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Essay – Puppetry Arts
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As a multidisciplinary performance artist, I was first exposed to puppetry when studying at the O’Neill’s National Theater Institute in 2016, and since, have had a wide range of experience in the art form. I participated in the O’Neill puppetry pre-conference last year in the writing strand, where I worked with Hansol Jung on creating Plot, Character and TheatreWorld based on creative impulses, and performed my monologue for the pre-conference. I also learned techniques from the puppeteers during my time there, which I further expanded on during my residency with Marya Ursin at the Dragon’s Egg Studio later that summer. I further utilized my puppetry skills when I premiered a full production of the multimedia musical *Passageways* in August 2019 at HERE Arts Center. I used puppetry to make the world of fantastical trees come to life in the protagonist’s dreams. As an NTI student, I worked to construct a mask puppet, and then wrote a monologue from a tree’s perspective after suddenly being sparked to life by the symphonic sounds of its forest community.

I studied many aspects of traditional Japanese puppet theatre, including the construction of the puppets the music, and the text performed when studying Asian Performing Arts with Junko Oba at Hampshire College. My final project involved research and performance influenced by both bunraku and kabuki theatre. This was also an opportunity to practice vocal versatility, since one narrator traditionally voices all of the puppets.

I worked with shadowplay and puppetry on a multidisciplinary play with director Kristy Chambrelli, “Form.” As we devised the moments in this show, we discovered new ways to utilize objects, light, and media. The protagonist of our story begins on stage surrounded by every item needed for the show. As the story shifts time from the present to the past, practical things become more fanciful and take on different forms. Everything in her isolated world is utilitarian and transformative. Creativity provides a safe container for her to explore her emotions and start to form ways for her to deal with the play’s conflicts. We incorporated movement, shadow work, and puppetry to represent some of the challenges and demon faced. The puppetry created an ever-changing works, with its form is constantly shifting through the use of projection and video den.

In my play *Factory Treasure*, I incorporated puppetry, and shadowplay to create a fantastical street scene sequence. This full-length work interwove moments of magical realism within the documentary theatre aspects to bring the “factory stories” to life that were being recounted along the surrounding streets. Time and location changes told through the factory stories were shown through projected images, work with fabric, constructed puppets, shadows, ambient sound and lighting changes, Puppetry can give so many dimensions to telling a story - a two-sided tapestry - one patched and ragged, was flipped to indicate changes from factory to streets. This was a solution to trying to tell such an expansive story. I love the idea of playing with how a simple material create such a vibrant story - hearing fabric slide on the floor, being folded like an accordion, or swept around like a breeze. Puppetry requires the imagination to imagine the possibilities bursting from every aspect of a single object, I also have training in various forms of expressive movement and dance including Butoh. I’ve trained extensively with Tectonic Theater Project, and am inspired by devising theatre through momentwork, where a single element, such as prop, costume, light or sound, is isolated and experimented with to explore its theatrical potential. When I saw the puppetry conference here last year, I was awestruck by the different ways of telling a story, and the range of possibilities that puppetry opened up to. Music, projections, costume, light, and props became a theatrical playground, painting the most vivid and immediate story.

By the time I participated in the O Neill conference this past summer and participated in Jim Napolitano’s shadow puppetry span I was ready to engage in the full world of experience and storytelling one can achieve with puppetry. Since Then, my workshops with Kate Brehm, Movement Theatre studio, physical theatre, marionette work with Edwin Salas, Paper Pop Up Theatre and more have further convinced me

that my theatre-making has found a home in puppetry. I have gotten so much out of Annie Rollin's Shadow Puppetry course thus far, and most enjoy learning about how puppetry exists in around the world as a spiritual tradition, ritual, and experience that exists far beyond theatre – each with its own intricate history and legacy. I loved learning from John Bell when participating in the Toy Theatre pageant and would love to be part of the UCONN Puppet Arts community.

Sensory images magically hold the feeling of an experience. Sound, texture and movement help us connect viscerally. How can we engage the audience using all five senses? I'm interested in allowing the chat function to coexist with puppetry, engaging viewers and helping us devise artful ways to be with each other online.

As a multidisciplinary performer who is accustomed to having an audience to work from and a physical space to engage with, I've learned to explore other ways to create a dynamic alive space, playing with location, lighting, movement while filming, and incorporating other forms of media. I've also experimented with remote collaborations with other artists where a live streamed performance through zoom involved multiple actors and puppeteers creating one framework together in my full-length *play Factory Treasure*, which starred Tyler Bunch, using fabric work and movement to create the ghosts of a garment factory, *Sun-Breaths*, a short play specifically created for a zoom format, *Frida with a Ribbon*, an online play bringing the voices of a painting to life, and *Flicker & a Firestarter*, a three-act play which explored the journey of waking from a coma through a soupy collage of sounds, images, text and light.

I want to learn more how object theatre can be performed outdoors in nature, and travel through a vast landscape, across different ecosystems and environments, yet within a very small framework. After studying Toy Theatre with Kate Brehm, since the final workshop, I have been exploring possible vignettes based on the various objects and props I was using in the piece. I'm looking to explore this dichotomy by using naturalistic things in a time where people are viewing the piece from indoors and very separate from nature. Since the body is mostly water, I want to involve more of my own body in relation to the puppetry, and also the simple idea of pouring water, and finding the dance in that natural movement of water moving. How water spreads on a napkin, or drips around the edges of a glass is puppetry and object movement in itself, as well as how sweat gathers. Kate Brehm opened my world in terms of the perspectives that can be shown, all from one small framed box. Her mentorship sparked so many possibilities for me, and I would like to expand on those ideas further in this residency.

At the 30th anniversary O'Neill Conference, I performed shadow puppetry while with an original song, "When the Trees Learned to Soar," illuminating the hidden life in nature. Then, my interest in Spiritual Ecology, the Sacred Feminine, and Eco-Feminism inspired the question, "What is the creation story our world needs to hear now? I plan to use object movement to show the connection between science and spirituality – to eliminate that compartmentalization. I want to show people that feeling a spiritual connection to the earth does NOT mean ignoring science, as well as the other way around. I want to make spiritual ecology a tangible, accessible concept through performance that can speak to a variety of ages, backgrounds, beliefs and abilities - through Puppetry I can bring these larger issues to light through the subtlest of interactions and simplest of objects. Nature awakens hidden resources in our minds that make us feel deeply connected with the past, and moving inanimate objects enables viewers to attach their own emotion to these materials creating the narrative. How can I use my art and performance to wake us all up to that and inspire us to action, even if, to others, it feels too inconsequential, unimportant, ungrounded or inconvenient? I am still at odds with my body as a survivor of 28 gastrointestinal surgeries, sexual abuse. And complex PTSD, and continue to explore the internal and external landscape of disability through movement.

What I hope to work on is isolating one moment at a time: it's easy designing infinite amount of elements, but you only know what each element is capable of when you take a pause and be present and be with what you are creating, giving adequate time to explore. Puppetry forces me to slow down, stop creating for the sake of creating, be still, experiment in order to witness what new directions can be taken. Puppetry is also the perfect way to be a character in the story, but not become the story, as I've done mostly in my one-woman musicals. I have to listen in a new way. My intention in creating this work: As I integrate my own story into larger causes I want to create from, I want to focus on how we can locate ourselves within a wider issue.

How can theatre show the importance of childlike wonder/curiosity/play as an important life process? How can theatre make an individual story universal? How can we show the importance of childlike curiosity and open-mindedness/inquiry through our relation to an object? How can it help us be present and comfortable with stillness, silence, emptiness, even boredom, lengthening our attention spans and ability to be present?

I want to explore how minimal I can keep my idea - challenging myself to find the possibilities from paring down, working with one object, a single medium, medium, exploring the seed of an idea with play, persistence, and patience. It is my goal to work on breathwork and presence in order to have a fully polished minimal piece, rather than an art table full of half-finished ideas.

In puppetry, you can work with the simplest object - even a cut-out silhouette on cardboard. But it's scraps on your table if you don't pick it up and actively engage with it. I'm learning that a *character comes to life through somatic experiencing, breathwork and body being present. Puppetry, as well as my Butoh practice is about not only is the object in the movement, but this Stillness, the empty space, breath, and negative space.*

I love the idea that we can each come with the seed of an idea, and with group feedback we can see what feels the most potent and be pushed in that direction week by week. Puppetry is so dependent on giving time to explore the process, and the support of community is what helps this flourish. I especially want to learn more about using the digital framework of the camera to address these issues, and improve my filming capabilities for puppetry – especially focusing on the body versus object, and the use of negative space and emptiness in an online format. Forms of puppetry I'd like to explore more are different kinds of shadow puppetry, specifically Indonesian shadow puppetry, and especially in an online format, I want to become more versatile in my use of the hand, limbs, and facial features, even silhouettes of body shape

You can always create a very intricate marionette world where each room is finally detailed, but a set made of just cardboard and Sharpie can speak volumes, as well as one hand moving one smell twig with presence and engaged awareness. I also hope to integrate my Butoh work, emphasizing not only the movement in my body, but this space created around it, and my relationship with the frame of the camera. Just like in comics, there is a statement made with the use of negative space and the space between panels, what is the empty space trying to tell you? The relationship a puppeteer has to the space can unfold a whole story. What is the space around us? The way someone sits in a chair is a way of telling the story. How can a puppet become manipulated by the space? What is the puppet's relationship to be empty space around it? I think of puppetry opening the realm of theatrical storytelling just as I imagine graphic novels opening up the world of books with pages of text.

Puppetry doesn't just create narrative. It can become the narrative, and transform it instantaneously. We can tell larger stories through the use of a simple object. We can personify an object that someone might initially overlook. The best part is how it we create for the viewer to attach their own

emotion to the object. We can bring untold stories to light, giving audiences the gift of a new awareness, or a call to action to tune in a bit deeper to our surroundings – which is what I think all great theatre does. Through puppets, we can also become multiple roles – not only performer, but witness, creator and facilitator. We can show the big stories through the smallest of actions – and show that everyone, everything – has story. They can portray a character’s inner life, they can make daydreams become tangible realities on stage, they allow us to inflate a mundane aspect of life with explosive childlike wonder. Puppetry can expand theatrical possibilities, take us to far off places, yet also find the commonalities in all of us. Puppetry can capture the life all around us, giving everyone - and everything - a voice. We can jump in and out time, location, narratives, and points of view. We can bring audiences into a completely different world.

As a creator, I love being an artistic “scavenger” gathering the leftovers—the scraps of life that some might consider worthless, and I reassemble them into a mixed media narrative to tell stories, embracing unexpected routes as opportunities to create something different on stage. I love capturing stories across time and space of reassembling identity after life seems to change overnight. I’m very interested in finding a universal story from the most eccentric situations. As a disabled female artist, I’m interested in using puppetry to embracing our uniqueness through unexpected means. Puppetry can explore the idea of belonging, even with our own unique “quirks” through the simplest, tiniest of objects or life-forms. I’m also inspired by a quote from the groundbreaking book on PTSD, *The Body Keeps The Score*: “The imprints of traumatic experiences are organized not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces: images, sounds, and physical sensations.” This idea drives me to utilize the simplest objects, which can be packed with different meaning for every individual, and create a sense of solidarity and empathy by each relating to one object and it bringing up different associations for all of us. Puppetry is about exploring the seed of one idea and see where it leads. I like playing with these objects and finding the gentleness of nature, the spirit behind it. I don’t stop exploring that seed until I feel that I have brought the invisible to life, and I have animated the hidden life behind what we might overlook. The movement of body, breath, awareness, space, the touching and relationship to the audience. Movement brings the language of experimental puppetry to life, while finding the dance in the most nuanced of gestures, finding the rhythm and grace in my interaction with everyday objects, which is how I will tell my story and drive others to participate.