

PUPPETRY & PERFORMANCE



A scene from *Grand Panorama*, directed and designed by Theodora Skipitares. Photo: Richard Termine.

Introduction

Benjamin Gillespie

The ever-expanding world of puppetry presents a rich fabric of cultural influences encompassing old and new styles that approach nearly every subject imaginable: from climate change to the performance of ancient texts to contemporary politics and immigration. The pieces collected here provide a snapshot of this artistic field and a plethora of styles, including shadow puppets, hand puppets, Japanese bunraku-style puppets, rod and arm puppets, marionettes, stick puppets, and a melding together of puppetry with dance, physical theatre, and opera.

Claudia Orenstein explores the impact of the three-week-long visit of the ten-year-old Syrian refugee puppet Little Amal to New York City from September to October 2022. Created by the South African Handspring Puppet Company, the U.S. itinerary of this performance followed after the gigantic puppet's 5,000-mile journey across Turkey, Europe (France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Belgium, among other countries), and the UK in search of her mother. Walking in NYC across all five boroughs with the assistance of numerous puppeteers, and followed by large crowds everywhere she went, the itinerant performance drew together New York's many immigrant communities and spread a message of hope and inclusion to audiences throughout the city.

John Bell revisits the legacy of the radical Bread and Puppet Theater, founded by Peter Schumann in 1963, which remains one of the longest-running puppetry companies in the U.S. Just shy of its sixtieth anniversary, the celebrated activist ensemble's work continues today under Schumann's direction as documented in reviews of the two recent Covid-era productions included here, written by Skye Strauss and Paul Bedard. The company continues to address contemporary politics head on with the playfulness and do-it-yourself aesthetic for which they have long been known.

Kate Brehm offers us a snapshot of puppetry in New York City over the Winter 2022 season, covering four puppetry events and a broad range of artists from the U.S. and abroad. These works include *Book of Mountains and Seas*, a collaboration between Basil Twist and Huang Ro at St. Ann's Warehouse, which also hosted multiple

productions in the *Puppet Lab* series also reviewed here; *Song of the North* by Hamid Rahmanian at the Brooklyn Academy of Music; and Theodora Skipitares's *Grand Panorama* at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club.

Lastly, Robin Frohardt provides an excerpt from her production *The Plastic Bag Store*, "a tragicomic ode to the foreverness of plastic," which premiered in Times Square in 2020 and has since toured to Los Angeles, Chicago, and Austin, Texas. *The Plastic Bag Store* is a public art installation that questions the enduring effects of our single-use plastics. In the piece, shelves are stocked with thousands of original, hand-sculpted items to mimic store products made from discarded plastics and packaging. During timed activations, the store transforms into an immersive stage involving inventive puppetry, shadow play, and intricate handmade sets.

Considered together, these pieces are a testament to some of the most exciting work happening in the theatre now, and offer new meaning to the power of objects to speak for the human. As humankind becomes ever-more fragile and divided, puppets seem to provide a universal language to explore an unknown future.

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