

## THE KING OF THE GREAT CLOCK TOWER

The purpose of this paper is to discuss a project which I recently followed through with students of the universities of Amsterdam and Utrecht transposing Yeats's play *The King of the Great Clock Tower* to the puppet stage. The performance in Amsterdam was very much work in progress, not a completed production which would have made it difficult to present here, apart from the logistic problems of transporting seven students from the Netherlands to Tours. The subject of this paper is therefore a discussion of some of the problems involved in staging this short work with puppets in the hope that in itself may bring us closer to an understanding of how the play works in theatrical terms.

*The King of the Great Clock Tower* is one of Yeats's last plays. Thematically it relates most closely to *A full Moon in March* written in the same year 1935. Both are highly erotic plays, somewhat reminiscent of Wilde's *Salome*. The formal element and the framing of *The King of the Great Clock Tower* also encourage us to group it with the earlier "plays for dancers" with their strong Japanese Noh inspiration. At the same time the final chorus, with its reference to the disappearance of the Irish Great Houses, its reference to Castle Dargan's ruins all lit

Lovely ladies dancing in it.

links the play directly with the Ireland of the 1930s and the atmosphere of *Purgatory* (1939).

A brief résumé for anyone not familiar with the play.

It is introduced by two attendants, who will later take on some of the voices of the characters. They evoke the joys of love in the Celtic Elysium, Tir-nan-oge, the land of youth, and, in their opening line evoke the joys of the dance.

They dance all day that dance in Tir-nan-oge.

As they speak they part a curtain on which a pattern of dancers is painted.

The first scene is between a king and his queen. The action is clearly set in the heroic age, but, since the issues are more at the level of the emotions and the imagination, it is not a matter of a specific king (such as Cuchulain). The king may remind us a little of Midhir, and his queen Etain (we might also make a comparison with Maeterlinck's Golaud and Mélisande, who clearly derive from the same mythological sources). The king has been married for a year to a woman who has arrived from nowhere and whom he knows as little now as he did then (it is also clear that the marriage has remained unconsummated). The queen herself is a masked figure, which helps her enigmatic quality and the role was written to be played by a dancer (Ninette de Valois, later to create the British Royal Ballet).

The catalyst is a third figure, a stranger who arrives, "a stroller and a fool", in whom we recognise the itinerant poet or seanchai of Irish society - he has come because he needs the queen as a source of inspiration for his song, and asks to see her. To the king's anger he then asks that she should dance for him so as to release his poet's voice

I swore that I would see the queen, and that -  
My God, but I was drunk - the Queen would dance

And dance to me alone,...

Dance and dance,  
Till I grow grateful and grown grateful sing.

The king is angered and begins to harbour suspicions that the Stroller has been the Queen's lover in the past, and that this is why she remains in a mute and non-communicating state, and so he orders the execution of the Stroller. The Queen breaks her silence and sings a strange song, both frightening and erotic

O, what may come  
Into my womb...

and then, as the king brings in the severed head of the Stroller, she begins a dance, finally picking up the head, which itself begins to sing. As the song ends, midnight strikes and the Queen continues her dance finally pressing her lips to the head, the king raises his sword to kill her, then lowers it and falls on his knees, and the attendants slowly close the curtain to a last song evoking the disappearance of everything and taking on the voices alternately of "the rambling shambling travelling man" (the latterday equivalent of the stroller) and the "wicked crooked hawthorn tree".

This play was selected for a puppet project because of its formal nature. The separation of speaker and actor (in the case of the Queen, the severed head, and the Captain of the guard, who is only a voice) suggested an exploration of the Bunraku style of puppet where there is also this separation between actor and speaker, with the joruri singer (japanese equivalent of the seanchai) and the samisen player sitting at one side of the stage. Yeats's desire for the use of masks was another formal element which, if partly deriving from the Noh theatre, also relates to ideas expressed by Gordon Craig in his essay "The actor and the Uber marionette" (the influence of Craig on Yeats was important, and this play was originally meant to be performed in an abstract setting consisting of a semi-circle of the famous Craig screens). Craig's notion of the ubermarionette as broadly-speaking the actor less his own personality and egocentrism, able to play the essence of the role without his own physical presence getting in the way, is fundamental to the more poetic side of Yeats's expression. Yeats tried to obtain this hieratic quality through the mask. The puppet in fact serves a similar function and above all, invites an audience to project its own imaginative vision. If the king perhaps loses a little of his earthiness by being rendered as a puppet, the magical element of the severed head can only gain - it is more acceptable for a puppet to hold a puppet head than for a human actor to hold an obviously papier-mâché one (however realistic the treatment). Because of the framing created by the two attendants in their songs at the beginning and end, the use of puppets enhanced the sense of otherness, of distanciation. There is some possibility for realism in the king's appeal to the queen to respond to him, and in his jealousy of her, but apart from this the three central characters are essences presented to us, and the use of puppets to do this gives an enhanced aesthetic satisfaction.

Puppet movements are quite different from those of human actors usually, and allow for a reduction to essential gesture and for a degree of minimalism which heightens the dramatic effect. In the production work the emphasis was upon breaking up movement into a series of gestures and attitudes relating to the emotional and poetic colouring of lines at a given moment. As far as possible we emphasised the puppet quality and tried to avoid treating the puppets as diminutive actors. Thus,

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heads would seldom move whilst speaking, though the angle of the head at a particular moment of a speech would be seen as being of the utmost importance.

The Bunraku puppet was chosen not only because of its Japanese associations and its roots in a theatre-form relating to the Noh, but because it is a type of puppet theatre in which the manipulators are at least partially visible and where the audience senses the manipulators directly behind the puppet. Properly speaking in the Bunraku theatre each puppet has three manipulators, but we had to make do with two (quite enough in view of the limited amount of training time available - about three weeks, whereas a fully-trained Bunraku performer may require as much as fifteen years of training!). The sense of the manipulators behind the puppet emphasises the emblematic quality of the figures, the sense that they are manipulated by other forces. This was a technique I had already explored in another symbolist piece, Maeterlinck's *La Mort de Tintagiles* with quite terrifying and hypnotic results.

Yeats's plays for dancers were in some cases written for performance in a drawing-room. This is not actually the case with *The King of the Great Clock Tower*. However, with his two attendants Yeats is employing a very similar technique. *At the Hawk's Well* begins with the line

I call to the eye of the mind.

Just like Shakespeare on his bare platform stage. Yeats is inviting his audience to make a strong imaginative effort, planting images in our minds, and not simply depicting a scene for its own sake. The plays for dancers usually involve the "musicians" who sing as they go through some relatively ritualistic movements folding and unfolding a cloth. This is slightly simplified here, but we are made to focus on the slow drawing of the curtain to the accompaniment of the song of the attendants. And at the end the process is repeated in reverse. What Yeats is in fact doing is creating a playing space in a way that is very similar to work done by Peter Brook over more recent years, when he has used, for example, the techniques of carpet theatre, where the unrolling of a carpet focuses attention and creates a zone where the imagination can have free reign.

In our own production we debated whether we should use puppet or masked figures for the attendants, but finally rejected this as something which would get in the way of the imaginative construct which needed to be created. In the end we opted for a very sober presentation with the attendants simply coming in and sitting at either side of the stage, with their scripts and reading, allowing Yeats's own words in a dark environment, devoid of any additional visual elements, conjure up the images which they contain. Although we did not fully realise it in our demonstration of work in progress, had a full-scale production been attained, the idea was to use some of the techniques of black theatre to conjure the figures out of the darkness, as if called up by the imagination, and to diminish as far as possible any sense of a physical environment carrying its own signifiers.

As a part of this paper, a demonstration of the use of the puppet as a means of expression for a poetic text was given. The passage selected was a speech by the Stroller describing his meeting with Aengus.

The puppet had an opening mouth but, as this was not a muppet the mouth was barely used. Thus a movement of the mouth was not naturalistic, but chosen for

specific effect - in this particular speech it moved only when quoting the words of Aengus. Otherwise expression to accompany lines was limited to angles of the head. Partly for interest and partly as a convention, a change of head angle was used at each break in the phrasing, thus emphasising a thought rather than an individual word, and again avoiding a tendency of poor puppetry which is to make the puppet jig constantly when it is supposed to be talking. Much more important was to establish a strong sense of focus, and this was generally achieved by stillness and by the direction of the puppet's gaze. It is often not realised that the direction of a puppet's gaze is of the greatest importance in establishing it as a living entity - this involves direct eye-contact with other puppets and with the audience (an audience soon loses interest in a puppet who is always looking up at the sky and never looks at its interlocutor). Some actors have been praised for having expressive backs. In the case of the puppet (as with the masked actor), body language is exceptionally important. There is no universally recognised notation of puppet manipulation. In the case of the puppets used for *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, the hand movement alone could be divided into about five positions, from closed to open, but this would not take into account the angle of the hand, its position in relation to the body, or the movements of the wrist. The following passage, which was used for demonstration purposes is simply annotated as a page from a prompt copy. It may, however, give some notion of the complexity of signifiers at work, even in a short and relatively simplified scene. The sign / indicates breaks in phrasing

(1) I ran to the Boyne Water/ (2) And where a sea-mew  
and the salt sea wind Yelled (3) Godhead, / (4) on a  
round green hillock lay, / (5) Nine days I fasted there /-  
(6) but that's a secret Between us three (7) /- (8) then  
Aengus and the Gods Appeared (9) and when I said what  
I had sworn /(10) Shouted approval. Then great Aengus  
spoke / - (11) O listen. for I speak his very words / -  
(12) 'On stroke of midnight / when the old year dies,  
Upon that stroke, / the tolling of that bell, The queen  
shall kiss your mouth ' /- (13) his very words / - (14)  
Your Queen, / (15) my mouth, / (16) the Queen shall  
kiss my mouth.

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#### NOTES

- (1) Move puppet straight downstage in a rapid glide (he has been centre upstage of the King, on his right and the Queen on his left) - the puppeteer's shoulder should be behind this and his elbow should change from a closed to an open position. The puppet's movement should begin with a slight downward plunge and finish looking upward, a slight additional upward tilting of the head may complete the movement he is remembering something exciting. This line to be spoken rapidly and in a light

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almost breathless voice. The register must be different from the previous exchange of dialogue with the King. In completing this movement, the puppet will come into the light of an almost vertically positioned narrow-beam spotlight centre downstage. When the head tilts up it will catch the full light, otherwise it is up to the puppeteer to play with the shadows created by the contours of the face

- (2) Tilt head down to look at audience. Use tone of parenthesis, right arm down to one side with palm half-open facing audience (explanatory).
- (3) Slight pause, then pronounce word "Godhead" slowly and firmly, not too loud.
- (4) Turn head slightly to left and support this with slight movement of right hand - still look at audience.
- (5) Tilt head down.
- (6) Straighten head, turn and look straight at King (right), extend arm towards him (still slightly bent), palm upward and open back.
- (7) Keep hand extended towards king, then turn body and head to centre position, second manipulator to open out left arm (with staff) towards queen to include her in general gesture.
- (8) Drop arms slowly into body before speaking, look firmly at audience and speak this slowly and deliberately.
- (9) Tilt head up.
- (10) Look at audience.
- (11) Right arm forward raise forearm and open hand, pointing upward, palm facing audience wrist at shoulder level.
- (12) Close eyes and tilt head up, move mouth on stronger words (midnight, dies, stroke, bell, Queen, mouth).
- (13) Drop hand, open eyes and look at audience.
- (14) Turn to king, bend slightly at waist, slight movement of right arm towards King.
- (15) Turn slowly to front and bring hand up so that fingers point towards mouth.
- (16) Continue movement towards left, opening up gesture with left arm towards Queen, keep relationship of right hand to mouth.