

## **Ethical perspectives on the representation of sexuality through puppets in theatre performances**

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**Abstract:** In the next article we will try to answer the following questions: What boundaries exist outside the ethical norms of staging the obscene? To what extent can we consider the depiction of sexuality as artistic expression? Can a puppet diminish the vulgarity unwanted by the audience in a sexual scene? How much can be accepted in the representation of sexual intercourse on stage, even if it is to be performed with the help of puppets?

**Keywords:** puppet, ethical, sexuality, obscene.

### **1. Introduction**

The scientific debate of recent years increasingly records the problem of contemporary man in confrontation with the ethical benchmarks present in society, with the imbalance caused by false opinions and the hijacking of social meaning, with the bringing to the fore of the erotic, the vulgar, the grotesque, the immoral and the unaesthetic, leading to the destabilisation of moral codes. The ethical problems involved in developing the theme of sexuality in a puppet theatre performance derive from the stereotyping of puppets as a clear appearance to a child audience.

Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.who.int/teams/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-research/key-areas-of-work/sexual-health/defining-sexual-health>.

For some theatre productions, gender or sexuality are character footnotes, and for others, they are a central theme.

In the hands of visionary artists, the puppet or marionette becomes a metaphorical language that transcends spoken words, conveying complex narratives in a visually powerful manner. The interaction of naked bodies made of different materials on stage can symbolise vulnerability, unity or even disconnection between characters.

The question which images will be considered obscene and/or pornographic is always determined by the spatio-temporal context of their situation, which is evidence of the discursive character of both categories, also common in narratives on (non)art, but, while pornography is placed on the peripheries of the world of spectacle, broadly understood “art” – at least in its traditional, “high” form – occupies its center. The scene/stage and the obscene are woven together by the dream of transgression, understood as stepping beyond bodily-subjective as well as systemic boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. Representations of sexuality and ethical implications**

Dealing with sexuality in puppet theatre is similarly a sensitive issue and one that needs to be carefully debated. The portrayal of this subject can serve various artistic and thematic purposes, but must be treated with maturity and respect for the target audience. Establishing a sexual theme in puppet theatre raises many ethical dilemmas and requires careful consideration of the impact on audiences and cultural values.

Because of their strong symbolic traits, the characters of the world's puppet theatres have always had the ability to embody the passions of the audience and, in some historical contexts, they could express support or hostility towards political or religious figures, risking to attract the anger of the authorities upon them. The puppeteer, always ready to pack up his show and to run away quickly, would often resort to bawdy references or allusions to the political situation of the day.<sup>4</sup>

Framing refers to how a character is positioned in relation to other elements in the scene so as to draw the viewer's eye and maintain aesthetic appeal. Good character construction should be visually appealing and engaging, while remaining true to the overall theme of the story.

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<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from <https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/between-stage-and-obscene-critical-potential-naked-body>

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from <https://wepa.unima.org/en/society-and-puppets-social-applications-of-puppetry/>

In theatre, sexuality transcends mere shock value and provocation to become a powerful and legitimate form of artistic expression. Embraced by playwrights, directors and daring actors alike, the deliberate use of eroticism on stage serves as a profound means of delving into the depths of human emotion, revealing complex narratives and challenging social norms. By depicting the obscene or vulgar, artists aim to communicate raw vulnerability, ignite introspection, and ultimately evoke a deeper connection with their audience.

There are not many examples of theatre performances that explicitly use puppets with an erotic character for artistic reasons. However, there are a few exceptions where sexuality has been explored in theatre using puppet forms or special techniques: *Hen*, *Avenue Q*, *Hand of God* and *Objectum Sexuality*. An analysis of these performances allows us to show the reciprocal influences of the stage and the vulgar, as well as artistic strategies for transforming the obscene into a domain of resistance, in which subordinates can speak, and thus negotiate with structures of symbolic violence.

Deniz Başar analyzes a puppet theatre piece as a productive space to address female sexuality within an oppressive culture. She documents aspects of the creative process alongside her production analysis to situate the work within the Turkish cultural and art scenes just prior to and during its making. In so doing, she lays bare the potential risks artists faced, that were mitigated by their use of puppets.<sup>5</sup>

The adaptation and reinterpretation of puppets or marionettes from a traditional context into a new and modern vision, the effects and impact of technological developments as well as artistic trends that have emerged in the last decades in the construction of characters in animated theatre can bring a fresh and exciting perspective on them and attract a new kind of audience. They can also help to keep animated theatre relevant and topical in a changing world.

In the climate of a culture deeply influenced by religion and conservatism with aggressive moral and sexual distorted expressions, in which the agony of ethical-aesthetic education outlines the weakening of human dignity, a human conduct in which the taboo is kept out of the discussion, a necessity is affirmed for the awakening and mobilization of the will of directors, actors and puppeteers in the introduction of truths towards society and our human nature.

“The mix of means of expression only favours the author. Thus, the co-existence on the stage of the elements actor and puppet creates the possibility

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<sup>5</sup> Alissa Mello, Claudia Orenstein, Astles Cariad (2019), *Women and Puppetry. Critical and Historical Investigations*, Routledge, London, p. 10.

of a new, metaphorical theatrical language”<sup>6</sup>. The boundaries of objectivity arise when the sensibilities and expectations of the audience are shattered by violating the values and cultural norms of the society in which the performance takes place. What is considered acceptable or unacceptable can vary significantly from culture to culture.

According to both von Stuelpnagel and Moore, getting this type of scene right requires a lot of time working with the actors and simulating various sex acts with puppets. “There was definitely a lot of me, calling out to the room, what does reverse cowgirl look like? No, that doesn't look as strong as doggy style. What does this position look like?” von Stuelpnagel says. Avenue Q's process involved a “long porn-inspired list of what are a bunch of positions and things that can happen in bed that look funny on the puppets,” Moore says.<sup>7</sup>

In these productions, where sex is an integral part of the plot, it becomes a vehicle for psychological exploration, revealing the depths of the human mind and the complexities of relationships. Through this symbolic language, the puppet becomes an indispensable element of storytelling, weaving a tapestry of emotions that remains in the audience's mind long after the curtain falls.

Clear communication between the audience and the performance, in the case of sexual performances with puppets, should already be expressed in the poster with clear warnings so that they can decide whether they want to participate. The development of eroticism in a puppet show could negatively affect or offend certain segments of the audience. Implementing age restrictions for performances with sexual scenes or humour can help ensure that only age-appropriate audiences attend such performances.

“In Avenue Q, themes of equality in relation to race and sexuality are told through a human– puppet social network that reveals prejudice to be equally problematic in both puppet and human communities.”<sup>8</sup> The theme of sexuality has been addressed in puppet theatre to raise an alarm against gender inequality, race and social and political issues.

It is important to note that the use of puppets in theatre to explore mature themes can vary significantly depending on the content and the manner in which they are represented. In most cases, theatres that address such topics do so with care and sensitivity to the target audience, and do not use sex dolls in an explicitly pornographic sense. This can often lead to a perception of 'kitsch' depending on the perspective.

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<sup>6</sup> Henryk Jurkowsky, apud Cristian Pepino, *op. cit.*, p. 37, our translation.

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/a34897/puppet-sex/>

<sup>8</sup> Janet Banfield (2022), *Spaces of Puppets in Popular Culture. Grotesque Geographies of the Borderscape*, Routledge, London, p. 113.

“Related to the significance of bodily capacities is the facilitation and enhancement of psychological or cognitive capacities, which finds expression in the form of human self-actualisation. Taking us beyond the role of the puppet in facilitating communication to enabling self-realisation or salvation, the human characters become – in some way – a ‘truer’ form of their former self.”<sup>9</sup> The character's personality must be alive and proclaim its belonging to the actor, not to be restricted by any law of nature or physics, by any limitation of the playing space. The character's own stylistic identity has a major influence on his play.

Through the humorous nature of some puppets, it is allowed to address taboo questions or topics that are simply neglected in public debate, which it is then enjoyable to see come to life on stage. The recognition at the same time of the real awkwardness of people during sex can easily be rendered by the complete lack of self-awareness of the characters constructed in the physical form of puppets or marionettes.

Like any art form, puppet theatre can be seen as a manifestation, a sign and a reflection of the historical, cultural and political situation of a society at a given time. Beyond the culturally specific elements, there are many analogies highlighted by the comparison of different uses of puppetry in religious and social rites.

The 2019 performance *Hen*, directed by Johanny Bert, awarded at the Charleville-Mézières World Puppet Theatre Festival in September 2021, is the main example to support my debate. The theatrical production aimed to raise alarm bells on the issue of gender identity, sexuality and queer ways of living. Performances with such characters in puppet theatre are rare at a time when it is a practical medium for expressing gender fluidity.

*Hen* has the particularity of not embodying any gender. Its name comes from the Swedish “Hen” pronounced “Heune” which is the neutral pronoun of the language, often used in school textbooks. The challenge is to educate about the issue of gender from an early age. Johanny Bert's approach, which can sometimes seem confusing, is more or less the same, because his show aims to awaken minds on the question of gender identity, sexuality and ways of living “queer.”<sup>10</sup>

The essence of this visual appearance on stage can be summed up by the process of creating a concept that is meant to come to life, so that this modelled or sculpted body can interact with the audience.

The visual radicality of these performances forces the audience to give up the comfort of not seeing what the homogeneous system wants to hide,

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<sup>9</sup> Janet Banfield, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>10</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.letotetabag.net/culture-arts/theatre/hen-dun-thea%CC%82tre-de-marionnette-erotique-et-comique-a-la-necessite-pedagogique/>.

and the exacerbation of the impact produced by shockingly obscene images proves to be a form of widening the boundaries of art with images that only seemingly deny typical practices.

Theatre is a reflection of the human experience, a mirror held up to the triumphs, struggles and complexities of society. Empowering the role of the puppet in theatre serves as a testament to the courage of artists to explore raw emotions and uncharted territories, pushing the boundaries of creativity and initiating discussions about the human condition. Introducing sexuality into puppet theatre is a complex conceptual choice that requires deep consideration and responsibility to the audience and to the art of theatre in order to fit within ethical parameters.

Hen offers us “reveal” moments which are characterized by almost instantaneous outfit changes directly shown on set, presenting the puppet in totally dazzling and unexpected styles. Also appearing on stage are oversized phallic shapes and breasts that begin to dance to the music. These body parts are sometimes found in place of Hen's head, provoking laughter from the audience and surprise where you least expect it. The spectator enjoys the raw eroticism of these surprises, becoming Hen's accomplice and waiting each time for a new “shocking phrase” or an acrobatics.<sup>11</sup>

The impact of gender portrayal through puppetry on audiences transcends geographical boundaries, and cultural perspectives play a significant role in shaping audience reactions. What might be considered acceptable in one culture may be perceived differently in another. As theatre reaches global audiences through productions uploaded to digital platforms, sensitivity to diverse cultural norms becomes paramount to ensuring a positive and respectful audience experience.

The puppet was for a long time a “disassembling” tool to convey ideas that were too risky for an actor to assume at a given moment. The poet Paul Claudel then maintains that the puppet “is not an actor who speaks, it is a word which acts”. The words would ring out even louder than spoken directly by an actor. Considering the political usefulness of the puppet, speech becomes the artery of the game and speech takes flesh on the puppet stage. We would assume the following idea: the subject would last longer starting from these characters, characters certainly plastic but hypnotizing, with a presence larger than life.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.letotebag.net/culture-arts/theatre/hen-dun-thea%CC%82tre-de-marionnette-erotique-et-comique-a-la-necessite-pedagogique/>

<sup>12</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.letotebag.net/culture-arts/theatre/hen-dun-thea%CC%82tre-de-marionnette-erotique-et-comique-a-la-necessite-pedagogique/>

The aim of the provoked debate is to bring to attention an ethical norm, to argue the necessity of introducing sexual themes represented by puppets or marionettes in performances, a way of innovating adult animation theatre in the Romanian space. The active mission of actualizing and dynamizing the puppet's potential, in order to increase the expressiveness of a character and to diminish its restrictive ethical boundaries.

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