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DANCING

LIFELIKE

Puppets in New York.

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Members of the Awaji Puppet Theatre Company prepare for a performance at Japan Society. Photograph by Sylvia Plachy.

Japanese puppetry takes its great power from the fact that it is very realistic and very artificial at the same time. As was proved again by the Awaji Puppet Theatre Company's recent season at Japan Society—its first New York appearance in eleven years—what strikes you first is the realism. The puppeteers seem to have spent five centuries (that is the genre's estimated age, at minimum) working out the precise rhythm with which a weeping woman would dab her eyes with her sleeve, or the exact wobble with which a drunken god would raise to his mouth his fourth, as opposed to his third, cup of sake. Donald Keene, in his 1965 book "Bunraku" (the Bunraku tradition grew from the same root as the Awaji), wrote that when people want to compliment a puppet they usually say, "It seems to be alive!," and the lifelikeness is indeed a thrill. But the reason that we can enjoy the realism is that in other respects, most respects, these figures are not at all like us. The Awaji puppets are about three feet tall, to start with. Furthermore, to get around, they need three men, with rods and springs, manipulating them. The puppeteers are clothed and masked in black, but that doesn't mean that we don't see them.

All this, maybe, we could shut out, and enter fully into the illusion, but there is another thing stopping us: the fixity of the puppets' faces. Awaji dramas, like their Bunraku (and also Kabuki) counterparts, often concern the furthest outdistricts of human emotion. In one of the offerings at Japan Society, the ferry-crossing scene from "Hidakagawa Iriai Zakura" (1759), a woman becomes so jealous of her beloved's mistress that she turns into a green

sea monster. In another scene, from "The Miracle at Tsubosaka Temple" (1887), a blind man is so stricken with remorse for having doubted his wife's chastity that he hurls himself over a cliff; then the wife arrives, figures out what happened, and jumps over the cliff after him. These violent deeds are preceded by long, histrionic speeches, but, as the characters deliver their orations, their faces, eerily, do not move. (Some of the puppets can move their eyes, eyebrows, and/or mouths, but only in small ways.) The emotion is displaced from the face and thereby gains in subtlety and force.

Much of it is transferred to the torso and the hands and, above all, the head. How, in the scene with the drunken god—it is Ebisu, the god of wealth—the host manages to indicate his sense of the inadvisability of Ebisu's having another sake, and how, when the sake bucket is finally empty, Ebisu, staring into it, communicates his sorrow, is a great mystery. It is also an indication of why puppeteers have to begin their training in childhood. But, as I recall, it all had to do with tilts of the chin—the angle of the head in relation to the chest. The heads of the Awaji puppets move constantly, and not just to signal nameable emotions but to tell us, in a general way, that these creatures are alive. In a sense, the head is doing the breathing for the body.

"Unfortunately, the urine test counted for half of the grade."

As for the characters' words, those, too, are displaced—to a chanter. This person, considered the star of the puppetry team, sits to the side of the stage, where he tells the story and, when necessary, speaks the dialogue. The characters' lines are not always interesting. (In "The Miracle at Tsubosaka Temple," the cliff-jumping couple is restored to life, and the husband is given back his sight. He greets his wife as follows: "You are my wife? What a surprise! It's very nice to meet you. Oh, I am so happy.") But, as with many equally unstirring scripts in Western opera, the crux is not the words but the singing. The chanter sobs; he gasps; he calls on Heaven to witness his grief. (And he does so in male and female, old and young, high-status and low-status voices.) When the woman in the ferry-crossing scene from "Hidakagawa" describes her jealousy, the chanter runs the gamut of vocal expressiveness: head notes and belly notes, squeals and grunts, trills and runs without end. Meanwhile, the lady for whom he is speaking stands there with an unmoving face, white and lustrous, like a pearl. We seem, here, to get everything that art can give: the abstemious and the unleashed, the Gothic and the Baroque. The logic is not logical; it is lyrical, musical.

To see puppetry in New York, you don't have to wait for the Awaji troupe to return. "Avenue Q," a sort of hipster offshoot of "The Muppet Show," has been playing on Broadway for almost six years. In this musical, two hand puppets have sex on the stage—quite a trick, in view of the fact that their bodies end at the waist. Julie Taymor, who made a long study of Asian puppetry in her youth, almost always has something going on in town: right now, the long-running "Lion King" and, until recently, the production of "The Magic Flute" that she made for the Met in 2004. (She will direct the "Spider-Man" musical that is due on Broadway next year.) Basil Twist, this city's foremost "art" puppeteer, has been steadily producing shows—"Petrushka," in 2001; "Dogugaeshi," inspired by Awaji, in 2004; "La Bella Dormente nel Bosco" ("The Sleeping Beauty"), in 2005; "Arias with a Twist," in 2008—and he will stage a "Nutcracker" with the Los Angeles Philharmonic next year. In a recent interview, I asked Twist whether he thought that puppetry today was part of avant-garde theatre. He said no: "If we have anything in common with the avant-garde, it's just that we're both marginalized." But this may have been unpretentiousness speaking. Since the nineteenth century, puppetry has turned up again and again as part of the artistic vanguard's struggle with realism, its mixed feelings about copying life. The fact that puppets are like human beings but narrower, clearer, and more poetic makes them a natural for symbolic drama. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, in the hands of the Bread & Puppet Theatre and Paul Zaloom, they were an important part of experimental theatre.

They are still doing service in that department. In January and February, Dan Hurlin put on a wonderfully spooky puppet show, "Disfarmer," at St. Ann's Warehouse. Mike Disfarmer (he invented the last name) was a photographer

who worked in a small town in Arkansas in the early twentieth century. He was also a delusional paranoid, convinced, for example, that he was not born to the people who raised him but had been deposited on their doorstep by a tornado. Though Disfarmer was able to live on his own, and to produce beautiful photographs, the coexistence of his artistry and his mental peculiarity is an enigma, and one that, if the story had been staged with human actors, might easily have fallen prey to mad-genius sentimentality. But the sight of a miniaturized version of the man's life (a tiny camera for him to do his work; a tiny shovel for him to bury a baby doll that, appallingly, is part of his personal creation myth; tiny piles of old newspapers that gather in his rooms as, at the end of his life, his housekeeping deteriorates)—this stratagem, by its coldness and wit, paradoxically delivers the pathos of Disfarmer's story, without draining away its weirdness. It is a brilliant stroke.

Soon after "Disfarmer" closed, "Diva," the work of Sofie Krog, from Denmark, opened at HERE Arts Center, which has a puppetry series curated by Basil Twist. This piece took place inside a structure that looked like a giant, velvet-draped refrigerator and which contained, as it revolved, five small separate theatres, each with its own cast of puppets operated by Krog, who stood unseen in the center. It is impossible, in a short space, to say what happened in "Diva," but, briefly, a Professor who no longer has a body, only a head—presumably a *déformation professionnelle*—is trying, with the help of a rabbit named Eddie, to get the rest of himself back. He fails, but the Diva, our heroine, who also starts out as a disembodied head, is eventually granted a full form. Another puppet, the Butler, who is just a hand, hangs himself, and others, too, fare badly. But Eddie, our favorite, ends up on a desert island with a girl rabbit, under a blue sky hung with little white clouds, on strings. Sound too sweet? It wasn't. The death of the Butler was rather grim—and also black-humorous. (The hand hangs itself by its index finger.) But the major effect of the show was to demonstrate the sheer range of puppetry, the number of its choices—for example, its ability to play with scale. (Eddie was perhaps six inches high. The Diva, at the end, was life-size.) There is also the genre's natural reflexiveness. The bodiless heads, the despondent hand—these are puppetry jokes. Finally, Krog's show was an example of the vivacity of puppetry, its carnivalesque quality, its ability to make things fly and explode and the like. I don't want to stress that too much, because a big part of the job in writing about puppetry is to convince people that it's serious. It is serious. Its mediation between realism and fantasy makes it so, even apart from the efforts of its best practitioners. At the same time, however, it's a lot of fun. ♦

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