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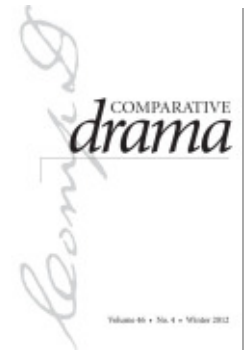
Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life (review)

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back. The bibliography also provides useful context missing from the entry itself. Helpfully, the annotation clarifies that the author is Anton's brother, rather than his more famous nephew, and reveals that the single-page entry came from the 220-page memoir of Anton's brother, published in 1929. Only once does Sekirin provide such useful context within the entry itself. The final chapter includes an entry by Elena Shavrova. In a note before the entry, Sekirin explains that she was the "aspiring writer and translator" on whom *Lady with a Lapdog* is loosely based (148). This sort of background information would have been welcomed throughout the work. Additionally, the reader should be cautioned that the entries are sometimes heavily edited, but there is no signal when omissions are made. These should not be read as complete accounts in the original format and style of the memoirist.

In spite of the book's occasional structural inconsistencies and omissions, *Memories of Chekhov* provides interesting and wide-ranging accounts that are brief and helpfully compiled in a readable format as an introduction to the student of Chekhov or general reader.

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Kenneth Gross. *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. 224 + 4 color plates, 24 halftones. \$25.00.

Toward the end of *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*, Kenneth Gross evokes the unusual environment in which puppetry exists:

It is a space where unexpected forms of life emerge, assert a form, shift shape and then disappear, not a vast space, not a great wilderness or a grand palace, but like some rumored corner of an old house, or some neighborhood in a city that you stumble across by surprise, where people under the shadow of war or poverty engage in commerce of peculiar sorts, trading in strange goods and using odd currencies, feeding unaccountable and suspect appetites. (158–59)

In *Puppet*, Gross attempts to articulate the essence of the creatures that inhabit this space, their special nature, and our attraction to them. Each chapter is an encounter with a few particular examples of puppetry, sometimes from traditional forms, like Japanese *bunraku* or Sicilian rod puppets, and sometimes from innovative contemporary artists like Janie Geiser or Germany's Ilke Schönbein, who are exploring the boundaries of this world in new ways. Each chapter also provides a meditation on aspects of puppetry that captivate and puzzle us,

leading to more profound consideration of the puppet's relationship to art and life. As Gross explains, "The puppet and the idea of the puppet move together here, the actual and imagined, or unknown, puppet, the visible and the invisible puppet" (4). *Puppet* is at once a book of personal reflections—based on Gross's own experiences with objects in performance, with literature that draws on the metaphor of the puppet, and with individual puppeteers—as well as an exposition on the nature of puppets, in all their variety, and how they work on the imagination.

Chapter 4, "The Fate of Hands," for example, begins by proposing the hand or glove puppet as the "extension and tool of our will" (51) because of the palpable presence of the human hand inside the puppet's body. The hand puppet transforms a part of the self into a separate, distinct entity even as it remains inseparable from the puppeteer. Furthermore, "The poetry of the connection between hand and puppet is so intense in part because of the range of ways in which we live in our hands, and in which our hands connect us to the world" (52). This observation brings Gross to the work of the famous Russian puppeteer Sergei Obraztsov, who, in his *Attitude to a Lady*, used simple balls on the index finger of each of his otherwise bare hands to act out a scenario of courtship and seduction. Gross articulates the complexities inherent in this simplest of puppets: "What you feel is the presence of a composite or double body, animate and inanimate at once, a relation perhaps echoing some image of a soul within a body, though never simply—it may be a body within a body, or a soul within a soul" (55). Gross builds on these insights to inform his reading of Philip Roth's novel *Sabbath's Theatre*, in which the main character is an aging puppeteer. While Sabbath's hands once had a special seductive life of their own, with age their powers have withered, "[a]nd the hardening of the puppeteer's hands keep pace with the hardening of the poet's own art" (59). Gross finds that the novel "reminds us that puppets offer a refuge for fantasies otherwise exiled" (60) and ends his chapter, "What I wonder is whether any actual puppet theatre could translate what the novelist's language seems to know" (62). Gross's full circle of reflections, from the unique expressive possibilities of hands in the art of puppetry, to the way Roth's novel redeploys those realities, and the metaphors they embody, in a different artistic sphere, mines the riches buried in the reciprocal connections between the puppet as both stage object and literary metaphor.

While chapter 4 explores the physical presence of the puppeteer's body, chapter 5, "Wooden Acting," focuses instead on the puppet as object and objects used as puppets. Gross begins weaving his way into this new web of ideas with a commentary on Kleist's famous essay "On the Marionette Theater" and its "attempts to mark the source of the marionette's peculiar and inhuman grace of motion":

That's where the puppet's soul is found, in its merely physical center of gravity, which is the line of the spirit. The soul lies in the motion it has as a material object and not a living body, and it is this to which the puppeteer must give himself up, to which he must lend his own living soul, desire, and bodily motion. (63)

Noting the expressivity of the basic physics of objects leads Gross to memories of seeing "a carved puppet hand, not yet attached to any larger body, made by Frank Soehnle" and how

[t]he wooden hand had a life and unpredictable will of its own, making each gesture a heart breaking surprise....A puppet in its very stillness and abandonment may be charged with potential motion, becoming an object of reverie, patiently awaiting some further life. (66)

Gross complements his observations here on the power of objects in and of themselves by turning his attention to the corollary absence of or carefully crafted voices in the puppet theater: on stage movement and sound work together to endow inanimate objects with life. Focus on the puppet's voice then leads organically to questions about texts for puppetry and how "[k]nowing the force of the puppet's limitations is crucial in the work of adapting for puppets dramatic work composed for human actors" (73). The next chapter, "Fables for a Puppet Theater," follows up on the theme of the puppet's force and limitations simply by listing images or ideas that lend themselves to the puppet stage: "Blocks learn to spell out words"; "Buildings shaking themselves awake at dawn"; "The wire sings to the wire-walker"; "The siege of the city. The death of the hero. The battle for his corpse. The burial of his armor. The wanderings of his name" (86–87). These are snapshots of poetry in motion, objects expressing their secret lives in ways that only the puppet theater can embody. In pinpointing tales that can translate to the puppet stage, Gross delves into the very heart of how puppetry operates. Further themes of the puppet's unique essence that Gross addresses include

its ardent indecorums, its talent for metamorphosis, its dismemberings of language and transformation of scale, its materiality, its commitment to giving life to the unliving, its negotiations with death and survival, its love of secrecy and shadows, its literalness, its fundamental strangeness (4)

The book's thorough and thoughtful coverage of the realm of the puppet—its familiar residents, its well-trod theoretical paths, alongside its more hidden alleys and byways—reveals Gross's deep engagement with this world, an oft-returning visitor or part-time resident, no mere tourist. Those who have hung out in these corners for some time will feel at home encountering many familiar faces; while Gross allows himself to be a *flâneur* of sorts through this land, he, nonetheless, manages to visit all the important landmarks of puppetry performance, theory, and artists. For anyone unfamiliar with this terrain, Gross is an inviting,

knowledgeable, and insightful guide. For someone already familiar with the topography, Gross offers new perspectives from unusual vantage points. His visit to the Sicilian Opera dei Pupi, for example, focuses on puppeteer Mimmo Cuticchio's production *Visita guidata all'opera dei pupi*, in which the puppeteer unconventionally takes a visible role onstage alongside his huge rod puppets. The show discloses the accumulation of ills that have afflicted Palermo and, at its climax, the puppeteer dismembers his own puppet hero, a metaphor for what he sees as the death of his art, now disconnected from its popular roots, just another tourist attraction. The irreverent hand-puppet Punch, an iconic puppet character, makes his appearance through Gross's analysis of its role in Russell Hoban's post-apocalyptic novel *Riddley Walker*, where it is unearthed after being long buried and forgotten to become the "image of an art more fantastic and archaic, at once young and old... its pathos and power, has something to do with survival, with an earliness that is wrapped up with a sense of violence suffered, a sense of things destroyed yet strangely preserved, alive in the present" (112).

Throughout the book, Gross shows his commitment to dissecting, in all its detail and nuance, the experience of encountering the animated object. He is, thankfully, not satisfied with simple astonishment at the animation of inanimate matter, but dives into the numerous ways we relate to objects of varying construction, form, size, and possibility of manipulation, and how these beings seize our minds and hearts. Moreover, he expresses these revelations in a poetic language that reconstructs the magic of the original experience, while also illuminating it.

As performing objects of all types increasingly take center stage in a range of theatrical venues and contexts, from cabaret-style puppet slams to off-Broadway theaters (*War Horse*), to Broadway houses (*Lion King*, *Avenue Q*), Gross's *Puppet* is a timely project, devoted to digging into the deep emotional connections we have with these beings and our continued reliance on them as vehicles for interpreting and concretizing human experience. Through Gross's eloquence, the book reads like a love letter to a sometimes disturbing, often exhilarating, now timely, but also timeless art.

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Min Tian. *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage: Chinese Theatre Placed and Displaced*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012. Pp. xi + 298. +12 illus. \$95.00.

Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) is indisputably China's greatest *jing* (Peking Opera) actor. His prolific fifty-year stage career and personal life have been well documented in autobiography, biographies, personal and professional