and will involve interviews and rehearsal observation. Product oriented analysis regards the performance as a finished aesthetic product. Event oriented analysis studies the process of the performance on a particular night and will focus on interaction between audience and the performers. As part of the process oriented analysis, the

research involves the rehearsal observation of The Finger Players' *The Book OF Living And Dying* and interviews with the practitioners.

*List of Abbreviations*

TFP – The Finger Players

BDDBS – Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea

CPF – Central Provident Fund

FNDS – Furthest North, Deepest South

Turn By Turn – Turn By Turn We Turn

Piano Teacher – I'm Just A Piano Teacher

TBOLAD - The Book Of Living And Dying

Note: As there are two Chongs who are associated with The Finger Players, to prevent confusion, Chong Tze Chien is referred to as TC Chong and Oliver Chong as O. Chong.



## *Chapter 1*

### *Puppets, Theatre, and The Finger Players: Situating the Theatre of Puppetry in Singapore*

My earliest memory of puppets is being taken to watch a “Thogulugombe”<sup>1</sup> performance when I was a child growing up in India and, later, as part of the children’s drama workshops I was involved in, making masks and puppets out of papier-mâché and old socks. In my twenty years of experience as a theatre practitioner, I had limited exposure to puppet theatre before my arrival in Singapore roughly ten years ago. Since then, I have watched *Wayang Kulit* in performance a few times and videos of other traditional puppet forms such as Vietnamese water puppets, *Wayang Golek* and *Bunraku*. This was the sum of my experience with puppets until I began to watch performances by The Finger Players. Since then I have come to understand why Penny Francis claims in her book *Puppetry: A Reader in Theatre Practice* that she became excited by puppetry’s “inventiveness and possibilities, its unusual admixture of the visual, dramatic and auditory which together contribute to the best of contemporary theatre” (3).

The Finger Players juxtapose puppets and performing objects with human actors in almost all their productions. Watching these performances was an extraordinarily engaging experience, one that was perceptually, emotionally, and analytically demanding, but that rewarded my efforts by giving me more to see, feel, and think about than I have got from exclusively

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<sup>1</sup> “Thogulugombe” literally means leather doll and is a form of shadow puppetry prevalent in Karnataka, the state I come from in India. It is an traditional art form which has been practiced for centuries and the stories performed are either from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata or local folklore.

human performance. While theatre companies and directors since the 1960s have been experimenting with puppets in performance with human actors in other parts of the world The Finger Players are unique in Singapore as they are the only company who consistently employ puppets and objects as part of their artistic aesthetic.

The aim of this thesis is to understand the influence and significance of the use of puppets in contemporary theatre in Singapore, by studying and analysing the performances and the theatre-making process of The Finger Players. It examines the concurrence of performing objects and human actors in their oeuvre. It analyses the meaning conveyed and the impact achieved when puppets and actors share the stage by studying the design, movement, and acting of the puppet and actors and assessing “what happens”, perceptually and experientially, when we see this kind of performance. By studying the phenomenon of puppets on the stage the analysis gets firmly rooted in the concretely visible aspects of performance. The assumption behind this approach is the belief that before we can interpret or read meaning into a performance and before we can evaluate the effectiveness of a style or context, we must first perceive and experience the performance itself, which, in this case, is the relationship of puppets and human beings on the stage.<sup>2</sup> This fundamental experience is based on design and materials, movements, and the way the two kinds of performers are configured in the space. These conditions will exist as primary elements in all puppet/human performances,

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Pickering, in his book *Key Concepts of Drama and Performance*, observes that when we watch and respond to a theatre performance we are employing our powers of perception “the process whereby sensory experience is transformed and organised” (236).

regardless of the purpose behind the performance or the method used to interpret it.

Contemporary theatre in Singapore includes a wide array of forms and styles from text-based performances to experimental performances as well as devised theatre. Theatre groups such as The Singapore Repertory Theatre usually produce either classics or well-known plays. The Necessary Stage leans towards the production of home-grown scripts, especially those of their resident playwright Haresh Sharma. Groups such as Cake Theatrical Productions produce experimental devised pieces. While a study of all types of theatre-making and theatre companies would undoubtedly be a welcome addition to the discourse of Singapore theatre, this project limits itself to the study of a theatre group that consistently employs puppets and objects as part of their artistic aesthetic and is “exemplary of current cutting-edge theatre and performance, actively redefining established practices and inventing new ones in the conception, creations, rehearsal and presentation of theatre productions”(Harvie and Lavender 3).

### ***The Discourse on Theatre in Singapore:***

Books and research about theatre in Singapore claim that historically English-language theatre dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. The early performances were travelling colonial companies performing for the expatriots stationed here. Singapore English theatre till independence was English drama played by English actors to predominantly English audiences. It was in the 1960s that local writing and production began to emerge and this gathered momentum through the 1970s. The 1980s witnessed the formation of the first professional theatre companies such as Act3, The Necessary Stage

and TheatreWorks and also, an increasing audience for English-language theatre. Since then, theatre companies have performed (in Singapore and internationally) locally written plays, experimental plays, classics, musicals, devised performances, intercultural performances – a wide array of forms, styles and content.

However, it is only in the 1990s that an academic discourse on theatre in Singapore begins to emerge. The earliest book to be written is a collection of essays commissioned by the Necessary Stage called *9 Lives: 10 Years of Singapore Theatre, 1987-1997*. Since then there has been a steady proliferation of books and articles written about theatre in Singapore. The books and articles raise and address issues such as national policy and the effect on theatre, the way ‘nation’ is staged in theatre, national identity, gender identity, censorship, multiculturalism, interculturalism, the community, the growth and development of theatre. Some books chronicle the life of theatre practitioners such as William Teo and Kuo Pau Kun.

In *9 Lives: 10 Years of Singapore Theatre, 1987-1997* academician David Birch provides a comprehensive historical overview of English drama from 1958-1985. Other essays in this book written by theatre practitioners, critics and arts educators reflect on past theatre and offer insights to future developments. The book also includes reports of three forums conducted on arts education, Malay theatre and looking forward to the future. Illustrating the importance of The Necessary Stage in the development of theatre, Tan Chong Kee and Tisa Ng serve as editors to another volume called *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre*. Two books that meticulously address

the issue of state policy on culture, the nation and theatre are William Peterson's *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore* and Jacqueline Lo's *Staging Nation: English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore*. Peterson's main argument in the book is that in Singapore, theatre cannot be divorced from politics just as culture cannot be seen apart from the political apparatus that seeks to contain and shape it. Lo states that her book "aims to study the relationship between the politics of representation and the politics of intervention in relation to constructions of the nation" (2). A more recent book published last year is Terence Chong's *The Theatre and the State in Singapore : Orthodoxy and Resistance* where he provides a comprehensive examination of the contemporary English-language theatre field in Singapore and describes it as a politically dynamic field that is often a site for struggle and resistance against state orthodoxy, and explains how the cultural policies of the ruling People's Action Party have shaped Singapore theatre.

I would be remiss in my survey of the writing on Singapore theatre if I didn't include the discourse centred on TheatreWorks' Ong Keng Sen's intercultural experiments. Articles in journals such as TDR, Theatre Journal and Asian Theatre Journal, describe, debate and critique his work. Writers include Singaporean and international academics like Yong Li Lan, Rustom Bharucha, K K Seet, Helena Grehan and Craig Latrell.

However, despite the existence of puppet theatre and an employment of puppets and performing objects in theatre, there has not been much research or writing undertaken about puppets and performing objects in contemporary theatre in Singapore. While there are books that extensively examine

traditional puppetry in Asia<sup>3</sup>, there are not too many that focus on the use of puppets and objects in non-traditional performances. This thesis is an attempt to redress this gap.

***The Discourse on Puppets, Performing Objects and Puppetry:***

Puppets and puppetry have existed in one form or another in nearly every culture throughout human history. Sergei Obraztsov, one of the most famous puppet artists of the twentieth century, claims in his essay “Some Considerations on the Puppet Theatre” that while it is one of the earliest types of spectacle, “it is the one which has been the least studied” (Union internationale des marionnettes 17). In another essay in the same volume “The Eternal Conflict”, Henryk Jurkowski states that while there have been many different stages in the history of the puppet theatre, today we see it as an artistic theatre<sup>4</sup>. He goes on to add, “the immediate beginnings of our puppetry must be sought at the turn of the century when a revolt against naturalism induced artists and theatrical reformers to turn their attention to the puppet stage” (25).

John Bell in the introductory chapter “Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects at the End of the Century” claims that despite being one of the oldest forms of performance, puppetry has rarely been the subject of “sustained, systematic academic attention in this century” (5). Writings about puppets

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<sup>3</sup> Books such as J. Tilakasiri’s *The Puppet Theatre of Asia*, A.C. Scott’s *The Puppet Theatre of Japan*, S.Obraztso’s, *The Chinese Puppet Theatre*, J. Mrázek’s *Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre : Contemplations on the Art of Javanese Wayang Kulit*, P. Buurma’s *Wayang Golek : The Entrancing World of Classical Javanese Puppet Theatre*, C.P. Hsieh’s *The Taiwanese Hand-Puppet Theatre : A Search for Its Meaning*

<sup>4</sup> The primary purpose of artistic theatre is to use puppetry to create a work of art and this is differentiated from folk theatre where the primary purpose of puppetry could be religious, ritualistic or entertainment.

instead appear within the various literatures of folklore, anthropology, semiotics, art history, theatre history, drama and performance studies. Bell provides a survey in this chapter of the exploration done by the French symbolists, Russian futurists and constructivists, Prague School semioticians and avant-garde artists regarding the experimental, social and political value of puppets and puppetry.

Other scholars<sup>5</sup> who trace the same history agree with Bell that Heinrich Von Kleist was the first of the Romantics to propose the idea of puppetry being a subject worthy of serious theoretical consideration in his essay "On the Marionette Theatre" (1810). He sees in the puppet figure a performer without the ego or self-consciousness of the human. Primarily, but not solely, in the West, puppetry has most frequently been associated with folk or itinerant theatre, and a sustained analysis of how puppets and objects actually function in performance does not appear until the turn of the twentieth century, when Symbolist, and then modernist theatre movements brought forth an interest in wresting puppetry from its folk roots and putting it on a new, legitimate stage. The concerns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as increased mechanization and industry, the loss of spiritual and mystical elements of life, and the place of the human being in the modern world, prompted modern theatre artists to reconfigure the stage space to reflect the complicated relationship of the human being to his or her external (literal) and internal (metaphorical) environment.

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<sup>5</sup>Scott Cutler Shershow, Puppets and "Popular" Culture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).;

Penny Francis, Puppetry : A Reader in Theatre Practice (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

The Modernists, and especially Edward Gordon Craig, propose the puppet as the ideal ‘impersonal’ actor. Opponents of Realism, such as the Symbolists, found in puppetry an ideal alternative as their interest was in the poetic and the metaphoric, the surreal and spiritual, the grotesque, the sub-human and the super-human. Harold Segel in *Pinocchio's Progeny : Puppets, Marionettes, Automaton and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama* avers that “no period or movement in the history of the European stage ever found as much creative relevance in the puppet figure as modernism and the avant-garde” (75).

Craig is best known today for his notion of the über-marionette, in which the puppet or puppet like actor is posited as being a superior performer to the actor. Craig took immense interest in puppets of all kinds over the course of his long career, collecting them, studying their scenic and kinetic possibilities carefully, writing about their history, and designing puppet stages and new forms of puppets. Francis explains that for the Symbolists and their theatre the puppet could symbolise humanity and the human condition and could portray their new dramaturgies as actors could not (166). The Belgian poet and playwright Maurice Maeterlinck wrote three plays for puppets in 1894. Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, which was performed in 1898 with puppets by the French painter Pierre Bonnard, created a stir because the play's brutal simplicity and its grotesque puppet-like central figure challenged both Naturalists and Symbolists.

According to Bell, avant-garde practitioners such as F.T. Marinetti, Wassily Kandinsky, Fernand Léger, André Breton, and Oskar Schlemmer



valorised the puppet in three new ways – “as an important link between European and non-European ritual performance; as a central aspect of traditional popular theatre with contemporary experimental possibilities; and, in a particularly new manner, as the central focus of what Léger called “machine aesthetics”” (6). Historically, this was also a time when European practitioners were exposed to traditional performing art forms including puppetry from Asia. According to Cohen, Craig “formulated his theories of the über-marionette with reference to wayang, while Richard Teschner adapted wayang puppets for his unique Viennese puppet theatre” (340).

The different agendas of the modernist artists and theorists and their increasing interest in and exposure to Eastern forms of puppetry led to an unwieldy mass of information about the puppets and performing objects, with conflicting ideas about how they function in performance and the way one evaluates how puppets and performing objects work. Theorists of The Prague School such as Petr Bogatyrev, Jiří Veltřusky, conducted an exhaustive examination of how the puppet theatre differed as sign system from the human theatre.<sup>6</sup> What they discovered in their investigation of styles and sources was that the performing object defied categorization. The puppet made an easy transition between the folk theatre and the art theatre; it performed as easily with its puppeteers hidden from the audience as when these puppeteers were visible and exposed, and it could play a scene with a human actor as easily as it could play a scene with another puppet. This observation of the puppet’s fluidity in performance prompted Jurkowski to identify Western puppet theatre

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<sup>6</sup> The journal *Semiotica* dedicated an entire issue to puppets and performing objects and contains articles on the semiotic study of puppets, masks, and performing objects, including articles by Bogatyrev, Veltřusky, Frank Proschan, and Henryk Jurkowski.

as an open system of performance in which the elements of puppet theatre and live theatre were “atomized” and thus existed as a (virtually) unlimited number of “atoms” waiting to be reconfigured into new theatrical units depending on the demands of a particular production (Jurkowsky 129-31).

This facility of puppet theatre was explored in theatre in since the 1960s both in Europe and America. In the 1960s, especially in America, interest in puppetry was revived with Paul McPharlin and Marjorie Batchelder laying the foundation for serious study of puppet theatre while companies such as Bread and Puppet Theatre and puppeteers such as Jim Henson created innovative, imaginative and effective performances that are distinct in style and content, yet somehow remain faithful to the puppet theatre’s “populist, egalitarian roots” (Bell 18). Kaplin claims that the Bread and Puppet Theatre is “the first modern puppet theatre in America to aim its work specifically at adult audiences and to open itself to direct community participation” (28). Cohen claims that the 1960s ushered in a new era of intercultural communication (338). A major influx of Indonesian puppetry came to the United States when a generation of budding American puppet artists received direct tuition from Indonesian puppet masters at California summer schools in the early 1970s. Others such as Julie Taymor, exposed to Indonesian puppetry in college and trained further in Indonesia and Japan, is known for her successful use of puppetry on Broadway.

Francis includes an article by Brunella Eruli - “The Use of Puppetry and Theatre of Objects in the Performing Arts of Today” (141-44) where Eruli claims that directors such as Taduez Kantor, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman,

Taymor and companies such as Periferico de Objectos (Argentina), 'XPTO' (Brazil), 'Figuretheatre' (Germany) and the Handspring Puppet Company (South Africa) have used puppets in various guises in pieces with quite diverse aesthetic values thereby demonstrating the broad range of possible applications of puppetry.

In order to understand and analyse the use of puppets and objects by The Finger Players, it is necessary to be aware of the discourse on puppets and puppetry. But what exactly is puppetry? Francis defines 'puppetry' as:

The act of bringing to life inert figures and forms (representational or abstract) for a ritual or theatrical purpose – for a *performance*. The perceived investment of the inanimate with *anima* or spirit is effected through the convincing transference of the performer's energy to one or more of these figures and forms, endowing them with motion (normally), voice (if necessary) and presence (always). (5)

Puppetry in performance can be identified in two ways: one in which puppetry is the principal medium of expression and can be called a 'puppet show' or 'puppet theatre' and the other which is a performance in which puppetry is only a component used in varying degrees and hence can be called a 'theatre with puppets'. Examples of the former would be puppet theatres such as "Punch and Judy" or traditional forms of puppetry such as Indonesian Wayang Kulit, Japanese Bunraku or Turkish Karagoz. Transformation, so central to fairy tales and myth, lies at the heart of puppet theatre, where the unreal becomes real, the inanimate animate. But the forms differ sharply in

their effect, depending largely on whether the mechanics of the transformation are visible to the audience. Mainly, in conventional puppetry, the magic is engineered by hidden puppeteers, while the other forms of puppet theatre present both the illusion and the anti-illusion at the same time. In Japanese Bunraku, the puppeteers are not only manipulators but actors, taking on the physical characteristics of their charges. In the Indonesian Wayang Kulit the audience can also sit behind the screen, where the dalang, or puppeteer, sorts through his box of leather characters, improvising for hours on a well-told tale. In all of these forms, where the puppeteer is visible, the audience assimilates both the puppet-fiction and the technical reality.

Francis traces the growth of 'theatre with puppets' from the 1980s to contemporary times and posits that theatre makers see puppetry as "accessible and attractive" (12) and it is here that the onstage interactions among the puppets, their operators and human performers become complex and provocative. Eruli's examples of directors and companies as mentioned in the previous paragraph are apt examples of 'theatre with puppets'. Puppetry has been widely absorbed into contemporary performance where the use of animated figures and objects may be observed in mainstream as well as in experimental productions. Whether it is mainstream or experimental, puppet theatre or theatre with puppets, the prominence of the puppet is unquestionable.

Perhaps the complex interaction between puppets and puppeteers adds to the enduring appeal of puppetry. "The puppeteer, trained or not, can be showman or shaman, exhibitionist or poet" (Francis 24). The puppeteer has

played many roles through history – as the animator (the giver of life), as the writer and narrator of stories, as the designer-maker of puppets and as the director of the performance. Francis sees three categories of puppeteers in contemporary theatre – the builder of puppets and sets who may also be the overall designer of the show, the performer-operator and the artists who can do both – construction and performance. The puppets as well as the puppeteer's movements, complex orchestral music, and theatrical language do not simply coexist in the performance; rather they interact in complex ways, and much of the meaning and expressiveness of the medium comes from this interaction among different components, from the very process of synergizing them in performance.

What, then, is a puppet? Proschan in his essay "The Semiotic Study of Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects" defines performing objects, as "material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance" (4). According to him, while puppetry is at the centre of this definition, it is not only this. For Francis, the puppet is "a representation and distillation of a character, the repository of a persona perceived by both creator and spectator within its outward form."(13) Eileen Blumenthal claims "whenever someone endows an inanimate object with life force and casts it in a scenario, a puppet is born" (11). While there are many other definitions, I find Steve Tillis' explanation of the puppet the most persuasive. According to him, when people talk about puppets, they are talking about "figures perceived by an audience to be objects, that are given design, movement and/or speech in such a way that the

audience imagines them to have life” (“Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet.” 38).

The puppet is a mysterious yet tangible, lifeless yet alive, silent yet articulate being. There are many varieties of puppets that have been on contemporary stages. Puppets with distinctive lineages such as rod and string marionettes, glove or hand puppets, and shadow puppets have graced the stage along with innovative puppets such as the humanettes, completely new creations such as ‘found object’ puppets or ‘junk’ puppets.

A final summation of the puppet is provided by Francis:

Puppets, animated objects in performance mirror, emphasize, and interpret. They speak to and are understood by the entire world, having little need of a spoken language. Pragmatically they respond to the demands humans make of them. More abstractly they respond first to the spirit of the puppeteer who makes and controls them, then to the spirit of the individual spectator. They are a blend of sculpture, and actor, of scenographic entity and cynosure. (178)

Whichever way we perceive puppets and puppetry, it is an unarguable fact that mainstream and experimental theatres in many countries have grasped the metaphoric and symbolic potential and significance of puppets and performing objects and are making use of their theatrical value in innumerable ways. Perhaps this is the reason why The Finger Players have chosen to do so in a sustained manner and thus are unique in Singapore for the use of puppets and objects in their theatre.

***The Finger Players:***

TFP started in 1996 as a division for children specialising in traditional hand puppetry under The Theatre Practice. The late Kuo Pao Kun recruited the original members of the company, Tan Beng Tian and Ong Kian Sin, to promote the art of puppetry among the young. In 1999 TFP broke off from The Theatre Practice with the stated mission of creating a puppet theatre that promoted the legends and myths from the Asia Pacific. From 1999 to 2004, the company performed puppet theatre using different types of puppets and techniques locally and toured internationally.

Since Chong Tze Chien took over as Company director in 2004, the profile of the company has changed from being a puppet theatre company performing mainly for children to one that produces a rich, visually-textured contemporary adult theatre dealing with relevant social issues, with and without puppets, while also producing innovative theatre for the young. This change is reflected in plays which address weighty issues such as dealing with the pain of death, the loneliness faced by contemporary Singaporeans, parental expectations and pressure. The stories are told in a uniquely Singaporean voice which is accompanied by a startlingly different visual aesthetic. However, the company remains committed to producing theatre for children and participating in community projects. The company has three branches – Main Season, International Season and Reach Out. As part of their Main Season the company has produced over 16 multidisciplinary productions for adults since 2004. Internationally the company has been invited to perform in 20 festivals around the world. To date the company has taken its productions to Africa, Austria, Australia, China, Hungary, Japan, Korea, Macau, Myanmar, Thailand

, Spain, Taiwan and Turkey, making it one of Singapore's most prolific international touring companies. The company also actively encourages arts appreciation in Singapore by cultivating new audiences through its Reach Out! Arts Education Program.

The company is small with Tan Beng Tian as Artistic Director, Chong Tze Chien as Company Director, Ong Kian Sin and Oliver Chong as Residential Directors/Artists and Ang Hui Bin as Accounts/Artist. They are supported by Natalie Chai as Business Manager and Darren Ng and Lim Woan Wen as Associate Sound Designer and Associate Lighting Designer respectively. In the works produced for their Main Season since 2004, Chong Tze Chien, Ong Kian Sin, Oliver Chong and Tan Beng Tian have directed or helmed most of the plays barring a few exceptions such as *Furthest North* *Deepest South* and *Flare* which were co-produced with Mime Unlimited and Cake Theatrical Productions respectively.

Since 2004 the company has produced seventeen plays as part of their Main Season. These include critically acclaimed plays such as *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (2005), *I'm Just a Piano Teacher* (2006), *0501*(2007), *Poop* (2009) and *Turn by Turn we Turn* (2011). All the plays performed by the companies are original works written by the members of the company or devised by the ensemble. The company works collaboratively and they take turns in conceiving and directing the plays.

***Methodology:***

This study examines the work of The Finger Players within the larger discourse of puppets, puppetry and theatre with puppets from around the



world. The attempt is to analyse The Finger Players' past and present performances using a combination of process oriented, product oriented and event oriented analysis (Balme 142-43). Process oriented analysis focuses on the way a production is created, and will involve interviews and rehearsal observation. Product oriented analysis regards the performance as a finished aesthetic product. Event oriented analysis studies the process of the performance on a particular night and will focus on interaction between audience and the performers. As part of the process oriented analysis, the research involves the rehearsal observation of *TFP's The Book OF Living And Dying* and interviews with the practitioners. The study also involves archival research of newspapers, online art journals, online blogs and online databases for articles about the company and their performances. It will also locate and study the ephemera associated with the productions such as programs and publicity postcards and posters.

***Chapter Breakdown:***

Chapter Two examines TFP's productions focusing on the juxtaposition of puppets with human actors. It attempts to find what they have achieved through this juxtaposition: does it enhance the narrative in any way or is it used merely as a visual device; is the puppetry organic to the performance or a gimmick used by the writers and directors to distinguish the performance.

Chapter Three examines the productions where this negotiation between the puppet and the human actors becomes increasingly complex as the distinction between puppets and actors gets blurred. It delineates the resulting impact on our understanding of the puppet as actor and actor as

puppet. It will also analyse the impact of this blurring on the meaning of the play.

Chapter Four analyses the two productions, *0501* and *suitCASES*, which are distinctive in the repertoire of TFP in their conception, design and execution.

Chapter Five explores and analyses the artistic process of creating a performance to understand the nature of the rehearsal process when puppets and puppetry are incorporated into a performance and how it impacts the final staging of the play.

Chapter Six is the conclusion which presents the inferences drawn from the analyses in the previous chapters regarding the ways puppets and performing objects contribute to and impact the performance when sharing the stage with human actors.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Side by Side: The Juxtaposition of Actor and Puppet*

In all the productions that comprise the Main Season of TFP, puppets and animated objects are used in varying degrees – from being part of the visual scenography to being central to the performance. As Company Director TC Chong states unequivocally, one of the guiding ideologies for the company is that it would not just do puppet theatre but endeavour to “push the envelope of puppetry and what puppetry could do to theatre”; and, furthermore, that the company would explore the “devices of puppetry and how they fuse with other disciplines”(T. C. Chong "Personal Interview")<sup>7</sup>. He adds that he would not wish the company to be pigeon-holed as puppet theatre. Instead the company’s explorations in the use of puppetry, character and narrative should really create a “theatre of imagination”. This ideology is reflected well in all the plays that the company has done to date. When puppetry is fused with human actors or actor-puppeteers, we can see character and theme and metaphor literally manifesting on stage. Furthermore, the playwright/director gets the opportunity to delve into the relationships among puppet, manipulator and human actor, dealing with weighty issues such as power and control, or even the supernatural, in ways a more traditionally written play might never be able to express as eloquently. For TC Chong, “puppetry *is* theatrical” as it can “immediately be identified as theatre” and for him, “nothing is more magical than that.” “Puppets cannot talk but they speak and sometimes they don’t have a recognisable body but they live”(T. C. Chong "Personal Interview"). Indeed this is magical.

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<sup>7</sup> Please refer to Appendix 3 for Interview transcript.

“Magic” and “puppet” often seem to go hand in hand. According to Stephan Haff, “Magic refers to a naive belief in the life of objects, an undying animism that boldly defies modern materialism” (14). When contrasted with human actors who represent a character, a puppet, when animated, *is* the character – pure and singular. However, Haff contends that this purity isn’t as powerful in isolation as when it shares the stage with actors who “provide the distractions and contradictions of live bodies with their potential for failure, their sweat and tics and sniffles” (14). Tillis expresses a similar view in “Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet” - “the distinction between the actor and the puppet, between the living being deploying signs and deployed signs themselves, between the person perceived to be alive and the puppet perceived to be an object, has theatrical ramifications that can reach into metaphysics” (“Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet.” 172). Julie Taymor, who uses live actors, puppets and actors in masks in the same performance<sup>8</sup> explains the usage as “the change of scale, the mixture of media - live actors, next to masked actors, next to puppets - helps you move through different levels of reality” (qtd. in Tillis “Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet.” 174). Tillis explains that the result of this “change of scale” is to have each medium challenge the others, to force the audience to confront the conflicting ideas about what is an “object”, and what is a “life.” The artist and the spectator are forced to confront matters of shared focus, scale, spatial relationships, and kinaesthetic response between the visible human actor or puppeteer and the visible object. This series of confrontations is sophisticated and complex, and necessarily engages questions of design, movement, and perception.

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<sup>8</sup> A well-known example would be her Broadway production of *The Lion King*

This juxtaposition of human actors with puppets / performing objects is evident in almost all of the company's works where they have used a variety of puppets and puppetry in innovative ways, intermingling form and technique in their creating. What have The Finger Players realised through this juxtaposition? Is the effect of the intermingling of human and puppet actors the same in all their works? Does the use of puppetry with human actors enhance the narrative in any way or is it merely used as a visual device? Is puppetry just a gimmick used by the writers and directors to distinguish their productions or is it organic to the performance? This chapter seeks answers to these questions through an analysis of TFP's productions.

*Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea* is the first play that TC Chong wrote and directed for The Finger Players in 2005. The play features three separate stories linked by the central theme of HDB<sup>9</sup> upgrading. The story line is deceptively simple - in the first story the grandson wants to move to America while his grandmother wants him to stay; in the second a mother and daughter are at loggerheads over the issue of the mother's boyfriend and in the third a middle-aged man finds out that his wife was unfaithful to him twenty years ago and that his daughter who is on the run from the police having embezzled from her employer needs her recently retired father's CPF<sup>10</sup> savings so she can escape the country and make a new life for herself elsewhere. The stories although independent are interconnected by location (they all live in the same HDB block) and the issue of upgrading. The set, also designed by TC Chong, is again deceptively simple yet highly symbolic. The

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<sup>9</sup> HDB – flats built by the Housing Development Board are familiarly called HDB flats

<sup>10</sup> CPF – Central Provident Fund, the only retirement savings that many Singaporeans have at the end of their working life.

set is a three-dimensional steel structure that provides the outline for the walls, doors and windows of the three-room flat. But, the walls, the doors and the windows are 'invisible' and the audience seated on three sides can see everything that happens in the flat providing for a voyeuristic view of the lives of the people living in the flat. The front 'wall' of the flat is set away from the back of the stage to provide a corridor of space in front of the flat where various people and animals (a dog and a cat) played by the ensemble in masks wander by at various points of the play.

TC Chong and his production team make the play simple, yet supremely complex and layered with the addition of an ensemble of puppeteers and puppets. These offer contrapuntal notes of the otherworldly to what are essentially very human stories. This juxtaposition of human actors and puppets (or masked actors) mirrors the visible / invisible leitmotif of the play. A home is meant to be a private space where we are 'invisible' to others but here, with the set making the lives visible to the audience, we are forced to ask ourselves the uncomfortable question of whether our homes are as secure and private as we think they are. Further, the characters' feelings of betrayal, guilt, anxiety and doubt are manifest in the guise of "devils" and the invisible is made visible on stage. The "devils" are the ensemble wearing devil masks and they provide a thematic connection that runs through the three acts. The four puppeteers double up as the devils and are present in each of the stories, although unseen by the characters (only the Grandmother sees but chooses to ignore them), performing various functions such as moving furniture, opening doors and walking through the invisible walls at will. Beyond these functions, in each of the stories, the "devils" metaphorically represent the demons that

haunt the characters: in the first story, the grandmother is haunted by her complicity in the deaths of her son and daughter-in-law. She is able to see the devils but ignores them, maybe because she senses what they stand for. But while her grandson does not see them he senses something is not right about what he has been told regarding his parents' death.

In the second play, the mother's wilful blindness to her boyfriend's faults and deafness to her daughter's complaints haunt the flat and are mirrored in one scene where she blindly sinks into an armchair - an armchair that is nothing more than a floor mat held upright by one of the devils and therefore she is metaphorically sinking into the devil's embrace, the devil here being a false reality where everything is rosy in her world. She refuses to believe her daughter, who protests innocence of a shoplifting charge and who complains of her stepfather's lascivious behaviour until the devils cruelly enact her boyfriend molesting her daughter – a manifestation of the realisation that something is not right in her household. Subsequently, she agrees to the upgrading which will provide the daughter with more private space.

In the third story, the devil is manifested as a skeletal 'policeman' puppet who is trying to find the fraudulent daughter. The father, who is at first blinded by his anger at his wife's infidelity, eventually 'kills' the policeman and saves his daughter. In the final scene, we are taken back to the first story where the dying grandmother hears of a white woman moving into their now upgraded block of flats and sees this as a sign that Kuan Yin, Goddess of Mercy has come for her and passes away in peace. A curtain is drawn and on we see the shadow of the goddess dancing and beckoning the grandmother

into the afterlife, an adept and apt usage of a puppet. An inherent quality of the puppet is its ability to exist in different realms – “Straddling morality, puppets have often been the performers of choice for plays that cross the life / death divide.”(Blumenthal 209) As a final reaffirming touch of humanity, the grandson, who is all alone now, is invited to dinner by the mother from the third story.

The devils are the demons that haunt the characters – described eloquently by K. K. Seet in his introduction to TC Chong’s *Four plays* as “phantasmagoric projections by protagonists who are unable to come to terms with their own nagging doubts, suspicions and anxieties”(*Four Plays* xiv). There is a further meaning to ‘haunting’ that can be inferred by this juxtaposition of “devils” with human actors – the subconscious, atavistic fear that haunts humans in the dead of the night is made visible. Mathew Lyon, critic for online arts journal “The Flying Inkpot”, while praising the nuanced use of the devils notes

The masked actors playing the demons had calibrated their performances carefully: it would have been very easy to overplay the impish comedy of the roles - to exaggerate gestures and mug through the masks - but the actors all resisted this, and while they often allowed themselves to be funny, they never forgot to be slightly sinister with it. ("The Old, Old Story")

This feeling of the ‘sinister’ pervades the three stories and touch the hidden, primitive fears in all of us. The stories remind us of the many times we



have felt watched when there's nobody visible or we have experienced fear that we are being followed down a dark road in the dead of the night although we can't see anybody behind us. The "devils" nurture those flickers of fear that the dead can come back to life, that inanimate things might suddenly spark with malign intent, and that they might speak. The characters too feel haunted and it is no surprise that in all three of the stories they burn incense at the altars.

But are the "devils" puppets? Francis elucidates that mask play is an effective route to the puppet play and envisions the masked performer as a self-manipulated figure, where her physicality and vocality is "subsumed by the dictates of the mask" (35). Therefore, it could be argued that the "devils" in the play are self-manipulated puppets and that they along with the other types of puppets provide a contrapuntal weight to the reality of Singaporean life where the urge to 'upgrade' literally and metaphorically affects society. At the same time the puppets emblematically make the invisible visible. The addition and the juxtaposition of puppets and human actors in this play transform the mundane to the mythic.

While in *BDDBS* the puppets are woven into the visual narrative of the play, in *Twisted*, one strand of the play is centred on the puppet. *Twisted*, billed as "Singapore's first puppet performance for adults" was conceived and directed by Tan Beng Tian and Ong Kian Sin in 2005. The puppets, the shadow images and the live action are all combined to tell two intertwined stories about two people. The first story, performed entirely by puppets, is the tale of a boy and his relationship with a hole in the ground as he grows. The

second, performed by Tan Beng Tian, is about a woman and her journey in the search for love. While the story may seem simple, the telling of it was visually rich and complex. In contrast to the three-dimensional puppets made of Styrofoam, papier-mâché and wood, ranging from an infant the size of a hand, to a one-meter tall puppet - were the two dimensional shadow puppets. Even the shadow puppets were not uniform in dimension and texture – cut-outs of a city scape, shadows of two hands, a paper cut-out of a man were used at different times in the performance. The shadows and, at times, text were back-projected onto the back wall of the stage. In the foreground the set consisted of a wide platform from stage right that ran across the stage with a narrow but deep depression (the hole) in the middle, and then a higher platform on the stage left. Behind this, along the back wall, to stage left of the projection area was another platform on which a life-sized but non-naturalistic male effigy sits motionless throughout the play. The sequences with the puppets had no spoken dialogue (only projected text at times) but were set to and accentuated by a sonata composed and performed live by Darren Ng.

The puppet strand of the play traces the life of a man through five stages – as a toddler, as a young boy, as a young man, as a middle-aged man and finally as an old man. The three puppeteers (Tan Beng Tian, Tan Wan Sze and Koh Leng Leng) are visible throughout the performance, dressed simply and uniformly in a flesh-coloured tunic and loose, white pants – the visibility of the puppeteers allows the audience to witness the technique. At the same time seeing the puppeteers' concentration on the characters intensifies the audience's focus. At times, a single puppeteer handles the puppet and at others, two – one manipulating the head and legs, the other, the arms. The

puppeteers, apart from breathing life into the puppets, also interact non-verbally with the puppets - sometimes playful, sometimes tenderly admonishing, and sometimes sympathetic. The puppeteers skilfully demonstrate the range and versatility of puppet-acting: the innocent fascination of the toddler with the ball, the terror of the young boy as he faces his 'demon' school bag, the intense love felt by the young man for his lover, the grief and despair of the middle-aged man and the resignation of the dying old man. Even as the puppeteers make the actions and emotions of the puppets credible they deliberately undermine the effect by having them move and behave in incredible ways. The toddler finally catches the ball and floats upwards while holding it; the young man 'pulls' out red ribbons from his eyes to signify his passionate grief; the middle-aged man 'rips off' his face to reveal bloody eye sockets, ear holes and nasal cavity. This duality of seeing the puppet as being 'object' and at the same time 'alive' creates what Tillis describes as a "double vision" which is the defining characteristic of the puppet. "Double-vision exposes the audience's understanding of what is an object and what is life, creating the pleasure of a profound and illuminating paradox." (Tillis "Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet." 137)

The audience is challenged further by the difference in scale, materiality and dimension provided by the shadow puppetry segments. The shadow 'man' is further removed from humanity as he is a two-dimensional outline of a human shape. He is dropped, spun and torn apart by the god-like shadow hands. In one sequence, the shadow puppet navigates a cityscape which moves as if it were being filmed by an airborne camera. The puppet climbs ladders and jumps across rooftops, straining to reach the god-like

shadow hand which hovers just out of reach. Finally, when the puppet reaches the edge of the last roof, it leaps off and falls, broken, to the ground. The “double vision” allows for the perception of the two-dimensional shape as being human, and at the same time, the understanding that it is an object distances the audience from the horror of the puppet figure’s dismemberment. In another sequence, the audience is challenged even further when the shadow puppets are removed and they are exposed to an interaction between the two hands of the puppeteer (Ong Kian Sin) silhouetted on the back screen. Ong endows his hands with feelings, desires and fragilities. He makes them love one another and makes one of them love too strongly, so that the other is frightened and retreats. The hands, just with their movements, depict shyness, aggression, fear, need and loss. Thus the hands become “objects” and generate the “double vision” that Tillis postulated.

The puppetry segments in *Twisted* highlight the enduring appeal of the puppet and its ability to address adult themes. However, this is just one part of the play; the other, the story of the lonely young girl who grows to be a lonely old woman runs parallel to it. If in *BDDBS* the puppets supplement the narrative of the live characters and are woven seamlessly into the performance, in *Twisted* the juxtaposition appears very contrived and gratuitous. While the two narratives – the puppets’ and Tan’s are universal, in my opinion, the puppets, paradoxically, represented and questioned humanity far better than the human actor. The puppets didn’t speak - the segments with the rod and shadow puppets were set entirely to Ng’s live piano music while Tan’s segment was a monologue which by itself had touches of humour and pathos. However when juxtaposed with the puppets story, Tan’s seemed

redundant and overly simplistic in comparison. For example, in the last section of the play which is about old age, the old man puppet is made to totter along the path and is helped gently into the hole. There, the puppet sits breathing heavily and takes a long time to shakily look around the hole. As Tzachi Zamir observes in his article “Puppets”, “slowing down emotion, in effect, breaking down emotional expression into discrete units, enables puppets to represent by embodying a fragment of a larger whole ...”(407). The old man’s tiredness at the end of his life and the contrary comfort he finds in the hole that has had different meanings at different times in his life is expressed eloquently. In contrast, Tan’s lines which follow this sequence seem rather banal “Only regret is we don’t have any children. I suppose Andy doesn’t mind. If he did mind he would have left me long ago.”

TC Chong incorporates puppetry in his play *First Family* as he did in *BDDBS* although the juxtaposition of puppets with human actors creates a very different effect. The play was written and directed by TC Chong in 2006 and performed at the Drama Centre Theatre from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> July. He states in an interview “After *Devil*, which was very dark and emotionally draining to do, we decided to do something directly opposite...We wanted to get out of our comfort zones and take on new challenges” (Hong "Fingers up for Gongfu") Described variously as “totally irreverent and off-the-wall..” (Chew "In First Family, It's the Emperor, the Assassins ... And the Clowns"); “..a satire on the Hong Kong gongfu flicks of the 70s..” (Lye); “..infectious blend of slapstick comedy and affectionate parody...” (Cheong "Good Clean Fun with Dirty Laundry") *First Family* is certainly a departure in subject matter from his earlier play. The storyline is fairly straightforward – it tells the story of an

ancient kingdom, ravaged by war, that unexpectedly receives help from six daughters (five of whom have impressive gongfu powers) born of a prostitute. With their aid, the tide of war soon shifts and the kingdom's armies are victorious. The grateful emperor, indebted to the daughters, promises his son's hand to one of them, to be chosen by their mother. This leads to the main plot involving the emperor's assassination, jealousy and resentment among the daughters over the one chosen by their mother, and the prince's hidden agenda.

However, the way the story is told is definitely not straightforward – TC Chong uses a combination of shadow puppetry, slapstick comedy and an “affectionate parody” of 1960’s and 70’s Chinese martial art films to create a madcap version of the story. The first tongue-in-cheek announcement to the audience before the curtain rises sets the humorous tone when they are asked to switch off all mobile devices and to check-in their weapons with the ushers; anyone caught violating this rule would get their hands chopped off. The play begins with a very dry, funny voice-over narrating the story during the opening sequence of shadow puppetry which is a blend of Wayang-Kulit-type puppets and shadows cast by human actors wearing masks.<sup>11</sup> Thus the Emperor is represented by puppet as well as an actor in a mask. The director intermingles the two types of shadows in a seamless manner in telling the story - when he needs the ‘Emperor’ or the ‘Rat’ to climb mountains or move through time and space he uses the puppets; when the characters speak, he uses the actors in masks and at times he would have the puppets conversing or interacting with the actors in masks. The beleaguered Emperor is advised by

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<sup>11</sup> The masks used by the actors as part of shadow play were two-dimensional cutouts of faces that mimicked the puppets. The actors were always in profile when creating the shadows.

the Rat to seek the help of a pregnant harlot in saving his empire. In contrast to the dry, voice-over narrating the story in English, the Emperor speaks in a sonorous Cantonese<sup>12</sup>. As advised by the Rat he takes the harlot back to his palace where, as her pregnancy advances, her stomach grows bigger and bigger and eventually eclipses the palace. Shadow puppetry proves very useful to the director here in the mixture of myth and the ridiculous where the fantastic and the implausible are depicted on stage with the clever use of lights, distance and puppetry. The harlot keeps getting bigger as the six children that she is carrying refuse to be born. The Emperor decides to crawl into her womb to entice them to be born and when finally the harlot's waters break, the resultant flood drowns the Emperor's enemies and a new era of prosperity is established with the birth of the six daughters, the "First Family".

This is a completely farcical and implausible scene that is elegantly carried out with the clever use of shadows cast by objects, puppets and human actors. The six daughters are 'born' and emerge from behind the shadow screen into the light. All the costumes worn by the human actors are parodies of period Chinese costumes worn in gongfu films. The six girls are played by a mixture of races and genders and speak in Chinese and English. The variations in materiality – human, mask and shadow puppet – further reinforces the divide between the real and the unreal and at the same time the combination highlights the far-fetched nature of the narrative.

The acting style used by the human actors in front of the screen is in complete contrast to the elegant black shadows - a mixture of gongfu-style

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<sup>12</sup> Projections on either side of the stage provided translations of the Cantonese and Mandarin dialogues in the play.

fighting moves married with a hysterical, campy, operatic acting. This juxtaposition of styles highlights the ridiculous and enhances the satiric narrative. TC Chong cleverly uses many visual devices apart from shadow play throughout the play. One such device is movable panels that are utilised in various ways throughout the play; for example, the panels become palanquins carrying the shadow occupants across the stage to create the effect of a marketplace. In another sequence, shadows of arms on the panels represent the monks in a monastery. However, despite the frenetic acting, brilliant visuals and the elegant shadows the play begins to drag as it moves through the subsequent scenes. It is quickly established that while the Mother wants the Prince to marry the youngest daughter, all the other daughters long to marry him. But the repeated dialogues that lead to repeated fights among the daughters begin to pall. As one critic remarked, “but after this opening sequence, the play waned and never quite recovered. The pace slowed and scenes seemed to repeat each other without progression...” (Lyon "Family Valued"). Another noted “however, it soon collapses into tired mediocrity with an uninspired story, a more-than-obvious villain and a generous helping of melodrama and camp” (Lye). The campy melodrama of the human actors overwhelms the elegance and simplicity of the shadow puppetry and the juxtaposition of human actors and puppetry in this play seems to create an aesthetic imbalance. Perhaps this is because puppetry is used in this play mainly to help with depicting the fantastic and thus become ‘gimmicky’ rather than being an organic part of the story. This is not to say that the puppetry was not well done or that the actors performed badly; it had many visual devices that were exciting. However, it was the way in which the different elements of



puppetry, acting, visual devices and dialogue combined that made the comedy seem forced and imbalanced at times.

With *Turn By Turn We Turn*, Chong Tze Chien's experimentations with puppets is taken to a different level where the puppets are not only an important part of the play but the puppets and their puppeteers are also the subject of the narrative itself. The narrative starts in 1912 China and chronologically presents different episodes in the life of puppet master Bo Yuan and his troupe of puppeteers. Woven into this narrative is the story of the Monkey King, Sun Wu Kong, which is performed by the puppets and the puppeteers. This device of play within a play and the juxtaposition of the puppet story with the human story makes the performance doubly self-reflexive – on the one hand, the story of the Monkey King, mirrors the struggles in the life of the fictional puppeteer; on the other, a theatre company that works with puppets performs a play about puppets and the joys and heartbreaks of the puppeteers who work with them. This juxtaposition also highlights the plight of traditional art forms such as Chinese hand-puppetry in a world increasingly unwelcoming and apathetic. The play interrogates the role of an artist and his idealistic passion in a world with rapidly changing political and economic ideologies and technology. The genesis and the development of this play emphasise the company's commitment to puppetry and their stated ambition of "pushing the envelope of what puppetry and puppets can do to theatre" – the project was inspired by a serendipitous donation of more than a hundred and eighty hand puppets in excellent condition. TC Chong states in an interview "It's been a while since we've revisited this form of traditional Chinese hand puppetry. I felt it would be

quite significant and meaningful for us to look at this art form, resurrect the puppets and revisit our roots to see if we can breathe new life into them” (Tan). The task of breathing new life into the puppets was facilitated in 2010 when the company received a grant from the Arts Creation Fund and TC Chong had his company's actors undergo intensive training with puppet master Li Bofen and his son Li Yi Hsin from China. While they trained the actors to use the numerous hand-puppets, Chong started to put together the script from various interviews he conducted with Li Bofen and his son about puppetry, training, the formation and running of a puppet troupe and life in China during the Cultural Revolution. While the dramatic trajectory is chronological, the play is not historical as much as personal and intimate as it chronicles events in the life of the fictional puppet master. He wrote the play originally in English and had Ong Kian Sin translate it into Mandarin. For non-Mandarin speakers, the translation was projected as surtitles.

The projections used throughout the play serve another purpose besides providing a translation. In a Brechtian fashion, the projections comment on the action, indicate the time and location of particular scenes and finally provide a historical context for the scene. An example of the first would be the projection used during the beginning of the prologue:

Master said... in our world, there are two levels: one that is above us where the gods and deities, emperors and heroes roam. The other is the level below where we are. All that the audience pays for and wants to see – is right above our heads.

They are not interested in what goes on below (*Turn by Turn We Turn 1*).<sup>13</sup>

The levels are metaphoric – they allude to the lives of the puppeteers and by extension all artists. The spectator is only interested in the creation and not the creator. Both the projection and the sequence that follows in the prologue are highly symbolic and surreal: the master Bo Yuan is dead and when he is asked by his wife what he would like to take with him, he gets up and declares that he wants and needs nothing now. His students protest that the puppets are now orphaned with nobody wanting them. In a desperate attempt at survival, the puppets cut off the puppet master’s hands and run off with them declaring that now they will never let him go. The Master claiming that he needs nothing now that he is dead can be read as signifying an ‘ashes to ashes’ existence. However, the Master’s death itself signifies a changing of times – it is not just the artist who is dead, it is a whole art form that is dying out.

While the story is very historical and rooted in time and place, the *mise-en-scène* by contrast is very contemporary. The set designed by TC Chong is minimalistic consisting of a “skeletal framework of a puppet stage which shows two levels” (*Turn by Turn We Turn 1*), two sloping railings traversing the stage. The lower railing gains height from stage left to right and ‘turns’ and starts to gain height from stage right to left. The railings have strings looped around them. This starkness is contrasted by the rich hand-puppets hanging on the walls. The music in the play is not the traditional score one would expect to accompany the traditional puppets as Darren Ng does not

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<sup>13</sup> Script curtsey of The Finger Players.

use a pentatonic scale. As TC Chong stated in an interview, “We’re not using traditional music, for example. It’s definitely unconventional..” (Mayo). Similarly Lim Woan Wen uses modern technique to light the puppets and the actors. The puppeteers are dressed simply in black clothes that suggest China but are not period specific. The stark colours of the puppeteers are brilliantly off set by the colourful costumes of their tiny counterparts – the puppets. By making the puppeteer’s costume non-period specific, TC Chong brings in a suggestion of universality into this story of a dying art form. Furthermore the apposition of the historical with the contemporary highlights the self-reflexivity of the play.

By juxtaposing the puppet play with the human play, TC Chong calls attention to the materiality and theatricality of both puppets and actors. The audience constantly negotiate between the two. According to Margaret Williams in her essay “Including the Audience: The Idea of ‘the Puppet’ and the Real Spectator”, puppetry’s “greatest resource is the enigmatic and protean quality of materiality.” She argues that watching puppetry is a “constant negotiation between the spectator and stage figures and objects, living and inanimate, moving and static, all possible selves or something that is not a self at all”(127). Whereas, according to Jifi Veltrusky, puppetry explicitly requires its audiences to “explore the ambiguous boundary between the living and nonliving, without necessarily equating them with the animate and inanimate” (qtd. inWilliams 127). What is similar to both is the concept of negotiation.

The projection for Scene One sets the time and historical context – “1912 China. At 10 Master gives his first stage performance. The Last

Emperor of China abdicates his throne” (*Turn by Turn We Turn* 4). The puppeteers enact the first traditional segment - the birth of the Monkey King. The story of Bo Yuan in this scene mirrors this birth by showing the beginnings of Bo’s artistic passion and life-long obsession with the Monkey King puppet. The hubris of the Monkey King is reflected in Bo’s obsessive practice and immersion in the art form and a wilful blindness to the reality around him that does not involve his two constants - the Monkey King and the practice of his art.

Similarly, TC Chong weaves the other four traditional segments of puppetry into the story of Bo’s life to symbolically highlight aspects of his life - just as the Monkey King wanted to protect his kingdom and his people, Bo Yuan wanted to protect his troupe and their livelihood. The Monkey King’s conceit in gaining the pillar that supports the earth from the Dragon King, thereby destabilising it, is reflected in Bo’s willingness to do anything for his troupe to survive, even if it means performing for collaborators of the hated Japanese. And again, just as the Monkey King was subdued and placed under confinement, Bo Yuan is subdued at various times – first by the Japanese, then by the communists when the Communist Party of China establish the People’s Republic of China and all art troupes are professionalised. At this point he is symbolically confined and decides to let his disciple take over the troupe. When he finally decides to perform again, his release from this self-imposed confinement is mirrored by the Goddess of Mercy freeing the Monkey King and sending him on a westward journey, and this is echoed in Bo and his troupe traveling west to perform in Romania. And finally the Monkey King and his followers reaching the fiery mountain and being engulfed in fire is

symbolic of the 1966 Cultural Revolution setting fire to cultural traditions and customs and replacing it with a 'modern' ideology and customs.

Another theme that runs strongly through the play is the struggle for the traditional performer to survive in the fast-changing political and modern world. Bo epitomises the traditional performer who practices an age-old art that has been passed down to him by his master (in this case, his father), and which he wants to pass down in a similar fashion to his most deserving disciple. While in this play he is a Chinese hand-puppet artist, he could well be a Noh or Kabuki performer from Japan, a Mak Yong performer from Malaysia, a Kudiattam performer from India – the conflict is the same. This adherence to and reverence of tradition makes any change extremely difficult for him. He loses Ah Heng to communism with this intransigence, he loses the respect of Ah Liang and other members of his troupe when he opts for survival over nationalistic feeling and finally he gives up the leadership of his troupe as he is unable to cope with the changing political climates.

TC Chong employs a fine irony towards the end of the play – just when things are settling down politically and times are getting better for the troupe, some members of the troupe give up the art and drift away in different directions. When the Master's Wife exhorts the others not to give up, Ah Liang replies "I don't want to suffer for entertainment's sake any more. It's not giving up. It's letting go" (*Turn by Turn We Turn* 41). This irony is echoed when the Master comes to Singapore to visit some of his ex-troupe members and disciples and asks them why they are not practicing their art anymore; they reply rather lamely that it is difficult. He asks:

Why? In the past, China was poor and power changed hands every day. Times were difficult, but that didn't stop you. Singapore has had the same government for as long as I can remember. There's money everywhere. What's there to stop you now?" (*Turn by Turn We Turn* 45).

TC Chong's playwriting and direction employs multiple sign systems concurrently and is strongly reminiscent of Brechtian theatre. Bruce McConachie in his case study "Brecht directs *Mother Courage*" (Zarrilli 450-58) analyses Brecht's successful usage of three sign systems in his landmark production with the Berliner Ensemble in 1948. McConachie identifies Brecht's usage of scenery, lighting and images on the cyclorama that convey the carnage caused by war as comprising the *Universal History* that underlined the general horror of war — stage images as relevant to his 1948 audience as to the historical situation of the play. This is distinct from the costumes and props used by the actors which were historically specific and the sign systems of these naturalist costumes and props for the play were intended to draw the audience into a realist illusion of *Specific History*. And finally, Brecht continually reminded spectators that they were in a theatre - at the top of each scene, a sign suspended from the flies told the audience in large block letters where, in Europe, the scene was set; each scene began and ended with an actor, in full view of the audience, drawing a half curtain across the proscenium opening and throughout, the spectators could see the lighting instruments, which were not masked from view – all employed to generate Brecht's ideal of *Verfremdungseffekt* - and this is what McConachie calls the *Theatrical Present*. McConachie explains

In his organization of the sign systems and his deployment of specific signs at significant moments in the production, Brecht encouraged his 1949 audience to apply Courage's Specific History to their own Theatrical (and socio-political) Present. The link uniting past and present was through Universal History, Brecht's Marxist understanding of the on-going dynamics of economics and power (Zarrilli 455).

I am not suggesting that TC Chong deliberately utilised Brechtian technique in order to create a socio-political awareness of society. But an analysis of the juxtaposition of puppets and human actors allow for three levels of significance, which, borrowing from McConachie with a little modification, I call Specific History, Universal History and the Metatheatrical.

Unlike Brecht, TC Chong does not use realism alone to create the specific history. Instead the very art form – Chinese hand-puppets and traditionally trained puppeteers signify the culture with the projection, at times, indicating the time and place. Similarly, the narrative, the dialogue and the choice of language – Mandarin – reinforce the specific history. The hand exercises done by the actors, the costume of the puppets and the actors and the puppetry segments again highlight the specific history.

As stated earlier, while the rich costumes of the puppets suggest the art form and the costumes of the actors are allusive of China, the set is very neutral and contemporary as is the lighting and sound design. This universalises the struggle of traditional artists in the contemporary world. While Bo and the troupe are Chinese hand-puppeteers, the story of their



struggle to hold onto an art form and a way of life is universal history. Similarly the metaphor of the puppets chopping off Bo's hands and running away with them symbolises a desperate attempt and desire to survive. Themes within the play such as the love of the artists for the art form –“Oh I miss the smell of puppets! They have been locked inside the crate for too long! I can still smell the sweat in them.” (*Turn by Turn We Turn* 22); the struggle art faces with the bureaucracy, as portrayed with subtle irony and humour in the last scene; and the fate of art when battered by different political ideologies signify universal history.

The juxtaposition of specific and universal history as well as the use of the play within the play creates the metatheatrical. The play is very self-reflexive and illuminates the status and life of artists in society. From the beginning projection, there are dialogues scattered throughout the play that are blatantly self-reflexive. This is evident, for instance, in Ah Liang's rather bitter speech about the status of artists in society to the Master's Wife:

The wind has changed direction again! Yesterday we were ghosts and invisible! Our life and death were of no concern to them. The next moment, they wanted to own us, making everything we did a reflection of their good will. Soon after, we were banished to the 18<sup>th</sup> level of hell because we were considered worse than demons. Now, they are art critics who think that there is a right and proper way to do art. We are their puppets at their disposal. We have to move, laugh and cry

according to their whims and fancies, whichever way the wind blows (*Turn by Turn We Turn* 38).

Bo Yuan's dialogue at the end of the play just before this death is again metatheatrical:

WE are the fools! The artists! The world's puppets! The stage is our projection of an idealised world, illusions created out of our foolishness! Our dedication is our liberation! Such sweet torture! Such dark enlightenment! (*Turn by Turn We Turn* 47)

TC Chong uses the signification created by the specific, the universal and the metatheatrical to create a performance where we are emotionally drawn to the plight of the characters, while at the same time are made aware of the self-reflexivity of the performance – a deliberate choice to stage a play about puppets and puppeteers by a company known for its use of puppetry in their performances. One reviewer from *The Business Times* noted the metatheatricality of the production “since the Finger Players are in some sense also playing themselves, the production becomes even richer in metaphor and imagery. 'I'm a puppeteer, acting is the only thing I know,' says Bo forlornly, making us think not only of the personas Bo wears both on and off-stage, but also those of the actor Ong, and of the masks all actors wear in general.”<sup>14</sup>

The four productions analysed in this chapter, *BDDBS*, *Twisted*, *First Family* and *Turn By Turn*, are very varied in their subject matter which ranges from life in contemporary Singapore to an exploration of the human life to a farcical parody of Gong-fu films. The Finger Players use puppets and objects

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<sup>14</sup> Arts Critic, "Hands of History," *The Business Times* 22 April 2011.

organically in all these productions and the juxtaposition highlights the interplay between the real and the imaginary. In *BDDS* the 'devil' puppets are the material manifestations of the fears that haunt the characters while in *First Family*, the shadow puppets allow for the visualisation of the fantastical and farcical. The juxtaposition of human actors and puppets in *Turn By Turn* allows for a self-reflexive exploration of the life of an artist. The use of puppets and objects contribute both to the narrative of the stories and to providing additional layers of meaning. The next chapter continues the exploration of the effects of juxtaposition of puppets and human actors with a focus on the nature of puppet 'acting' and human actor acting.

### *Chapter 3*

#### *Blurring the Distinction: Puppet as Actor and Actor as Puppet*

Penny Francis includes Brunella Eruli's essay "The Use Of Puppetry And The Theatre Of Objects In The Performing Arts Of Today" (141-44) in her chapter on "Aesthetics", where Eruli asks rhetorically why modern theatre directors show an interest in puppets and suggests that placing the presence of a flesh and blood actor alongside puppets provokes a deep questioning of the role of the actor. Eruli proposes that:

The levelling of the traditional codes of puppetry has resulted in contemporary creators understanding all that the terse idiom of puppet gestures – that body that barely touches the ground, that theatrical object floating in a space where interior and exterior tend to merge together - could offer in terms of fertile ideas for the development of the contemporary actor. The gap between gestures and words is no longer considered the sign of a poor actor but now acts as an invitation to explore the shadows that exist at the heart of objects (Francis 142).

In almost all of their productions TFP seem to have accepted this metaphoric invitation and placed live actors alongside puppets and experimented with the different natures of puppet 'acting' and human actor acting. Whenever this juxtaposition exists in their plays, the audience is constantly negotiating the differences between the signs produced to communicate their character by puppet actors and those produced by live actors. This negotiation becomes increasingly complex when the distinction

between puppet and actors gets blurred as in the case of *Furthest North, Deepest South, I'm Just A Piano Teacher* and *Cat, Lost And Found*.

*FNDS* was co-produced by TFP and Mime Unlimited in 2004 and directed by Christina Sergeant of Mime Unlimited. Chong Tze Chien was commissioned by Sergeant and Tan Beng Tian to write a play based on Gavin Menzies' 2002 book *1421 - The Year China Discovered America*, a highly contested book which traces the journey of a eunuch Admiral Cheng Ho and his fleet of ships around the world. The play does not concern itself with the historical accuracy of the facts in the book; instead the main concern of the play is the relationship between Emperor Zhu Di and his eunuch friend Cheng Ho. This was the first play produced by TFP after TC Chong took over as Company Director with the stated objective of producing a "theatre with imagination"<sup>15</sup>. Mime Unlimited is a company known for its innovative use of mime, physical theatre and Commedia dell'Arte techniques in their productions and this expertise is merged with TFP's experience with puppetry. The resulting juxtaposition of mime and physical theatre with puppetry creates a unique blend of acting and adds layers of meaning to the narrative. The cast included members from both companies and the puppets were conceptualised and designed by TFP.

This analysis is based on the 2004 production that took place in the Asian Civilizations Museum Auditorium and not the 2006 production at the Esplanade Theatre Studio. The play begins and ends in an unspecified time and place, a limbo, where Cheng Ho and his sailor meet certain odd characters and the story of Cheng Ho and Emperor Zhu Di is told as a flashback. The set,

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<sup>15</sup> As stated in the program.

also designed by TC Chong, consists of three mobile platforms which are used in different configurations and different times. There is no attempt to create a realistic, historical set or props and the costumes are more allusive than historically accurate. The director uses the mobile platforms, simple props and actors' bodies imaginatively and innovatively to iconically create ships, the Emperor's court and foreign lands.

*FNDS* is not the first play written by a Singaporean playwright about Cheng Ho. The late Kuo Pao Kun wrote *Descendants Of The Eunuch Admiral* in 1995 which has castration as its central theme and draws parallels between the power struggles of court eunuchs and modern-day office workers. In contrast to Kuo's social concerns, TC Chong's focus is on the personal. He thematically explores the difficult friendship between master and servant, the individual's struggle with circumstances, the meaning of manhood and Cheng Ho's struggle to regain it.

The play opens with Cheng Ho and a sailor who get blown off course in their ship and land in an unspecified time and place where they encounter three puppet characters: a 'spaceman' rod puppet, a 'talking book' puppet and a stiletto shoe anthropomorphised to resemble a female torso. All the characters appear to have lost their way "We are all lost in place and time" – either literally or metaphorically, and meet up in this limbo like space. The 'talking book' is a hand puppet that claims to be Virginia Woolf and the shoe puppet claims to be Imelda Marcos. They are present in limbo because each of them has "gone too far, physically, emotionally and morally". This limbo serves as a framing device for the rest of the narrative as Cheng Ho, when

questioned by the puppets begins to tell his story. The playwright and director made the deliberate choice of having a woman, actress Fanny Kee, play Cheng Ho. TC Chong mentions in an interview that he was reading Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* at the same time as he was writing the play and the influence of the book is seen in his choice of a woman to act as Cheng Ho and further in his creating a 'talking book' puppet representing Woolf (Hong "Theatre They Wrote").

The puppets have different functions within the play. As Cheng Ho begins to speak of his childhood as a eunuch, he goes behind a screen and comes out with a string puppet version of his younger self. He becomes a puppeteer and 'walks' the puppet to the bench in front of the screen and moves behind the screen. Another string puppet, the younger version of Zhu Di, also appears on the bench, with his puppeteer hidden behind the screen (at this point, it is not clear to the audience if the two puppeteers hidden behind the screen are the two actors playing the characters). Cheng Ho meets the young Zhu Di and they get into a fight over the question of Cheng Ho's masculinity. The use of puppets here highlights the funny yet poignant difficulty of a eunuch trying to urinate and later defending his manhood by beating up the future prince. As the two boys make up and decide to be friends, the puppets and the screen are removed and we see the actors playing the two friends strung up like puppets – a visual metaphor for the two characters' lack of control over their destinies which is one of the central themes of the play. Cheng Ho does not want to be a eunuch servant and Zhu Di wants to be the next Emperor instead of his brother, who is the rightful heir to the throne. As they hatch the plot to assassinate Zhu Di's brother and take over the Empire,

the two actors move around the stage like puppets, with their strings being held by two anonymous black-clad puppeteers. Cheng Ho agrees to help Zhu Di in return for his freedom and so Zhu Di literally cuts his strings; Cheng Ho returns the favour as they decide to make their own destinies. They then 'kill' the puppet Emperor by beheading it. Thus, through the device of puppetry the director and her artistic team are able to visually and creatively depict the emancipation and empowerment of these two characters.

Cheng Ho, who is played by a woman acting as a eunuch, morphs into a puppeteer holding the strings of a young Cheng Ho puppet and morphs further into a puppet whose strings are held by a puppeteer. The boundaries between gender/actor/puppeteer/puppet are blurred in an effort to add layers of meaning to the narrative. Cheng Ho is a metaphoric puppet who has no control over his destiny and he desperately struggles to assert himself, first as a boy and then as a man who wants to be his friend Zhu Di's equal. From a theatrical point of view, four combinations of the puppet - puppeteer relationship are explored in this production. When the puppeteer is concealed, as he or she is in most traditional performances, the attention is centred on the puppet. When the puppeteer is exposed and moves into the same space as the puppet, the relationship and the interaction between the two is brought to light. Further, when the puppeteer is also an actor, this increases the complexity of the interaction and presents a contrapuntal relationship between the actor and the puppet. Lastly when the actor becomes a puppet, a metaphorical dialectic of slave – master or oppressed – oppressor is created. This range of theatrical relationships explored here also draws attention to the corporeality of the actor and the materiality of the puppet: the flesh and blood body of the actor when



placed alongside the wood/cloth/wire body of the puppet call attention to the difference in the kinesthesia of the two bodies. This is further highlighted when the actor moves like a string puppet and mimes drawing an arrow and shooting it or mimes opening books and reading them. This concept of having actors behave as puppets has antecedents in theatre history. Blumenthal offers examples of writers and directors from the eighteenth century to twentieth century experimenting with actors behaving like puppets (251-55). She also offers the example of Kabuki theatre where during emotional climaxes, the use of “ningyo buri”, human actors acting like Bunraku puppets with black-clad puppeteers pretending to move them around, is a common practice (253).

Puppets, as mentioned before, provide the playwright and the director enormous latitude in staging – puppets in this play represent children; they are beheaded and towards the end of the play represent Zhu Di’s dead body. They are also used to stage the fantastic – the spaceman, the Woolf book and the Marcos shoe. A further usage is the mixture of human actors and puppets as the ‘Mandarins’ of Emperor Zhu Di. Three actors hold four life-sized puppets in front of them; all are dressed identically and form the group. These puppets have a metaphoric meaning that is different from the metaphor created when Cheng Ho and Zhu Di behave as string puppets. The Mandarin puppets metaphorically represent the nameless, faceless subjects of the empire. As Tillis explains the puppet is a metaphor in two ways – puppet as a metaphor of humanity and when certain persons are viewed as “puppets” (“Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet.” 252). Apart from the metaphoric meaning, the mixture of human actor and puppets as Mandarins heightens comic moments

such as when the Mandarins suddenly change their opinions when faced with the wrath of the Emperor.

Aesthetically, the puppet and puppet-like movements are in contrast to the fluid, dance-like movements of the concubine or the frenetic, dramatic movements of Cheng Ho, his sailor and the ships. Another contrast is provided when the director uses human actors to represent the inanimate objects – an inversion of puppetry where the objects are animated: Sergeant has two black-clad actors ‘form’ a fireplace into which Zhu Di mimes tossing in documents. The actors, who are kneeling facing each other to form the fireplace, raise their upstage arms holding red streamers to simulate fire. Another interesting combination of puppet-mask and actors is when Cheng Ho and his sailor enter the stage riding on a ‘giraffe’ and an ‘elephant’ – two creatures reminiscent of Taymor’s puppet-animals in *The Lion King*. The animals comprise two actors, the front actor holding the puppet head of the elephant and the back actor holding the puppet head of the giraffe. Once Cheng Ho cuts down the dead Emperor-puppet, we see that the actor carrying him on his shoulders is the same actor who played Zhu Di, without the Emperor costume, and he voices the dead Emperor’s lines.

In the final analysis, *FNDS* is a deconstructive reading of Cheng Ho’s story which focuses on the meaning of manhood, destiny and the difficult friendship between a master and his servant. The director and the playwright mix different forms and disciplines with great felicity to mine new meanings juxtaposing a quasi-historic story with the contemporary - the spaceman, Marcos, Woolf, the Miss Universe pageant, Eagles’ *Hotel California* etc. One

critic found these references rather juvenile and the comic movements produced by them rather forced. However, in my opinion these references and the juxtaposition of puppets, mime and physical theatre are what distinguish this play from the other retellings of Cheng Ho's story (Lyon "The World on a String").

Oliver Chong's *Piano Teacher* (2006) further blurs the boundary between puppet and actor by conflating them and creating the 'humanette' puppet. The humanette puppet is described by Penny Francis as a "curious kind of puppet" - part human, the manipulator's head and sometimes hands; and part puppet, body, arms and legs (67). The puppeteer's head is substituted for the puppets and sometimes the hands too. The puppet body at times hangs from the puppeteer's neck and it is often used in 'Black Theatre'<sup>16</sup> or as a table top puppet. David Currell, in his book *The Complete Book of Puppetry*, also describes the humanette as having the capacity to be extremely funny (169); the incongruity between the larger human head and the smaller puppet body seemingly moving of its own accord can be humorous.

O. Chong wrote, directed, and designed the set for the play and considering *Piano Teacher* is the first play that he has written and directed it is remarkably innovative both in the design and use of puppetry, and the subject. The influence and contribution of O. Chong's background as a designer, a toy maker, a puppeteer and a physical actor is very obvious in his writing and direction. In my opinion, it is O. Chong's visual design, use and direction of the 'humanette' puppets and a script that is darkly funny, surreal and at the

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<sup>16</sup> 'Black Theatre' is a type of performance lit from either side of the stage, creating a corridor of illumination or white light in which the puppets perform while the puppeteers, most often dressed in black, remain mostly unseen.

same time thought provoking that sets the production apart. The humanette puppets create a strikingly unusual visual aesthetic and furthermore add layers of complexity to the play.

The narrative mirrors typical Singaporean life – a small, crowded apartment inhabited by a couple with their grown-up son and a foreign domestic worker. While the plot of the play is rather dramatic – the maid kills the mother, the son kills the father and the maid to cover up his involvement – it can at a stretch be seen as dramatizations of sensational or tragic stories that we hear or read about in real life. But where this play steps into the surreal is in the way the director conflates the puppet and the actor to create the ‘humanette’ puppet. His innovative usage of puppetry, acting, stage and text produces what he describes as a “black comedy” (Hong "Oliver's Twist"). The characters are archetypes – The Loser Son, the Neurotic Mum, The Distant Father and the Black-Faced Maid - and his choice of an all-female cast to play these characters further distances the audience from the real to the surreal. The characters are familiar – the over-ambitious mother who has high aspirations for her son and wants him to be a concert pianist and who is emotionally manipulative, a compulsive pack-rat, cloyingly devoted to her husband and cruel to her maid; the distant, authoritarian father who speaks little but whose silence effectively expresses his disapproval and displeasure, a hard man; the Loser Son who teaches piano to students in a community centre and is rejected time and again when he tries to get a date with a woman that he admires. The Mother prefers her vision of him as a pianist and the Father views him as a failure. For the Maid, he is salvation from her pathetic life. The Maid is obsessed with food (which she lacks) and, by extension, cooking shows.

The humanette puppets elevate the play from what could easily have been a melodramatic tragedy to a surreal tale which is very funny at times and full of pathos at others. Critic Lyon describes this as a play where “the people behind this production have married a minute perceptiveness of human flaw and foible to an exuberant fairground mirror aesthetic and they have produced something with humour, truth and poetic force” (Lyon "Is This Adagio I See before Me?"). However, O. Chong's unusual aesthetic of human heads with puppet body is different from the other descriptions of humanettes used in puppet theatre. Normally, the puppeteer's body is in the background – only her face and at times her hands are seen by the audience. In *Piano Teacher*, the actors' bodies are as visible<sup>17</sup> and as important as their faces. Each of the actors exhibited a detailed physicality unique to the character and they four carry pint-sized puppet bodies around their necks, which they manipulate with their hands; the actors' faces, meanwhile, are totally visible and serve as the puppet's heads. It is the combination of the physical movements and gestures and the way the actors manipulate the puppets that create the persona of the character.

From the shambling, swinging, heavy footed gait of the Son to the tripping gait of the Mum, each of the actors' has a distinctive way of walking, moving the head and gesturing that was meticulously worked out and maintained throughout the play. O. Chong, who is himself trained in Commedia dell'Arte, has a fine understanding of creating a physical language for a character. The puppet bodies robbed the actors of their three-dimensional

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<sup>17</sup> The lighting designer lit the stage in such a way that anything below the level of the puppets' feet was in darkness. However, this did not hide the physicality of the actors.

humanity but in turn gave them a gaudy cartoonish thinness that encouraged them to become vivid caricatures with semi-articulated, masklike faces (the actors used a white base to highlight the forehead) - archetypes of need, weakness or anxiety. Tan Beng Tian, who plays the Loser Son, is dressed like the other three actors in black while the puppet body wears a shirt with a bow tie which creates a nerdy look which is accentuated by the pants worn too high on the waist to highlight the potbelly. She creates a physicality for the character that showcases his diffidence, his discomfort in social interactions with his peers, and his unhappiness at home; the character emerges as an immature, middle-aged, timid, whiny, ineffectual man.

Jo Kwek who plays the Neurotic Mum alternatively floated and scurried across the stage. The set of the head, the coquettish and irritating giggle, the movements of elbows (the puppets arms lie on the arms of the puppeteers), her 'dances' during her songs paint the picture of a needy but manipulative mother who seems to live for her son and her husband. The body of the puppet is clothed in a red cheongsam and Kwek puts on an apron on the puppet body for certain sequences. The Distant Father too moves in a distinctive stiff-legged fashion that makes him seem larger than life. Judy Ngo who plays the Father, created a distinctive head movement, a circular roll of the head ending in an emphatic toss reminiscent of martial characters in Chinese Opera. Each gesture and movement of the Father is strong, decisive and executed with force. The literally Black-Faced (they had blackened the actor's face) Maid is played by Koh Leng Leng with her puppet body in raggedy shorts and shirt highlighting her scrawniness. Lyon compliments her acting and considers it a remarkable physical performance. "She endowed the

Maid with three moods: a childlike eagerness, a kicked-puppy anxiety, and a blank vacancy” (“Is This Adagio I See before Me?”). She created this by her angular walk, the side-to-side tilt of her head and her wide-eyed look.

Along with creating the physical movements that enhance the character of their puppets the actors have the equally important task of being puppeteers. Francis notes that contemporary theatre companies that work with puppets employ two types of puppeteers – trained puppeteers who work alongside other actors in creating the performance and actors who are trained to use puppets for a particular show (91-95). An example of the former is *War Horse* (2007) produced by the National Theatre, England in collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company, Cape Town, where the puppets were designed and manipulated by trained puppeteers (Francis 77-80). In *Piano Teacher*, O. Chong uses a combination of the two, with Tan being a trained puppeteer and the other three actors trained to work with the puppets for the show – what Francis calls ‘actor-puppeteer’(92). Puppeteers are normally focussed entirely on transferring vitality into the puppet thereby revealing its particular personality, physicality and vocality while remaining neutral, however, by choosing to use humanette puppets, the director brings in an added layer of complexity into the work of the actor-puppeteer. Francis warns of a potential danger in the case of actor-puppeteers when the actor forgets to project into the puppet and it becomes a mere prop. The complexity of having to direct energy and giving presence and focus to the puppet while at the same time using your body movements and face and head to fuse seamlessly with the puppet is certainly an arduous task and one that the actors in *Piano Teacher* achieve admirably. However, it is this very complexity – the conflation of the

actor and the puppet - in *Piano Teacher* that distinguishes it as a performance. Reviewers lauded the performance of these ‘actor-puppeteers’<sup>18</sup>, and the play won the award for Best Ensemble at the 7<sup>th</sup> Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards.

Tillis in his essay “The Actor Occluded: Puppet Theatre and Acting Theory” in *Theatre Topics* suggests that in puppetry, we should conceive of the actor-puppeteer as the producer of the signs that communicate a dramatic character, and not as the site of those signs; in fact, the puppet is the site of those signs. He explains, “[T]he puppet replaces the actor as the site of signification: it has a physical presence in front of the audience (although this presence is material rather than corporeal), it moves (or rather, is given movement), and it speaks (or rather, is spoken for).” (“The Actor Occluded: Puppet Theatre and Acting Theory” 111) He goes on to argue that in puppet theatre, the actor, even if he is the producer of the signs, is occluded as the site of signification is the puppet. This occlusion can be visual – as in the case of puppet theatre where the puppeteers are hidden from view of the audience or “figurative” (“The Actor Occluded: Puppet Theatre and Acting Theory” 113) where the attention of the audience is directed away from the puppeteer to the puppet. He suggests that Bunraku theatre is an example of figurative occlusion where the puppeteers and the narrator are in full view of the audience. However, this occlusion becomes complicated when working with humanette puppets. With the conflation of actor – puppeteer, the site of signs is both the

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<sup>18</sup> The reviews - Clara Chow, "All the Right Notes," The Straits Times 10 October 2006.; June Cheong, "Play Group," The Straits Times 15 February 2007.; Sangeetha Madhavan, "With Humans as Actors, Its More Than a Puppet Show," The Business Times 29 September 2006.; Mathew Lyon, Is This Adagio I See before Me?, 07-10-2006 2006, Available: <http://www.inkpot.com/theatre/06reviews/1007,pianteac.ml.html>, 10-02-2012.



actors head and the puppet's body. The only visible occlusion in the performance is the area of the actors' bodies below the level of the puppet feet as this is deliberately not illuminated by the lights.

Tillis uses the word 'occluded' rather than stating that the puppeteer might or might not present herself to the audience to emphasise the inescapable tension that exists within the puppet itself - which is a material object and at the same time a signifier of life. He reiterates his earlier argument that this "tension presents an ontological paradox that is at the heart of the puppet's ubiquitous appeal: the puppet pleasurably challenges the audience's understanding of object and life" and that the signs of life sited on the puppet must themselves be produced by life – the live performance of the actor/puppeteer. Thus the puppet

invariably exposes the presence of the operator behind it, even as it occludes that presence by taking focus as the site of the operator's performance: the ontological paradox of the puppet is, in this sense, the result of the simultaneous occlusion and exposure of the producer of signification (Tillis "The Actor Occluded: Puppet Theatre and Acting Theory" 115).

Tillis also suggests that an analogous process takes place when the actor sites signification upon his or her own body, with this signification of character in tension with the physical being of the actor as a particular person. In other words, a tension exists between the actor and the character that she plays. Bertolt Brecht exploited this tension in his theatre by having the actor almost play a double – herself and the character. What makes *Piano Teacher*

more surreal than real and manifests as a black comedy rather than a melodrama is this tension that exists between actor and character; puppeteer and puppet. The audience is drawn to the character by the physicality and vocality of the character but is distanced when the puppeteer suddenly makes the puppet fly across the stage or makes it take out a cigarette from a pack and place it in the human mouth and smoke it or makes it jump up onto the table and dance or makes the murdered mother reappear as dismembered parts of the body.

The *mise-en-scène* furthers the director's innovative use of puppetry. Given O. Chong's background in design and experience in physical theatre and *Commedia dell'Arte*, it is no surprise that the play is extremely strong in its visual elements. The set is a reflection of a typical HDB flat in Singapore but the material used to construct it is far from typical; he uses many cardboard cartons to construct the set – the half walls, the back wall which consists of the kitchen; the stove, the sink and the garbage chute. He also very cleverly works this into the script by making the Mother a pack rat – there are cardboard cartons and newspapers stacked all over the set attesting to this and further crowding the space to echo the cloying and claustrophobic nature of the *Neurotic Mum*. The set operates on two levels – the actual floor of the stage on which the actors move and the 'puppet floor' that is at knee level to the actors where the puppet's feet end; the set below that is black. The walls and tables, stools and piano, all start from the puppets' feet up. The 'TV' is just a square frame on the down stage 'wall'. When the Maid watches TV, her face is clearly visible to the audience.

As mentioned earlier, all the actors have a broad ‘v’ of white makeup on their foreheads and bridges of their noses which has multiple associations – circus clowns, the ‘Chou’ character type from Chinese Opera and the blank Mime face. Whatever the association, the makeup reinforces the connection of the human head to the puppet body. The eyebrows for all the actors are thick, black and frame the white ‘v’ on the forehead. The Black-faced Maid is that literally – her face is blackened to match the arms and legs. This sets her apart from the Chinese family and is a reflection of the racial dynamics in a large number of Singaporean households. The clothes of the puppets, as mentioned earlier, cleverly reinforce the character types.

Sound and Light for the production are designed and executed by the very talented duo of Darren Ng and Lim Woan Wen who are the Associate Sound and Lighting Designers for the company. Darren Ng creates a soundscape that resonates throughout the play. The importance of sound design in a play with puppets is emphasised by Francis “because of the close relationship of the puppetesque to the cinematic, creative and inventive sound and music are of greater significance than in human theatre, requiring a finely-tuned sensibility” (Francis 91). Ng’s soundscape which includes live music on the piano, sound effects and recorded music is seamlessly interlaced into the performance. There are a few sequences in the play – the caning of the maid, the ‘superman’ sequence, the comic interplay with the boxes - where the integration of action, music and puppetry are truly outstanding. Considering the central character in the play is a piano teacher, it is no surprise that music is integral to this play.

As author, director and designer of the play, O. Chong's artistic vision is materialised comprehensively on stage. The narrative of the play is closely linked with the humanette puppets both visually and metaphorically. While the prologue, apart from the song, has very few spoken words, it establishes the Mother's unrealistic aspirations for her son, the Son's anxiety in trying to please his parents and the Father's disappointment in his son. The Mother is coquettish in her movements and gestures, the Son nervous and disjointed and the Father stern and authoritarian – all expressed through the physicality of the actors and the way they manipulate the puppet bodies.

O. Chong wrote the play in a mixture of languages that is a close reflection of the 'code switching' native to Singapore – the audience hears a mixture of Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin and English, with surtitles providing a translation for those who require it <sup>19</sup> (O. Chong "Personal Interview"). The Mother speaks Hokkien, the Father Cantonese, the Maid in English and the Son in Mandarin and English. In Act 2 while the Father reads the newspaper at the breakfast table, there is an exchange of dialogue between the Father and the Mother about language:

M: Can you read it to me in Hokkien?

F: Why? It's not as if you can't understand Cantonese. You speak it too. Why haven't I heard you speak it by the way?

M: I am Hokkien.

F: I am Cantonese.

M: Hmmm

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<sup>19</sup> Please refer to Appendix 1 for transcript of interview

*Pause (O. Chong I'm Just a Piano Teacher 13)*

Apart from creating humour, O. Chong's device of having the different characters speak in different languages also underscores the dysfunctionality of the family.

In all three acts, the director uses the voice over coming from the television as a comic and ironic motif – in Acts 1 and 3, the maid watches a rather bizarrely violent cooking. The first show about a chicken dish; describes in brutal detail the various ways to butcher the chicken using words such as “gore and filth”, “slit the chickens neck and the blood will flow” (O. Chong *I'm Just a Piano Teacher* 4). The verbal imagery created is a rather ominous harbinger of the murders to come. At the same time, the visual imagery on stage – the Maid watching the TV slack jawed and drooling causes the scene to be absurdly funny. Similarly in Act 3, the cooking show about stewed pigs leg is funny and horrifying at the same time as it speaks of “chopping the leg in strong clean strokes” and repeatedly uses the word “chopper” (O. Chong *I'm Just a Piano Teacher* 29). Immediately after this, the Son enters and asks for his Mother, the Maid replies casually “I killed mum. Mum is in those boxes” making it weirdly funny. Act 2 opens with the TV announcing a plane disaster in Denmark and Indonesia – the former bringing to mind shades of *Hamlet* (O. Chong *I'm Just a Piano Teacher* 9). This is followed by a very mundane conversation between Mother and Father. It is this repeated contrast between the serious and the ridiculous as enacted by the humanettes that creates tension and adds layers of surrealism to the play.

Francis claims that when directing puppets the “old-fashioned idea of ‘blocking’ becomes intensely relevant [...] to plan in detail the physical gestures, rhythms and movements of puppet and puppeteer (when visible)” (80). This is certainly true in *Piano Teacher*, especially the comedic sequences. In Act 1, Mother, woken up by the Maid watching TV, sees that the table is not cleared and that the Maid is engrossed in the TV show. Then she picks up the remote in one hand and a stick in the other and silently moves behind the Maid and switches off the TV. The Maid not knowing this turns it on again. This happens again and again until she catches on that her employer is standing behind her. Timing in any comic routine is paramount and this is complicated by the fact that it is the puppet that is doing the actions.

There are similar comic sequences – there is an almost cartoonish sequence that ensues when the Son tries to throw out a box between him, Mum and the Maid which is beautifully scored by piano music, reminiscent of classic cartoons such as *Tom and Jerry*, and a reminder that the soundscape in this play has as important a role to play in meaning-making as the script, the acting and the direction. Another sequence is a short but hilarious moment of fantasy – very Walter Mitty-esque – when the Son, after exaggeratedly chugging down a six-pack of beer, imagines himself as Superman. The puppet body is made to fly across the room, climb the door and fight in slow motion Kung-Fu, when he ‘rescues’ the Maid from his parents who are abusing her and finally carries her and flies off into the sunset. Lim’s lighting is nuanced and picks out the puppets and the puppet set. She uses ultra-violet lights (something which is common in ‘black light’ theatre) during the night

sequences which picks up the white makeup on the actors' faces adding to the surreal effect of the play. The music and the strobe light enhance the fantasy.

However funny these sequences are, there is a dark side to them – in the first sequence, the Mother is asserting her complete authority over the abused Maid; in the second it is the Son trying to assert himself but ultimately gives in to his manipulative Mother in despair. The Superman sequence highlights the Son's suppressed desires and anger. O. Chong builds up the frustrations of the middle-aged Son – his failure in pleasing his disappointed and disapprovingly distant Father, his inability to get the woman he wants to date him; the unreal expectations of his Mother and her treating him like a child culminating in a climax towards the end of Act 2 when his Mum presents him with a toy drum. He is shocked that she expects him to hang it around his neck and play as if he were a child. This is the absolute nadir for him. When she insists, he starts to beat the drums numbly and this slowly builds up into a frenzied banging, his face savage and possessed.

In Act 3, Mother is killed by the Maid, hacked to pieces and parts of her body stored in the cardboard boxes littered around the house. However, the Son doesn't even remember asking the Maid to kill his Mother. The whole incident is lost in a drunken haze and he is shocked to find her murdered. Even at this juncture, he comes across as the ineffectual loser. He is terrified, apologetic and whiny when his Father finds out and he clumsily kills the Father and the Maid to cover his complicity in the crime. But the true twist in the tale is when he calls the police – instead of meekly confessing to the crime, he claims to have found all three of them killed and covered in blood when he

arrived home. He then calmly wipes his fingerprints from the knife, puts it in Father's hand and then the Maid's hand and places it next to her body and washes the blood from his hands and face, and in the process, wiping out the puppet makeup – the first stage in reclaiming his life.

While O. Chong has effectively used symbols throughout the play, both as a director and as an author, the ending of the play stands out as being unforgettable – the Son opens the piano and stands with his back to the audience. He then lifts his arms into the air above his head as if he is going to bring it down on to the keys and then freezes – which is when you notice that for the first time in the play it is the actor's arms that you see and not the puppet's. This can be read as a symbolic statement of his freedom from his previously oppressed life – he is no longer a puppet, he is now totally alive.

The humanette puppets act as a Brechtian device in distancing the audience from the story allowing for an ironical yet astute observation of human life. By conflating the actor and the puppet, the “ontological paradox” associated with the puppet is projected to the actor – the puppet and the actor are ‘objects’ perceived to be ‘alive’. O. Chong uses humanettes again in his play *Cat, Lost and Found*. But the effect of the humanettes here is very different. This is the third play that O. Chong wrote and directed for TFP.

A woman who works as an usher in a cinema loses her cat and spends the rest of the play trying to find him. Meanwhile she has an admirer who lives with his mother who is convinced that her husband who disappeared has now returned as a cat. The movie that plays in the cinema where the usher works is an old fashioned Malay movie about a hero trying to avenge his brother's



death by finding and killing his murderer while his wife patiently waits for him to come home. The five threads of the story – the usher, the lover, the mother, the hero and the wife intertwine and tangle in an uncanny manner throughout the play creating a surreal comedy interspersed with pithy comments about life in Singapore.

O. Chong uses many types of puppets along with his human actors – the cat is a rod puppet operated by a puppeteer in black wearing a mask on his head; the wife of the hero looks like a Bunraku puppet but instead is an amalgamation of a humanette body that hangs around the puppeteer's neck with a white mask which is worn on the face; another variation on the humanette puppet is the mother whose body is made of two dimensional cardboard with the face is painted in white and with two red spots on the cheeks; a fluffy chicken; the cat ghost which is a humanoid cat puppet which comprises the mutilated cat body that hangs from the puppeteer's neck and a mask which covers the face of the puppeteer. There are no boundaries between the real and the make-belief. The puppets and actors blithely ignore the boundaries of the dimensions that they exist in and mingle with impunity. As critic Ng remarks, "The astonishing thing was that all of it worked. There was never a sense that the play was only a fragmented dramatic experiment. Rather, the madness converged to become a unified, symphonic whole" (Ng).

O. Chong utilises the unabashed theatricality of puppets and at the same time extends this theatricality to the human actors either by conflating the two or juxtaposing them to create a bizarre universe while at the same time extending a wry look at the human need for love and the loneliness we hope to

keep at bay through finding it. The Usher loves her Cat as a cat but the Cat wants the usher to love and marry him as a human man. The Man is in love with the idea of love and wants to get married to his dream girl. The Wife dutifully loves the hero/husband (whom she had never met until the wedding) and longs for his return. The Hero in turn dutifully loves his brother (whom he doesn't know very well) and wants to righteously avenge his murder. The Mother is convinced that the *Maneki Neko* or lucky cat doll is her missing husband and loves that doll.

The scene where the Usher breaks through the cinematic barrier and speaks to the Wife is wryly self-reflexive where the film is depicted as a metaphor of life and the director as the god. Speaking in a monotone, the Wife remarks, "Nobody can see you or hear you. You don't exist". Transformation is the heart of puppetry – an inanimate object is brought to life by the puppeteers. But by blurring the boundaries between puppet and puppeteer and juxtaposing human actors and puppets in a surreal manner, O. Chong raises questions as to who or what is being transformed. While using humanette puppets, is the puppeteer transforming the puppet or is the puppet transforming the actor? The Wife symbolises helplessness as her life (the movie) cannot progress until the Hero returns; the Mother with her cardboard body becomes a caricature of herself; the Ghost Cat humanette puppet symbolises the breach of boundary between the dead and the living. This crossing of boundaries and the bizarre juxtaposition of acting styles, puppet types and time and space create a surreally funny vision of life in Singapore. While some critics (Ng) enjoyed O. Chong's transgression of forms and styles, others found it difficult to accept (Kwok). As a spectator, I found the play

fantastic and wonderfully irreverent and thoroughly enjoyed the surreal comedy and as a theatre practitioner / researcher I was intrigued by the possibilities of theatricality exposed by the performance.

## *Chapter 4*

### *Decentring the Text: Puppetry and the Postdramatic*

The two productions, *0501* and *suitCASES*, are distinctive for the repertoire of TFP in their conception, design and execution. While *0501* received favourable print and online reviews and won The President's Design Award in 2007 and the Life! Theatre Awards for Best Set Design and Best Light Design in 2008, *suitCASES* was not as favourably received. However different the reception, the two plays were described variously in the newspaper and online reviews as 'physical theatre', 'movement theatre', 'contemporary dance but was not dance', 'experimental', 'installation art'. There were elements of mime but at the same time it was not a completely silent performance. The voice over narrated a story but again, it was at only one juncture and not throughout the plays. The movements seemed choreographed but it was not dance. It was this seeming fluidity and the ambiguity caused by the inconsistency in recognisable sign systems within the plays that made the performance "difficult to understand".

While these productions, in keeping with the ideology of the company, incorporate puppets or performing objects in the performance, the juxtaposition of puppetry with human actors here has a very different effect and meaning and may be described as being "postdramatic" rather than "dramatic". "Postdramatic" is a concept extensively delineated by Hans – Thies Lehmann, whose book was first published in German as

*Postdramatisches Theater* in 1999<sup>20</sup>. According to Lehmann dramatic theatre “was the formation of illusion.” “It wanted to construct a fictive cosmos [...] the principle that what we perceive in the theatre can be referred to a “world,” i.e., to a totality. Wholeness, illusion and world representation are inherent in the model “drama” [...]. Dramatic theatre ends when these elements are no longer the regulating principle but merely one possible variant of theatrical art” (22). Barring *0501* and, to a lesser extent, *suitCASES* all the other plays of TFP created a “fictive cosmos”. In contrast to dramatic theatre, Lehman uses the term Postdramatic to describe a theatre which decentres the text as a defining element in the production and reception of theatrical experience, making the text of the play an element neither more nor less central than movement, light and set design, sound or multimedia. Puppets and performing objects in postdramatic theatre become another element added to the above. Eruli, while elucidating the reasons for the increasing integration of puppetry into contemporary theatre, notes the influence of puppets and performing objects, especially their essential visuality and plasticity, on postdramatic theatre. She traces the influence of puppets and puppetry on directors such as Tadeusz Kantor, Romeo Castellucci, Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson.

Lehmann’s book is more descriptive than prescriptive and he draws examples from European and American practitioners, primarily from the 1980’s - Klaus-Michael Gruber, Heiner Müller, Foreman, Wilson, Elizabeth LeCompte and the Wooster Group; Robert Lepage; Gob Squad and Forced Entertainment; Kantor; Castellucci; Societas Raffaello Sanzio and many more.

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<sup>20</sup> The book has subsequently been translated and published in many languages. The English translation was done by Karen Jürs-Munby and published only in 2006.

He considers their work as an example of Postdramatic theatre. In describing their work Lehmann hopes to “serve the conceptual analysis and verbalization of the experience of this often ‘difficult’ contemporary theatre and thus to promote its ‘visibility’ and discussion” (19). Lehmann’s understanding of postdramatic theatre as “more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information” (85) is echoed in *0501* and *suitCASES*.

*0501* was a site specific performance at the Victoria Theatre which ran from 5-7 April 2007. The website of the company described the production thus: “Poet, dancer, visual artist, actress, puppeteer, set/installation, lighting and sound designers come together to create a multidisciplinary theatrical production. A SITE-SPECIFIC PLAY on the stage of Victoria Theatre, audiences sat on the cavernous stage as each performer/designer delivered his/her tale via various mediums. The 900-seats auditorium was in turn used as performance areas”. *suitCASES* was performed at the Drama Centre Blackbox from 28 to 30 October, 2010. In the synopsis, the play was described as “a multi-disciplinary performance which attempts to unravel the secrets of our land through an experimental and self-reflective approach.” Both performances were helmed by Ong Kian Sin.

As Lehman explains, in postdramatic theatre, elements such as space, sets, props, lighting, sound, movement and, as in these two plays, puppetry are all equally important to the performance. In *0501*, the use of space has been noted as unique by audience and critics alike – the traditional seating and

performance areas were inverted and the audience, ushered in through the stage door were seated on part of the stage facing the empty rows of red seats and the performance took place partly on the stage and partly among the velvet red seats of the auditorium. The proscenium was transformed into a black box where intricate networks of pulleys and strings criss-crossed the ceiling with tin cans hanging from them. When one can was pulled, another can attached at the other end of the thread is lifted up, revealing special messages.

At various times in the performance, the performers moved through and among the audience. On the one hand, the separation between the audience and the performance was minimal. On the other hand, when a performer sat in one of the many empty red velvet seats in the auditorium or walked among the seats or came down the aisle, she seemed very far removed from the audience. This added to the sense of disorientation and change in perspective already in place from being seated on the stage facing the auditorium. Lehmann categorises both very intimate spaces and huge spaces as being “dangerous” to dramatic theatre (150). If the distance between the actors and the audience is reduced to one where the breath, sweat and the panting of the actors is heard and felt, then, Lehmann postulates, “a space of a tense *centripetal* dynamic develops, in which theatre becomes a moment of *shared energies* instead of transmitted signs” (150). In contrast, “centrifugal” space is one where the vast space outweighs or over-determines the perceptions of all other elements simply because of its dimensions.

As mentioned earlier, *0501* is a site specific performance that forces the audience to view the familiar – Victoria Theatre – in a new light; a new

aesthetic gaze is cast over the familiar site of the auditorium and the more alien space of the stage and the over mechanical and technological devices that are usually concealed. The inversion of the space corresponds to the inversion of the traditional roles of theatre – the performers are not the actors but the often invisible “back-stage” crew. This deliberate inversion of space and roles demands a rethinking on the part of the audience of the very concept of theatre and what goes into the creating of it.

*suitCASES* was performed in a black box with a small audience. While there is an immediate sense of intimacy created by the closeness of audience to the stage, there is however a definite separation of the two. The basic set of the stage was multi-level scaffolding which filled most of the acting space and towered over the audience. It worked on two levels – spatially to create different levels of performance and as a symbolic expression of a modern cityscape. In this intimate space, the scaffolding loomed larger than life, dwarfing the audience. It was a dominant visual imagery that was the metaphorical scaffolding for the play.

The rest of the set consisted of a glossy, metallic platform downstage, left of the scaffolding. The actors used the scaffolding to raise and lower props using pulleys and they hanged or anchored props using metal wires. The set did not have a fixed locality. The context defined and informed the location. The set also ‘created’ sound – the movements of the actors and, at times, the banging of a metal pipe on the scaffolding. The multiplicity of levels and the rigidity of the structure also served as a metaphor in the performance. It



highlighted the difficulties faced by the characters in their journey and aided in the sense of alienation, spatially and temporally.

Lehmann uses the term “visual dramaturgy” (93) in postdramatic theatre that takes the place of a dramaturgy regulated by text. Here it is not merely visually exclusive dramaturgy but rather a one that is not subservient to the text and can therefore freely develop its own logic. In both the performances under discussion, the scenography which included the puppets and objects was neither subordinate to the text nor was it dictated by it. Instead it had the same weight in the performances as other elements such as movement, sound and text.

In *suitCASES*, the sound track for the play was continuous and created a ‘soundscape’. It was the predominant aural component of the performance. The opening overture of sound segued into the musical score that was primarily electronic music interspersed with various electronic sound effects such as beeps and bongs, with occasional recognisable sounds like rain and thunder. The performers also added to the soundscape by striking objects against the metallic scaffolding. Similarly, *0501* too had a distinctive ‘soundscape’ that included single long held notes, ‘white noise’ created by an indistinct radio, classical music, the song ‘Que Sera Sera’, jazz notes, a rain effect created by the rustling of plastic bags and the objects used by the performers. The soundscape in both plays underscored, highlighted and at times confronted the visual imagery and emerged as being as important to the performance as the scenography, movement and lighting. For example, in *0501*, in the sequence where the actor is huddled in front of the industrial

strength fan, the sound of the fan heightens the effect of his trembling hand reaching into the can. In *suitCASES*, the desperate longing and movements of the actor is in contrast to the gentle tinkling sounds of the music. In another sequence, the actors strike the metal scaffold with sticks to create an ominous sound that underscores their authoritarian movements. The sound score 'performed' a role beyond that of a background score used to enhance the text. De facto, the score was an important device used by in the process of artistic creation on stage.

The lighting in *0501* was as central to the performance as the sound. Apart from stage lights, the designer Lim Woan Wen, used bulbs of various shapes and sizes and they formed a part of the visual landscape. The stage lights created areas of light and shadow and unlike in most theatrical performances were completely visible to the audience. There was no effort made to conceal the lights, rather they appeared very much a part of the performance. There is one episode soon after the opening of the performance that was sheer poetry of light and shadow. The play of light on the long "dress" let down by the performer sitting on top of a stepladder who gives "birth" to a bubble of light segues into shadow play highlighting the contrast between light and shadow.

The designer lighted the auditorium for another episode where a section of the red, velvet seats were lit and immediately contrasted with a play of light on the stairs leading to the stage. In another episode, the audience was lit up along with the actors creating intimacy and at the same time a harshness due to the type of light used. The final sequence of lights was memorable as

the designer slowly revealed different parts of the stage – the flies, the lightbars, the scaffolding, the cat walk, the vast space over the visible acting area that is normally never seen by the audience. The usual domain of the backstage crew was cast in a new light.

The lighting in the opening sequence of *suitCASES* and throughout the performance created a play of light and shadow. Critic Mathew Lyon describes the opening scene of *suitCASES* as a “tableaux vivant in which a cityscape of scaffolding and bent-metal vehicles slowly rises into crepuscular glory...” (Lyon "Traveling Light"). For most of the play the lighting designer uses various shades of blue and therefore it is particularly noticeable and notable when she switches them off and an actor (Ang Hui Bin) holds a powerful lamp and slowly illuminates various parts of the scaffold. After looking at the shiny steel set lit in blues to suddenly look at it in a harsh white light compels the spectator to look at it anew.

The action on stage for both plays was closely tied to the space, set, soundscape and lighting. For the first ten minutes or so of *0501*, actors moved around the space, seemingly in random, either pulling down a can or sending it up. The audience could see some of the actors huddled in different parts of the stage. The other actors moved, picked up objects and moved them to different parts of the stage. Some of the actors moved among and through the audience while others were seen huddled in various corners. Throughout this sequence, we could hear different sounds – a deep humming, long held sounds interspersed with March music, the indistinct sounds of a radio and piano music. The lights intermittently illuminated the stage and the ceiling. There

was a multitude of actions happening simultaneously which, according to Lehmann, causes the “*parcelling of perception*” (88), where the concentration on one particular aspect makes the clear registration of another impossible. Additionally, he claims, such performances often leave open “whether there exists any real *connection* in what is being presented simultaneously or whether this is just an external *contemporaneity*.”(88) Postdramatic theatre, instead of offering one dramatic action, create events in which there remains a range of choice and decision for the spectators - they decide which of the simultaneously presented events they wish to engage with.

After this opening, the performance proceeded through a series of vignettes or episodes of a wide variety: the titles of the pieces were evocative of their theme – the opening of the play was called “Beginnings – anticipation” and the following episodes were titled “Connection”, “Birth”, “Wind”, “House”, “Face”, “Untitled Solo”, “Missing Rain”, “Dead” and “The Void”. In these vignettes the performer made shadows using children's toys, water and mirrors that were projected onto an unconventional screen - a long white dress worn by another actress; a man in heavy clothes shivering slowly in the wind of industrial-strength electric fans; a boy dancing in front of a music box; a girl being attacked by ‘performing’ corners; a chorus of robots with paper packets over their heads; a group photograph within a frame; a couple dancing around the stage kicking up plastic and paper bags that were strewn around the stage; a performer cuddling her dog; another performer dunking her face in water. There was no apparent connection among these episodes – each stands separate and at the same time there is a flow from one episode to the other without an attempt at synthesis. What we saw were a

series of visual images with a ‘soundscape’ which were allusive rather than narrative.

However, each episode had a visual if not a narrative structure to it – a beginning, a middle and an end. In “Death” for example, a group of people came together in seeming happiness to take a group photograph within a wooden frame. Each time the camera flashed one person in the group disappeared. This could signify death as the title suggested or how we forget the people in our lives as time passes.

Rather than use conventional puppets such as marionettes or rod or glove puppets, the performers played with objects and technology, animating the inanimate. Francis distinguishes between the animated *figure* and the animated *object*. The former may be made to represent a character and the latter is a thing in its natural state. It is her contention that “in performance, animated and manipulated, *both* are puppets” (18). An object puppet could be anything not intended for performance in its natural state – a balloon, a spoon, chairs, or a box. She concedes that it is more difficult to convince a spectator of an object’s living presence and make it a puppet than to work with recognisable human or animal figures. In animating an object, through acting and manipulation, the puppeteer transforms the object into a character; for example, a balloon into a lover. “First he has to contradict the iconic and practical value of the object and next he has to endow it with new functions and new appearance to make it recognisable as the intended character” (Jurkowski qtd in Francis 19). The actor-puppeteer needs ‘energy’ to enliven the object convincingly. This energy can also be produced by technology as in

the sequence titled “Birth”, where the performer sitting on a ladder let down a long ‘skirt’ and a glowing orb of light was ‘born’. The lighting designer’s technique and vision invested the orb of light with life and transformed it. The play of light and shadow shifted to a white screen behind the performer on the ladder where the designer of the pieces played with light, shadow and scale by moving the performers closer to the source of light and away from it. In another sequence, “House”, ‘corners’ of the house formed by actors manipulating rectangular shapes threatened the boy. These corners could be his nightmarish visions brought to life. In the sequence “Face” the performers wore paper-bag masks and sat quietly on small chairs and as soon as the masks were removed, some performers started to babble, others to sing and dance. As soon as the masks were worn, they become subdued again and sat quietly. This sequence could be viewed as a metaphor for the invisible “masks” that people wear that hides parts of our personality. While there was no narrative structure that connected the vignettes, an overarching theme of connections ran through the performance. The theme was explored visually and aurally in all the pieces with text kept to a minimum.

There was no dialogue in the performance of *suitCASES*. The only speech was a short story narrated by a recorded voice. The opening sequence of the play had four actors moving slowly around the set carrying fairly identifiable metal objects like a ship, suitcases, airplane, etc. They placed them at different points of the set or hooked onto pulleys and winched them slowly into place. One of the metal objects resembled a boat and was winched up onto a piece of scaffolding which created a silhouette that was clearly recognisable as the three towers and the sky park of the Marina Bay Sands. The location

insinuated by the set and created by the actions of the actors in the opening sequence was very clearly Singapore. This was one of the most unambiguous parts of the *mise-en-scène*. The modes of transport and props like the suitcases carried by the actors alluded to a journey and arrival, although this was not explicit. The actors wore white raincoats with hoods and were indistinguishable; under the raincoat, their costumes were unremarkable, although the costume of one of the characters is vaguely reminiscent of that of a clown. Their faces were painted white in the style of Mime actors. The movement of the four actors in the opening sequence was very controlled and deliberate, indeed, throughout the play; the movements of the actors were very considered and conscious. It was closer to choreography than the blocking one is accustomed to seeing. There were no impromptu movements or moments anywhere in the play. The actors' movements around the scaffolding became increasingly mechanical and controlled, almost puppet-like. These puppet-like movements juxtaposed with the looming structure of the scaffolding representing a cityscape of high rises became a visual metaphor for the power relations between the two. The humans can be read as "puppets" controlled by invisible forces, and at the same time the puppet-like movements depersonalises them into a mass of humanity.

The rest of the play consisted of four episodes with one actor as the focus in each. When an actor assumed the central role in each sequence, the character created was a stereotype – the comic performer, the lonely woman, the pariah, the authority figure, the common man, etc. The story of these four characters was not clearly delineated with the interpretation left largely to the imagination of the audience. In the first episode, the actors moved around the

different levels of the sets playing with red balloons in ways to suggest that the balloons represented human characters. Some animations of the balloons were clearer and easier to identify than others. For example, one of the actors, Tan Wan Sze, the focal character in this episode, tried to 'entice' the red balloon to kiss her. Her desire for the balloon became increasingly desperate and eventually, when she did get the balloon, she tried to force a kiss on it and it popped, symbolising the difficulty of finding and keeping what you desire.

The second episode involved another actor, Ang Hui Bin, trying to please the others by performing tricks and clowning. When she didn't succeed, she moved downstage right and exposed a mask on her stomach which depicted a rather gruesome face with its tongue hanging out. How this connected to the previous segment of clowning was not very clear. The other three actors now became puppeteers and brought a puppet out of the suitcase to enact the story narrated by the voice over. This was the only part in the performance where there was a vocal narration. The story of beings and earth and sky signified primordial myths of creation, but the puppet did not resemble humans. Instead it was a giant eye which 'exploded' into many eyes – this was shown by the puppeteers donning gloves with many eyes on them. These hand-puppets multiplied again and again and constructed a giant city which eventually exploded reducing everything to dust – an allegory perhaps, for our overcrowded and overbuilt up cities. The puppeteers then bring out a vaguely humanoid puppet bride which accepted and was in turn accepted by the clown. The puppets in this sequence highlighted the mythic nature of the story and at the same time remained completely alien in contrast to the human actors.



The third episode used the multi-level scaffold to highlight the repetitive and puppet-like movements of the central actor in the piece. Various signs that were part of the scaffold like 'stop', 'go', 'try again' lit up at different times to control and direct the actions and movements of the actor. The movements of the actor became increasingly frenetic. The authoritative figures spoke a few words - "very good" and "try again". At one point the central character in this episode tried to speak in the 'speaker's corner' and was thwarted repeatedly. This was the only time in the performance that the actors spoke in Mandarin. The authoritative control of the three actors over the puppet-like 'citizen's right to speech could be viewed as a metaphor of life in Singapore in general and the perceived authoritarianism and the lack of personal autonomy in particular. This was further explicated when one of the actor's took another puppet out of the suitcase – a deformed face wearing a poncho (the actor slipped her arm through the armhole of the poncho and animated the puppet); the puppet 'ordered' the citizen around, representing an authoritative figure.

The fourth episode appeared to be about a sick or a diseased person who after many attempts at being cured by the 'institution' finally found friends who seemed to be similarly diseased. Each actor revealed, with great ceremony, vaguely human 'masks' attached to various parts of the body but it was uncertain what these rather ugly growths on the body could be. When the four characters realised that they had a common link, they each took their suitcases to a part of the scaffolding and found 'home'.

In comparison to *0501*, *suitCASES* had a narrative structure to its episodes, although the narration was visual and auditory rather than text based. While the central “character” in each episode was anonymous, she did represent a particular stereotype. The actors wore what was immediately identifiable as ‘mime’ make up – a white base with exaggerated eyes and mouth – which traditionally signifies the silence of the actor. In this performance, there was an added layer of signification – the silencing of the actors is symbolic of the alienation and isolation of the characters living in a big city. It also served the purpose of depersonalising the characters and making them part of the nameless faceless mass of humanity that inhabited the city.

The paucity of text in both plays emphasised the movements and actions of the actors and performing objects and gave them greater weight and significance. The audience were forced to use their imagination to give meaning to the gestures and movements as there are no familiar words to contextualize the actions and movements. Lehmann suggests that a postdramatic spectator is not expected to process what she has perceived instantaneously but rather to postpone the production of meaning and to store the sensory impressions so that her perception remains open for connections, correspondences and clues at unexpected moments which could happen after the performance (87). Postdramatic theatre demands an open and fragmenting perception instead of a unifying and closed perception.

Both *0501* and *suitCASES* were also distinctive in the TFP repertoire as they were devised performances. Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson and Katie

Normington in their book *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*, claim that devising has “the flexibility to enable theatre-makers to address matters of personal concern, to interrogate topical issues, and to extend the aesthetics and reception of performance (4)” and that many practitioners are attracted to devising as a creative method due to its “pliability and porousness”. Both the plays under discussion certainly interrogate topical issues such as city dwelling, loneliness, relationships and connections as well as provided the Singaporean audience with a novel theatre going experience.

Ong Kian Sin, who conceptualised *0501* was quoted in the newspaper “Today” as saying “Most actors and designers just serve the needs of the directors of a script and don't have the opportunity to create their own works or express their thoughts” (Chew "Finger Food for Thought; Audience, Crew, Actors Play out Loneliness Drama"). He roped in fellow collaborators performers Koh Leng Leng, Jo Kwek, Doreen Toh, Tan Wan Sze, sound designer Darren Ng, lighting designer Lim Woan Wen, set designer Lim Wei Ling, dancer-choreographer Lim Chin Huat, dancer Lee Yeong Wen, and production manager Cecilia Chow in creating the performance over the course of a year. In the program for the play, he stated that they didn't have a script to start with nor a story or an outline. They had no predetermined end product; he saw the creative process as a journey. Each artist was given five minutes each for their performance – but the five minutes could be the working title, a

theme or a consideration or a contract. The episodes were created through a series of workshops (Ong)<sup>21</sup>.

Similarly, while Ong Kian Sin was credited as being the director of *suitCASES*, the performance was devised over the course of a year by many of the same practitioners involved in *0501*. In the credit list in the program, the practitioners called themselves a “collective” and the actors were credited with “performance creating” and not just acting. The performance was self-proclaimed by the group as being the result of a collaborative process. They have partially documented the process in their blog (puppetsolo). They claimed to have worked collaboratively through a process of workshops and meetings and devised the performance collectively (*Drama*). This practice of devising had been instrumental in developing artistically satisfying ways of working by stretching the limits of established practices and reshaping their creative processes. Devised theatre is concerned with the collective creation of art (not the single vision of the playwright or director), and it is here that the emphasis has shifted from the writer or ‘auteur’ director to the creative artist and thus devised theatre is quintessentially postdramatic.

In an interview while speaking about *suitCASES*, Ong Kian Sin stated “The visual elements will be very strong. We will be using every element in theatre, not just text and performance, which usually form the backbone of most conventional theatre productions. (Chia)”. Ong’s assertions seem hauntingly familiar. Artaud’s call for a new and rejuvenated theatre in his writings seems to find at least a partial response in these two performances. His idea of a “Total” theatre, where spectacle is primary in sequence of

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<sup>21</sup> Please refer to Appendix 2 for transcript of interview with Ong Kian Sin

elements certainly sees fruition in these performances where the visual elements of both design and acting dominated. In his essay “No More Masterpieces” Artaud wants to subvert the classical privileging of poetry over spectacle “Following on sound and lighting there is action ...” (Artaud 61). It is indeed no surprise that Lehmann positions Artaud as part of the ‘prehistory’ leading to postdramatic theatre.

What made *0501* work as an innovative, creative piece of theatre was the multiplicity of voices in the performance text. It was very clear that the creative perspectives offered were autobiographical in the sense that they had grown out of the experience of the creators. This made for a presentational rather than representational theatre that was thoughtful and self-reflexive. There was no attempt at synthesis and the episodes were held together only by the overarching theme of connections.

In contrast, while *suitCASES* was also devised, there was an attempt at creating an overarching structure to frame the narrative of the four episodes. While the precise meaning of each gesture and movement may have been unclear, there was a definite attempt to create a singular thematic meaning – “the unpacking of emotional baggage and psyche that are trapped inside the minds of the city dweller”<sup>22</sup>. When you have such a clear thematic agenda you need an equally strong narrative – whether text based or otherwise to support it, especially if the performance becomes more representational than presentational.

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<sup>22</sup> TheFingerPlayers, *The Finger Players*, 2012, Available: <http://www.fingerplayers.com/>, 28 February 2012.

Whether it is dramatic or postdramatic theatre, puppets when used alongside live actors augment the visual and/or symbolic meaning of the performance. The versatility of puppets and performing objects and the different ways in which they can be integrated productively into a performance is evident in the different types of plays of The Finger Players.

## *Chapter 5*

### *Participation in Process: Creating a Performance with Puppets and Actors*

This chapter explores and analyses the use of puppets and puppetry in the artistic process of creating a performance. The opportunity to observe and analyse the rehearsal process of TFP presented itself when the company went into the final phase of rehearsal for their production of *The Book Of Living And Dying*. The objectives of this rehearsal observation are to understand the nature of the rehearsal process when puppets and puppetry are incorporated into a performance; identify the stages of such a creative process; and comprehend the influence of the juxtaposition of puppets and actors on the creative process.

This rehearsal observation is influenced by the participant-observer approach as explained by Kate Rossmannith in her article “Making Theatre-Making: Fieldwork, Rehearsal and Performance-Preparation”. The observations recorded by me after watching the rehearsals and the interview, both formal and informal, with the practitioners inform this analysis. Rossmannith explains:

Rehearsal analyses are more than simply an account of things said and done; they not only explain the nuts of bolts of what it was to put a show together, but they attempt to make sense of the way that practitioners made sense of the work in which they were engaged” (7).

This analysis of the rehearsals will study the creative decisions that the practitioners make and attempts to make sense of how they “put a show together” with a primary focus on the juxtaposition of puppets and human actors in creating the performance. In order to contextualise and frame my analysis, description of the process and observation is unavoidable.

*TBOLAD* was performed by TFP during the Singapore Arts Festival on 31<sup>st</sup> May and 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2012 and was a collaborative work undertaken with the Italian company Teatri Sbagliati. The creative process that took two years was executed in many phases and many places; it began when TC Chong met Antonio Ianniello from Italy and Nambi E. Kelley from the United States at the annual La MaMa Playwright Retreat in Italy in 2010 and they decided to collaborate on a production. The script was collaboratively written by TC Chong, Ianniello, Kelley and O. Chong and directed by TC Chong.

The narrative comprises two stories – the first follows the life of an Italian-American transvestite Martino/Martina and his adopted African-American daughter Eve and the second is a story of a golden lamp-holder stolen from a Tibetan Monastery many centuries ago. Inspired by *Tibetan Book Of Living And Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche, the play traces the different incarnations of the thief across time ending with Martina as the final incarnation. Apart from the actors playing Martina, Eve and the Cat the cast included an ensemble of three actors who played the various characters in the lamp-holder strand of the narrative. They, along with O. Chong, manipulate the puppets and objects and create the chalk drawings on the back wall and the floor of the stage. A thief steals a golden lamp from the monastery in order to



provide a better life for his wife and unborn child. Unfortunately, the wife miscarries and the thief goes through various incarnations where his fate is intertwined with that of the cat and his child. In his final incarnation, he is born as an Italian, Martino, who moves to New York to become a transvestite, Martina, and eventually steals an African-American baby girl and fraudulently adopts as his child. He is diagnosed with stomach cancer and asks his now grown-up daughter Eve, who has moved to Chicago, to come back and live with him during his last days. This story of Martino/a and Eve is not told in chronological sequence. Instead episodes from their lives are interspersed with the story of the Chinese/Tibetan villagers in such a way that the audience only puts together the whole story towards the end of the play.

The creative process was executed in roughly three phases over three years, the first being a research trip undertaken by the director, the playwrights, the puppet designers and the actors from 14<sup>th</sup> -25<sup>th</sup> June 2011<sup>23</sup>. The entire company convened in Xining, China, to study Tibetan Buddhism under a mentor/monk at Kumbum Monastery - one of the most important Tibetan monasteries in the world. Each day comprised morning prayers, scriptures learning, learning tours around the monastery and question and answer sessions with their mentor. Each night the company recapped their experiences and impressions in sharing and writing/designing exercises. TC Chong came up with a preliminary narrative framework – a beginning and an ending. Someone stole something from the monastery, and after many incarnations, dies in his final reincarnation.

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<sup>23</sup> Information is based on program, my interview with TC Chong (please see Appendix 3 for transcript) and informal conversations with the cast and crew during the final rehearsal phase.

The second phase was the writing and designing phase where in their respective home countries, each playwright (O. Chong, Ianiello and Kelley) responded to the director's preliminary narrative framework by writing fifteen minute playlets. TC Chong then consolidated and wove the respective writings into a montage of scenes. The story of Martina and his/her daughter Eve emerged from this exercise. Later, from 24<sup>th</sup> October to 11<sup>th</sup> November 2011, the company convened in Singapore where the playwrights worked on the Martina/Eve story in detail while the designers/puppeteers worked on staging and puppetry prototypes. The three-week-long workshop churned out a draft that mapped out the plot and the backstory of the main protagonists as well as a staging framework. After this workshop the draft was further edited and revised by the director. By April 2012 the final draft was ready and the construction of staging elements began. The final phase of the creative process involved the company convening in Singapore for rehearsals for a month before the show, starting from the last week of April. These two phases of the process highlight the company's artistic ethos which is committed both to collaboration with artistes and designers from a range of backgrounds but is marked by the executive facilitation of the director-playwright.

The rehearsal observations began on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April and the stages of the development of the performance from blocking to detail work on scenes to the final run through before the shows were observed. Observations were recorded in a notebook but no video or audio recording equipment was used. My experience of the rehearsal process to date has been as an actor, as a stage hand, as a production manager, as a dramaturge and as a director; this was the first time that I was observing rehearsals from the position of a researcher.

Informed by Rossmanith's advice, the observations and questions that occurred to me were written down as rough jottings and were later transcribed as "field notes" (25). Similarly, based on her advice, these questions were used as a starting point for the observations - what is known of the practitioners, the theatre company, and the space where they will rehearse? What is known of the script? What kinds of puppets will they be using and how will they be deployed alongside the human actors? Will the director follow any particular genre of staging?

Some of the answers to the questions were known before the beginning of my observations – by now my familiarity with the work of the company led me to expect the incorporation of puppets and performing objects in the performance. My interactions with the members of the company till date had been through my observations of their school performances. The rehearsals took place in a large room on the second floor with one part of it used to store some of the puppets, props, costume and material from previous shows. The room was divided roughly in half, with one half serving as the stage/rehearsal area, the other, apart from the stored material, accommodated the piano (used later by the sound designer), and a few chairs which were used by director TC Chong, myself and the others who came in to watch the rehearsals. Apart from knowing that the play being rehearsed was inspired by the *Tibetan Book Of Living And Dying* I had no knowledge of the script. As an observer, my main aim was to view every aspect of the rehearsal process from a position of a theatre and performance researcher. However, it is unavoidable that my understanding of the process would be influenced by my many years of experience in theatre as an actor, director, designer, dramaturge and spectator.

According to Rossmanith, the physical environment of the rehearsals is as important to note as what happens in it. It was obvious that O. Chong and the other puppeteers who are either part of the company or have worked frequently with them were very comfortable with the space right from the beginning whereas it took some time for the 'outsiders', Ianiello and Kelley to grow accustomed to the space. Kelley was discomfited and at times distracted by the loudness of the air-conditioning unit especially during the early stages of the rehearsals. This was observed during the first few rehearsals and raised the question of the difficulty that actors from another country face when they come and work with a company where the others have a shared history of work and friendships. At the same time it was obvious that Ianiello and Kelley were very comfortable with the other members of the group. However this inconsistency was explained when I learnt about the long process the group had been through to reach this point, and I came to realise that while the space might be something that they have to get used to, they had already formed bonds with the other members of the group.

One the first day of my observation, the director gave me a copy of the script but my first experience was completely without any idea about the nature and the shape of the play. The most noticeable thing about the acting area was that the back wall was covered in black boards from ceiling to floor and the floor too had a thin layer of black board. It did not occur to me at first that this was the set for the play. The director was rehearsing a scene with Martina and Eve and the ensemble drew pictures on the walls and the floor with chalk as the scene progressed. This was different from any of the other productions of TFP. Along with puppetry and human actors, the director had

brought in an added element of performative scenography. How would all these elements work together in the performance?

The director followed a pattern during most of the first two weeks of rehearsal where he worked with the three actors - Ianiello, Kelley and O. Chong - in the mornings and the whole cast which included the addition of the three ensemble actor/puppeteers, Ong Kian Sin, Ang Hui Bin and Tan Wan Sze, in the afternoons. The morning rehearsals focussed on character work and it was surprising to note that the exercises and vocabulary used by the actors and the director were ones commonly used in the 'naturalistic' or realistic' style of theatre, for example, the director's instructions to the actors to "improvise scenes and work the characters to excavate the meaning of the text". In another exercise Ianiello and Kelley were asked to fill in the gaps between the times their respective characters meet by describing what the characters might have been doing while away from each other. In yet another exercise, the director questions 'Martina' about the way she sees herself and Eve and later questions 'Eve' about Martina. He even questioned the 'Cat' played by O. Chong about his motivations during certain scenes in the play.

The afternoon rehearsals were completely different. The director positioned and moved his actors and ensemble in order to 'compose' the scene. The same two actors who had delved into the motivations of their characters now spoke to the audience and barely acknowledged each other and were completely oblivious to the ensemble busily moving around them drawing and erasing pictures. Is this then how it would appear in performance?

The following is a description and analysis of the rehearsal process of one sequence between Martina, Eve and the Cat and the way in which it is finally reflected in the performance. This is the scene in which we first see Eve after she has returned to New York from Chicago to look after her dying mother. Eve plans to pack some of her mother's things and asks her what she should keep and what she should throw. Martina wants her to throw everything except bank books and certain papers. Eve then casually asks her if she has her adoption papers and Martina gets very upset. Meanwhile, off stage, the Cat is trying to drown itself in the toilet bowl. When O. Chong as the Cat is dragged by Eve into the room where Martina is, he launches into a rant in Mandarin which the other two obviously don't understand. In the morning rehearsal when they begin to run the scene, the director first runs it as he has blocked it, with Martina and Eve not facing each other while they speak and as Eve 'finds' different things of Martina, she draws it on the floor within the boxes.

After the scene is run, the director questions the actors about characterisation and Kelley asks the director if the scene can be run as a 'naturalistic' exercise to help her 'ground her acting' on a naturalistic plane. The scene is run as a 'naturalistic' exercise with the actors speaking directly to each other and miming opening boxes and taking out things. Even the Cat when he rants is more restrained and direct. Following this exercise, once again the actors follow the blocking and this time Kelley is able to infuse her voice and movements with what she had worked out in the exercise and marry it to the very non-naturalistic blocking and movements that the director had wanted. The Cat is asked by the director to use big gestures and movements to

go with passionate delivery. Through this rehearsal process, the director and the actors had found a comfortable balance between the actors' comfort level with emotions and motivations and the director's vision of how he wanted the scene to appear. In contrast, the rehearsal of this same scene with the ensemble necessitated the actors repeating the scene over and over again while the director and the ensemble worked out the visual chalk compositions on the stage floor and back wall.

This scene during the performance was completely organic in the way in which the actors and the ensemble delivered the scene – Eve was concerned, apologetic and exasperated in contrast to Martina's rising hysteria. The scene with the Cat is pervaded with dramatic irony as the audience (who either knew Mandarin or read the surtitles) understood the Cat while Martina and Eva only heard the cat meowing. The presence of the ensemble acts as a Brechtian device and distances the audience from the fictive world of Martina and Eve.

The puppets used in the production were shadow puppets cut out of stiff black cardboard. Apart from the shadow puppet of the little girl, all the other puppet shapes such as the thief, the tree, the rat and the ox were skeletal. One of the devices used to create the shadows was a circle with skeletal outlines of prehistoric creatures including a dinosaur and which is turned with a handle in front of the lamp. Apart from the prologue and the epilogue the puppets are mainly used in the scenes with the villagers in Tibet / China. The first time the puppets were observed by me in rehearsal was when the whole cast came together for the prologue. I had observed earlier rehearsals of

sequences from the prologue that involved only Martina, Eve and O. Chong as the Priest. The light source used to create the shadows was a powerful lamp usually placed in the centre at the downstage edge of the acting area. During rehearsals, the stage manager operated the lamp and the puppets were manipulated at different times by different members of the ensemble along with O. Chong. This scene involved a lot of visual elements – the puppets, the ensemble and actors drawing with chalk along with two big globes mounted around a lamp on upstage right and upstage left. Apart from the visual elements the director had to co-ordinate the movements and drawings of the ensemble with the actors' speech. The ensemble juggled many functions, they had to keep track of what they drew where and when, at the same time they needed to remember when and who had to be in position to manipulate the puppets. The cast had to rehearse small sequences over and over again to get the timing and placement right.

The ensemble's jobs were even more complicated in the village scenes when they had to deliver dialogues as well as to manipulate the various puppets. O. Chong as Cat freely crossed the two strands of the stories and appeared in the village scenes as Cat as well as puppeteer. As an exercise, the director ran this scene naturalistically so that the ensemble actors "bring intensity into their voice and understand the characters and situations". He explained to them that he wanted the voice carrying natural intensity to contrast with their stylised movements. All the scenes with the villagers are in Mandarin. TC Chong told me in the interview that he originally wrote the scene in English and then had O. Chong translate it into a formal rather than colloquial Mandarin. Thus a voice carrying natural intensity speaking in



formal Mandarin using stylised movements provided a contrast to Martina and Eve's more naturalistic, contemporary speech and movements.

Furthermore, while rehearsing this scene, the director instructed Ong, who plays the village headman, not to be naturalistic in his movements but to be "almost Noh like", very intense but controlled. The result was rather surprising. The headman was speaking to the skeletal shadow of the thief and demanding that the thief return the golden lamp-holder that he had stolen. The shadow, although two dimensional, towers over the headman, however, Ong, with practice, was able to point accusingly at the shadow with such intensity that the enormous shadow puppet appeared chastised. Here, I was able to observe in the making the ways in which scale, materiality and intensity can challenge the audience's concepts of reality and illusion. Once again, the juxtaposition of live actors and puppets demonstrates the ability of the puppet to cross the real-imaginary divide and to transverse time and space without causing any confusion in the minds of the audience.

The director paid close attention not just to the acting of the human actors but to the 'acting' of the puppets as well – during a rehearsal he instructed the puppeteer that he wanted more 'emotion' from the puppet and she worked through different movements and angles until the director was satisfied that the puppet's despair was sufficiently evident. TFP's experience and expertise with puppets, objects, lights and shadows could be clearly observed not just in their use and manipulation of puppets but in their use of clever devices such as the globes used to visually create the birth of the universe through shadow play and the basket used to spotlight the cat. For the

latter, the puppeteers at the light used a simple wire-mesh basket painted black with its bottom removed and placed in front of the light to form the spotlight.

The puppets represented the various incarnations of the thief who stole the lamp-holder from the monastery and each incarnation was questioned by the village headman as to its whereabouts. A bonsai tree was questioned as he had been a Japanese soldier in his previous life who massacred, pillaged and raped thousands of civilians during the Japanese occupation. The lamp-holder turned up in his possession and a cat that he had adopted, a reincarnation of the same cat that did not stop the thief, was called as witness. The cat realised that his 'karma' was tied to that of the thief and that he would be born again and again until the thief returned the lamp-holder and that each time the thief was reborn, the cat had to bear witness. The company, apart from using shadow puppets to represent each of the incarnations, also used skeletal heads that appeared on the stage held by one of the ensemble members covered in a black cloak. This device placed the puppet on the same plane as the human actors allowing for physical contact. During rehearsals, the ensemble had to meticulously work out the shifts from puppet form to skeletal-head form. In some sequences, the shadow puppets, skeletal-heads and human actors all appeared on stage at the same time, creating a highly visually layered effect of scale and form. I was observing, in the making, the creation of Tillis' "double vision" where "Double-vision exposes the audience's understanding of what is an object and what is life, creating the pleasure of a profound and illuminating paradox."("Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet." 137)

During the early days of rehearsals, the village sequences were rehearsed separately from the New York sequences. After about ten days of rehearsals, I observed the scenes in sequence and realised that as the play progressed the two stories got more and more intertwined which for the actors meant fast and difficult switches from drawing with the chinks to puppetry to manipulating objects to acting as the villagers. They were able to perform all of their assorted jobs with an ease that showcased their experience as puppeteers and actors and so I was very surprised when they stumbled. The director was rehearsing the last scene before the epilogue in which Martina imagines that she is singing a version of Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*. The ensemble of three was asked to go up against the back wall and mime certain movements corresponding to the words of the song. For some reason, two of them found it very difficult to get what the director wanted and finally after some days he reduced what they had to do and finished the sequence with only one ensemble actor. One inference I can draw based on my experience as an actor and director is that it is difficult to perform when lacking comprehension or conviction and that, whether working in a naturalistic style or with puppets and objects or in a stylised form, the actor or puppeteer's understanding of the situation is important.

As the rehearsals moved into the last two weeks, the mornings were used for detail work and the afternoons for run through which gradually incorporated sound and music, costume and finally make-up. As the production began to come together the different ways in which the director and his team had deployed puppetry, objects and performative scenography and the role they played in performance began to emerge.

The play was performed in a temporary blackbox theatre constructed by the organisers of the festival and therefore the acoustics and soundproofing was not as good as it should have been. The audience had to contend with the noise from outside while watching the performance. The audience were seated on the three sides of the stage with two large-screen TV's mounted high extreme stage left and stage right for the surtitles. The audience size was small as the theatre could only accommodate roughly eighty people each night. My attention was split between the audience and the performance and as I watched them I was looking for answers to some of the questions that arose from my rehearsal observation. The audience had to follow the myriad actions happening simultaneously on the stage— the acting, the puppetry, the performative scenography, the story and the surtitles and, from time to time, they had to make a choice about what they would pay attention to. This perhaps is what Lehmann mean when he speaks of the “*parcelling of perception*”(88) in postdramatic theatre when the concentration on one particular aspect makes the clear registration of another very difficult. This might not be a problem in a performance like *0501* where there is no story to be followed but in *TBOLAD*, this splintering of attention and perception might affect the way the audience understood the play. Therefore in this particular production, did the use of puppets and objects hinder meaning making rather than enhance it? When asked this question the playwright / director replied that for him, going to the theatre was not to understand but to experience the human condition.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Please refer to Appendix3 for transcript of interview.

The puppets, objects and the drawings helped to create the imagined universe where the complex concepts of karma, death, and reincarnation were materially visualised. Puppets have the elemental ability to straddle the spiritual and material worlds as evidenced by the earliest uses of puppets in animistic practices which underline another of man's deepest compulsions to "bow down to the spirit, *anima*, perceived in all of nature's manifested forms and humours" (Francis 146). The shadow puppets effectively transcend the barriers between the real and the spiritual to depict the various incarnations of the thief. The chalk drawings were visual representations of scenography and theme as well as a metaphor for the ephemerality of life – they were only momentary and could be easily erased by a wet cloth. The puppets, the objects and the drawing added visual and symbolic layers to an already complex exploration of a very difficult concept and at the same time simplified the telling of the story by affording a way for the playwrights and the directors to represent the spiritual and the inner world of the characters. The shadow puppets and the puppet-heads are characters in the story – the thief, the bonsai tree, the rat, the ox and the slave master (the previous avatars of Martino/a) and provide a contrast to the flesh and blood living avatar. The puppets and objects in this performance are used to convey the very abstract concepts present in the *Tibetan Book Of Living And Dying*.

The process of creating *The Book Of Living And Dying* not only incorporated live actors and various types of puppets and objects, but also required the integration of two foreign artists into an already well-established troupe. This delineation of a creative process that spanned many months and phases highlights the logistical complexity involved. The chalk drawings, the

puppets, the objects and the movements of the actors create a rich and complicated visual scenography which challenges the attention of the audience. The rehearsal process and what happened before in the early stages of creation reflect the highly collaborative nature of theatre making. The puppets and objects were inspired by the stories and conversations between the designers and the director. However, this process would have been very different if not for the firm direction provided by TC Chong. As the rehearsals progressed, it became very clear that the juxtaposition of actors and puppets and the resulting effect were very much a part of the director's vision.

## *Chapter 6*

### *Conclusion: Towards a New Understanding of Puppetry*

This research started with the aim of understanding the influence and significance of the use of puppets in contemporary theatre by studying and analysing the performances and the theatre-making process of The Finger Players. The analysis of the company's oeuvre in the light of the discourse on the use of puppets and puppetry in theatre offers a number of insights.

Theatre-makers from around the world have been drawn to working with puppets and objects in creating their performances. The puppet offers the artist the freedom to engage in two specific types of subject matter. The first is based upon the realisation that since the puppet is not bound to reality it can be made to represent beings that are in no sense real. Batchelder considers this freedom to be the key to puppetry: "The enduring success of the puppet theatre rests, I believe, upon the facility with which it brings into juxtaposition the real and the imaginary, endowing both with equal plausibility"(qtd. in Tillis "Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet." 86). The imaginary could represent fantastic worlds or the 'inner' world by being material manifestations of fears and emotions. In *BDDS* the 'devil' puppets are the material manifestations of the fears that haunt the characters; in *First Family*, the shadow puppets allow for the visualisation of the fantastical and farcical; in *suitCASES* the puppets are completely alien. A puppet is a natural transgressor and has the ability to cross boundaries with ease, whether between life and death, reality and illusion or even time and space. In *TBOLAD* the puppets and objects are used to convey the very abstract concepts of karma and reincarnation by their

ability to transgress the boundary between life and death; in *FNDS*, the puppets represent the younger versions of the human actors. Throughout theatre history and in various parts of the world, puppeteers performing for children and adults alike have taken advantage of the puppet's ability to mingle together the worlds of reality and imagination.

The second type of subject matter that the use of the puppet offers to the artist is that of satire/parody, and is based upon the realisation that since the puppet is not bound by reality, it is free to present a caustic portrait of it. According to Francis, parody where the puppets “imitate and mock their human counterparts and their activities, has been a constant in the puppet theatre probably since antiquity.”(8) Therefore it follows that it is in the field of satire that the puppet theatre seems to have established its widest adult appeal as puppets lend themselves obviously and easily to caricature and representing stereotypes as in *First Family*, *FNDS*, *Piano Teacher* and *Cat, Lost And Found*. This ability of the puppet is firmly rooted in the contemporary.

The visibility or invisibility of the puppeteer adds a complex aesthetic to the performance. When the puppeteers are visible, their physicality as they manipulate their puppet character becomes as much a part of the scenography as the puppet itself. In theatre with puppets, the puppeteer, apart from manipulating the puppet, often has to play a role other than her puppet's and interact with other actors or objects. An array of meanings is thrown up when the puppet with the puppeteer, is placed alongside the human actor as is evident in *FNDS*. Whereas the actor is capable of making direct human contact



with the spectator and of expressing a subtle and complex range of feelings, the puppet draws its greatest intensity of response by suggesting through visible images the invisible world of imagination. The puppet provokes a double-vision in the mind of its audience: it is, like the actor, imagined to be alive; but unlike the actor, it is perceived to be an object. In this way it is essentially different from the actor. Zamir states emphatically, “Unlike living actors and our relation to their experience onstage either as characters or actors (or both), the puppet almost always remains an object in the audience’s mind” (401). This “ontological paradox” as Tillis calls it allows the audience to perceive life in the object and be empathetic, but at the same time, the recognition that it is an object distances the audience from it. This allows the audience to view puppet “violence” as being humorous rather than being repulsive, for instance - the beheading of the Emperor puppet in *FNDS* is funny rather than horrifying; the mutilated body of the Mother in *Piano Teacher* coming to life and singing a song is funny rather than macabre. According to Blumenthal, puppet violence can be playful rather than serious and the “barbarity is irreverent rather than vicious and often so over-the-top that it bounds clear over the edge of horror into farce” (144).

Another inherent ability of the puppet that is clearly visible in this study is its flexibility. As Von Kleist noted puppets can achieve a kind of gracefulness impossible for a human actor. The puppet can fly; it can be beheaded, torn apart and put together; it can grow in size and shrink (as in the case of shadow puppets). Unlike human actors’ limited agility and endurance, puppets “can be designed to possess exceptional skill or withstand extreme physical insults” (Blumenthal 88).

Hence the puppet provides much artistic freedom of subject-matter. Along with these, the puppet carries with it another set of associations, when thought of as a metaphor – on the one hand the puppet itself might be taken to be a metaphor of humanity, and the term "puppet" might be applied to particular people. The puppet, while it is an object, is controlled by the puppeteer and perceived to be alive. However, when the puppet is a metaphor of humanity, the human is perceived to be alive but controlled by forces greater than him. The metaphoric association when puppets are juxtaposed with human actors is seen in many of the performances of the TFP such as *FNDS*, *Twisted*, *Piano Teacher and Cat*, *Lost And Found*. In *Turn By Turn*, the puppet story as a metaphor for the story of the characters highlights the self-reflexivity of the performance.

In all TFP productions the visible presence of the human manipulator deliberately engages the issue of the performing puppet/object versus the performing human being by establishing a convention in which humans and objects share the stage. The artist and the spectator are forced to confront matters of shared focus, scale, spatial relationships, and kinaesthetic response between the visible human manipulator and the visible object. This series of confrontations is sophisticated and complex, and necessarily engages questions of design, movement, and perception. These confrontations, as seen in the preceding chapters underscore the pure theatricality of the puppet or performing object. Puppets and performing objects provide the theatre artist with a rich array of visual imagery and symbols. Whether it is dramatic or postdramatic theatre, puppets when used alongside human actors augment the visual and/or symbolic meaning of the performance. As Blumenthal states:

Finally, all art – in fact, everything human beings design – both reflects and helps to shape our sense of who we are. Puppets, with their peculiar ability to make us believe they are us, are surely among the canniest and uncanniest, of human creations (255).

The Finger Players employ a variety of narrative styles in their repertoire – the contemporary, the historic, the mythic, the abstract, the fantastic, or a hybrid of styles – and they have successfully incorporated puppets, objects and human actors in all of them. The company is certainly unique in Singapore for their unusual aesthetic which sets them apart from other contemporary theatre companies. Although some of the issues that the plays address find resonance in the work of other companies – multiculturalism, identity politics, human concerns such as death, loneliness, urban living – what makes TFP unique is not the subject matter but the manner in which the story is told – through the mingling of living actors, puppets and objects.

Puppets and objects when juxtaposed with live actors in a performance which uses an evocative soundscape and innovative lighting (whether narrating a contemporary or mythical story) create an intermingling of forms, disciplines and media and produce a form of theatre which can be called “Hyper-Theatre”. The term hyper-theatre has been used of late to describe performances which employ “a myriad of storytelling techniques such as digital media, music, dance, puppetry, mask work, special effects, theatrical illusions and other underrepresented art forms.”(Cawelti 19)

This study is limited to the work of The Finger Players here in Singapore. Theatre makers and companies<sup>25</sup> from around the world are experimenting with different types of puppets and puppetry techniques as part of their visual aesthetic. A global research project into contemporary theatre practice which incorporates puppets and objects into theatre in other countries will facilitate generating a greater knowledge of the ways in which puppetry can be combined with other forms of theatre. An attempt to explore and define the concept of “Hyper-Theatre” could help to introduce a new paradigm into the discourse of theatre and performance studies. A further study might lead to new understanding of intercultural practice, the impact and significance of the intermingling of tradition and technology and how all of these affect meaning making in theatre.

Certain questions that emerged from the study also merit further research. What happens when a live actor and a puppet are seen on stage together? An in-depth study of acting where actors work alongside with puppets and puppeteers might throw new light on the very nature of acting. Can the duality of the puppet – an object that is perceived to be alive – provide a deeper understanding of presence and representation? How does the audience make sense of the “double vision” generated by the puppet? Perhaps a study of audience perception of actors and puppets on the same stage could provide further insights into our understanding of spectatorship.

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<sup>25</sup> Some of the theatre makes such as Julie Taymore have been mentioned earlier. Companies such as South African Handspring Puppet Company and American Rogue Artists Ensemble have produced exciting and innovative theatre using puppets and objects.

Further research into puppets, objects, puppetry and contemporary theatre practice will greatly enhance and broaden the discourse of theatre and performance studies.

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*Appendix 1: Interview with Oliver Chong*

*Date: 15-05-2012, Time: 12.20pm.*

The first part of the interview involved ascertaining the background information of Oliver Chong with regards to theatre, primarily his introduction to and beginnings in theatre. The summary is as follows:

Chong started his involvement with theatre at a young age and after his schooling, studied in a polytechnic with electrical engineering as a subject. After two years he quit and joined NAFA's interior design course. He started working as a graphic and set designer even before he finished his course. He worked in advertising and pursued his interest in theatre during the evenings. He started an advertising company that folded after two years and during this time, he also designed toys. He then decided to work in theatre full time as a professional. He worked with TTP initially and on Tan Beng Tian's suggestion, joined TFP. His training in theatre has been on the job as well and through attending workshops such as the Commedia dell'Arte workshop. While he had no formal training in puppetry, his experience with designing toys and physical theatre helped him in learning to make and use puppets. He also trained with the company when they attended foreign workshops in Prague and Jogjakarta.

SV: Which was the first play that you wrote and directed for TFP?

OC: The first play that I wrote and directed for the Main Season was *I'm Just A Piano Teacher*. I volunteered and TC booked that slot for me. After finishing the writing, I gave the script to TC and said why don't you direct. He pulled me aside and said that if I didn't try I never would. It was scary but at the end of the day I enjoyed it and it was fruitful.

SV: When you direct do you use any particular style?

OC: No I don't consciously think of a style per se. Some audience who watch the play might say oh it's very obviously my style. I choose to

be honest and sincere and do it my way. Of course, all this is informed by my previous training.

SV: Was there a particular reason you used the type of puppets you did in Piano Teacher?

OC: I think I wanted a puppeteer who could manipulate a puppet. Most of the time if you use puppets of that size, you need three puppeteers. But I wanted it to be a very human show not a puppet, puppet show. So I wanted to come up with something that could merge the two. Then of course when I started making this puppet I also asked some volunteers to come in and help and they asked why you want them to wear the puppet in front. The human actor can do all that the puppet can do so wouldn't it be redundant? Technically yes, but visually no, it gives another layer. Of course it was scary but it worked. I wouldn't want to repeat it.

SV: Was it difficult for the actors to combine acting and manipulation of the humanette puppets?

OC: Yes it was. One of the actresses cried.

SV: What was the rehearsal process?

OC: I wanted them to try move in the Commedia dell'Arte way. It's more heightened and stylised. The way we manipulate the puppet, you will have to transfer the soul into the puppet. This time when the body is so close to you, they have to recede themselves to behind, so the real self is behind and they have to manipulate the puppet. We used commedia training, not the whole attitude but the essence.

SV: Why did you opt to use different languages and dialects?

OC: Again it comes back to the sincere and truthful way. Because in real life Singaporeans, we all speak like that, we don't speak one language throughout. It's quite weird to watch Singaporeans doing a play in

British English or accents or perfect Chinese accented Chinese. It's not Singaporean.

SV: Similarly in *Cat, Lost and Found* you used different languages?

OC: Yes I tried Malay. Farez helped and I asked Najib to translate.

SV: In *Pinocchio's Complex* what kind of puppets did you use?

OC: Again, I tried to use different types of puppet by having Jo Kwek act like puppet. I thought it was a more daring move. That was an experiment. The visual impact was much lesser. There were strings attached to her.

SV: For *Cat*, were you trying to make a political statement?

OC: Subconsciously I think yes, because it gets more and more that way. But when I was writing I didn't consciously want to put that in.

SV: For *Cat*, you didn't use conventional puppets. Why is that?

OC: I am not a *puppeteer* puppeteer, for me puppets are just a tool. If it doesn't better tell the story, I'd rather not use it.

SV: How much does cost influence the way you create?

OC: It effects a lot, sometimes you have to make do and by making do the end result is more creative. For *Piano Teacher*, I wanted to cut cost on the sets, so I found a lot of carton boxes so the set is all carton boxes and luckily there was a production before that by another company and they used lots and lots of carton boxes. So I asked them if they wanted to throw and they said yes and I took them and designed the sets.

SV: Why puppets?

OC: I think there is something magical about puppets. Whenever puppets and human beings are on stage, you can't help but watch the puppet. The puppet is what it is; it's not a representation of whatever. An actor

is embodying something. It is very magical when you see something that is inanimate comes alive. That alone is magical.

SV: What did you mean by 'soul' of the puppets?

OC: When I conduct workshops with adults or children and I teach them to manipulate puppets, they want to make the puppet do a lot at once make them move fast. But the most difficult part is how to make the puppet be still and just breathe, because when you are breathing into the puppet, the puppet is actually now your body. The puppet will breathe with you and moves with you. If your soul is in it, it will just follow you and you will do whatever the puppet is doing.

SV: What are some of the different types of puppets you have worked with?

OC: Well, traditional string, rod, hand but I still prefer rod. The rod is more immediate, it will feel whatever you are feeling. String takes longer to transfer.

The following were follow-up questions asked and answered via email:

SV: What do you see as the role and function of the director?

OC: To facilitate and lead the whole production team towards realizing a vision. The broad strokes of this vision should come from the director and it serves as a guiding framework that is clear and at the same time flexible enough to allow room for everyone to contribute the finer details in the picture. Communication becomes very important in the creative process. The director communicates just enough ideas across to stimulate, facilitate and lead actors' improvisation, rather than dictating every details. The director must have a very clear idea of the direction where the play is going prior to the rehearsal process so as to better lead and manage the process.

SV: How does your approach to theatre making change when creating performances for your "Reach Out" division?



OC: Most of the time, the audience of our reach out shows are younger and less frequent theatre goers. The content has to be more straightforward. And I don't mean shallow themes or condescending forms. The content structure has to be very clear and simple for the message to get across. More so, if it is a roving show, street show, or in any public space. Performing wise, we have to be especially sensitive to the audience and deliver the play accordingly, as they might come from a wide age range and with different levels of reception.

SV: Does audience reception guide you in your choice of play, puppets, theme or concept?

OC: Yes and no. Yes, because in order to communicate with the audience, we have to try to understand them and "talk" to them in a way that they can understand us. I use "communicate" a lot. That is because I believe that is what my job is about.

No, because the genesis of a creation should be truthful and not impeded by what the audience want or like to see. The rest is finding the balance in employing a way to communicate this across without losing the integrity in the impulse.

SV: What kind of new works would you like to create?

OC: Site-specific works.

*Appendix 2: Interview with Ong Kian Sin*

*Date: 22-05-2012, Time: 11.30am.*

SV: How did you start in theatre?

OKS: After my university education I became a journalist in JB and then through friends in Theatre Practice, I met Beng Tian and we did a show together. We had a good connection and as Mr Kuo Pao Kun asked her to set up a children's' branch. And he asked me to join her. I wrote the first show.

SV: Did you work with other puppeteers from 1999 to 2004?

OKS: Only the two of us were full time.

SV: Were you trained as a puppeteer before?

OKS: No, never, learnt on the job through attending workshops and creating performances.

SV: What do you think of the change in direction since TC came on board?

OKS: We were more focussed on children, now we have expanded and are more versatile.

SV: Do you sit down collectively and plan?

OKS: Yes, it's very simple, every year we have two meetings when we ask who wants to do a show?

SV: How did you come up with the idea?

OKS: They are all friends, at that time I was thinking of doing something collectively. Previous shows were always based on a script. 0501 begins with lots of workshops and games; different people conducted lots of workshops about their experience in theatre. It's very simple, if I gave you 5 minutes what would you like to say to the audience? It was a one year process. Every month we would meet together and have workshops. In the last month we would gel up the pieces.

SV: How did you select the different pieces?

OKS: It was a collective decision. My job was how to gel up. Which one was to be the first one, the second one. Basically the traffic.

SV: Did you have a storyboard a script?

OKS: Each of them had to turn in a simple script of the segments, four segments – tell people what was going on, then do some repetitions, then need to have a conflict, then resolution. Those were the main parts of the segment. They had to turn in the script; they can do it by drawing or writing.

SV: Was it autobiographical?

OKS: Yes, very, it came from the soul it came from that time how they feel about themselves, theatre, it's about lines, very personal and very intense.

SV: Some of the performers were also doing technical work. Was it difficult for them?

OKS: For some like Wei Ling, she had never stepped on the stage before. At first they were not so sure. But the process made us very connected so they did not appear on the stage alone, they think of it as a game, they were more comfortable. be supportive

SV: So that was your job?

OKS: Yes, calm them down, be supportive.

SV: You were directing the workshops?

OKS: Yes.

SV: When you started to decide the roles and responsibilities, was it again done as a collective?

OKS: It was different for different pieces, for example with Darren's, he himself decided who would appear on the stage. For Wei Ling's sets, I had to help about to make her concept about the system work.

SV: What was most rewarding about this process?

OKS: It was very beautiful to see how an artist really was putting his inner feeling into the piece. This I really appreciated. The collective feeling was very strong. I remember after the last show at the VT after the bump out and we were sitting outside and we were feeling very sad that it was the end. But the beauty of it is that after 0501 we felt so connected and that's why we are still working together. And I think this connect will last till the end of my life.

SV: Did you have the same team for suitcases?

OKS: Same team but different theme. For suitcases it was about how it is living in a city. I started with the actresses first. They came up with their own ideas. I didn't have the designers come in first. The actresses explored and worked out the story and then we had the presentation and then we had the designers come in to work out the set and then the actresses were put into the set.

SV: But was it still collaborative?

OKS: Yes when the music came in and he was jamming we had to adjust.

SV: As a director what was the difference between the two experiences?

OKS: 0501 was my first collective work and they were a lot of up and downs. We had to give equal support for each piece. We had to do a lot of pulling and pushing. For suitCASES it was easier as we were more experienced and so the process was shorter and smoother.

SV: How did Victoria Theatre figure in your creating of 0501?

OKS: We didn't know where we would perform initially. We just knew we wanted to be different and play with the space. We wanted to give the audience something different about theatre. For most of the audience it was the first time on stage. The show didn't have a lot of text and they had to use a different sense to feel theatre.

SV: You have used puppets and objects in both the plays. What were your ideas regarding the use of objects?

OKS: For me puppetry is about making any object come alive. Like Leng Leng's piece about using structures come alive. To me everything on stage, you have to find a connection, you have to gain the history of every object on stage. To me puppetry is about anything, this table, this could be a puppet to me. Every object has its own life.

SV: The scaffolding in suitCASES dominates the stage. How did the creation of the set come about?

OKS: The set is so very hard to come out from Wei Ling because she had difficulty how to bring the city onto the stage. There is a secret there – there is a drawing of the set on the platform because her concept is that the 3-d set is shrinking onto that.

SV: What do puppets give theatre?

OKS: Definitely will make the theatre richer with puppetry. I think puppetry is something very reality – non-reality, to bring darkness to bring a dreamy feel, it's a tool to bring reality into a mystical world to me. When I am using puppetry I always think about why I am using it. For example for this show (TBOLAD) you see the skeleton it makes sense to use it.

With puppetry when I am using it I figure out why I think I need it when I am using it on stage. We are good at puppetry but we are more good at visuals, we are very collectively using different kind of elements in the theatre pieces. We do it well, we do it correctly, nicely and it's visually stunning.

Normally when I introduce myself to the audience I say I am a performer, a theatre practitioner. I don't want to be labelled as a puppeteer; it's one of my skills. It's more difficult when the puppeteer is exposed. We have to be more neutral but we have to transfer all our energy and emotions to the puppet.

SV: With 0501 the 'energy' in the play is very outward while with suitCASES it is very inward. Was this intentional and why?

OKS: It is because of the themes, 0501, it is about what I want to tell people whereas suitCASES is about the city. When you walk down Orchard Road you feel oppressed a lot, so the energy becomes very enclosed, very depressed. So it comes naturally because of the theme. When we talk about the city we feel sad, very oppressed. 0501 is about connections while suitCASES is about isolation.

SV: Would you like to do another collective piece?

OKS: Yes, next April, I want to do something a little happier. The show name will be One Fine Day. I want to ask all the collective group to come together and talk about how do I make my day happy?

*Appendix 3: Interview with Chong Tze Chien*

*Date: 01-06-2012, Time: 12.06pm.*

SV: Does the group have any guiding principles that they follow?

CTC: First and foremost I think I didn't want the company to be shaped by the personality of an artistic director. I wanted something more of a collective of artists working together having the same ideology and yet having enough time and space to develop their own style and voice as creators and artists. And so as a company, conventionally if you have a theatre company, the company and the season will be shaped by the personality of the artistic director and I didn't want that. Which is why it was important for me to have full time artists and we are the only company to have a full time ensemble. And I wanted to devote resources to just that.

SV: What is this common, shared ideology that you speak of?

CTC: There are two things, one is of course, which is the very fact that it is puppetry, we push the envelope of puppetry and what puppetry could do and it's not just about puppet theatre, it's about devices of using puppetry and how it fuses with other disciplines. The second one is about Singaporean stories, and the Singaporean way of telling the story. We are invested in the local culture, Singaporean answers.

SV: Almost every single play that you have done is original. Is this deliberate or by chance?

CTC: If we invest in Singaporean artists very naturally they will touch on stories and issues close to their hearts, it's natural that the material that they are most interested in is their expression and that will be shaped by what's around them.

SV: What, in your opinion, do puppets do for a performance that a live actor does not?

CTC: My entry point to puppetry is that it is theatrical. The minute you see a puppet on stage you know that you are watching theatre and there is nothing more magical than that. There is something about puppet theatre that screams imagination. Sometimes a puppet doesn't even have a mouth and yet you can imagine that they have a mouth and can speak and sometimes a puppet doesn't even look human but you believe that it has life. This fascinated me a lot. So when I officially joined TFP I thought let's capitalise on that and push it to its logical conclusion and lets refine this concept so that it extends to every single work that we do. So that we are not pigeon-holed as a puppet theatre, we are more than that; the tag-line for TFP is that we are creating a theatre of imagination.

SV: As you have worked on productions which do not use puppets, what do you see as some of the challenges of incorporating puppets into your performances?

CTC: Because it is such a visual medium, when you are rehearsing with actors who are not puppeteers, you have to prepare them and frame the work in such a way that they co-exist and the actors/puppeteers and actors who are not puppeteers could interact with ease with inanimate objects and yet make sense to them. Which is why in our rehearsals we don't start with character work. We start with composing the work first to make sense of this work we are creating so that the audience don't think we are being gimmicky and we are using devices for the sake of using it.

SV: What is your directorial process? Where do you start? With a script, an idea, a political or ideological statement? What are the steps you follow in your process?

CTC: My process is that I aim for simplicity in the way that I tell the story and the way that I want to drive home certain points. I like simplicity, for me simplicity is the most complex thing in the world. It's not about being simplistic or reductive; it's about articulating a very complex or nuanced or layered idea or story and yet making it accessible not just for the

audience but for us as well; and so I spend a lot of time thinking about it before I write or direct.

The process of production depends on the genesis of the project. For example for Turn by Turn, the genesis of the project was the donation of the puppets. So the puppets become my first cast. I was almost writing for these puppets in the boxes. Once I had that, the casting came later. Then for Whom it may Concern, it was because Karen approached me to write her a monologue. Because of the circumstances here in Singapore we don't have enough resources for workshopping the play. Ideally we should work like that. So not unless I can afford the time. If I can't, work double time, I process it in my head as a dramaturge and look at it objectively – what works, what doesn't and how do I refine the script.

SV: What do you see as the role and function of the director?

CTC: Facilitator. I facilitate. Because primarily because its visual which means that you have to coordinate actors, puppeteers, light and sound, pull strings together, in such a way that they complement each other. When I enter rehearsals, I have very concrete ideas in mind but am prepared to change. So I am constantly negotiating and facilitating so that it all comes together to speak a common language. I love accidents, surprises, because theatre is such a live medium.

SV: What is the role of language in rehearsal and performance?

CTC: I write it first in English and they get Kian Sin and Oliver to translate. I think multilingualism is a strength of Singapore. We don't realise that we code-switch all the time. It's a natural process; it only makes sense for me to use different languages.

SV: Is your work more collective than other directors?

CTC: As a playwright what defines me is that the play always has multiple perspectives. I get bored by my own voice and am more interested in what others think.



SV: Do you have a political or social message in your plays?

CTC: For me my philosophy is that the personal is political and social. So for me everything is. And I just zero in on the personal. Is it political is it social I leave it to the audience.

SV: How long did you take to write *Turn by Turn* and how long did the process from page to stage take?

CTC: *Turn by Turn* started out with an impulse, and the first thing that came to my mind was that I needed to bring these masters in to train the puppeteers. When they were here I interviewed them, I knew that I wanted to pay a tribute to the masters. In between, during the breaks, I asked questions like how did they form the troupe, what was it like during the Cultural Revolution, how did they get it going, what's it like now that it's becoming a dying art? Once I had that in my mind, the story crystallised in my head. It was pretty easy because the dramatic trajectory is shaped by the march of time, these were the events – I didn't want it be a historical play, I wanted it to be personal and intimate, so the masters' anecdotes and stories become the focal point for each event. And I shaped that accordingly. That wasn't too tedious.

Then the staging was trickier because what we did wasn't the authentic thing, the puppeteers at most had one month of training, they were not masters of the art. How to make them convincing as masters of the art and yet present the story in a way that makes the art exciting again without bastardizing it. So it was really a challenging process to think about what do you keep and what do you throw away, especially in the presentation.

For example, if you look at the staging in the conventional type of staging of this theatre the puppeteers should be masked or underneath the platform. But for me that become the opening lines of the play for there are two levels, one that the audience pays to see and one that they are never interested in, what goes on behind. So for me that was

important, here they are exposed and it is the human story that I wanted to tell, the people behind the puppets.

We did the Monkey King a couple of years ago, a very traditional presentation. So we decided to capitalise on puppets and skills we already had but at the same time as a metaphor, so that I could have the story told in the most succinct manner altogether. If I can tell the story and convey the characterisation and at the same time contribute to the heart I will do that.

SV: The next set of questions is about *The Book Of Living And Dying*– What was the process in creating the show until rehearsals?

CTC: We met in June last year to go to Tibet without any preconceived notions about what the play would be and each evening we would have sharing sessions just to consolidate our thoughts. We had would have writing with the playwrights or drawing exercises with the puppeteers, sometimes collectively, and just process the information and so the sharing exercises at the end of the day was important.

We had all read *The Book of Living and Dying* and we all had questions, it is so rich and dense where do we even begin? We had many Q and A sessions with the master. It's such a complex philosophy, you can't explain it in a few Q&A sessions, and you can't explain the religion in that way. You've got to experience it. So it was an experiential journey.

At the end of the tenth day I came up with a preliminary narrative framework – and I had a beginning and an ending. The beginning meaning I wanted to start off with a very simple incident that has repercussions across time and history. So picked something - someone stole something from the monastery and he lost his job and that is the alpha. The omega is that after many, many lives he dies. That's all I have, and I told them this and I said I want you to write five reincarnations of this person, make that a 15 minute play. So they went back home and wrote it. Two months later they sent me a draft, of course they had no idea what the others wrote.

I read all three playlets and my job was to weave it together into a coherent story. I had to keep some lines throw out some and transpose some. Antonio wrote about this woman on a Vespa and she hits a dog and falls out of the motorbike and dies and talks with the dog as she is dying and that gave birth to the story of Martina, who was a mother who was dying. Oliver or Nambi wrote about a father and daughter having a difficult relationship and I lifted the lines from this and combined the two and this became the last reincarnation. Something so simple and heart breaking seeing a daughter feeding a dying mother.

So when they came to Singapore, I told them ok this is what I did and we are not using it. Throw it away I'm going to give this to the puppeteers as spring board for design I wanted them to translate the reincarnations into visual images and puppets. So they came up with whale, rat and eventually what became the villagers' scenes.

So the three weeks in November we just worked on Martina and Eve. Martina became a transvestite only because we had two guys and a girl, and so Antonio had to play a transvestite. So I told them the ground rules – the mother is a transvestite, she adopted Eve. The turning point was when we decided that he stole her, because he is white, and Nambi is not. So how does this link to the alpha story, and I realised that it made logical sense as he stole the lamp holder and that is the Karma that has been running through their lives. And so we just had that as the back story and we concentrated on Eve's coming home from Chicago and the events that led up to Martina's death. The cat was Nambi's contribution. Everything was just working out the details.

I pored over the documents for two months and visually composed the stories according to the writing. I wrote the first draft written according to the visual map I had and we had a reading in February and got a feedback. So I took out what didn't work. And that became the second draft.

The naturalism was the details needed for characterisation to understand where they are in terms of their emotions, that's where the meteor came into the play. I imagined that a person taking morphine to imagine these apocalyptic visions. I went back to the Tibetan *Book of Living and Dying* where there are detailed descriptions of the nightmarish visions of their regrets of the dying, which they go through for 49 days of ordeal before they die. So for me the meteor became Martina's ordeal. And those become the heightened realism scenes within the naturalistic set up.

My intention in putting up this play was because I am very moved and engaged by the generosity in Buddhism philosophy and wanted to share this with people; I believe in cause and effect, I believe in karma.

SV: The Chinese story line and lines in the play – all devised or based on other stories?

CTC: I wrote it first in English and had Oliver to translate it. In English it was written in a certain formal rhythm. When Oliver translated, he asked if it should be conversational or formal Mandarin. I said I wanted it formal. And when we were looking for ways to deliver it, I realised that it had to be almost, flat to lend itself to rhythmic pattern, body language minimal almost like Noh theatre.

SV: Who decides to use the blackboard and why? Who comes up with the designs? How much input do the actors have in creating the 'art works'?

CTC: I did, because when we were in Tibet we saw a lot of Thangka paintings. In one year they would have a Thangka made of sand which takes days and months to make, and once it's done, they erase it. I wanted to recreate that and it ties in nicely about permanence and impermanence after all the effort, how easy it was to wipe it away. I wanted something flexible, and yet create that imagination, yet not something permanent. So I thought chalkboards. I keep going back to the swirl. The details I left it to the actors.

SV: Who conceived and who designed the puppets – collaborative?

CTC: I told the puppeteers what I wanted, the look. I wanted the past life to be skeletal animals because there are lots of lines. I wanted abstraction, chalk drawings and shadows emerge from the lines. Shadows are so ephemeral and so magical in shadow play.

SV: Is it important for the audience to know what shadow puppets stand for?

CTC: No I was more going with how the audience respond to the work emotionally. I wanted it to be a visceral experience.

SV: Why is the chalk white in the prologue?

CTC: White represents simplicity and purity and peace.

SV: Why do you have the characters not address each other in the play? (Except at times).

CTC: The thought process was that because it was such an emotional situation, I didn't want it to become sappy. So there is some alienation effect in that. So it was metaphoric and symbolic.

SV: During one rehearsal you suggested that the actors need to ground emotions on a naturalistic plane while acting in an almost "alienation" way. Can you explain this? Are you deliberately bringing in Brechtian terminology here?

CTC: All I knew is that I didn't want it to degenerate into something melodramatic. I wanted to save the eye contact for when it was really needed to engage each other.

SV: You said during a run that you need the pacing to be fast – but this doesn't always allow the audience enough time to process the multiple things happening on stage - is this intentional?

CTC: For me going to theatre is not to understand but to experience the human condition.