

## THEATRE

**PUPPETS DON'T LIE**

The heart of puppetry with Papermoon Puppet Theatre

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**The beginnings of puppetry can be traced back to the carving of stone and bone by early man into human and animal figures.**

Puppets remained a vital tool for storytelling across the ages, from the use of clay dolls and string puppets in ancient Greek theatre to wooden figures with movable parts to depict liturgical dramas in medieval times.

By the 19th century, puppetry was still perceived as a form of popular, if low, entertainment across Europe, one example being the bawdy, slapstick Punch and Judy shows along the English seaside. But with the early 20th century came the rise of television, cinema and spectator sports, along with a growing public interest in science and technology and a preference for naturalism and more life-like depictions. This had the effect of pushing puppetry increasingly to the margins of kids' entertainment because of its association with children's toys such as dolls.

But there is more to the art form than the fabric constructions of Oscar the Grouch or Miss Piggy (adorable as they are). "As long as an object takes on the form of a character to tell a story, and is performed in front of other people, that's puppetry," says Maria Tri Sulistyani (Ria), one of the co-founders of the celebrated Papermoon Puppet Theatre from Indonesia. Indeed, looking at the evolution of puppetry, especially in Asia, offers different ways of thinking about what forms puppetry can take, what it can do, and who it is for.

Esplanade audiences will be able to experience for themselves the many facets of puppetry when Papermoon, which integrates both traditional and contemporary as well as Eastern and Western approaches to puppetry, returns to Singapore at the end of 2022 with *Stream of Memory*, an Esplanade commission for the opening of the new Singtel Waterfront Theatre.



Maria Tri Sulistyani and Iwan Effendi, co-founders of Papermoon Puppet Theatre. Image courtesy of Papermoon Puppet Theatre.

## Puppetry in Asia

Unlike in the West, puppetry managed to endure longer in Asia as a popular but respected art form because of how deeply it had been integrated into cultural life and the traditions of the land. Puppets were a fundamental component of everything from temple services and funeral rites to village performances involving the whole community—and not just children.

In China, puppet troupes performed for royalty and the aristocracy as well as for labourers in the fields, and, in Java, Indonesia, wayang performances would run for hours, with people moving in and out of the performance space, catching up with friends, having a meal in between. In India and across Southeast Asia, Hindu epics were told and retold as oral history through the use of constructed actors, and, in Japan, puppets continued to evolve in complexity from the simple figures used in noh and kyogen dramas to elaborate bunraku puppets requiring multiple performers.

Variations of rod, string, glove and shadow puppets have been used over centuries for public education, political discourse, social commentary, religious rituals, and the passing down of heritage and cultural knowledge from generation to generation, with high regard bestowed upon the greatest puppet masters and their craft.



A performance of tholu bommalatta, a Telugu shadow theatre tradition, at Kalaa Utsavam – Indian Festival of Arts 2019.



This elevated status in Asia enabled puppetry to better hold its ground as an art form against the arrival of mass media, though there is no denying that constructed actors eventually became co-opted into folk shows for tourists or as decorative artefacts. Notably, however, these continue to be targeted at adults and families rather than children specifically.

Of course, the association between puppetry and children's theatre does exist in Asia too. Singapore's Paper Monkey Theatre, for example, is well-known for its entertaining children's theatre productions such as the award-winning *The Magic Paintbrush*. Is puppetry particularly effective in engaging children? Certainly. But it is problematic if puppetry is perceived to only be able to engage children.

Unfortunately, because the use of practical effects requires a greater suspension of disbelief than with a human actor onstage, puppetry is often dismissed as unsophisticated and silly. Shows involving puppets are assumed to always have simplistic storylines, lack complex emotions, and trade in fantastical stories which are only attractive to children—never mind the all-age appeal of actor-driven franchises like *Harry Potter* and *Avengers* for these same reasons.



The Magic Paintbrush by Paper Monkey Theatre, presented at Moonfest – A Mid-Autumn Celebration 2017

## The power of illusion

In fact, the transparency of puppetry's illusory nature is what provides this artform with its unique power. Children may indeed give themselves more readily to a fictional world of constructed actors because of their openness to the blurring of make-belief and reality, but once an adult audience makes the active choice to enter the world of the performance, they are also deciding to invest in an intimate three-way relationship with the puppeteer and the puppet. This relationship is what theatre designer Tina Bicat calls a "covenant", a "shared energy" between animator, object and audience. There can be no realism onstage, no pretence in a production involving puppets, but everyone has nonetheless agreed "to put doubts and prejudices away till later and collude with the theatrical experience ... without having to travel through a mist of apparent naturalism".

The immersion into the world onstage becomes complete, and now, the heart, the mind and the imagination can all be activated by, say, the singing puppets of Avenue Q as they interrogate racism and suicide. It is why we can watch The Lion King and Warhorse, and somehow forget that there are human actors beneath the lavish constructions, and it is also the reason we are moved when a character in a story—depicted in the form of cardboard rolls held together by sticky tape and manipulated by a clearly visible hand- dies.

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When you give that trust to the stage, it  
becomes real.

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Ria, Papermoon Puppet Theatre

The use of puppets also allows theatre-makers to consider staging possibilities that are simply impossible without prohibitively expensive special effects, creating new opportunities for wonderment and magic.

This was, in fact, a significant reason for the resurgence of puppetry in the West in the later half of the 20th century, with artists hungry for innovative approaches to performance that would surprise their audiences. A puppet can soar into the air, remain submerged in a pool of water; even have its body ripped apart, limbs flung across the stage, intestines spilling out onto the floor. Singapore theatre company, The Finger Players, often uses puppetry techniques to striking effect, for example, in the critically acclaimed production, Between The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea where a skeleton (dis)assembles itself on stage.

In fact, because of puppetry's emphasis on visual impact and movement, it can be said to have "more in common with dance and mime than with acting; puppet theatres depend more upon action and less upon the spoken word" (David Currell). We see this ability of puppets to transcend language in the many non-verbal productions involving constructed actors, including the contemplative and emotionally resonant I Know Something That You Don't Know by Papermoon which explored a family coping with loss and grief.



"Gesture is the mother language of the puppet," says Ria. "It is a language that contains silence, which can give audiences permission to build their own stories by looking at the performance."

Bright Ong, who has worked with puppets in Singapore for over a decade, offers another perspective; that puppets uniquely exist "as the purest form of their character" because a constructed actor can only ever be what it is presented to be, "Puppets are innocent, a blank canvas. If, for example, a puppet character is presented as Genghis Khan, this character is Genghis Khan, and nothing else. An actor, no matter how brilliant, will always carry a certain identity or politics with them, based on their appearance, the way they speak."



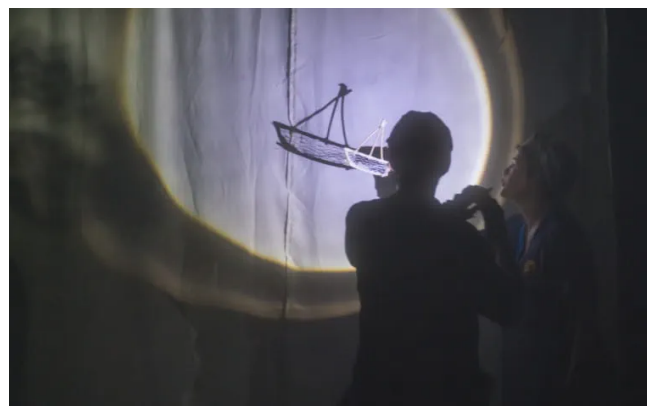
Bright Ong in Hello Elly, presented in PLAYtime! 2012

Ria agrees, "Puppets don't lie. They come as the character born on the stage. It's not Ria playing some role. The puppet is the puppet. We never ask who the parent of Elmo is. We just receive the puppets how they are."

### **A diverse vocabulary**

Ong cites Papermoon as one of the most exciting puppet theatre companies not only in the region but also globally, with numerous international showcases and awards to their name. The company, founded in 2006 in Yogyakarta, and led by theatre performer Ria and visual artist Iwan Effendi began to focus on puppetry after two years as a way to combine their love for both the performing and visual arts.

The company has its roots in wayang kulit (shadow puppetry, of which Iwan's late grandfather was a master), but Papermoon also incorporates a diverse vocabulary into their work, including object puppetry, ceramic puppetry, bunraku and kuruma ningyō (cart puppetry). In addition, the husband-wife team creates immersive experiences in the form of large-scale installations—like the ship in *Cerita Anak* (Child's Story) which takes pairs of parent-child participants on a seafaring journey. They also engage with technology, such as the use of binaural science in the filmed *I Know Something You Don't Know*.



*Cerita Anak (Child's Story)* by Polyglot and Papermoon Puppet Theatre, staged in Octoburst! 2019

The company's puppets are striking, but not necessarily because of a "polished beauty", says Tan Beng Tian, an independent theatre practitioner who co-founded The Finger Players. "It is a type of raw authentic beauty. Every puppet is handcrafted by Iwan and his company members, and when one puts his or her passion and soul in their creation, the end product is always very beautiful and inspiring."

Like The Finger Players, Papermoon is also notable as a puppet theatre-based company that develops productions which are for general audiences, rather than children specifically. Papermoon's revised mission statement was announced boldly in 2010 with *Mwathirika* ("victim" in Swahili) about two boys trying to find their father in the context of the 1965 Indonesian genocide, a period of civil unrest, massacres and political upheaval that led to an estimated 500,000 to one million dead. The play is also based on the experience of Iwan's own family.

People assume that "making puppet theatre is not something serious," says Ria, "since it's always associated with children, it's only about entertaining at a birthday party." Papermoon,

however, believes that serious topics can be addressed for all ages through puppetry because of the special way puppets activate emotions.



Mwathirika by Papermoon Puppet Theatre. Image courtesy of Papermoon Puppet Theatre.

“The story of 1965 that, for most of our audience, was usually a taboo subject or even seemed strange and far from their own lives suddenly became very close and relatable. With theatre, it’s usually about the brain, not feelings. But with Mwathirika, I decided I wanted to create a performance that started with people’s emotions,” she says, referring to her personal approach to her creative process which she calls “emotional dramaturgy”.

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People can yell a lot about climate change, but if it is too didactic, people won’t hear. People are already numb. Through an emotional journey, people will feel, and that helps them to remember what you are saying.

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Ria, Papermoon Puppet Theatre

This conviction is also the driving force behind the company’s upcoming family production, *Stream of Memory*, about the damage caused by human activity to our living environment. Ria and Iwan hope to tell a story full of wonder and imagination, but rooted, first and foremost, in the emotions they hope the audiences will feel, and the ability of artistic presentations to create connections, and foster communication and community.

“[For *Stream of Memory*], we started with the idea of a river, and how the water goes from the mountain and goes far away to the sea, and it passes so many places, so many problems,



so many troubles, and all these memories go into the water. We thought it would be interesting to tell a story about this river, and the many people who pass these places. But it's not one story about this, and this, and this, but everything will be sewn together to create an experience for the audience."

Unfortunately, the pandemic forced Ria and Iwan to adapt or even scrap some earlier plans, especially with regard to the interactive elements. The production will nonetheless involve a large installation at Esplanade which audiences will encounter before the performance at the new Singtel Waterfront Theatre begins. The company has also been working with dancers as puppeteers, and Ria says the company has enjoyed working with artists new to puppetry: "We have been so surprised, wow, I didn't know puppets could move like that in the hands of dancers, and now there are different possibilities to bring the objects alive."

For all its problems, the pandemic has also created opportunity and inspiration.

"We asked ourselves: first of all, why does the audience need to come back to the theatre?" Iwan explains. "The work must be thoughtful, and after these two years of pandemic, we want to reimagine how we can make something even bigger on stage, that will bring a lot of people together at the same time and in the same space. It's not just about the art, but how this art, the river, can also become a pond where people can gather and meet each other."



Iwan and Ria from Papermoon Puppet Theatre. Image by Arnold Simanjuntak. Courtesy of Papermoon Puppet Theatre.

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Kenneth Kwok is an arts administrator, educator and writer, and has been covering the Singapore theatre and dance scene since 1999.

Acknowledgement:

Interviewees

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