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The Alchemy of Puppet Theater at the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

By Ana Díaz Barriga

Abstract

The Third Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival took place on January 17-27, 2019, attracting thousands of audience members to the twenty-two venues in Chicago where puppet shows took place. This article analyses three performances presented at the festival: *Scweinehund* by Andy Gaukel, Sam Lewis's act with Jus Hambone, and Tom Lee and Koryū Nishikawa V's *Shank's Mare*. This analysis extends a metaphor provided by Blair Thomas, the festival's artistic director, who proposes that puppeteers create by combining pre-existing materials in their studios. I examine how contemporary puppeteers make use of a specific mastery of the practices of puppetry when repurposing existing histories and objects, integrating new technologies, and highlighting puppetry's connections to life and death, to invite both puppeteers and audiences to challenge their understanding of what puppet theatre is and can be. The puppeteers' strong appreciation and knowledge of the history and conventions of puppetry facilitates a connection with the legacy of this performance form and allows them to create work that broadens our vision of the multiple possible futures of puppet theater.

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I first heard about the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival at another puppetry festival I attended in 2017. As a puppetry practitioner and scholar newly arrived in Chicago in January 2019, I knew I could not miss my chance to attend. The biennial puppet theater festival, the largest in North America, prompts resolute audiences to face the Chicago winter to experience its international array of high-quality performances. I joined the thousands of audience members traversing the city to the twenty-two venues where puppet shows were performed.¹ The festival started in 2015 when puppetry director Blair Thomas brought together a group of disparate venues for the first time to present puppet shows under the festival's umbrella. He was following a model pioneered by Puppetropolis—a local government-presented festival that had taken place in 2001. Puppetropolis was only one of several theater festivals that took place in the city of Chicago, establishing it as a site ripe for cultural events through the number of artists present and the audience's interest in high quality and diverse performance ("About"). In February 2019, I had the opportunity to speak with Thomas about the festival. In our conversation he explained:

The metaphor of starting the festival was sort of like the metaphor of the puppeteer who has this studio with all the junk that they have collected and building supplies, and they have a puppet to make. And the puppet materially exists in the world, in disparate parts in the studio. And then they go

¹ The 2019 Prospectus for the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival states the event reaches audiences "of more than 14,000" (The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival).

in, and three weeks later they come out, and nothing has gone into that studio—it is already there—and then out comes this object. (Thomas).

Previous festivals, along with the audiences and venues interested in puppet theater, are the “parts” that Thomas refers to in his metaphor. “In some ways,” he continued, “the puppet festival exists in Chicago in ... disparate pieces around the city. ... It is the same kind of alchemy that making a puppet is materially” (Thomas).

In this essay, I borrow and extend Thomas’s metaphor of the parts that puppeteers bring together in their studio to analyze how artists performing in the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival also make use of “parts” they already have at hand to create—not a puppet, or a festival—but new forms of puppet theater. Combining existing pieces is a common practice in theater, yet puppetry requires a particular kind of mastery: the puppeteer needs to have the skills of the director, the performer, and, at times, also the theater designer and builder, in addition to their expertise in the meticulous task of making an object appear alive. Puppeteers develop these skills not only in the more general theatrical sense but also within the specificity of the puppet form, as they learn the existing conventions and practices that will create a puppet that is capable of performing life. Like the alchemist, puppeteers have the embodied knowledge of how to combine the ingredients of puppetry in the form of techniques and conventions so as to believably animate matter.

The liminal state of the puppet as a living inanimate object makes considerations about life and death particularly salient in puppetry, given the fragility of the puppet’s life and its dependence on the puppeteer to exist. As proposed by puppet director Basil Jones, what differentiates a puppet from a human performer is its engagement in two simultaneous performances: that of the narrative of the production, and that of the *Ur-*

narrative of its own “life” (61-3). In carrying out this dual performance, the puppeteer is not only giving life to the puppet but coming to bear on the life of puppet theater itself. As puppeteers engage their mastery in their embodied interaction with the object, they innovate and preserve this theatrical form. By repurposing puppetry’s histories and objects, integrating new technologies, and highlighting puppetry’s connection to ideas about life and death, the artists at the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival serve as prime examples of how puppeteers expand our present understanding of what puppet theater is. By referring us to existing techniques and conventions, their performances also make us think about the many possible futures of puppet theater.

In what follows, I will focus on three performances presented at the festival. I start by examining *Schweinehund* by Andy Gaukel and Sam Lewis’s pre-show to Jeghetto’s *Just Another Lynching* to explore how extant animation techniques and objects are repurposed to reclaim the past and reimagine the future. Then I show how *Schweinehund*, as well as Tom Lee and Koryū Nishikawa V’s collaborative piece *Shank’s Mare*, combine technology and puppetry to highlight material aspects of puppets and play with notions of durability and ephemerality. Finally, I discuss how, given its use of inanimate objects and ancient traditions, puppet theater’s relationship to death is brought to the forefront in *Shank’s Mare* to increase the spectators’ awareness of their own mortality and transcendence, in turn inviting them to consider the legacy of puppet theater, both in terms of its history and of its future.

The performances I analyze apply principles that Thomas enacts through the festival on a more focused level: they introduce some of the conventions of puppet theatre to encourage the audience’s understanding of the form before playing with, subverting, and developing those conventions. One of Thomas’s aims for the 2019 festival was to advance

puppetry by attracting diverse puppeteers and spectators. The festival context also allows Thomas to present shows that might be outside of what is normatively considered puppetry. By placing experimental works alongside more traditional puppet performances, spectators acquire some of the knowledge that puppeteers keep and nurture, learning to read and appreciate all of the events as part of an evolving form (Thomas). In each section, I expand my descriptions of my case studies to exemplify the artists' virtuosic skill in combining pre-existing manipulation techniques and objects of puppetry in the proverbial puppet studio. These performances allow us to see the knowledge the artists need to acquire to uniquely combine the elements of puppetry for a new production. They highlight how, given the puppet's liminal status, these pre-existing conventions are the necessary foundations for the development of the form.

RECLAIMING THE PAST AND REIMAGINING THE FUTURE

On January 25, I descended the stairs to the basement space at the Chopin Theatre to see Andy Gaukel's *Schweinehund*. As I later discovered, director-puppeteer Gaukel developed *Schweinehund* during a Creation Residency at the Institut Internationale de la Marionette in France ("Bio"). The show tells the story of Pierre Seel, a man deported to a concentration camp on suspicion of homosexuality. At the beginning of the show, we see him in the shape of a bird—an animation projected onto a thin veil in front of the table that functions as the stage—flying together with his lover. After he gets taken to the concentration camp, the protagonist is depicted by a completely white, skeletal-looking puppet, often costumed in a faded striped uniform. His puppeteer Myriame Larose is fully concealed in the dark space, generating the illusion that the puppet is independently alive.

Throughout the show, Pierre is tormented and humiliated by a pair of disembodied Hands who, among other things, take his clothes and push him around. In his darkest moments, a bird—a metaphorical figure representing his lover—appears to give him hope. Eventually, however, his lover is also brought to the concentration camp and is killed by the Hands. The story ends with an old Pierre, the white puppet no longer skeletal, walking slowly as he is encircled by a white bird.

Gaukel adds layers of meaning to this story about the Holocaust by ensuring every one of the performance's formal elements reinforces its content. I could see the abstract and intangible ideas he made tangible by hybridizing traditional techniques and assembling them for dramaturgical significance. As puppeteers, we often use visible and invisible manipulators with an awareness that these can incite belief in different ways in the audience. For example, puppet scholar Roman Paska proposes two categories of puppetry—illusionistic and primitivist—partly inspired by this difference. Illusionistic puppetry seeks to hide the puppeteer in order to create an illusion of realism and prompt the audience's belief in the independent life of the puppet. Primitivists, on the other hand, focus on directing the audience's attention to the devices used in performance to highlight the artificial nature of the life of the puppet (Roman Paska 138–39). Gaukel combines both visible and invisible puppeteers in this production. Pierre's invisible puppeteer establishes the agency of the puppet, like the illusionistic puppetry making us believe the puppet is independently alive. Meanwhile, the visible manipulator in the form of the disembodied Hands deprives the character of his independence and signals to the contingency of Pierre's life.

In a way, Gaukel is following the path of the early-twentieth-century U.S. puppeteers who developed what became known as modernist U.S. puppet theatre. Puppetry scholar John Bell examines this

development in *American Puppet Modernism*, arguing that modern U.S. puppet theatre was created by combining techniques and forms from traditional European puppet theatre, traditional Native American forms and rituals, and Asian puppetry techniques, with U.S. innovations (Bell). While some of the puppeteers in Bell's historical account were forced to integrate innovation due to their limited acquaintance with the techniques and ideas they sought to use in their work,² Gaukel's is an example of an intentional amalgamation of existing techniques reimagined to perform dramaturgical roles stemming from his expertise. Gaukel's awareness and recognition of how established conventions function in the frame of puppet theatre, let him apply these practices deliberately to encourage additional interpretations of the performance.

Another example of how productions recombined puppetry's historical conventions to add layers of meaning to the performances in the context of the festival is Sam Lewis's opening act for Jeghetto's *Just Another Lynching*, in which he took the practice of remembrance and reimagining a step further by repurposing existing objects as tools for reclaiming history. All the seats in Links Hall were taken on the night of January 20, as I gathered with the audience to watch Jeghetto's performance. Before the night's main feature, we were introduced to puppeteer Sam Lewis, who walked onstage with his 1940s Black Americana puppet. Although Lewis has renamed his puppet Jus Hambone, the puppet was originally sold as "Jambo the Jiver," a marionette from the tradition of blackface puppetry ("Sam Lewis"). Such marionettes, which were sold with their own music to dance to, perpetuated stereotypical racist representations of Blackness and preserved ideologies of subjugation (West). In the beginning, Lewis had Jus performing some of

² A clear example of this is portrayed in Bell's examination of the Little Theatre Movement in Chicago. See Bell 55-61.

the stereotypes referenced by the puppet. Soon, however, Lewis began to manipulate the puppet differently. Jus engaged with invited human Black artists, Time Brickey and Aquil Charlton, in a dance-off and a rap battle, respectively. I was amazed by how the energy imbued in Jus made it feel as if the puppet was breaking free of his strings. Through the intentional manner in which the puppet interacted with live human performers, Jus Hambone ridiculed his previous usages and attained agency and subjectivity. As Jus Hambone took control of the whole performance, he transcended his own objecthood.

When European puppet traditions were brought to the U.S. and performed within the U.S. context, Bell explains, they lost their roots and their historic connections. Presumably, this decontextualization allowed them to be reimagined and be newly inscribed into the emerging U.S. puppet tradition (12). Objects with a racist history, such as Jambo the Jiver, reinscribe the traditions they represent. Lewis's puppet remains within the geographical context from which it emerged: the history of the object is not detached from it as it was from the European puppets that traveled with immigrants into the U.S. in the early twentieth century. Yet Lewis's performance brings Jus to life outside of his intended contexts: the object appears on a public stage, performing new actions and led by new manipulators. Similarly to Gaukel, Lewis makes use of existing puppetry devices but shifts their significance by giving them new dramaturgical meaning. Thus, the object changes: from Jambo the Jiver into Jus Hambone, the puppet becomes a weapon that counters the ideologies it was built to perpetuate. Through his reimagining of the use of the puppet, Lewis's performance demonstrated how such objects can be reclaimed and activated through the mastery of the puppeteer in a way that shifts their initial purpose and invites the audience to rethink racist practices, making tangible the objecthood that is assigned to certain bodies.

These two performances serve as examples of how the festival offers new contexts for puppetry performance. They allow their creators to work with various audiences to re-imagine storytelling possibilities through the established conventions of puppet theatre mastered by the puppeteers. Additionally, they model for puppetry practitioners like me how to position foundational techniques or existing objects differently to shift their meanings for audiences. The form of puppet theatre encourages joint re-imagining between performers, spectating practitioners, and other audience members: as Jones suggests, the puppeteer works together with each spectator to sustain a life that vanishes if any of them lets it go (62).

ILLUSIONS OF PERMANENCE: PUPPETRY AND TECHNOLOGY

Puppets generate perpetual tension between ephemerality and durability. As foundational puppet scholars Henryk Jurkowski and Steve Tillis explain, puppets make tangible the paradox of the “living object” which requires them to be animated through performance in order to be puppets (Jurkowski 55; Tillis, *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet* 23). Puppets cease to exist as living things the moment that they are no longer animated, yet their materiality and tangibility generate an illusion of durability that outlasts the human being. In his essay, “The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production,” Tillis expands the definition of puppetry by establishing “tangibility” as a potential, albeit not a necessary characteristic of a puppet (“The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production”). The inclusion of technologically mediated images such as projections into the puppetry performances of the Third International Chicago Puppet Theater Festival further pushes the development of puppet theatre by amplifying fundamental questions not only of what

counts as a puppet but also about the assumed durability of tangible materials.

The materiality of “tangible puppets,” which Tillis defines as those “capable of being touched” (“The Art of Puppetry” 178), connects them to other objects around us, letting us consider ways in which they might continue to occupy space even when we are dead and gone. We see evidence of this in our everyday lives: we do not doubt that buildings that have existed for hundreds of years will be there again tomorrow when we pass them on our way to work; nor do we question that the family heirloom that has been passed down through generations will be in the drawers where we left it after our passing. This makes it reasonable to believe that puppets might outlive us too, especially when we watch them endure perils that a human would never survive. The torture that the Hands inflict on Pierre in *Schweinehund* emphasizes this durability we assign to physical objects. Upon his arrival at the concentration camp, the Hands painted Pierre’s face with red lipstick and forced him to dance to Edith Piaf’s *J’ai dansé avec l’amour*. As he danced, the Hands detached Pierre’s legs from his torso. Though the puppet was frail and powerless, I could see he was still alive. His life force, enacted by the invisible puppeteer, kept him going despite the Hands’ aggression. Eventually, he was compelled to pull himself back together, patiently reattaching his legs. In this moment I was very aware of the frailty of the puppet, but I did not doubt his ability to survive because I could see his integrity was still intact: his head and torso were still there, and they were moving. However, moments later, Gaukel subverted my expectations of the object’s capacity for survival with the arrival and murder of the protagonist’s lover. The puppet representing the lover was violently folded in half by the Hands, and discarded into a pile of puppet parts, shattering the idea that a puppet’s materiality ensures its perdurability.

In contrast to material objects, intangible ones can incite thoughts of disposability or ephemerality. It is not just a matter of how quickly the newest gadget becomes obsolete and, therefore, disposable, but also how our interaction with technology forces us to engage with flickering images that can disappear from one second to the next. Yet, Gaukel also subverted this expectation through the use of the projected bird in the piece. Just after Pierre had reassembled himself, the Hands took him and shoved him into a box. He began to hit his head against it as time passed and his despair grew. The projected bird, an animal that we had seen symbolizing him and his lover at the beginning of the piece, appeared and circled above. Upon seeing Pierre's suffering, the bird disintegrated into many smaller birds that lifted the box and freed him. The bird began to signify the capacity for memories to be tools of resiliency and survival. After the death of the lover, a bird emerged from the pile of puppet parts and avoided capture by the Hands. Since it was a projection, the Hands could not touch it. The intangible image thus acquired more permanence than the objects themselves, and even its ephemeral aspects—like the fact that it could disappear at any second—contributed to its survival. Thus, Gaukel brought together tangible matter and ephemeral projections, and, through the death of Pierre's lover, made us aware as the audience of our implicit assumption that the object could prevail by mere virtue of its materiality. The contrast between material and fleeting images contributes to the theme of the production, inviting questions about what things can actually outlast others.

A similar juxtaposition of the tangible and the technologically mediated used to engage assumptions of the durability of objects occurs in Koryū Nishikawa V and Tom Lee's *Shank's Mare*, which I saw on January 19 at the Art Institute. This production positioned two traditional Japanese puppet manipulation techniques, *bunraku* and *kuruma ningyō* (Japanese

cart puppetry), in contrast with live streaming and animation to narrate two parallel stories about master-disciple relationships. In one, a samurai's son is tragically murdered. Due to his grief, the samurai descends into a life of unjust violence in which he takes advantage of his training and strength to steal and inflict pain. His violence reflects a loss of hope in the fairness of the world. His despair reaches such depths that, at the moment of his death, when he is given a chance at redemption, he chooses anger over salvation. In the parallel tale, an astronomer travels with a young girl in search of a comet. During the journey, their bond develops to that of a mentor and student: he passes his knowledge onto the girl and, in the moments that precede his death, finally finds the comet he has so fervently sought during his life.

Shank's Mare's creators and puppeteers mastered tradition to a degree that they were able to make it tangible through the puppets. The puppetry techniques employed, *bunraku* and *kuruma ningyō*, both have long histories and practices that encompass both how puppets are made and how they are operated. The three-person manipulation style of *bunraku* as we know it today was first developed in 1734 (Orenstein 3). Seeking to perform detailed, stylized movement with the puppets, *bunraku's* 4-foot-tall puppets have one puppeteer manipulating the feet of the puppet, another one manipulating the left hand and waist, and a lead puppeteer operating the head and right hand of the puppet (Ortolani 209-214). Traditionally, these puppeteers stand on stage with their puppets, but they are fully dressed in black including a black hood and mask to appear invisible by convention. *Kuruma ningyō* was invented more recently, in 1872, by the first Koryū Nishikawa. The latter form appeared as a response to the decline in interest in *bunraku* in Japan, which made it too costly to stage with three performers per puppet. By providing a little cart on which the puppeteer sits, *kuruma ningyō* allowed the puppets to

have the same level of expressivity while being operated by a single puppeteer (Orenstein 3-4). For *Shank's Mare*, Lee and Nishikawa V combined *kuruma ningyō* with *bunraku* so that puppets could be operated by either one, two, or three puppeteers, depending on the movements required of them. The show also features a combination of traditional puppets and newly constructed ones made specifically for it. Parts of the new puppets, however, were crafted following traditional techniques. For instance, the hair of the puppet of the girl was made using the same practices as those used for the older, traditional puppets, so that, although the carving style of her face looks different from that of the samurai, their overall aesthetic appears cohesive within the production.³ In this way, the intangible histories which inspired the creation of these puppets are made tangible by the objects themselves.

Lee and Nishikawa V's expertise of these puppet forms that have been around for hundreds of years, enables them to integrate technology into the performance in such a way as to heighten the juxtaposition of ephemerality and permanence. The production began with a traditional Japanese dance ritual to purify the space and prepare it for the presentation of the story. The design of the *kuruma ningyō* puppets allows them to stomp on the ground given that their feet are attached to the feet of their puppeteer (Orenstein 4). Since I had not previously seen *kuruma ningyō*, I was grateful for this opening, which allowed me, as a spectator, to familiarize myself with the kinds of movements and conventions of these puppets. Immediately after the dance, we were pulled back to our technological present through the use of live-streamed video. The image of a town in the middle of the mountains was projected onto the backdrop of the stage. The miniature model of the town was positioned downstage

³ A more in-depth description of this can be found in Orenstein's article about the performance, cited above.

left with a camera rail set in front of it. We could see it being filmed and simultaneously projected. Projections from live streams were used at other moments of the performance to portray the point of view of individual characters. For instance, when a puppet character was writing, the projection showed hands and a piece of paper as if seen from the character's perspective. A performer worked over a table on stage left, manipulating puppet hands and pieces of paper for a camera positioned above, which projected to the backdrop what the puppet was supposedly looking at. The technology was incorporated in a manner that allowed it to highlight the story's mythical tone and natural setting, rather than drawing attention to the mechanics of how it worked. This in turn heightened the emotions the puppets conveyed through the expressive manipulation enabled by the traditional forms.

The play's careful combination of tradition and innovation creates a bridge, connecting the audience with the ancient origins of the forms presented on stage. At the end of the performance, the projected images are used to convey that everything the audience has seen could have been the girl's dream. Upon waking at her desk, she interacts with several objects that resituate us in a contemporary world: a box from an internet delivery service and a tablet. Projections display what the girl sees when she looks at the tablet. All the news that she scrolls through contain elements from the rest of the performance. Because she now exists in our same temporality, evidenced by her use of objects that are familiar to us, her durability appears to expand; it is as if she had existed since the immemorial time of the story she has just portrayed.

The bridge that is created by this final moment increases our awareness of the forms used in the storytelling and how they add to the themes of the story. By positioning the girl in a contemporary context, the audience is made aware of the fact that they have just experienced a story

told both through mediums that are more than a century old, and through some that came about in the last couple of decades. Much like with Sam Lewis's performance of *Jus Hambone*, the audience is reminded of how objects can connect us with the past. Yet in this instance, this association is achieved by juxtaposing the sense of durability created by the puppets and traditions with the ephemerality of the projections. The constant appearance and disappearance of the projections, their live and therefore unrepeatable movement, require heightened audience attention, as missing a detail would mean a permanent loss. Unlike in *Schweinehund*, the way in which Lee and Nishikawa V bring together technology and tangible matter allows the audience to see how objects remain in the form of traditions, while projections can quickly disappear without a trace. These issues of permanence and impermanence, amplified by the combination of tangible and intangible materials also evidence the tenuous line that exists between life and death, which is central to both *Schweinehund* and *Shank's Mare's* subject matter, and which we, as puppeteers are forced to navigate in our own practices of animation.

DEATH AS A MOTIVATOR FOR TRANSCENDENCE

It is not every day that we are confronted with our mortality in particularly evident ways, and we probably would not want to be. We do not typically go to the theatre hoping to be reminded of our imminent demise. Yet puppets bring out the best in death. The puppet's performance, in its closeness to death brought about by their contingent existence as an animated object, can be a constant reminder of our own mortality, and of the actions we perform every day, just like the puppet, in our effort to assert our aliveness. Jones considers that the puppet is in a constant "struggle" to perform its own life, and through this, it incites the

audience's belief (62). Thinking about our own death might also make us think about our future. How can we make the best of our time? What will happen when we are no longer here? What will we leave behind? Thus, puppet productions that address the theme of death can further invite us to ponder our mortality and consider our legacy.

Such is the case in *Shank's Mare's* master-disciple narratives. Both stories in the production end with the death of the master. In the samurai storyline, the master dies in disgrace. The astronomer, on the other hand, is able to leave traces of his legacy in his disciple, the girl. In a way, his teachings survive him through the knowledge the girl possesses. The use of *kuruma ningyō* to tell this story also supports the idea that transmission of knowledge can ensure its endurance. When a technique or tradition survives, those involved in its creation and preservation are also afforded a chance to live on. It is significant that *kuruma ningyō* was developed by Koryū Nishikawa V's family, and that he performs it now with Nishikawa So, his son, as well as with his student Tom Lee (Orenstein 10). Like the astronomer, the Nishikawa family sustains their legacy by passing down their knowledge and traditions to future generations.

Just as the performance of the puppet brings to mind notions of aliveness and persistence, so do the techniques through which said life is performed. The performance of *Shank's Mare* that I saw, ended with a brief workshop in which Nishikawa and Lee shared their mastery, explaining some of the traditional aspects of the production, like the *shamisen* music and the animation techniques of the puppets. They also, however, highlighted the performance's innovations, such as the addition of the accompaniment of the hammered dulcimer, and the integration of *bunraku* techniques with those of *kuruma ningyō*. Both the workshop and their novel approaches add to Nishikawa and Lee's effort to keep the tradition of *kuruma ningyō* alive. These two artists have expressed a

preoccupation with the future of puppetry and with their own legacies—what parts of their work, its meaning, and the traditions involved “will be passed on to” the next generation (Orenstein 10; 12). Nishikawa and Lee’s innovations not only attract more audiences and practitioners but also contribute to the future of *kuruma ningyō* and of puppetry more generally. Their expertise, uniquely combined by both of their impulses for experimentation, generates novelty in puppetry as a whole which in turn becomes their legacy and ensures their survival. By engaging with Nishikawa and Lee’s preoccupation with the preservation of the form, we, as audiences or fellow puppetry practitioners, are also invited to consider how to create a future for puppet theater.

CONCLUSION

Puppetry’s long and rich legacy invites us to consider what about puppetry has kept the form alive. Its continued existence signals its importance, even if we do not know the exact reasons for its survival. Reflecting upon puppet theatre that draws attention to itself, as the productions from the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival invite us to do, heightens our awareness of the history and the possibilities of the form. Simultaneously recognizing and playing with puppetry’s existing techniques and conventions—by reimagining the stories, integrating technology, and underscoring the puppet’s inherent tension with death—allows these artists to foster a space where puppetry can reinvent itself. By using their expertise of the form, passed on and developed through years, these artists and performances ask us to consider the many different futures that are possible for puppetry.

Just as different potential puppets could emerge from Thomas’s metaphorical studio depending on how the existing materials are

combined, new kinds of puppet theatre emerge from combining extant performance elements. The novelty springs from each artist's unique combination of parts: not only what materials and knowledge they had at hand to create their performance, but also what techniques and expertise they use to bring these productions, and the puppets within, to life.

Looking back at the history of puppet theatre allows us to see our current position within the ongoing development of this form, providing an understanding of its past and glimpses of how it might extend into the future. We see this in Lewis and Gaukel's reflections on how individuals have been othered historically and how puppetry provides a tool for them to be recentered today, and in the questions of the future of tradition and the values we leave behind for upcoming generations showcased by Koryū Nishikawa V and Tom Lee. It is these puppeteers' strong appreciation and knowledge of the history and practices of puppet theatre that inspires them to create something that expands our vision of what the futures of the form can look like. Spectators are a necessary part of keeping this form alive, as are fellow puppeteers like myself whose practice can be enriched by watching these artists' creations. The context of the festival, like Blair Thomas's metaphorical studio, allows us all to come together and enact the alchemy of puppet theatre. If you would like to take part in this process of extending the history of puppet theatre, you can attend the Fourth Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival in January 2022.

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