



Reading the Puppet Stage: Reflections on the Dramaturgy of Performing

Objects. By Claudia Orenstein. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2024. 188 pp.27
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In 2011, Handspring Puppet Company began performing *I Love You When You're Breathing*, a puppet's address to critics about the basics of a subtle, complex art. As the protagonist, Puppet, says at the beginning of that performance, "You might know plenty about theatre-theatre, but now you've come to hear me talk about what's different in puppet theatre." Claudia Orenstein's *Reading the Puppet Stage* is likewise a book about the foundations of puppet theatre for scholars and creators of theatre-theatre, but its sheer breadth of examples and depth of insight makes it essential reading for anyone who studies, makes, or enjoys puppetry.

Orenstein approaches puppetry as a dramaturg, having served as one for *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Shank's Mare*, among other productions. With reference to Jan Mrázek's observation that puppetry is "primarily an art of montage" (23) that asks its viewers to bring together disparate aspects of the puppet in space and time, Orenstein emphasizes that puppetry should give audiences the satisfactions of human-centered drama—by engaging their horizon of expectations—while also enlisting the distinct affordances of puppet performers. Throughout her introduction and five chapters she returns to the notion that effective and supple puppet dramaturgy encourages audiences and creators to become sensitive to the "'material' invitation" that puppets issue: opportunities to develop "dramatic structure" in concrete terms, captured in tangible, physical objects and their expression onstage (55).

Within her dramaturgical frame, Orenstein generally favors phenomenological readings—she's interested in how we perceive and apprehend puppetry, and it's no surprise to see Bert States and Alice Rayner in her bibliography. Her first chapter, "A Puppet *Being* and a Puppet *Doing*," begins with the felt attraction to "the act of coming

alive, being alive” (19) that often defines the fascination of puppetry. By starting with Basil Jones’s influential assertion that the main story of puppet theatre becomes the puppet striving towards life, Orenstein encourages us to think of the puppet’s becoming-alive as the opening of a broader set of inquiries. She asks how we can build meaningful durational events out of this primary attraction. Through examples from American puppeteer Paul Zaloom and the Off-Broadway show *The Woodsman* (2012), Orenstein considers how the discrete materiality and motility of any puppet conditions audiences to “watch in a way that sees life” (26), sensitizing them to the vitality of things and preparing for longer and more ambitious “macro-dramas” (29) to unfold.

One such macro-drama, developed in the second chapter entitled “The Dramaturgy is in the Object,” is the exploration of materiality over time: “an interesting puppet show can [...] have the dramaturgical structure come from the material itself” (33). Through the example of *kaavad* boxes, cabinets from Rajasthan that serve as portable altars and structure a story through the opening of doors and panels, Orenstein discovers the “emotional journey” that is embedded in the “physicality of the object itself” (37). In this sense, performing objects are, to Orenstein, like Chekhov’s gun: they have physical features that can be “revealed or exploited” (49), and we are disappointed if the expectations they set up are not fulfilled or cleverly thwarted.

In Chapter Three, “The Image Aspect of the Puppet,” Orenstein takes in a variety of two-dimensional and paper puppets to explore the perception-skewering moments when “image becomes object or vice versa” (59). For instance, Redmoon Theatre’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* emerges from and recedes into a pop-up book and in Les Anges au Plafond’s *Le Cri Quotidien* stories in a newspaper spring to life. Asian scroll storytelling traditions, shadow puppetry, and moving screens likewise contribute to a far-flung account of how images move and are moved by performers, insights also applicable to toy theatre and Bread and Puppet Theater’s use of Italian *cantastoria* and hand-operated “crankies.” Animating an image extends “our knowledge of how a body moves and its possibilities and limitations” (76), much as puppetry that harnesses conventions from comic books can create compelling trans-dimensional art. The cross-

cultural case studies in this valuable chapter proliferated until I began to suspect that it might take two chapters to fully explore all the intricacies and dramaturgical implications of each puppet's image aspect. Nonetheless, I believe this chapter is the most daring in the book and likely to provoke transformative conversations.

Chapter Four, "Humans and Objects," turns to one of the most familiar and yet least examined macro-dramas in puppetry: the dynamic relationship of puppeteer and puppet. By concentrating on the visible human presence on stage and its "metaphorical and symbolic implications" (90), Orenstein brings innovative perspectives to puppet characters as human-and-object composites. The use of a giant puppet in *King Kong* on Broadway, for instance, represents a series of missed opportunities because the creators insisted on a "traditional theatre paradigm that foregrounds the human actor" (96) rather than considering how "the language, customs, and habits of puppet objects should govern not only how one moves a single puppet object, but how one creates drama" (97). On the other hand, *The Lion King* "lives in a world of expressive object-actor hybrids" (99) appropriate to a story about an interdependent ecology and the balance between the material and the spiritual. Orenstein likewise considers how we are taught "to understand the presence of [...] puppeteers, how to read them" (107) in forms as diverse as *kuruma ningyo*, contemporary BIPOC puppetry, and robot performances. Operators both infuse puppet characters with life and become characters themselves, serving as role models for the diversity of experiences and identities in the performing arts and as "subjects becoming or being treated like objects" (112). The sheer imaginative plenitude of this chapter offers a cosmos for practitioners and puppetry theorists in search of inspiration.

A brief final chapter, "Notes on Sounds and Words," presents a range of thoughts on the use of speech, object-generated sound, and music in puppetry performances. Orenstein asks us to attend to the dramaturgical uses of sound: as a score generated by and through the puppet body, as "dramatic punctuation" (118), and as accompaniment that can shape a performance rhythmically and structurally as music does in dance. She likewise considers how different types of puppets "support" (119) or resist speech, from

language-rich toy theatre to giant puppets and *bunraku* that either resist or perform alongside the human voice and glove puppets whose moving mouths are “made for dialogue” (121). Perhaps her most trenchant guidance is directed to puppetry playwrights, whom she encourages to construct drama that takes advantage of how puppets communicate physically and to understand that speech spoken for them from the outside does “not affect the puppet’s own body through utterance” (122). *Reading the Puppet Stage* concludes with a final swerve into how Orenstein has translated her critical reflections into puppetry design and practice with her students at Hunter College. An appendix groups theoretical and ethnographic texts on puppetry by subject and region with notes and recommendations—welcoming her readers into the fellowship of puppetry scholarship.

Like a puppetry *Poetics*, *Reading the Puppet Stage* is a tune-up shop for material performance: it provides diagnostics for testing and extending the expressive potential of the puppetry arts. Lest her book sound like a technical manual, however, Orenstein’s tone is speculative and conversational, offering “reflections” rather than theses. Her writing gives a sense of her warmth and dynamism as a teacher, and much of *Reading the Puppet Stage* gestated during decades of instruction and research at Hunter College and CUNY Graduate Center. As Orenstein states in her introduction, when someone “wants to pick my brain about this form,” giving them this book will “[offer] the fruits of my years of thinking, now harvested and gathered in one place” (17). As we pick Orenstein’s brain, we also get to see how it was shaped. *Reading the Puppet Stage* is an intellectual autobiography—a guide to finding and founding a like-minded community of mentors, colleagues, and collaborators from the first fascination with a topic to becoming a leading figure in a field. Young academics will benefit as they navigate the seemingly opaque and haphazard process of making a home in scholarship, even if they don’t have much interest in puppetry—yet. This is a book to savor and to reread for its capacious sense of what a puppet is and what puppets can do.

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