

Lawrence Switzky

This article surveys the art and thought of Jane Taylor, one of the most adventurous and virtuosic minds in the study and creation of puppetry. The first section considers Jane's scripts for puppets and actors: Ubu and the Truth Commission (1996) and Zeno at 4am/Zeno Confessions of Zeno (2002), both collaborations with Handspring Puppet Company and William Kentridge, as well as After Cardenio (2011) and PAN: A Performance Lecture (2018/19). The second section turns to Jane's wide-ranging theoretical writing on puppetry, particularly her investigations of how puppetry manifests the formation of subjectivity, acts of projection and recognition, the multiplicity of agency and identity, and the body as a technology for consciousness. A final section looks at Jane's influence on puppetry artists and puppetry scholarship and her legacy of "thinking through the puppet."

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Jane Taylor loved to explore the relationships between words and things. One word that comes up again and again in her prose (as it came up in her speech) is *precipitate*. If Jane were writing this, she would likely begin—as she began much of her writing—by considering the various meanings nested within that charged word. By training and by nature a deconstructionist, Jane enjoyed the inner tensions in language, the way turning a word over could shake up what you think it means, beguiling with ambiguities and contradictions that more than compensate for the loss of any stable ground.

So: "II.3.a *transitive*. To cause (an event or series of events) to happen quickly, suddenly, or unexpectedly; to hasten the occurrence of. Now also more generally: to

bring about, cause to happen.” (*Oxford English Dictionary* s.v.). But also: “III.5.a. *intransitive*. Chiefly *Chemistry*. To be deposited as a solid from solution or from suspension in a gas or (formerly) a liquid; to settle as a precipitate.” And furthermore: “I.1.a. *transitive*. To throw (a person) suddenly or violently *into* a particular state or condition, esp. an undesirable one.” A sudden and surprising emergence. A radical change in material properties. A jarring metamorphosis of the self. Jane insisted that we make (and reveal) who we are out of the objects that attract us and therefore become part of us, and she included words and images in her litany of objects. Within the cosmos of this word are so many of the ideas that fascinated Jane. But her favorite word was surely *puppet*.



Figure 1. Jane Taylor and puppet friend. (Photo: Dassia N. Posner)

Of Identity and Number

After receiving a PhD in English literature from Northwestern University, where she wrote on the circulation of commodities in Restoration-era drama and literature, Jane began her geographically and intellectually wide-ranging career in 1985 as a junior lecturer in English at the University of the Western Cape in Bellville, South Africa. She quickly established her commitment to artworks as staging grounds for culture and politics with a landmark 1987 issue of the journal *TriQuarterly*. *From South Africa*, co-edited with David Bunn, is a sweeping anthology of contemporary writing, photography, and the visual and performance arts. She and Bunn followed up with a 1994 exhibition and conference at the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, “Displacements,” which explored the relationship between identity and landscape and brought together artists and scholars from South Africa and the United States.

Jane emerged as a major theorist and practitioner of the puppetry arts in South Africa in 1996 with the performance of her play for puppets and actors, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. *Ubu* was devised as part of *Fault Lines*, a series of responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that she curated at Cape Town Castle. Jane invited artistic responses to urgent questions of memory, language, and power that suffused the work of transitional justice but were, at that time, not widely discussed. *Ubu* also inaugurated her lifelong collaboration and friendship with Handspring Puppet Company, who designed and operated the puppets, and visual artist William Kentridge, who directed the production and created the “drawings for projection” that framed and commented on the staged action. For Jane, artistic and scholarly collaboration was a way of bursting past the limits of individual experience and ability. As she remarks in an interview with William Kentridge in her groundbreaking 2009 book on Handspring Puppet Company, making with others frees up the minds of both experts and amateurs. The former are impelled by the exuberant ignorance of the latter: “You don’t have to have the capacities inside yourself in order to realize things, so you have no constraints on your imagination, because you are working with people who have various abilities” (209).

In adapting Alfred Jarry’s proto-absurdist *Ubu* plays from the 1890s to the circumstances of South Africa a century later, Jane showed the devastating consequences of a failure of moral imagination by the perpetrators of apartheid (played by actors) on their victims (played by puppets). After listening to hours of transcripts of culprits seeking amnesty and those who suffered at their hands, she became acutely sensitive to the dispersal of speech during TRC hearings, when interpreters translated testimony from one of eleven official languages and were called on to speak (and thus experience) accounts of traumatic violence and loss as they were narrated. This displacement, she came to realize, is also fundamental to puppetry. Between scenes of Pa Ubu, the leader of a death squad, thoughtlessly plundering and murdering, she inserted verbatim reenactments of victims’ testimony, “spoken” first by a puppet in their home language and then again in English by an actor in Ubu’s shower stall which has now become a translation booth. Through *Ubu*, Jane was discovering the puppet as a crucial device for exploring juxtapositions of power and perception. As she later observed, puppets are “a way of thinking about scale—my sense is of the grotesque asymmetries between the obtuse blindness of Jarry’s Pa Ubu [...] and his victims as individuals who have had their lives and households destroyed by Pa’s every gesture” (2015, 52). Ubu’s reckless self-interest showed the routine dehumanization and denial of apartheid-era South Africa. Handspring’s puppetry, in which two puppeteers blend into the composite being of the puppet, offered an alternative.

Jane often spoke about “thinking through the puppet.” By this she meant at least two things: exploring what actions and narratives a puppet might perform (thinking through the *puppet*) and also the unique forms of cognition that arise when making, operating, and creating with puppetry (thinking *through* the puppet). Writing *Ubu and the Truth Commission* alerted her to the vast possibilities of the puppet as a philosophical instrument. Jane would go on to become Handspring’s foremost theorist, a steadfast friend and a dynamo of ideas and provocations.

She was also the librettist for another collaboration with Handspring, Kentridge, and composer Kevin Volans, the one-act opera *Zeno at 4 am*, which was then expanded into

the three-act *Confessions of Zeno* (2002). Both were developed from excerpts of Italo Svevo's 1923 modernist novel *Confessions of Zeno*. In the *Zeno* plays, shadow puppets manifest Zeno's dreamwork, performed live and simultaneously projected onto a screen. As in *Ubu*, puppetry gives tangible, insistent form to what has been denied and repressed—though instead of the suffering of unnoticed victims, here they represent Zeno's subconscious guilt, anger, and desire. Likewise, puppetry again allowed Jane to think through discrepancies in scale, but in a very different context. Shadow puppets materialized Zeno's mind and its distortions of experience in which “the trivial minutia[e] of the bourgeois condition become matters of monumental psychic drama and ethical quests”—a perspective on the relations between the “personal and the political [that] are profoundly dissimilar to those with which we are familiar in South Africa” (2003, 237).

Jane's artistic experiments with puppetry continued for the next two decades. She mentored dozens of students and artists. She was also commissioned by Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt to create a version of a “missing” Shakespeare play based on an episode from Miguel de Cervantes's novel, *Don Quixote*. *After Cardenio* (2011) was inspired by two events: the fainting fit of Luscinda, the love of melancholy hero Cardenio, at the altar during their wedding; and its echo in the real-life “death” of Anne Greene, a woman who had been hanged for infanticide in 1650 and subsequently revived on an anatomy table in front of a surprised group of doctors. Staged at the anatomy theatre at the University of Cape Town, *After Cardenio* starred a life-sized puppet version of Anne, created by Gavin Younge out of vellum and operated by Marty Kintu, that converses with an actor also portraying Anne, played by Jemma Kahn. The drama as a whole is a series of provocations about the doubled self, expressed through the puppeteer-puppet relationship: the puppet is a metaphor for the way feelings and thoughts can seem to originate somewhere other than the physical body as well as the uncertain relationship between matter and spirit. As she remarked in an exchange of letters with intellectual historian David Nirenberg, “I have learned to think about the body as a technology for the staging of consciousness through working with puppets” (2012b, n.p.). *After Cardenio* also allowed Jane to test a series of philosophical puzzles

envisioned by John Locke that had long inspired her, proposals that identity resides in consciousness though consciousness need not be confined to a single body. Spectators' responses to her puppet of Anne, voiced by one person and operated by another, reinforced her sense that selfhood extends past the threshold of the skin: "It was remarkable to observe how easily audiences embrace this complex triangular relationship as embodying a single 'person.' In itself the visual field was superseding the Cartesian model of a dual subject" (2014a, 238). Jane kept the puppet Anne Greene in her living room for years as a companion and a goad.

Jane pursued a similar inquiry in *PAN: A Performance Lecture* (first presented in 2018, published in 2019) featuring Monk, one of the chimp puppets from Handspring's *Chimp Project*, and first performed by Tony Miyambo and Terry Norton at the Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg. In *PAN*, Jane explores the human and its limits in terms of our kinship with primates. Chimpanzees confound categories by appearing like and unlike us at once, much like puppet representations of the human. Her script traces several lineages that consider the human and its likenesses, drawing on cybernetics, Jane Goodall's field work on chimpanzees and tool use, and the behavioral research of German psychologist Wolfgang Köhler. The form of Jane's script poses a challenge, daring observers to integrate the apparently incongruous layers of the puppet and the speaker, the genres of lecture and performance, and disparate fragments of intellectual history. In asking her audiences to find similarity in diversity while preserving difference, Jane is inspired by the wild acts of sympathy in puppetry. "At some level, then," she writes, "the puppet is a metaphor of human relations: each individual is actually a cluster" (2019a, 503). *PAN* teases us with the possibility that if we are willing to imagine alternatives to the autonomous and bounded self during a performance, we might also begin to loosen the constraints that separate human from animal, constitute racist thinking, and lead to fears of encroaching artificial intelligence that shares some of our traits.



Figure 2. Jane Taylor. Center for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. July 2019 (Photo: Dassia Posner)

Through her title, Jane gestures towards the scientific name for a chimp (PAN Troglodyte) as well as a prefix that means synthesis (e.g., PAN-African). Her lecture-performance models how to build connections between fragmented ideas and beings after centuries of division. The puppet would continue to serve Jane as a crucial diagnostic that helps us to understand changing and conflicting definitions of the human, as well as what various ideas of the human involve and exclude. She proposed that we see the human, animal, and object as positioned along a continuum rather than as discrete entities.

Humans, Prostheses, and Mysteries

Making art and making theory are so entangled in Jane's life and work that it would

betray her to separate one from the other. Her many essays and lectures on puppetry are performances as much as arguments, painstakingly assembled collages of images, quotations, and snatches of history. In them, she assumes various poses and guises—teasing, cajoling, earnest, accusatory, prophetic—often ending suddenly with a gnomic statement that asks you to reconsider everything you have just read or heard. Jane is a subtle and allusive (and elusive) philosopher. But it is possible to identify recurring ideas and insights across decades of her thought.

One thread that runs throughout Jane’s writing is that puppetry is not a minor art or diversion. Rather, the puppet engages mental and physical acts that are foundational to the formation of human subjectivity. Jane looks to psychoanalysis to understand the dialectical relationship between the subject and the things external to it, its “objects”: we make ourselves out of what is not us and see traces of our evolving self in other things. She is fascinated by the ways subjects internalize objects while at the same time projecting their minds and bodies onto things outside themselves. This basic fact of our minds enables us to lend animacy to puppets, as well as Smartphones, robotic dogs, relics, commodities, and fetishes.

Perhaps Jane’s favorite instance of this circuit of the self is the recognition of the baby by the mother. “I suspect that we are inclined to believe in the puppetry arts because this is how the human being reproduces itself,” she writes:

The puppet is a bundle of sticks and cloth that is inchoate and it relies on the projective conviction of its audience in order to become live, full of potentiality, with a potential for narrative and metaphoric complexity, and which in turn will provoke and surprise, demonstrating what strikes the viewer as an astonishing autonomy. This, it seems to me, is the circumstance of the infant child. It is through a kindling process that the life of the parent anticipates and prompts the emergent infant with a reciprocal celebration and a mutual hailing. We believe in the puppet because we are hard-wired to do so. (2018a)

For Jane, puppetry reveals taken-for-granted capacities of the human. The extraordinary effort and attention required to create persuasive motion in the puppet—the opening and closing of a hand, walking across a playboard—directs our attention to everyday miracles of musculature and bone. In conversation, Jane would often move from a discussion of a puppet performance to reflecting on the mysterious human processes it calls forth: “What the hell are we, anyway?”

One of these processes is the way any identity is porous and open to contributions and support from others. In opposition to prevalent Western models of radical individualism, the puppet—which blends the agencies of subject and object—demonstrates that we are ontologically multiple, and that agency does not originate exclusively within the self. “Because of cultural biases, there are deeply negative constructions attached to the notion of being a puppet,” Jane argues, looking back on *Ubu* from a decade later. “It is instructive to recognize that puppets in some meaningful sense reassert the necessarily social and reciprocal exchange upon which language is founded” (2008, 59).

Jane likewise saw puppetry in the prosthesis, a replacement for a missing or damaged part of the body that is then incorporated as at once natural and foreign to that body. She was intrigued by the inventive ways that non-normative and disabled bodies navigate the world. The puppet in some sense allegorizes the uncertain border between mind and matter for her, but also demonstrates how the puppet is a prosthesis for the puppeteer: a form of physical enhancement and extension as well as a means of accessing an unexpressed spiritual or irrational self through surrender to or “possession” by the object. Jane’s novel *The Transplant Men* covers similar terrain by considering how organ transplants—in this case, a kidney from a dead brother—can create a felt doubling of the self in recipients, a sense that one body contains and continues the life of another. Jane was amused by the fact that South Africa had produced the first successful human-to-human heart transplant in 1967: a poignant metaphor for the “change of heart” the country had longed for and lived through in the early 1990s.

While researching a play about the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jane likewise became fascinated by his brother Paul, a concert pianist who lost his right arm while serving in World War I. Paul commissioned a series of one-handed compositions that were, she argues, “Paul’s prosthesis,” and that troubled him while seeking to satisfy him: “Each composition could not return the missing arm. No matter how deft the composition, it would not repair an irrecoverable loss” (2018b, 192–193). The puppet, read back through Paul’s ambivalence, becomes a figure of disquiet as well as wonder. The suspension of disbelief in puppetry is never total and there is pleasure and pain in the awareness that the puppet always lives and does not live. Even as we take pleasure in the puppet’s refusal of the inanimacy attributed to mere matter, it reminds us that we will one day be lifeless matter ourselves. To a large extent, the puppet’s job, like the philosopher’s, is to rouse us from a condition of metaphysical calm and create enthralling if unnerving experiences of uncertainty.

Jane’s writing is always alive to both the astonishment and the discomfort the puppet provokes. She often comments on the sadism and masochism inherent in making and watching puppetry: the pleasure of being in authority over the puppet and the pleasure of identifying with (and creating within oneself) the puppet’s affective landscape. Ventriloquism, which Jane often presents as imperfect puppetry because the performing object does not assert an independent existence—and therefore does not fully access the puppet’s potent ambiguities—similarly depends on a bruising relationship between subject and object, packaged as comedy. While considering the colossal popularity of Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, for instance, Jane notes that “the relation between ventriloquist and doll [is] agonistic, aggressive, and rivalrous [...] a radically dialogic mode of performance [...] with ventriloquist and dummy competing for attention” (2012b). One aspect of puppetry that Jane found more straightforward is its sincerity. Whatever else puppets may be, they are truth tellers who do not conceal their illusions: when puppeteers are visible we simultaneously watch both the performer and the puppet, and we watch ourselves watching them. In that light, she joked, *Pinocchio* may be a good story about a little boy, but it is an inaccurate story about a puppet because puppets can’t lie.

Later in her career, Jane consolidated several strands of her thinking into the concept of the “emotional prosthesis”: an object that props up the self, providing continuity and coherence across personal and sociopolitical ruptures. To a large extent, such prostheses are effective at supporting us because they inhabit different temporalities than the human: trees, tortoises, and antiques are more durable and long-living than we are. Emotional prostheses therefore provide an “agency that manages the transition across epistemic breaks” (2017a), anchors that can stabilize when established ways of thinking have ruptured or shifted. The emotional prosthesis continues Jane’s project in *Ubu* of considering how South Africans negotiated the “psychic work of continuity” during and after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Jane also searched for exemplary emotional prostheses in early modern Europe before clear demarcations between nature and culture, alive and dead, and human and non-human had been drawn.^[1] The proliferation of holy things, from relics to footprints to limbs that migrate between bodies during dreams, gave evidence of a cultural need for an “inherently magical quality of the material form, the thing that persists essentially without decay or change over time” (2018a). They are also instances of magical thinking, a belief in the causal and interpenetrative agency of thought on matter, that persists in ways that secular modern people claim to have superseded. Animism and witchcraft in South Africa inspired Jane as present-day magical modes of thought that continue to be practiced alongside rationalism and materialism. So did quantum physics, which gives a humorously poetic name—“spooky action at a distance”—to the observation that entangled particles can mysteriously influence each other even when they are physically far apart. The epistemological overlap of the rational and the magical in these examples echoes the “split subject” that she argues puppetry is so good at allegorizing, capable of knowing in two different ways (being taken in by the illusion and knowing how the illusion is made) simultaneously (2014b, 194).



Figure 3. Jane at work (and play) while writing. (Photo contributed by Adrian Kohler)

Jane often turned to the puppet as an antidote to despair. Puppetry welcomes and, in fact, demands a spirit of play that counters the entrapments and disappointments of institutional and national politics. The puppet inhabits a space of perpetual undecidability and wonder. I believe Jane confronted brutal entrenchments of power and ideological polarization by translating them into more mutable ontological terms, the interdependent and fluctuating states of matter and mind that, to her, underlie all other categories. Towards the end of her life, she was especially eager to consider how puppetry's reciprocal flow of agencies might model improved relationships with animals,

who are, as she put it, under conditions of unrelieved domination that discourse alone cannot fix—since the English language, at any rate, is syntactically structured through actions that subjects perform on objects. Puppetry inhabits practices of mutuality with non-human companions. Puppetry also simply gives pleasure and that is a salve. Even after we have accounted for its effects psychoanalytically and cognitively, Jane once said, there remains an aesthetic puzzle in the puppet that is inexhaustible.

On Moving and Being Moved

Jane lived through her friendships and her passions. We learn where we are attracted, she often said, and she was attracted to many people and ideas. In addition to her books, articles, lectures, and artistic collaborations, she was an esteemed and adventurous instructor. She was a periodic Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago, a Visiting Professor at Oxford University and Cambridge University, and a Writer-in-Residence at Northwestern University. She was also the Skye Chair of Dramatic Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg from 2000 to 2009 and held the Wole Soyinka Chair in Drama at the University of Leeds from 2013 to 2016 and then the A. W. Mellon Chair in Aesthetic Theory and Material Performance at the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) at the University of the Western Cape—the first such academic appointment anywhere in the puppetry arts. As Mellon Chair, she convened the Laboratory of Kinetic Objects (LoKO) in 2016 at the invitation of Professor Premesh Lalu, then the director of the CHR, which catalyzed the creation of a new building in the Woodstock neighborhood of Cape Town to house its many activities. As Jane wrote in her description of the field LoKO exists to chart, the puppet should be viewed as a central participant in the “Arts of movement” that galvanized and reflected the “embrace of mobility, speed, [and] change” in modernity (2025). Puppetry likewise contributes to a “theoretical matrix” that includes mechanized warfare, motion pictures, “inherited ‘taken-as-given’ conceptions of the human,” as well as AI, avatars, and cyborgs. The *Jane on Jane* project, now underway at the CHR, catalogs and collects her publications and seeks to make the notebooks, planning documents, and unpublished material that attended her far-flung intellectual and artistic odysseys available to

readers.

Along with Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler of Handspring Puppet Company and Premesh Lalu, Jane also established the Handspring Puppet Trust, which supported puppetry activities and inquiries in the Western Cape region for many years. In partnership with the CHR, the youth advocacy organization Net vir Pret (Afrikaans: just for fun), and many other teachers, artists, and activists, Jane and the Trust co-sponsored and advised an annual Puppet Parade that began in 2010, based in the small rural village of Barrydale/Smitsville in the Klein Karoo region east of Cape Town. Under apartheid legislation and the ethos of so-called separate development, the village had been split in two: into a white (Barrydale) and a non-white (Smitsville) community. Each year, on the Day of Reconciliation, December 16, artists, educators, and scholars have gathered to hold a parade that circulates between the two parts of Barrydale and then meets again in the middle for a performance. It is prepared during much of the year by local students working with mentors from within their community and throughout the Western Cape and often visitors from other countries and continents as well. As Jane once summarized the benefits of the parade, “Apartheid sought to fix identities by restricting movement between communities and through the policing of boundaries. These events [...] celebrate mobility and fluidity” (2017b, 29). The parade and performance have taken up urgent questions about identity, environmental conservation, and history in the region, from slavery in the Western Cape to the sensorium of elephants to the threatened habitats of redbfin minnows to the art and myth of the Khoisan, the Aboriginal people of South Africa. In addition to studying a subject with specialists, students construct an array of smaller puppets and aid in the building of two giant puppets that lead the processions. Through these activities and the involvement of the CHR, there is now also a pathway to a university education for children from the area, which has increased their opportunities and imaginative horizons for both physical and social mobility.

Handspring initially provided puppet designs and construction assistance to the young performers in Barrydale—responsibilities they shared with Ukwanda Puppet Collective,

made up of the late Ncedile Daki as well as Siphokazi Mpofu, Sipho Ngxola, and Luyanda Nogodlwana. Since 2016, Ukwanda have taken on the role of head puppetry designers and directors. Jane regularly worked together with Ukwanda to conceive and execute each year's parade and performance and Ukwanda have since become artists-in-residence at LoKO. They have recently designed and built puppets and trained puppeteers for *The Herds*, one of the largest public art projects ever dreamt of. From April to August 2025, hundreds of animal puppets—made from prototypes designed by Ukwanda and constructed primarily from recycled cardboard and plywood—will traverse 20,000 kilometers, from Kinshasa to the Arctic Circle, to raise awareness of the climate crisis and its effect on migratory patterns.

Jane was a distinguished scholar with many students who now hold advanced academic positions themselves. She enjoys a legendary status in South African performance and the visual arts as a teacher-dramaturg-philosopher of virtuosic empathy, uniquely able to encourage, understand, and light the next steps on a creative path. When Jane wrote about the capacities of the puppet in a description of the Handspring Puppet Trust, she might have been inventorying her own protean endowments:

The puppet is a companion of extraordinary gifts. It will be as volatile, as docile, as effusive, or as silent as we need it to be. It can provide a metaphoric self that will supplement our own deficiencies; it can enable us to live inside able bodies if we are broken; it can allow us to perform experiments in order to explore gendered or raced identities. (2014c)

Jane passed away on September 6, 2023. Numerous gatherings were held to celebrate her accomplishments and lasting influence. One particularly fine remembrance is in the pages of a play called *Kafka's Ape*, written by two artists Jane mentored and adored, Phala Ookeditse Phala and Tony Bonani Miyambo. They give "[A] very special dedication to Mama Jane – Jane Taylor, who unfortunately won't be able to hold a physical copy of this publication, but she has held many versions in her spirit" (2024). Mama Jane was the way younger artists often referred to her. Whenever Jane heard that, she'd say,

“Well, how dare they?” and then smile with radiant delight.



Figure 4. Jane enjoying a larger-than-life pose for the camera. (Photo contributed by Adrian Kohler)

Notes

[1] In this aspect, Jane’s work resembles her friend William Kentridge’s drawings and animations, which also react against what Stephen Clingman has called the “logic of the hard line” that dominated apartheid-era segregationist geography. See Stephen Clingman, *William Kentridge* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2022).

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