

Puppets in theatre for social change: An Analysis of the Popularity of Puppets in Africa

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Abstract

Puppets have become increasingly popular in theatre for social change in Africa. An analysis of the reasons for this given by prominent practitioners points to the dual and symbolic nature of the puppet which enables it to be a representation with an extraordinary degree of freedom of expression that can surpass the capabilities of an ordinary actor to intervene in political and social issues which involve a number of barriers. A heightened presence of imagination, combined with the abilities which stem from the intrinsic qualities of puppetry and the defining visual nature of the art form seem to lie at the root of an explanation for the presence and popularity of puppets in theatre for social change even in countries with no pre-colonial history of the art form.

Theatre has become a prominent tool in the extensive struggle to address social problems in Africa, and it is fairly logical that puppets – as part of the traditional forms of dramatic expression of many African countries – would surface in theatre for social change. A variety of reasons are given by theatre practitioners for their choosing puppetry to do this. This paper analyses the reasons given by some of the most prominent practitioners in Africa.

Although puppets are found in many upper- and sub-Sahara countries, it is not totally surprising that the use of puppets specifically as instruments to promote social change in Africa emerged in South Africa. Puppets have in fact been used in educational entertainment in South

Africa more extensively than in any other African country, even though they were not prominent in pre-colonial times in South Africa. The white communities, in particular, have a well-established tradition of puppetry that date back to the late seventeenth century, when puppet performances were given by visiting French and English puppeteers in the young colonial settlement at the Cape. In the twentieth century a number of local pioneers entered the scene and puppetry grew into a diverse applied art form which is fairly eclectic in the sense that no single Western tradition or application dominates the use of the puppet (See my brief overview of South African puppetry in Don Rubin, 1997: 287-289). This freedom has opened the way for dramatic artists to use puppetry in any form of entertainment. National television and a number of puppet projects have also introduced the wider population to puppets, and the performances of Handspring Puppet Company in collaboration with William Kentridge, an internationally renowned artist, have succeeded in making puppets part of mainstream theatre in South Africa. In fact, some of the best known collaborations between Handspring Puppet Company and William Kentridge are *Faustus in Africa*, *Woyzeck on the Highveld* and *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, which were all performed at the major arts festivals and in prominent theatres in South Africa. Puppetry has been an established and widely applied educational medium since the mid-1900s. Most prominent amongst the many contemporary individuals and companies who use puppet theatre in largely underdeveloped communities to address social issues is the African Research and Educational Puppetry Programme (arepp) [sic], which has been operating nationally in South Africa since 1987. The influence of arepp can be seen in a number of other African countries for which they have trained puppeteers who could spread the use of puppetry even beyond their own region.

The African Research and Educational Puppetry Programme was founded in 1987 by Gary Friedman, Ann Wanless, Maishe Maonya and Oupa Mthimkulu. In 2003 the name was changed to arepp: Theatre for Life to stress their focus on providing social life-skills education to primarily disadvantaged communities by means of travelling educational performances with facilitated discussion. The general aims of arepp, namely to identify and address the social attitudes, issues and moral values that contribute towards maintaining ignorance, oppression and misinformation, and instead lead audiences to make informed choices, have become the general aims of almost everyone involved in puppetry

in this field. These are also, generally speaking, the aims of theatre as social intervention.

Looking at these aims, one cannot help but ask: why, then, puppets instead of ordinary actors? Why are some artists attracted to the idea of using puppets instead of live actors? Does puppetry offer the artists and their audiences something that ordinary theatre cannot? Does the puppet have certain abilities that can be of special benefit to interventional theatre? Does the puppet as an intermediary tool have an advantage over the live actor, or is interventional puppet theatre just one more approach to reshaping society? In an attempt to answer these questions about the possible abilities of the puppet I would first like to draw attention to how the use of puppets in interventional theatre in South Africa started, as well as the influence that this kind of theatre has had on a number of other countries; I also want to consider the reasons given by these artists for using puppets.

One of the most prominent puppet projects in the whole of Africa is arepp's *Puppets against AIDS*, which draws together aspects of puppetry and street theatre, a combination that is currently very prominent in interventional theatre in countries such as Kenya and Nigeria (**Figures 1 and 2**). This is, of course, not only a result of the influence of arepp and *Puppets against AIDS*, but also (and perhaps primarily so) because of the tradition of outdoor performances in black African communities.

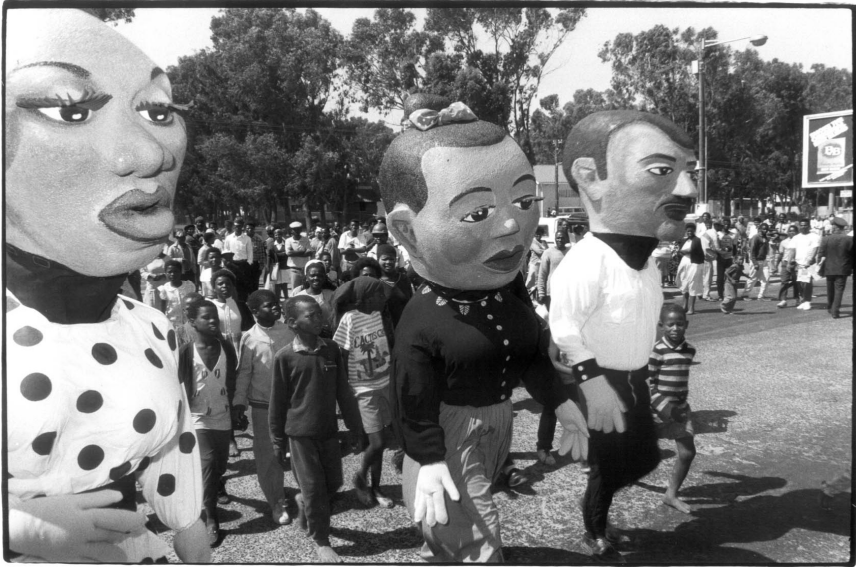


Figure 1 - *Puppets against AIDS* by arepp, a show which draws together aspects of puppetry and street theatre (Photo by Giselle Wulfsohn).



Figure 2 - *Drumbeats of Africa*, a company from Nigeria performing in an open-air space (Photo by Anthony Mboyo).

Puppets against AIDS was initially performed in Johannesburg during a HIV/AIDS week in 1988. This was to mark the beginning of a national campaign and a long-term project, which was extended to neighbouring Namibia and Zimbabwe. This project also inspired the Family Planning Association of Kenya to send two men to South Africa to be trained by arepp as puppeteers who could launch Community Health and Awareness Puppeteers (CHAPS) in Kenya.

Typical of street theatre practice, arepp did little or no pre-publicity before the troupe arrived at a selected venue, mostly a busy centre, to perform *Puppets against AIDS*. The setting up activities usually attracted some people, who increased in number as the marimba and drums started to play. Announcements over a public address system helped to attract more attention. Then the 2-metre high puppets with their grey faces and their message are introduced with "Hello! I'd like you to meet Jo, Mary, Gladys, Sue and Harry. They are going to tell you a story about a killer disease called AIDS!" The story unfolds to tell how Joe, who is infected with HIV, passes the infection on to others through his sexual liaisons. He infects his wife, Mary, who in turn gives their baby the virus. Eventually Jo dies of AIDS. To overcome possible uncomfortable feelings in the crowd, the story was flavoured with humour and a touch of dance. After the 35-minute show, a facilitated question and answer discussion followed to explain the central message which was the prevention of HIV infection. This is more or less the same way that CHAPS operates in areas such as Mathare valley, one of the slum areas of Nairobi.

With Gary Friedman as director of arepp, one can easily understand that the use of puppets would have been a natural choice when it became clear that HIV/AIDS was a serious and neglected problem in South Africa and its neighbouring countries. After all, Friedman had had a life-long involvement with puppets that dated back to his childhood years and had ample experience in educational entertainment with puppets. Nevertheless, arepp's choice of puppets as a performance medium was clearly motivated in a proposal for funding in 1989. They chose puppets because they felt that this medium could overcome ethnic and cultural barriers, as well as the restricted social conventions regarding sexuality. Arguments used in favour of the use of puppets were that puppets are a non-threatening medium, so the audience remains receptive to the messages; furthermore, arepp believed that the cultural tradition of puppetry in Africa makes it a culturally acceptable medium (arepp, 1989;

Skinner *et al.*, 1991:4). These reasons for choosing puppetry as codification are not unique to arepp and will be analyzed later on in this paper.

In 1989 and 1990 a panel of five reviewers (Donald Skinner, Carol Metcalf, John Seager, Cobus de Swart and Ria Laubscher), selected from a range of disciplines - the five disciplines were, sociology, psychology, anthropology, medicine and epidemiology - in order to obtain a multidisciplinary view, evaluated *Puppets against AIDS*. The aim of the evaluation was to assess the appropriateness of the performance and discussion in providing education about HIV/AIDS at a community level and their effectiveness in passing on knowledge and changing attitudes and intended behaviour. These reports naturally do not only reflect on the use of puppets, but cover aspects such as the development of a realistic fear of HIV/AIDS, behaviour changes that can reduce risk, support for people with HIV/AIDS, cognitive information, appeals to community responsibility, factors of general importance in getting a message across and changes in response to questions after seeing the show. My focus is, however, on the reasons for choosing puppets and the effect of the use in the campaign.

When the project was evaluated in 1990, the interdisciplinary panel reported that the puppets "appear to make a considerable impression" and appeared not to be "offensive in moral and cultural terms". The report also states "(t)he fact that people stayed to watch and were not offended would seem to indicate that the taboos did not interfere with the educative process" (Skinner *et al.*, 1991:19-20). These statements reflect well on arepp's goal of using puppets to overcome the barriers of social conventions. Skinner *et al.* (1991:4-5) comment (with references to other researchers) as follows on these barriers:

Education around HIV infection has met with a number of severe problems which limit its impact on changing behaviour in the required direction. Firstly, AIDS and HIV involve two major sensitive and taboo areas of our social functioning, namely "sex" and "death" (Sontag, 1988; Christie, 1989). The second problem results from a tendency to project the risk of infection onto others thereby denying personal risk (Kelly and Laurence, 1988). Another major area of difficulty is that there is a complex relationship between knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, particularly when the negative effects of the behaviour are only likely to be felt many years into the future. It is now generally accepted that acquiring knowledge is not sufficient for behaviour change to take place, and that attitudes and basic social norms also have to be adjusted (Ajzen, 1988; Eiser & van der Pligt, 1988).

This abstract from the report not only reflects on the complexity of HIV/AIDS education, but also points to the possible role of puppets in adjusting social norms as unscripted rules which are not easily broken as this can evoke strong reactions. This ability of the puppet to act as an appropriate codification in changing norms seems to be one of the main reasons for the popularity of puppets and will be analysed in the second half of this paper.

By 1996 Friedman and his collaborator, Nyanga Tshabalala, had launched another project, *Puppets in Prison*, described by Darryl Accone (1996) as a possible blueprint for HIV and AIDS education in South African jails. A group of long-term juvenile prisoners were equipped with the necessary skills to be performers and trainers for their peer groups in jails around the country and three short puppet plays on male prostitution, sodomy and rape – issues usually suppressed in discussions – were created for prison audiences (see **Figure 3**).

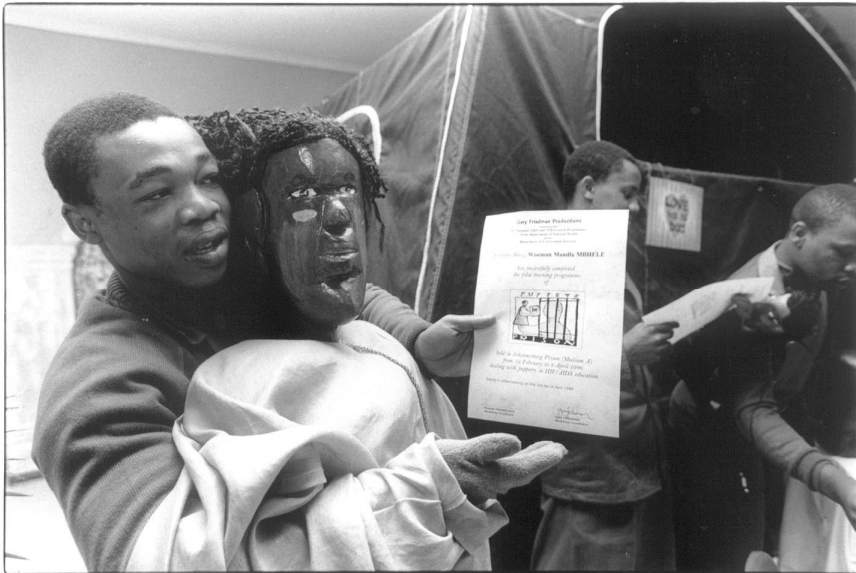


Figure 3 - A performance by CHAPS at Edupuppets 2002, a biannual international puppetry festival and the first of its kind in East Africa (Photo by Anthony Mboyo).

Puppetry as a presentation of safe codes once again played a major role. In an interview with Darryl Accone (1996), Friedman expresses his attraction to puppets as follows and draws the attention to additional reasons for the popularity of puppetry:

Puppets express emotions and feelings without words. It is the theatre of metamorphosis and transformation. It is all about sound, movement and light. That is the magic of puppet theatre: actions are a thousand times more effective than words. Puppets give you so much scope. You can range from the very poetic to blatantly political, across a thousand shades of grey.

Friedman's attraction to the use of puppets seems to lie in mainly three things which will have to be tested, namely the transformative power of puppets, the visual quality of the art form, and a wide range of emotions which can be articulated through visual signs.

Although *Puppets in Prison* never succeeded in gaining the support of the government and prison authorities in South Africa as was hoped, the fight against the growing AIDS pandemic was continued and by 2000 arepp (now with Brigid Schutz as the director) was touring South Africa with *Check Your Mate*, an interactive show that also dealt with rape and included a quiz show, races and other games. Mary and Joe, the two main characters from *Puppets against AIDS*, were now both HIV positive and Joe is living with AIDS. They explained to their audience how the virus is spread by taking them through several events in their lives. After every scene the possible choices offered to Mary and Joe were presented to the audience by means of these interactive activities so that the audience could discover what should be done in similar circumstances to avoid becoming infected. The audience also had a chance to participate in a demonstration of condom use. The AIDS series was further extended to *Playing for Keeps* (a combination of actors, shadow puppets and rod puppets) and *Look Before You Leap*, which also dealt with sexual awareness (**Figure 4**).



Figure 4 - A scene from *Playing for Keeps* in which arepp combined actors, shadow puppets and rod puppets (Photo by Brigid Schutz).

In an internet article (Artslink, 2000), shortly before performing at the international AIDS conference in Durban in 2000, arepp's efforts to combat AIDS were described as innovative and successful because of certain qualities of theatre and puppets:

With the eyes of the international community on Durban and the XIII International AIDS Conference, the community-based arepp Educational Trust is on tour delivering an innovative approach to the AIDS pandemic. As an NGO, arepp aims to educate and inform South Africans of all ages through the unique form of "edutainment" using theatre and/or puppetry. These are successful mediums because of their non-threatening and universal nature which reach audiences of all ages.

Both the ordinary theatre and the puppet theatre – because of their symbolic depictions and freedom of speech – create a non-threatening opportunity to engage with an audience as stated above, and both mediums allow the possibility to address any age group. Yet some artists in the field of theatre for social change seem to think that the puppet theatre has an advantage over the ordinary theatre; this view will be examined more closely in the second half of this paper.

By 2004 arepp had extended its fight against HIV/AIDS to *No Monkey Business*, a series of seven plays which was targeted at 6- to 9-year-olds (Grades 1 to 4 learners). The series also deals in an interactive way with stranger danger, good and bad secrets, body awareness, physical boundaries, life skills, self-efficacy, basic health, violence, discrimination and substance abuse. Larger than life animal mouth-puppets in bright colours and a live actor are used to examine the issues of acceptance and working together, and to foster the concept of "I'm okay, you're okay" (Figure 5). This series is still performed in schools and care centres in South Africa.



Figure 5 - Vanda Vulture, one of the brightly coloured animals from *No Monkey Business* by arepp (Photo by Brigid Schutz).

By the time the *No Monkey Business* series was introduced, *Takalani Sesame* had already been launched to support the Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy of the Department of Education in South Africa. In 2002 Kami, an affectionate 5-year-old HIV-positive character, was incorporated into the show to help destigmatise HIV/AIDS and to encourage positive behaviour toward infected people. The name Kami is not without significance. It is derived from "Kamongelo", which means acceptance and/or welcome in Zulu, Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana. The name thus carries with it a sense of hope and optimism in a society where many babies are born HIV positive and children are often orphaned by AIDS early in their lives. This is also true of very many children in a

number of sub-Saharan countries. I would therefore now like to turn to a few other countries in Africa where puppets are prominent in attempts to bring about social change.

With an estimated 400 community-orientated puppeteers at present, Kenya is the African country which by far relies most heavily on puppets in bringing about social change. This is quite remarkable, if one takes into consideration that Kenya has no pre-colonial puppet tradition. The efforts and success of Family Planning Private Sector (FPPS)¹ with their Community Health and Awareness Puppeteers (CHAPS) programme extends even beyond their own county to include Nigeria, Tanzania, Eritrea and Lesotho. In 2002 CHAPS launched Edupuppets, a biannual international puppetry festival and the first of its kind in East Africa (**Figure 6**).



Figure 6 - *Puppets in Prison*, a project by arepp in which long-term juvenile prisoners were equipped with performance and puppetry skills to combat prostitution, sodomy and rape (Photo by Giselle Wulfsohn).

In his report on Edupuppets 2002 Anthony Mboyo (2003:1), as programme officer for CHAPS, writes,

Edupuppets 2002 focused on the theatrical form of puppetry and its power to engage, educate and inspire. Its theme, *'Building bridges through puppetry for community education and development'* captured

puppetry's potential to communicate at the grassroots community level, enlarge perspectives and break down cultural and racial barriers.

Although puppetry was initially taken up by CHAPS to address effective family planning, it was soon used to deal with other health-related social problems, such as HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. Issues such as drug abuse, corruption, transparency, integrity and the encouragement of gender equality now also form part of their community outreach programme. A document drawn up by Mboyo (2006a:3) outlines their use of puppets extensively, but at times he fails to distinguish between the qualities shared by puppets and ordinary actors in performance:

First, puppetry involves the use of puppets, visual metaphors, to represent real-life characters and situations in a non-threatening way. This is because puppetry breaks down cultural, religious, racial and even socio-economic barriers due to the 'neutral' nature of the puppet. Secondly, it opens a door for discussions that go deep to explore the root causes of a problem and continue to challenge the audience to try and identify workable solutions. Thirdly, puppets are unique, fascinating, attractive, dramatically entertaining and unusual it is novel. Nobody wants to listen to long and boring speeches. Fourthly, a puppet show is easy to mount, for example, in a market place. All it takes for puppeteers is a makeshift and portable booth and a few puppets, and the audience is entertained, educated and provoked to discussion. Such is the power of puppetry in the transformation of society.

Mboyo's outline clearly points to the importance of applying participatory communication principles in any theatre as an agent for premeditated change. The puppet has certain useful inherent abilities which attract many practitioners. As a tool it must be applied in an appropriate way. As I pointed out in a previous paper (Kruger, 2006:211-214), participatory communication can be defined as a dynamic, interactional and transformative process of dialogue between people, groups and institutions that enables people, both individually and collectively, to realise their full potential and be engaged in promoting their own welfare. Participatory communication therefore means working with and through the people, as opposed to working on or for the people.²

The puppet as a performance object has a metaphorical nature and seems to be popular because socially it is permitted greater freedom of

speech than the ordinary actor is, as claimed in one of the FPPS brochures (undated:1-2):

The puppet is a visual metaphor, representing 'the real life' but at the same time it is one step removed from the real world. Puppets can say more than the live actor. Puppets can get away with being highly controversial and thus often say more than would be possible for a live actor to say. This is especially true when dealing with taboo or sensitive issues such as family planning, sexually transmitted diseases or the reproductive system when a puppet performance can be less embarrassing to the audience than human act.

The protective qualities of the puppets as codification are also referred to by Mworongo (internet source, 1996), in a report on the work of FPPS. He also draws the attention to the use of puppets in adult education:

It is taboo in Africa to discuss sexual issues with strangers and even trained family planning providers often feel uncomfortable discussing reproductive health issues with groups of people, especially men. In the wake of the successful use of puppets to lead audiences in South Africa about AIDS, the Family Planning Association of Kenya use puppets to teach men about family planning, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS. Trained puppetry troupes now perform regularly in Kenya at male-dominated institutions in Nakuru and Kakamega. The approach has proved highly effective in drawing crowds of men to listen to reproductive health information ... they can say more on controversial issues than a live actor without offending the audience ... Puppets offer the viewer and listener a non-threatening opportunity to look and laugh at themselves.

A close look at the work and reasons given by practitioners in Africa for using puppets as interventional tools reveals that puppets are chosen for several reasons: mainly because they are perceived by an audience as non-threatening; their ability to transcend social barriers through being allowed an extraordinary freedom of speech; the advantages of visual and metaphorical expression; their attraction as a novelty in many communities; and their general appeal. Puppets are regarded as having a universal appeal and as being able to transcend the barriers created by factors such as education, race, gender and language. They are seen as being able to educate and entertain people irrespective of social status, cultural background or level of literacy, and can often do this without the use of words. These attractions, which are largely interlinked, stem from

the indivisible dual nature of puppets, their ability to act as visual metaphors, their ability (and perhaps even inherent quality) to be comical, the broad principles which steer the art form, its sign systems and the undisputed dual nature of puppets.

The history of the puppet theatre shows that puppets have appealed to individuals and diverse societies over many centuries. The basis of the puppet's appeal in general is important for its justification as a tool in theatre for development and social change. Various explanations have been put forward for the continuing theatrical existence and appeal of the puppet in diverse societies. Tillis (1992:30-53) convincingly categorises these explanations into three groups: explanations based upon the artist, the puppet and the audience.

Puppetry offers the theatrical artist a distinctive array of possibilities for control over the medium. The artist has the opportunity to construct the desired characters that carry certain permanent emotional qualities which cannot be alienated in performance from the puppet's unvarying and constant external qualities as an object. A fine puppet's character is clearly visible in his appearance. Unlike the live actor who performs a character, the puppet is the character. The last two categories given by Tillis are directly correlated and refer, respectively, to puppetry as a medium that is by its very nature dual and therefore unbounded by reality, and the puppet's license to act and speak with remarkable freedom from control by social norms and political ideas as barriers.

The puppet is an object without life and at the same time has an imagined life. This creates the dual and unbounded nature of the puppet as a performance object. The action and words of the puppet do not belong to a living person. Neither do these actions and words belong to the puppeteer, nor is the puppeteer perceived as being directly responsible for them. Both the performer and the audience share the freedom created by the puppet as an object with an imaginative life. The puppet is not a living person and can therefore deal with taboo issues such as sex, disease and death without causing embarrassment and shame. The sensitive and controversial nature of the social issues addressed in *Puppets in Prison* (rape, sodomy, etc.), for example, and the puppet's freedom of expression and ability to act as a shield between the performers and audience, as a metaphor with no real independent life, as well as its ability to turn the otherwise unspoken into a conversation by means of these qualities give the puppets an advantage over the ordinary actor. An audience does not fear the characters presented by puppets, as they are not real and therefore no threat to real people in the real world.

This is supported by the fact that the puppet has no life, identity or personality beyond a performance. This absence of reality allows the puppet also to be perceived as neutral and without any social and political baggage which may become a barrier between the audience and the message. The puppet can thus become a mediator in the process of social change, acting as a medium through which the artist and audience can communicate freely.

The dual nature of the puppet, which leads to the extraordinary absence of restrictions on it, makes it particularly suitable for satire and parody, which rely on caricature, exaggeration, and misplaced and irreconcilable juxtapositions to create ridiculous and jarring effects. As a pre-constructed object which gives the artist a certain control over the medium, some repulsive or ludicrous characteristics may even be part of the reality of the puppet by being represented as actual physical qualities. Although artists are mostly safeguarded by this, it seems naïve to accept that puppeteers will always and completely be protected by their “hidden identity and the extraordinary freedom of expression that live actors do not enjoy”, to quote Dagan (1990:12).³ Although the puppeteer might not be visible in the performance, the creator of the metaphor is concrete and can be criticised. This is why Friedman had mixed reactions to *Puns and Doedie – Puppets against Apartheid*, a political satire which was performed in South Africa during the regime of PW Botha. It was his very portrayal of Pee Wee, the finger-wagging Prime Minister, which caused a man in Cape Town to punch him on the jaw⁴ (**Figure 7**).



Figure 7 - Gary Friedman with Pee Wee and Puns from *Puppets against Apartheid*.

The possibility that puppets can have a visual impact and even communicate without the spoken word seems to be a huge advantage in social intervention. To understand this one has to consider the symbolic nature of the puppet, as well as the semiotics and the basic principles of puppet theatre. Puppets are by nature visual metaphors which, like symbolic acts, allow ideas to have an immediate impact and to be communicated and reformulated even without the use of words. Why is it possible for puppets to communicate a message with very little or no speech at all? Three sign systems are used in puppet theatre, namely design, movement and speech. These sign systems operate independently, but simultaneously co-operate to generate meaning and create a representation that an audience will imagine to have life. The art form relies on the ability of puppeteers to apply the inherent nature of the puppet as a visual metaphor and generate the production of visual messages. This is why the distinctive principles of puppetry, namely representation, distortion, exaggeration, reduction, simplification and movement, are directed toward modalities that can support visual actions and symbols. Distortion as a basic principle of puppetry means that the representation will not be so complete that verisimilitude is created. The most common means of distortion is reduction, which at the same time leads to exaggeration; this in turn means that reduction can also be

described as simplification in order to enlarge. The puppet is a visual and symbolic representation and, as in any representation, the number of elements included in the depiction is reduced. As a visual symbol, the puppet is a simplification of reality; as a representation of humankind, it takes on a singular and exaggerated character. This ability to be a representation with a larger-than-life quality plays a vital role in intervention. Also the ability to increase the impact of images and actions makes puppetry as an applied art form a means through which ideas can be communicated in an intensified, larger-than-life style. The potential to do so is one of the advantages of the puppet over the ordinary actor. I would like to clarify this by using arepp's *Puppets for Democracy* as an example.

Puppets for Democracy was a series that was developed for the South African national broadcasting corporation in 1994 to prepare disadvantaged voters for the first democratic election in South Africa. Dialogue was minimised to overcome the problem of having to address audiences in 11 official languages, so design and movement had to convey most of the meaning. Symbolic – and therefore simplified, yet recognisable – characters, significant situations and meaningful motion carried the message. The design of the puppets thus played a vital role. The colourful Muppet-like puppets represented identifiable human beings, but humans who were not explicitly linked to a specific ethnic, cultural or language group, a feature that was of vital importance in a diverse society struggling to find common ground⁵ (**Figure 8**).

Simplification, distortion and exaggeration as basic principles of the art form were combined in the quality of the features, thus giving the puppets a humorous and affectionate quality. The distorted features, especially the froglike mouths, long slender arms, big, almost clumsy hands, and the soft quality of the material were intended to draw the sympathy of the audience. These same qualities could also be found in the sets and props, and this amalgamation was supported by simplified, basic movements to carry the message in the absence of speech.



Figure 8 - These colourful Muppet-like puppets from *Puppets for Democracy* represent identifiable human beings, but humans who are not explicitly linked to a specific ethnic or cultural group.

Most puppet artists have little doubt that movement is the most important sign system. The puppet is therefore often defined in terms of movement. Tillis (1992:133) sums up the arguments for the dominance of movement over either design or speech as follows:

The design of a puppet may be radically unlife-like, presenting the audience with signs so unrepresentative of a given character as to be unintelligible by themselves... the speech of a puppet may be radically modified or the puppet may be given no speech at all, presenting the audience with signs that are either unintelligible or nonexistent... the general movement of the puppet must be intelligible as character movement, or else the design and speech, whatever their representational quality, will be nothing more than plastic art and oratory.

Although movement is without doubt a vital element in puppetry as the animation of objects, the art form also relies on the audience's willingness to imagine life for the puppet. The acceptance of the "life" of the puppet is merely the acceptance of a particular theatrical convention which, Tillis (1992:64) calls "the process of double-vision". Through this process the audience simultaneously sees the puppet by means of perception and imagination as an object and as a life. The audience's

willingness to make the leap from representation to the imagination of life is seen by Tillis (1992:47) as perhaps the single quality that can explain the enduring appeal of the puppet. This “willing suspension of disbelief” is perhaps also the explanation why puppets are often accepted by adult audiences, as can be seen in the work of arepp, CHAPS and a number of other projects in Africa. Part of this acceptance of puppets into the adult world is also the result of the ease with which puppets can present problems in a light-hearted manner without minimising the importance of the situation. Puppets can, of course, perform serious acts and can “range from the very poetic to blatantly political, across a thousand shades of grey” as noted by Friedman above. This variety which is shaped through distortion, simplification, exaggeration and representation without verisimilitude includes the capability of creating a comical and amusing mirror of mankind.

The puppet’s ability to entertain young audiences is evident worldwide. Their unbounded nature, ability to create comedy through distortion and exaggeration, and their ability to turn fantasy into reality (and vice versa) surely play a role in this appeal. The use of puppets to entertain and educate adolescents, however, is not so common and also to a large extent absent in Africa. Although arepp had used puppets initially for this age group, they abandoned their efforts after it became clear that their efforts were not well received. No data shedding light on this phenomenon are available and I can only speculate that adolescents from different cultures will respond differently to puppetry as their attitudes might largely be determined by local customs and attitude. Some adolescents, just like many adults, might associate puppets very much with children’s entertainment and will therefore find the medium unacceptable and possibly condescending. *Puppets in Prison* in South Africa seems to a large extent to be an exception and the success can perhaps be attributed to the novelty value of a dramatic experience, the uniqueness of puppets as part of their culture, the ability of the puppet to shield off the performer even when the puppeteer is visible, and the free and open atmosphere in which to discuss highly controversial issues and shared anxieties. Perhaps adolescents in general are less willing to make the leap from representation to the imagination of life, and are less willing to suspend their disbelief as such enthusiasm reminds them of an earlier phase during their lives when this was almost second nature. In Mali – with performance traditions such as the *Sogo bò* in which the whole community is the audience and the performers are by custom members of the respected the *kamalen ton* (youth association) to which all Bamana

males between the age of 14 and 40 and unmarried women from 14 years and older belong – puppetry could be expected to be an acceptable medium in adolescent interventional theatre. This in fact seems to be the case with *Project Guggenheim*, in which puppets are used to address the HIV/AIDS problem in the Bamana and Bozo communities in Mali, which have a long-standing tradition of puppetry (See, for example, Arnoldi 1995 and 2001). Although *Project Guggenheim* appears to have adopted a very dogmatic approach to the HIV/AIDS problem, puppets as a medium of communication in this context are culturally sensitive and acceptable (Friedman, <http://Africanpuppet.blogspot.com/2007/04/indigenous-aids-puppets-in-west-africa.html>).

One of the reasons given by arepp for choosing puppets for their HIV/AIDS campaign in South Africa was that “they believe that the cultural tradition of puppetry in Africa makes it a culturally acceptable medium” (Skinner *et al.*, 1991:4). This is a dubious argument, especially if one takes into account that the show was mostly performed to non-white audiences who have no established tradition of puppetry. As has been pointed out, South Africa has a tradition of puppetry in the sense that puppets have been used since the 1800s mostly by whites and in a largely European way. Some other countries in Africa such as Mali, Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Gabon have unique performance traditions that date back to times long before colonisation, traditions of which puppets and masks are an integral part. In Central and West African countries puppets have been an essential means of group communication and an integral part of the traditional expression and experience of many black African communities since pre-colonial times. One cannot claim that puppets in South Africa are culturally acceptable to underdeveloped communities because of tradition as a pattern of handed-down behaviour and customs. Puppets are, of course, an “acceptable medium” because there is no tradition in any South African community that opposes the use of puppets through their negative associations with witchcraft, etc. *Puppets against AIDS*, however, was culturally sensitive in that, although the basic story-line remained the same, the dialect and social traditions underlying the issue were changed to accommodate local cultures.

When Friedman explained his attraction to puppets to Accone (1996), who did the interview on *Puppets in Prison* (quoted above), he makes an interesting, yet debatable remark about metamorphosis and representation. The puppet is usually associated with representation, while the mask is associated with metamorphosis. Darkowska-Nidzorska (1980:19) says the following about this:

We frequently wonder about the nature of the relationship between puppet theatre and mask theatre. For, if the function of a puppet is effectively to represent man by a mirror image, the mask would be the means of metamorphosis.

The difference between metamorphosis or transformation and representation is a matter of intensity, shared by both the audience and the performer and created by the nature of the performance. In her discussion on dance masks and puppets in Africa, Dagan (1990:64) correctly points out that both the masked dancer and puppeteer can be involved in the process of metamorphosis as the difference between representation and metamorphosis lies in the social function of the performance:

Undoubtedly, this difference in intensity between ritual-drama metamorphosis and secular-drama representation, that both the puppeteer and the dancer can go through, is reflected in the type of narration connected to each of them. But the distinction is not that simple, because both puppeteer and masked dancer undergo a transformation of identity. In a ritual drama, they become something else; therefore go through a process of metamorphosis. In a secular drama, they play a role, therefore they represent a character (...) consequently, ritual masked dancers or puppeteers can manipulate an audience to a much greater degree because the spectators believe the mask or puppet is possessed by a supreme power, and that the manipulator is both physically and emotionally possessed. Obviously, such power cannot be projected in the narration accompanying puppets or masks in a secular drama.

Should Friedman's view of the puppet theatre as metamorphosis and transformation therefore be totally disregarded or ignored? Perhaps not, because it reflects the emotional intensity of the puppet artist who transforms him/herself in the process of creating objects which in the imagination of an audience, and through the puppeteer's own imaginative and creative power, take on a form of life in performance. This feeling of creating life and the involvement of the audience in this process, something which ordinary theatre cannot so easily offer, might well be one of the main attractions of puppetry in any form. This heightened presence of the imagination, combined with the performance features which stem from the dual and symbolic nature of puppets and the defining visual nature of the art form, might well explain the presence and popularity of puppets in interventional theatre.

The presence of puppets can, however, not guarantee the success of interventional theatre. Therefore many of the organisations, especially arepp and CHAPS, adopt a participatory approach to their work. This approach is well illustrated by '*Je, mwanithamini?*' *The Story of Kadzo the village girl*, done in a remote area in Kenya by a local puppet group that was trained by CHAPS to work in their own community. The young Kadzo is denied the opportunity to go to college and her father threatens to disown her if she refuses to marry a local headman whose wealth he is after. Mboyo (2006b:2) gives the following account:

As the story unfolds, one wouldn't fail to realize a confrontation in the making. Traditions and customs that are used to justify gender bias are laid in the open. As the realities sink in the minds of the audience, a new realization is born - the need for dialogue and compromise. This in turn paves way for collective discussion, which is why the whole process is initiated in the first place... The play pauses and a heated discussion follows among the community members...finally it is resolved that Kadzo should continue with her education. The play then takes a positive turn and depicts the future, educated Kadzo contributing to the development of the community... The community readily participates in the process since it is about them by their people in their own language. They are finally willing to face the problem themselves.

The dual nature of the puppet as a performance object, with a life only in the hands of a creative performer and in the imagination of the audience, enables the puppet to transcend reality and to enjoy an extraordinary licence to criticise, while the audience and the performer need not fear social taboos and constraints. This is the source of the popularity and success of puppets in the crucial participatory approach to theatre for social change.

End Notes

¹ FPPS is a non-governmental and non-profit-making technical advisory and management organization. Initially named the Family Planning Private Sector programme, it was funded by USAID and launched in 1984. Over 100 private sector companies, church-based hospitals and clinics, NGOs and universities were assisted by FPPS to operate over 200 reproductive health (a term dictated by USAID) clinics. The organization was registered in 1996 as a local NGO with a mission to assist the private sector and community organizations in development training. Additional funds from the United Nations Drug Control

Program (UNDCP), the International Red Cross & Red Crescent and the Ford Foundation enabled FPPS to extend their focus to even more social problems (Mboyo, 2006a: 1-3).

² See my paper *Puppets and masks in Africa as multifunctional social intervention* in Balfour and Somers (2006:207-215) in which I refer to the theories of Chambers (1983), Freire (1972), Singhal (2001), Singhal and Devi (2003) and Gumuncio Dragon (2001).

³ Blumenthal (2005: 168-171) gives a number of examples of how “puppet rebels” all around the world have been silenced at times by authorities who banned their performances, imprisoned them, and even reportedly beaten some of them.

⁴ See *Not all see the funny side of Puns and Doedie* in *Sunday Tribune* (22/12/1995) by Arlene Getz, and *Puppets much more than just Poppets* by Charlotte Bauer in *Weekly Mail* (30/10/1987). In defence of the puppet’s freedom of speech and ability to be controversial, I must say that some adult members of the audience, especially at Durban’s Expo ’85, might have walked out with their kids because they may have been expecting a more traditional Punch and Judy show rather than a political satire. The events in Durban might thus well reflect the common close association of puppets and children’s entertainment.

⁵ An earlier attempt by arepp to create racially unidentifiable characters was less successful. In *Puppets against AIDS* the grey faced puppets as a combination of black and white were supposed to represent the ethnic diversity of South Africa and were used to symbolize the notion that anybody could fall victim to the virus. Colour as a symbol and visual sign, however, did not succeed in doing this as the features of the puppets were not distorted as in *Puppets for Democracy*. According to Brigid Shutz in a private conversation, the grey-faced puppets were taken to be Asians. Soon after this became clear and when touring with the giant-sized puppets (which had the advantage of being highly visible and able to create a larger than life impact) became too expensive, arepp changed to glove puppets which represented the features and colours with which the target audiences could identify. Another example of how design can play a vital and symbolic role can be found in *Takalani Sesame*. The design of the puppets supports and celebrates the cultural diversity of South Africa. The idea of a “rainbow nation” resonates in the varied colours of the puppets, and through their shapes, features and soft texture adorable and comforting fantasy creatures are created with which children can identify.

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