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Adapting Shakespeare for the contemporary British puppet
stage**

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‘Taking the car engine apart and show[ing] all the bits’: Adapting Shakespeare for the contemporary British puppet stage

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Abstract

How does one interpret Shakespeare, in the puppetry medium in which the physical being, and not the famous ‘words, words, words’, is meant to be the primary draw? Contemporary British puppet companies, however, have shown a tendency to rethink and question the physical essence of performing Shakespeare. Through a study of shows and workshops by Blind Summit (London) and Forced Entertainment (Sheffield), this article explores how object theatre and bunraku puppets can offer fresh interpretations of Shakespeare’s works.

Keywords

William Shakespeare, object theatre, puppetry, bunraku, movement, complex mimesis

Résumé

Comment interpréter Shakespeare sur une scène de théâtre de marionnettes, où l’être physique, et non les célèbres citations (‘words, words, words’), occupe une place centrale? Les compagnies de théâtre de marionnettes britanniques contemporaines ont toutefois tendance à repenser et remettre en question la dimension physique de la mise en scène des pièces de Shakespeare. À travers une étude des spectacles et des ateliers théâtraux créés par Blind Summit (Londres) et Forced Entertainment (Sheffield), cet article explore comment le théâtre d’objet et les marionnettes de type bunraku peuvent offrir des interprétations nouvelles des œuvres de Shakespeare.

Mots-clés

William Shakespeare, théâtre d’objet, théâtre de marionnettes, bunraku, mouvement, mimésis complexe

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‘I just wanted to say: put [the puppet] down and say it properly’, Blind Summit Artistic Director and master puppeteer Mark Down jokingly remembers as he shared how he and his London-based company organised workshops to put on a ‘Puppeting Shakespeare’ show. These few words encapsulate the obstacles that puppet and object theatre companies face when adapting Shakespeare. The tendency of puppets to resist the spoken word for long durations is a commonly acknowledged characteristic of puppetry. So how does one interpret and adapt Shakespeare, in a medium in which the physical being, and not the famous ‘words, words, words’, is meant to be the primary draw for audiences? What is left of Shakespeare in a puppet or object show, where words are arguably not the primary focus? Despite his perceived complicated language and challenge at performing inextricable plots, how can puppets and objects perform Shakespeare today? Although the question of Shakespeare’s language is dealt with in very different ways, contemporary British puppet companies have demonstrated an inclination to focus primarily on the physical essence of interpreting Shakespeare as well as playing with the uncanny presence and ontological questions that come to the fore by the mere appearance of a puppet or an object onstage.

In the United Kingdom, two puppet companies of international renown have recently adapted and performed several plays by Shakespeare onstage, or during workshop sessions. First, Blind Summit is perhaps best known by the public as the creator of the larger-than-life puppets in the 2012 Olympic Games opening ceremony and their puppet show *The Table*, which encountered global success. Down kindly agreed to share videos and archives of his workshop as well as his insight on how to adapt Shakespeare for the puppet stage. These workshops include rehearsals (which have never been played before in a public venue) of famous monologues and dialogues from *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V*, and *The Tempest*. Second, Sheffield-based Forced Entertainment describes itself as a company working on projects that ‘pay particular attention to mechanical performance, the role of the audience and the mechanisms of contemporary urban life’.¹ Although the company is not a puppet or object theatre company (their work includes dance, theatre, cabaret, and stand-up), Forced Entertainment produced 36 of Shakespeare’s plays in object theatre in a series of shows entitled *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*, debuting at the Berliner Festspiele – Foreign Affairs festival in 2015. This article focuses on three of their Shakespeare productions: *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2*, and *Henry V*. While history plays are not regularly performed in puppet or object theatre, the ‘Henriad’ is well known among audiences for its intricate plots and iconic characters like Prince Hal and Falstaff as well as memorable lines – one may call to mind the Chorus’s opening prologue – and so this trio of plays makes for an interesting case study.

‘Words, words, words’: Shakespeare’s lines on the puppet stage

The question of language is likely one of the first obstacles object theatre or a puppet company must manage, if not overcome, when adapting Shakespeare’s works. Puppets

and objects can hardly 'deliver' long lines or monologues without potentially losing the audience's attention. Another hindrance in performing a play by Shakespeare in actors' theatre and puppet theatre alike is the poetic language itself. Even though some words are identifiable ('thee' or 'thou' are cited examples), references, metaphors, or comic references are not so easily or immediately understood. Nevertheless, the tone and rhythm, 'accessible and relatable characters' as well as the beauty and musicality of the poetry attract puppeteers like Down. But how can Shakespeare be effectively adapted for the puppet stage?

Despite the difficulties of adapting Shakespeare's text to the puppet stage, Down chose to retain the language. Although not focusing on full-length productions of the plays, he and his trainees staged some of the most iconic passages from Shakespeare, including the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* and the Chorus's opening prologue in *Henry V*. These workshops reflected how much Down counterbalances speech with movements to keep the performance – and the puppets – alive. One of the most striking additions to the performances is the prism introduced by the character of Donnie, which features in most of Blind Summit's puppet and object workshop performances. Puppet-Donnie was built some 10 years before Down started putting up a *Puppeting Shakespeare* show – which is still a work in progress to this day – and which the company describes as 'part puppet show, part Shakespearean salon'.² Some of the sketches feature and are organised around the character of Donnie, whose part and traits have been carefully developed. Donnie is an actor from New York who speaks with an American accent. He wears a leather jacket, grey trousers, white trainers, and a red scarf. He is usually seated on a high wooden stool and often manipulated by Down (operating his head and left arm and, sometimes, in collaboration with another puppeteer, in charge of the right hand). On his perch, Donnie possesses an air of authority, and he, more often than not, acts as the stage director and manages the other members of the cast. Donnie is a determined, easily irritable, passionate, over-enthusiastic and slightly egotistical actor and stage director. He gets angry when things are not done the way he wants them to be done, and he seems to enjoy purely speaking Shakespeare's lines; for example, in the living-room of a private home, Donnie – as manipulated by Down – plays the role of a famous American actor, posing as 'a humble student of the Bard' and one of the 'founding members of the New York Downtown Shakespeare workout, which is a place where artists can go to work out Shakespeare'³ – likely alluding to both acting training and the difficulty of understanding Shakespeare's language. The process of having to expend considerable effort to concentrate and understand Shakespeare's world is soon mocked in Donnie's introductory talk, as he explains that he has just visited the Globe:

Shakespeare might have been here [in the living-room], if he had known the owner of the house and invitations were extended. Then he might have stayed [...] actually in this house – it is really quite something to wrap your head around.

Blind Summit thus adapts Shakespeare's text through assorted methods, such as from keeping the text while selecting iconic monologues or dialogues, to mediating Shakespeare through the prism of the addition of an American performer. Most of the

humour from this sketch comes from a play on stereotypes as it humorously hints at what tourists might think or say, while playing with time periods, the gap between public and private spheres, and variation in types of language. Some of the comic dimension is also derived from Donnie's 'inexperience' at performing Shakespeare and his slight distortion of language: in performing the opening chorus of *'Henry the Five'*, he delivers it in an overly dramatic fashion:

Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden o the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincour.....t?

The dramatic pause he makes between the end of his pronouncing 'Agincour' and the 't' sound induces laughter among the audience, as his emphatic and passionate way of acting introduces a gap between his performance and what is generally expected.

Forced Entertainment Artistic Director Tim Etchells approaches Shakespeare's text in a fairly different manner in their *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*. The mention of 'table top' in the title is in fact misleading, however. In the United Kingdom, 'tabletop puppets' actually refer to 'bunraku-style puppets'⁴ – a 90–140 cm-high puppet operated by two or three puppeteers operated and manipulated on a table. A good illustration of this is Blind Summit's *The Table*, which premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2011 and which presents bunraku-style puppet Moses. Forced Entertainment's use of the expression 'table-top', though, stems from a different 'tradition': that of Etchells's entertaining his children and telling stories using a carton of orange juice or salt and pepper pots on the breakfast table. He also mentions movie scenes where criminals plan a bank robbery on a table. As he is asked about the concept of 'tabletop puppetry' during an interview (Forced Entertainment's original focus was not on puppetry but have since branched out into object-based work), Etchells provides a definition of his vision of 'table top' performance: 'the emphasis for me would be on the act of ascribing fictional/representational status to everyday objects – a kind of homemade pragmatic transformation'.⁵

In *Table Top Shakespeare*, Etchells chose to use object theatre to perform 36 plays by Shakespeare in a limited number of days. As mentioned, Forced Entertainment's primary focus is not object theatre properly speaking – their shows usually borrow from a variety of performing arts. For them, using objects to perform Shakespeare was primarily a way of understanding how his dramaturgy works: '[I]t's something like the pleasure of taking the engine out of a car and laying all the pieces out – it's understanding how it works'.⁶ And object theatre is precisely an appropriate medium to do so. Coined in 1980 by French Théâtre de Cuisine co-director Katy Deville,⁷ 'object theatre' is a kind of theatre that is 'freed from the omnipotence of the text as well as from the constraints imposed by the conventions of puppet theatre'.⁸ Deville also praises its metaphorical, evocative, suggestive values, and poetic form as well as the 'relationship between the actor-manipulator (the one who is in charge of the point of view), the object, which is moved (rather than manipulated), and the spectator (who watches)'. These objects are, more often than

not, extracted from our daily lives; objects that ‘we don’t notice anymore as we see them too often’. By using them in a different context, or rendering them ‘useless’, the performer intends to make them ‘seen’ again, and in a different way.⁹ The very essence of object theatre – ignoring the weight the script can potentially have on a production – may have influenced Forced Entertainment in their choice of staging Shakespeare with objects. Indeed, all 36 productions, which last between 45 minutes and one hour and all start with ‘it begins with’ and end with ‘and the last thing that happen[s] is’, stage a prose narration of Shakespeare’s plays. As Richard Lowdon, one of the performers, confirms in an interview, ‘[F]or the main part, we’re not keeping the text. It’s absolutely modern language. It’s a recounting, a paraphrasing of the situation. Just very occasionally I find myself using the odd little Shakespearean line, when something gets to the core of a moment’.¹⁰

The plots are told in paraphrases, then, and most of the time the performers use everyday language. The plays are performed on a large wooden table; a black curtain is displayed at the back of the stage; and shelves, on which the whole ‘cast’ of *Table Top Shakespeare* lies in wait, are arranged on both sides of the stage. If the plots are condensed and, in some ways, ‘simplified’ due to the paraphrasing, some of the performances do keep some Shakespearean flavour. The plays are performed in semi-improvisation, but particular attention to language is paid. There is a constant oscillation between expressions borrowed from our everyday language and more formal, Shakespeare-reminiscent ones. Jerry Killick’s performances are filled with more or less concealed references to Shakespeare’s text, and his stagings of *Henry IV Part 1* and *Henry IV Part 2*, as part of *Table Top Shakespeare*, mirror the process which Shakespeare’s text has undergone in the process of production. These plays are much more than mere paraphrases of the plays’ plot: they reflect how intimate the performers are with the text, since specific passages, words, alliterations, and metaphors directly drive the audience back to Shakespeare’s world. This is specifically true in Killick’s rendition of *Henry IV Part 1*. In 1.1, as Hotspur asks Vernon whether Hal is part of the men marching to the battlefield, Vernon compares Hal to Mercury riding Pegasus:

I saw young Harry with his beaver on,
 His cuisses on his thighs, gallantly armed,
 Rise from the ground like feathered Mercury
 And vaulted with such ease into his seat
 As if an angel ‘dropped’ down from the clouds,
 To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus
 And witch the world with noble horsemanship (4.1.110–16).

The mythological allusion is kept in Killick’s performance. Despite the paraphrastic nature of his account, the allusion to Pegasus immediately brings the audience back to Shakespeare’s text: ‘He’s riding an amazing white horse, and he looks like a fiery Pegasus, and he looks so princely and so valiant’.¹¹

Shakespeare’s imaginative language is also used in dialogues between characters. At the beginning of 2.1, Prince Hal meets Falstaff as he wakes up. The latter inquires what time it is, which triggers Hal to mock him:

What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were **cups of sack**, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping-houses, and the blessed **sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-colored taffeta**, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day. (*Henry IV Part 1*, 1.2.2–13, emphasis mine)

The reference to wine (or ‘sack’) and the mention of the wench reappear in Killick’s rendition of the play:

Well, what time is it, lad, what time is it? And Harry says what do you care what time it is? Unless hours were ... were ... **glasses of wine** and minutes were rude songs and the sun itself were some **wench dressed in orange**, why would you care about time?

Killick’s interpretation of Hal’s taunting of Falstaff is worth drawing attention to, for the use of these similes immediately bring Shakespeare’s text to mind – especially for the passages that are not as popular as others might be. Much more than a mere paraphrase, *Table Top Shakespeare* testifies to an intimate knowledge of Shakespeare’s plays and creates an imaginary world through images and metaphors borrowed from the plays – as well as Shakespearean insults¹² – and which are made more accessible. Finally, although the paraphrases are stripped of the Shakespearean rhythm and iambic pentameter, Killick heavily relies on alliterations that give rhythm to his account of the play; this is especially true when he refers twice to the rebels in *Henry IV Part 1* and *Henry IV Part 2* as the ‘weird Welsh warlord’; a reference that culminates in the ‘weird Welsh warlord in the west’, as a possible reference to the ‘wicked witch of the west’ and anachronistically linking Shakespeare to Franck Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*. Therefore, despite not strictly following Shakespeare’s language and focusing on the plot proper, *Table Top Shakespeare* still revives Shakespeare’s metaphors and rhythm to recreate, onstage, the imagery which lays at the heart of his plays.

‘Striving towards life’

In ‘Poetry, authorship, and the *Ur*-Narrative’,¹³ Basil Jones, co-founder of Handspring Puppet Company,¹⁴ highlights the tension between text and puppet performance especially since, to him, the major concern in puppetry is to make the puppet look alive: ‘the puppet’s work, then – more fundamental than the interpretation of written text and directional vision – is to strive towards life’.¹⁵

Thus, when the audience becomes engaged with the micro-movement of a puppet’s performance, spoken dialogue tends to fade from consciousness, as if it has been bleached out of the performance. Often we hear the comment: ‘lovely puppets, pity about the text.’ Most often this remark is made not because the text is poor, but because it is hard to really hear or apprehend the text when one becomes fully engaged with, even mesmerized by, this more profound level of performance.¹⁶

Movement is precisely the means that puppeteers use to make their puppets look alive and achieve their ‘striving’ for life. Movement, thus, becomes meaning: ‘our inquiry has to

come to grips with this work of the puppet and its manipulator, where meaning is generated more by process than by content, more by movement than by words'.¹⁷

The performers' use of breath to coordinate their movements is at the heart of puppetry movement, allowing puppeteers to find a shared rhythm to manipulate the same puppet. This is an aspect that is also tackled by Down and his fellow puppeteers, who excel at having Bunraku-type puppet-Donnie come to life, as such demonstrating their adeptness at coordination. In Blind Summit's 2022 workshop, a number of trial sketches were organised around the puppet of Donnie, performing a one-man show or directing other puppets. These workshops also question the tension between 'stillness' and movement – a 'stillness that is not absolute, as it would deprive the puppet of any appearance of life, but more of *'breathed stillness'*, to quote Jones.¹⁸ In his living-room performance of the Chorus of *Henry V*, puppet-Donnie introduces himself and the show he is about to perform. He pauses to focus before starting the show-within-the-show. His stillness does not deprive him of life though, and his 'breathed stillness', although almost imperceptible, holds the audience in suspense. What comes next is a sudden, overexaggerated 'Oh!' accompanied by a dramatic upward movement of the hand. The swift transition from almost stillness to quick, sudden motion has a surprising and comic effect among the audience. As he carries on delivering the prologue, Donnie's anthropomorphic movements mimic the contents of and imagery implied by the text (i.e. the displacement of the action from the 'wooden O' to the battlefields). A play between movement and *'breathed stillness'* then, can add to the performance and work to illustrate a text that can be complex and beyond the reach of some audience members.

The question of movement becomes even more intricate when dealing with object theatre. Indeed, the articles used in Forced Entertainment's *Table Top Shakespeare* – and more particularly in *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2*, and *Henry V* – are mere objects that are devoid of any type of articulation. It needs to be specified here that object theatre is first and foremost a political way of performing and is markedly different from performers 'playing' with objects as a child would play with toys.

Performers of *Table Top Shakespeare* 'treat the objects carefully physically',¹⁹ as their manipulation techniques have been developed over years of research and training. In object theatre, objects are not meant to mimic human movement or express emotion. Rather, in Philippe Carrignon's words, performers should use 'motionless movement', meaning that 'objects are not meant to be handled but are merely placed the way a visual artist would as part of their installation, and the performer's acting will be built around it'.²⁰ As performers are always visible onstage, they never try to make the object look alive, contrary to puppeteers.

The *Table Top* performers also use a multiplicity of techniques to manipulate the objects. Sometimes the objects are shaken to perform slightly anthropomorphic movements, as in *Henry V* (performed by Claire Marshall) for example. When in 3.4 Katherine (a Mazagran cup) and her maid (a plastic pill bottle) have their French lesson, the scene is condensed and the choice to paraphrase Shakespeare's text makes it less comic. However, when Marshall shakes the two objects in the air and tells, in a serious tone, that 'they're having a hilarious time', laughter emerges from the audience. Another example occurs in *Henry IV Part 1*, where Mistress Quickly (a little square pack

of starch powder) and Lord Chief Justice (a long, thin tube of Soudal mastic) are having a conversation about Falstaff (a big, round blue glass bottle), who is accused of having robbed people. Mistress Quickly holds a grudge against Falstaff because in the past he had promised he would marry her but he eventually did not. Falstaff says he would and Mistress Quickly-as-an-object is moved very closely to Falstaff, so that the pack of starch and the big round bottle touch each other very lightly. This comic manipulation of the object creates laughter among the audience as the objects suddenly hold an emotional charge and we suddenly see the characters and forget the objects.

Such anthropomorphic movements, however, are rare instances and are not resorted to often, so as not to risk losing the imaginative charge that is projected on to them. Objects in *Table Top Shakespeare* are not supposed to reflect what characters are saying or doing. When this happens, it works effectively – but it is deployed sparingly. Most of them do not necessarily have a direct ‘physical’ resemblance with the character they portray – although each member of the audience might draw a conclusion or guess a link to explain the choice of an object standing for a specific character depending on their knowledge of the text (the audience laughs in anticipation when object-Falstaff is taken out), of the object itself (brands well known to UK residents such as Brasso [metal polish] or Bovril [beef extract]) or on their own personal experience. Sometimes, the difference in size and perspective has an impact on the reception of the object-character – such is the case of the Page, which is represented by a vial and looks very small compared to Falstaff’s imposing bottle.

Most of the time, when objects are moved in *Table Top Shakespeare*, a slight touch to move them forward simply indicates that the character physically represented by the object is meant to be speaking, especially when several ‘characters’ are onstage. These little movements help the audience identify and remember what character the object is standing for – this is especially true for secondary characters, for the association object-characters is fairly quickly forgotten and not immediate. These various ways of moving objects have a direct impact on the way the audience projects the story onto the object. They constantly disturb the way the audience perceives the performer, who acts in turn as a narrator, a demiurge, or an actor. Characters then are both composed of the object and of the performer’s body and their facial expression and body language, since the object cannot express any type of emotion.

Table Top Shakespeare’s novel approach to Shakespeare’s text and object theatre distinguishes it from other puppet productions of Shakespeare. If in Blind Summit’s production, movement is essential to keep the puppets alive and override or complement the text, Forced Entertainment shows how much freer object theatre can be from textual conventions as its *Table Top Shakespeare* relies heavily on the audience’s imagination and what spectators can project on to the objects.

Complex mimesis

The relationship between and coexistence of the performer or puppeteer on the one hand and the object or puppet on the other hand is a central aspect of puppetry arts and object theatre – a construction that Didier Plassard calls ‘complex mimesis.’

The imaginary figure of the character is mentally constructed for us through the combination of these two mediums [the actor-puppeteer and the puppet]. A relationship is established between the three poles that are then formed (the actor, the puppet, the character), within which the actor and the puppet contribute either alternately or jointly to the representation of the character.²¹

As in most puppet or object theatre productions, movement and speech imply the presence of a puppeteer or performer. In the selected corpus, a collaboration between actor and puppet sometimes emerges. This collaboration happens on different fictional levels and continuously evolves, so that the status of the actor, the puppeteer-performer, the puppet, and the character itself are difficult to identify. In *Table Top Shakespeare*, complex mimesis can be witnessed through free indirect speech. The puppeteer-performer is primarily a narrator/storyteller who speaks for all of the characters in the play, especially when this practitioner performs dialogues. The lines are especially blurred when the puppeteer-performer delivers the speech of a character as if he or she actually was the embodiment of the character in question, without entirely taking on the part and thus creating an ontological dissociation between performer, object, character and voice – for the voice of the puppeteer-performer is meant to be transferred onto the object. For example, in Claire Marshall's staging of Henry's 'once more unto the breach' speech (*Henry V*, 3.1.1), the 'army' is placed in the top-left corner of the table and Henry stands in the middle of the table, closer to Marshall, who places herself behind object-Henry – so that the army, Henry and her body form a diagonal. She turns her upper body towards the 'army men' and, instead of narrating the action, as she does in most of the show, she directly addresses the 'men', taking on Henry's voice and role and mimicking his potential gestures, while not fully becoming the character – as the character technically remains, in part, the spray of Brasso metal polish. Marshall's role here is split into two – her own role as a narrator of the action using indirect speech, and Henry's role, which she delivers in direct speech – adding to the blurring of lines between characters, subjects, and performers.

Complex mimesis is pushed even further in Blind Summit's workshops on Shakespeare. This technique is not new in Blind Summit's works, as it is witnessed in previous productions.²² In a workshop where the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* is performed, an interaction between puppeteer, puppet, and object is developed. If Blind Summit is not necessarily known for its use of object theatre as part of their performances, it is nevertheless an interest that Down has developed. In his working notes, he refers to the aforementioned Theatre de la Cuisine company, one of the pioneering companies in object theatre:

In France this is called 'Object Theatre' and it is a separate 'genre' from puppetry. It was invented by a theatre company in Marseilles called T[h]eatre de la Cuisine. They made a show with kitchen implements in the early '70s which was very successful. I haven't seen it but it sounds really good doesn't it? I think still doing it [*sic*].²³

Down did exactly this as he performed *Romeo and Juliet*'s balcony scene using two spoons. Where he tests the limits of complex mimesis, though, is during another

Romeo and Juliet workshop – where the two spoons – moved by two other puppeteers-performers – are following the instructions of stage director puppet-Donnie. The idea of a puppet acting as a stage director is not novel – the first written scripts depicting a puppet directing other puppets on the English stage goes back as far as the eighteenth century, with plays featuring Punch directing a company of ‘wooden actors’.²⁴ As Donnie directs the two objects during their ‘rehearsal’ of the balcony scene, Donnie gives Shakespeare’s lines (as a prompter would) to his objects-actors, which they repeat in turn while ‘acting’. As per his now-established persona, Donnie acts as an over-enthusiastic, passionate stage director that gives directions in terms of speech (he tells spoon-Romeo to ‘re-act’) and movement (‘she’s over there’–prompting spoon-Romeo to turn and come slightly closer to Juliet). At the beginning of the ‘play’, Donnie gives Romeo’s lines (borrowed from Shakespeare) to spoon-Romeo, which the latter struggles to repeat. When spoon-Romeo does not remember the lines, the spoon-Romeo performer looks at Donnie so that he can say the words again. In response, Donnie starts performing in his stead and, at the end of his lines, dismisses spoon-Romeo: ‘don’t worry about it, Steve’, addressing the spoon as a spoon-actor and no longer as spoon-character, effectively cancelling spoon-Romeo from the play. After Juliet’s reply, ‘O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? / Deny thy father and refuse thy name, / Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, / And I’ll no longer be a Capulet’ (2.2.36–9), Donnie speaks spoon-Romeo’s line in his stead, ‘Shall I hear more, or [shall I] speak at this?’ (2.2.40), but tells spoon-Romeo that there is no need to repeat the cue (‘it’s ok’) before turning back to Juliet. From this moment on, Donnie acts the part of Romeo. If the actor moving spoon-Romeo looked at Donnie for him to repeat Romeo’s lines at the beginning, Donnie turns to the performer playing spoon-Juliet to whisper the following lines to her, with his hand cupped around his mouth, so that she can tell the lines for spoon-Juliet – introducing once again more confusion between the roles of puppeteers, performers, objects, and characters/subjects.

The distinction between roles and objects grows even murkier. Donnie ends up taking spoon-Juliet into his hand (it is held by the actress holding the spoon). With the spoon now positioned closer to Donnie, mirroring the action of the scene, Donnie goes as far as taking centre stage and eclipsing Juliet. As the play unfolds, and as spoon-Juliet is close to Donnie’s face, Donnie entirely cancels spoon-Juliet by telling her lines in her stead. He ends up playing opposite himself, as his head moves behind the spoon to deliver lines he gradually no longer takes pains to speak properly (spoon-Juliet’s clues are reduced to a mere mumbling sound) before playing Romeo’s part again, in a passionate way. The short sketch ends with a clumsy yet passionate kiss between Donnie and the spoon – an addition from Blind Summit’s part at this stage in the play. The ambiguity bought forward this play-within-the-play on different fictional levels is then fully exploited here: a puppet takes the role of stage director, actor, prompter, and interacts with both objects and puppeteers, while performers interact with him so he can repeat lines (instead of looking at the puppeteer who actually speaks the lines) constantly unsettling theatre conventions and the audience’s expectations. If Shakespeare’s plays are indeed characterised by constant movement, this short sketch further highlights how puppet theatre can further complicate the stability of Shakespeare’s texts.

Conclusion

While Shakespeare's work challenges companies to find new and innovative ways of interpreting his plays, the issues that often arise from adapting them are even more palpable in puppet and object theatre. Shakespeare's text might be the most obvious identifiable concern, as puppets cannot speak for too long and the text in itself is complex. What remains of Shakespeare then, if stripped from the text? Contemporary UK productions by distinguished companies such as Blind Summit and Forced Entertainment highlight how much 'Shakespeare's text' means different things to different companies: a collection of iconic monologues or selected extracts stand as much as an entire play; a loose paraphrase of a play perhaps affords more focused attention to the plot and uncovers truths that may not otherwise be revealed in a more faithful adherence to the original text.

Gesture and movement, which are usually not the primary focus in Shakespearean acting, is what brings extra life to puppets – even though some of the comic elements arise from a gap between exaggerated gestures and 'breathed stillness'. These movements though are made possible by puppeteers and performers, who sometimes interact directly with the puppets or objects and shift fictional levels to blur the boundaries between the roles of puppets, objects, puppeteers, characters, and performers. The complex mechanisms at work here strive to exploit the breaches emerging from the Shakespearean text, as the unstable nature of the text, in constant play with meaning, is transferred to the puppet-staging techniques.

These two companies chose to perform several plays of the Shakespearean canon demonstrate a willingness to experiment and play with techniques, fictional levels, and complex mimesis to propose different ways of understanding and imagining Shakespeare. The play-within-the-play and the prism of puppet-Donnie in Blind Summit's workshops, as well as the constant blurring of the role of the performer in Forced Entertainment's *Table Top Shakespeare*, reflect yet another way how these Elizabethan plays continue to stay relevant 400 years after their first stagings: the two companies draw inspiration from Shakespeare to shake up theatrical conventions and feed their creativity while offering, in turn, fresh, unconventional understandings and stagings of these plays.

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Notes

1. Forced Entertainment, <https://www.festival-automne.com/en/artists/forced-entertainment> (accessed 5 April 2025).
2. Blind Summit, 'Local touring – technical requirements', https://www.blindsummit.com/_files/ugd/e3dedd_4542fddfb6244cd2b200c25308267ab8.pdf (accessed 5 April 2025).
3. 'At Eddie's', Blind Summit company archive.
4. Bunraku-style puppets are full-view-manipulation puppets, which draw inspiration from the Japanese Bunraku theatre tradition. These puppets usually feature the entire body of the character, and possess small rods at the elbows, wrists, or feet, allowing for control limb control by one or more puppeteers. The World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts (WEPA) provides an in-depth definition and history of bunraku puppets and their Japanese origins: <https://wepa.unima.org/en/bunraku/> (accessed 5 April 2025).
5. Tim Etchells, Terry O'Connor, and Jungmin Song, 'Two dialogues on Shakespeare and objects in performance', *Puppet Notebook* 27, ed. Jungmin Song (British UNIMA: 2016), pp. 1–5. <https://jungminsong.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/table-top-shakespeare.pdf> (accessed 5 April 2025).
6. Forced Entertainment, 'The Making of Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare – with Tim Etchells' (30 August 2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1PfmFu5R-E> (accessed 5 April 2025).
7. Christian Carrignon and Katy Deville co-founded the Théâtre de Cuisine company in Marseilles in 1979.
8. 'Un autre nom pour une pratique théâtrale libérée de la toute-puissance du texte et des contraintes imposées par les conventions de la marionnette'. Katy Deville and Christian Carrignon, 'Théâtre d'objet', Théâtre de Cuisine, <http://www.theatredecuisine.com/theatre-dobjet/presentation> (accessed 5 April 2025).
9. Justine Duval, 'Le parti pris des choses', *L'Intermède* (30 October 2021), <https://www.lintermede.com/theatre-objet-marionnettes-isabelle-bertola-paris-cuisine-manarf-analyse-critique-interview-piece.php> (accessed 5 April 2025).
10. Rebecca Jacobson, 'Putting Shakespeare on the table,' *The Berliner Stage* (22 June 2015) <https://www.the-berliner.com/stage/putting-shakespeare-on-the-table/> (accessed 5 April 2025).
11. Jerry Killick, *Henry IV Part 1*, as part of Forced Entertainment, *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*, <https://www.forcedentertainment.com/complete-works/henry-iv-part-1/> (accessed 5 April 2025).
12. Falstaff is still described as being 'as fat as butter' (2.4.531) in Killick's performance.
13. Basil Jones, 'Poetry, authorship, and the Ur-Narrative', *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, ed. Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 60–8.
14. Handspring Puppet Company is a Cape Town-based puppet theatre company known for its award-winning productions featuring its inventiveness and artistry in the creation of puppets. They achieved global fame for their production of *War Horse*, which premiered at the National Theatre of London in 2007 and was revived in 2024. The company also collaborated with the Bristol Old Vic in 2013 and staged a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, featuring a diverse array of puppets and keeping the whole text of the play. Handspring's

production differs from that of Forced Entertainment's and Blind Summit's work, in that this production staged essentially the entire text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, while the other companies adapted their texts. This article aims at reflecting on how puppet companies have dealt with the language issue in adaptations of Shakespeare's plays that do not strictly follow the original text.

15. Jones, 'Poetry, authorship, and the *Ur*-narrative', p. 62.
16. Jones, 'Poetry, authorship, and the *Ur*-narrative', p. 63.
17. Jones, 'Poetry, authorship, and the *Ur*-narrative', p. 67.
18. Jones, 'Poetry, authorship, and the *Ur*-Narrative', p. 66.
19. Etchells, O'Connor, and Song, 'Two dialogues on Shakespeare and objects in performance,' p. 2.
20. Christian Carrignon, *Le Théâtre d'objet – à la recherche du théâtre d'objet* (Paris: Thémaa, 2009), p. 8.
21. 'La figure imaginaire du personnage se construit mentalement pour nous à partir de la réunion de ces deux supports. Entre les trois pôles alors constitués (l'acteur, la marionnette, le personnage), une relation s'établit, à l'intérieur de laquelle l'acteur et la marionnette contribuent soit alternativement, soit conjointement à la représentation du personnage'. Didier Plassard and Cristina Grazioli, 'La marionnette, ou la mimésis complexe & La complexité des "figures" dans le théâtre en tant que "mimesis"', *Urdimento*, 2(32), 2018, p. 61. <https://www.revistas.udesc.br/index.php/urdimento/article/view/1414573102322018056B/8919> (accessed 5 April 2025).
22. Piris, 'The co-presence and ontological ambiguity of the puppet', p. 30.
23. Down, Blind Summit company archive.
24. Before becoming the popular character of glove-puppet Punch and Judy shows, Punch originally was an essential yet peripheral character in rod-and-string puppet shows. The first recording of his presence on the English stage goes back to the seventeenth century, as Samuel Pepys records a show featuring Punch – or Punchinello – in 1662 in his diaries. The first scripts which record Punch as a stage director date back from the eighteenth century – one might think of the anonymous play *Politicks in Miniature: Or, The Humours of Punch's Resignation* (Westminster: J. Mechell, 1742). Donnie's temper and the use Down makes of him as a middleman between puppeteers and puppets/objects is in some ways reminiscent of this tradition.

Author biography

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