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Puppetry as reinforcement or rupture of cultural perceptions of the disabled body

Corresponding author: Laura Purcell-Gates

Drama, Bath Spa University, Bath, UK

Email: l.purcell-gates@bathspa.ac.uk

Second author: Emma Fisher

Drama and Theatre Studies, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

Email: emmacfisher@gmail.com

Abstract

This article proposes puppetry as a practice uniquely situated to intervene in ideological constructions of the disabled body both onstage and off. Examining our current and recent practice-based research that uses puppetry to intervene in cultural perceptions of disability, we put forth a provocation, asking readers to consider the ways in which puppetry practices can be deployed to enable performances by disabled puppeteers as well as in ways that engage with cultural constructions of disability. We suggest that puppets, as bodies that are materially constructed, can both reinforce and rupture such constructions.

Keywords: puppet, disability, bodies, Irish

Author biographies

Laura Purcell-Gates is Senior Lecturer in Drama at Bath Spa University and Artistic Director of Wattle and Daub, a UK-based puppetry company. Her main areas of research concern theatre and puppetry for social change, with a focus on constructions of and artistic processes involving bodies, puppets and performing objects.

Emma Fisher is a disabled set, costume and puppet designer based in Limerick, Ireland. She is currently doing her PhD in Puppetry and Disability at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. She established Beyond the Bark puppet and installation theatre in 2007.

In March 2012, disabled Irish playwright Rosaleen McDonagh published an article in *Irish Theatre Magazine* called 'Crippling Up - Copping On' in which she issued a challenge to Irish theatre makers to use disabled writers and performers in their work. She expressed frustration at her isolation as a crip performer within the Irish theatre community, and critiqued the use of able bodied performers to play disabled characters. McDonagh's challenge, and particularly its focus on actors playing disabled characters, raises questions around the 'authentic bodies' of disabled performers who are excluded from performing normative corporealities, an analysis taken up by Koppers (2003, p. 56). This article therefore furthers McDonagh's provocation, and the problematic issue of disabled performers trapped within their corporeal representation as non-normative bodies, by proposing puppetry as a practice uniquely situated to intervene in ideological constructions of the disabled body both onstage and off. We put forth our own provocation, asking readers to consider the ways in which puppetry practices can be deployed to enable performances by disabled puppeteers as well as in ways that engage with cultural constructions of disability. We suggest that puppets, as bodies that are materially constructed within a multitude of options for theatrical mimesis, can reinforce or rupture constructions of disability - or engage in both gestures simultaneously. Reinforcement can occur when a disabled puppeteer 'hides' behind a puppet, or when a puppet - despite its potential to embody the unusual, the strange, the absurd - is constructed as a perfectly formed iteration of the biological human body. Rupture can be made possible when the puppet is refigured with potential to disrupt normative constructions of the body.

Recent puppetry scholarship draws on the puppet's status as bodily metaphor, both imagined and material (Williams 2014, Cappalietto 2011). At puppetry's intersection with disability arts, scholarship largely coalesces around the figure of the cyborg, as in Parker-Starbuck's analysis of the 'abject' cyborg performances of disabled dancer Cathy Weis that draw on hybrid corporeal/technological forms to render disability visible and access new paradigms for the differing strengths of bodies (2011), or Barounis's positioning of cyborgs as bodies that create 'alternative queer temporalities' which allow for gendered bodies to relate to their future embodied development differently than through biological determinism (2013, p. 385). The multiple types of puppetry manipulation including strings, rods, direct manipulation, and shadow - several of which are explored in Astell-Burt's *I Am the Story: A Manual of Special Puppetry Projects* (2002) - present, alongside various approaches to the visibility of the puppeteer, a wealth of opportunities for engaging in reimaginings of the disabled body and examination of

questions around concealment, bodily extensions, hybrid bodies, and the ways in which bodies can be characterised/caricatured.

Disability arts practices in Ireland that engage with puppetry include both theatrical and therapeutic practices. Theatrical engagements include explorations of how disability might be differently enacted in society, such as artist and writer Corina Duyn's collaboration with fellow members of the Irish Wheelchair Association to create a puppetry community arts piece titled *Life Outside the Box* which premiered in 2016, with puppets created and performed by people with disabilities to explore the idea that people with disabilities can gain freedom by stepping outside of society's 'disability box'.¹ Therapeutic practices include the development of artistic skills in people with disabilities, such as the Arts in Disability workshops of Dublin-based Artastic, a street spectacle, entertainment and arts education organisation, in which adults and children with disabilities construct and puppeteer direct-manipulation puppets.² Countering the isolation of children in hospitals, including children with disabilities, and enabling creative conversations that connect them to the wider community was the core aim of Helium Arts' Puppet Portal Project in 2009-10.³

As a starting point for this provocation which seeks to build on and develop work in these contexts, we examine our current and recent practice-based research that uses direct-manipulation and rod puppetry to intervene in cultural perceptions of disability. Fisher discusses her work as an Irish puppeteer who has both hidden her disability behind a 'perfectly formed' puppet and who has recently chosen to make her disability visible in her puppetry. Her current research engages with puppets that are constructed both to reflect the disabled body and to enable people with disabilities to puppeteer them. Extending this analysis of puppetry as intervention into perceptions of disability, Purcell-Gates examines her puppetry workshops developed across the Irish Sea in Bristol, England that intervene in the medical model of disability through opening up an exploration into the 'world' a unique puppet creates through its movements. These respective projects suggest some of the many possibilities for using puppetry not only as a figurative tool of performance, but as a method for interrogating and intervening in cultural perceptions of disability.

¹ *Life Outside the Box* website with link to book and DVD: <http://www.corinaduyn.com/site/community-arts-puppet-project/>

² Website with images from Artastic arts in disability workshops: <http://artastic.ie/gallery/arts-in-disability-workshop-images/>

³ Helium Arts' Puppet Portal Project website: <http://www.helium.ie/programmes/programmes-archive/puppet-portal-project/>

Creating puppets that represent and are puppeteered by the disabled body (Fisher)

McDonagh (2012) writes about the lack of disabled actors and the subsequent 'cripping up' of able-bodied actors; this too is the case in puppetry. Working as a professional puppeteer in Ireland and being secretary of Irish UNIMA (Union Internationale de la Marionnette - International Puppetry Association), I am aware of only a few professional puppeteers with a physical disability in addition to myself. Puppets can represent anybody; if there were support and encouragement for performers with disabilities to train as puppeteers then no matter what the physical disability, the puppet body could represent it. People with disabilities are typecast because of their disability. There needs to be a cultural shift in the performing arts, to allow an awareness that an actor or puppeteer with one disability could play a fictional based disability other than their own, or subsequently a character with no disability. A puppeteer can't fly, yet a puppet can. Blind puppeteer Gibdel Wilson cannot see, yet his puppets are represented as sighted. I am not proposing the disabled body hide behind the puppet, more that I feel puppetry is a place where performers can have their disabilities in open view. Puppetry allows for the celebration of the disabled body, while at the same time allowing the performer to operate a puppet that through its physicality can break down the boundaries of the body.

As a professional puppeteer with a disability, the most memorable compliment I was ever given, after a puppet show, was 'How many hands do you have?'. I have a brachial plexus injury to my left arm which leaves me with limited mobility in my arm and no movement in my hand. I was delighted that my disability went unnoticed. About a year into my PhD, I realised I had not 'come out' as disabled and that I had been doing my best to hide behind these puppets that were the perfect constructs of an abled body. This realisation came when reading Kupperts (2011), where I came across the phenomenon of 'coming out as disabled', which Ellen Samuels linked with coming out as gay. Coincidentally that week I attended Ann Blake's *Overnight Minority Report* (2015) in the Belltable Theatre, which was a piece about her experiences of coming out as gay in her 30s. Hiding what was different was something that resonated with me. A large part of my research is looking at how I view myself, how I name myself, how others view me and how others name me. As expressed by Moore, 'We have named ourselves and have used the negative terms to our own benefit not only to shock people but to respect that these words are our history and we must claim them' (2012).

In 2015 and 2016 I workshopped and interviewed seven artists, who all create work around their sense of identity. Five of the artists had a disability. One of the questions I presented them with was if there was a moment when how they felt about their identity changed as a person and/or as an artist. From their replies, it became very apparent that they felt their identities were ever changing. For those who had acquired a disability, the moment of their accident/illness changed their social identity, however, it took a long journey to accept this new identity. Tajfel writes about social categorisation, in which we assemble ourselves into groups in order to give ourselves a social identity and through a need to reinforce our social standing we create a 'them' and 'us' (1979). Hall argues that 'otherness' is judged against the dominant group (1990). If we apply these ideas to the above, it stands that the road to accepting your new identity is paved by the fact that now socially we are 'them', that is no longer the norm but 'the other'.

We talked of how we each felt society viewed us, what we identified as, and whether we were comfortable within our social identities. We then made puppets of ourselves based on our discussion. My puppet had a detachable left arm that was puppeteered by my right; the other puppets had sections missing, added, exaggerated, and masked. Many puppets were animal/human hybrids, including a fish and a caterpillar, each with a human face. These puppets seemed to be truer representations of how we viewed ourselves than had we chosen to use figurative puppets designed to mimic our human bodies.

An outcome of these workshops is the realisation that as a person with an acquired disability you have to fight between subsets of your identity, your able-bodied self versus your disabled self. Using the mask as the visual signifier of the identity of the puppet, I have started making puppet versions of both myself and the other participants. When reading Beckett's *Not I* (1973), I was struck by the character Mouth, who is visually represented as just a mouth on stage. Could I represent my disabled self as just a body part? The puppet has the potential in its body to tell a visual story. I have experimented with many ways to represent these versions of myself – an arm with my face, a puppet with removable parts that sheds its skin, becoming and representing different identities, a room of forgotten limbs, body parts/identities that are hidden and replaced. I have worked very closely with the participants of this research on how they wanted to be represented and how their visual story is told. We collaborated in a distinctive way for they are also the cast and crew of the practice-based puppet play *Pupa*.

In this research I look at the puppet as 'other', to the identity of the self (the puppeteer), and the disabled body as 'other' and, different from the social norm. What happens when you put two different 'others' in dialog with each other? If the puppeteer is disabled, do you then end up with two different others coexisting? In the live performance of *Pupa*, I then add the element of audience to the mix. They enter a disabled puppet world where the world and the characters, both puppeteers and puppets, are 'other'. Does this mean that they are now the 'different' one in the social norm of this world? Does this juxtaposition challenge stereotypes around cultural disability identity?

In my research I puppeteer my own story. The central puppet in *Pupa* is specifically made for me. Early in the process, I questioned whether to make the puppet controls suit my own body or whether to use prosthetics and orthotics to allow me to control a more complicated puppet. I have adapted many splints with the help of Kathryn Johnson from Stanmore Orthopaedic Hospital in order to operate puppets that were designed with two hands in mind. These splints are very basic in design and generally involved velcro or gaff taping a hook or a rod to a wrist support. While these splints worked to some extent, I was still unable to drop or pick up a rod while on stage. Last year I approached Seattle based Puppeteer and Prosthetics designer Ivan Owens, telling him about my practice based research and my idea to build a device, where my able side operates my disabled arm, to subsequently operate a puppet hand. He was intrigued and offered his services in order to build this device.

We worked remotely over Skype for three months. With the assistance of Fab Lab Limerick, a digital fabrication laboratory based in Limerick, he sent me files that allowed me to cut designs out of wood using a laser cutter. It was very important to me in this process that my hand remain visible and also that we used wood as it was more puppet-like in appearance. With the device, when I move my toes and my right ring and baby finger they pull different cables which control motors. The motors are connected to wooden clockwork cogs on my back which through various strings, operates my arm, which then operates a puppet hand to open and close (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 image file]

[caption]

During this process, many questions have come up:

1) By using this device, am I once again trying to be as able-bodied as possible while puppeteering?

2) If my right shoulder is operating my left hand, is my right shoulder the able puppeteer and the left hand the disabled puppet?

3) If my left arm is now a puppet, do I just see it as an object?

4) Have I split myself in two, the disabled body versus the able body?

The decision whether to use prosthetics or not has opened up many questions that I had not initially perceived. This has led to the realisation that my search for the perfect replacement arm has led me to question how I perceive disability in my own body. Ivan's arm exo-skeleton has made possible my earlier desire to cover up and hide my disability, as once the device is covered with a costume in the performance, I puppeteer my hand to such an extent that no one knows it cannot move. In the performance of *Pupa* I puppeteer a puppet that is searching for the perfect replacement arm. She tells my story without them knowing it is mine. However at the end, as in *Pinocchio*, the puppet is replaced by a real woman. At this point in the performance I reveal the device and my body. Strangely the object that allows me the perfect way to hide my disabled body has now become the perfect way to reveal it and 'come out'.

I first did an apprenticeship in Bread and Puppet Theater in Vermont in 2006. I then studied at the London School of Puppetry. With a background in set design and installation art in 2007 I set up Beyond the Bark, an inclusive puppet and installation theatre. I am in the final year of my PhD. My research has been fuelled by my desire to make a piece of work around disability through puppetry. When I began my PhD I would not have identified as someone with a disability, so this research has been both a personal and academic journey.

The concept of this research came from my own personal experience of being in an accident when I was a child, resulting in a coma and a brachial plexus injury. Being in a sense of limbo between disabled and abled is a feeling I carry with me. This feeling resonated with the other artists whose testimonies I have collected. Combining these real stories with a fictitious

Kafkaesque world, the characters in the play bounce from reality to fantasy. In a land where we are all different, I question what normal even means. This research looks at how people with disabilities think society sees them. We are telling stories of coming out, identifying as disabled and navigating the grey area between disabled and abled.

'The history of this monster': puppetry as intervention in disability stratification (Purcell-Gates)

In the spring of 2014 my puppetry company Wattle and Daub, run by myself and Tobi Poster, developed and piloted applied puppetry workshops aimed at embodied critical engagement with cultural constructions of disability. The workshops grew out of research and development for our 2015 puppet opera *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* which explores the true story of an 18th-century French medical 'monster', and were run for adults with disabilities and non-disabled arts and medical practitioners who work with people with disabilities. Adapted from an existing workshop in which we teach participants to make and manipulate a simple direct manipulation puppet out of newspaper and tape, in these workshops we sought to use puppetry as material engagement with both the medical and social models of disability.

We engaged with the medical model of disability, the construction of the disabled body as a series of impairments (Sandahl and Auslander 2005), to question the assumption that there is a 'right' puppet body, that all deviations from this need to be 'fixed' (e.g. one leg shorter than another; inflexible limbs). This is an assumption that we have observed every time we have run our newspaper and tape puppet workshop: participants assume that any deviation from the norm in their puppet's body, which they construct during the workshop, is a flaw. They usually show us this 'flaw' and ask us how to fix it, at which point we encourage them instead to explore how this particular puppet wants to move, and suggest that a puppet's perceived flaws often become a defining feature of the puppet's emerging life and movement. Our exploration of the social model of disability focussed on working with puppets as bodies moving in space, asking participants 'What space does this body create? What world does this puppet's body live in?'. This is an extension of reframing bodily 'flaws' as defining features of the puppet - in this case, we were also looking at how these features shape the space and world of the puppet.

The workshop, developed in 2014, has been run with arts practitioners including those working with people with disabilities, and with adults with learning difficulties; we plan to continue running this workshop with a particular focus on people with disabilities and medical practitioners. In this section I discuss the pilot workshop, delivered during the spring of 2014 for a group of fourteen theatre practitioners, arts therapists, teachers and academics, some of whom work with people with disabilities, one of whom identified as disabled, as part of a public engagement event called 'Performing the Freak: A day-long dialogue between theatre and science about monstrosity' at Tobacco Factory Theatres in Bristol. We asked participants in small groups of 3-4 to build a puppet around the idea of their own 'monster', defined as a part of themselves that they perceived as in some way not fitting societal expectations. This could be a literal representation of a physical otherness, or a metaphoric representation of an aspect of self. As this was a one-off workshop, we explained that this exercise was not meant to cross any thresholds of discomfort. Once each group had created their puppet, we taught them basic group direct manipulation techniques, and invited them to begin exploring the space with their puppet. Each puppet, as is always the case in these workshops, had something non-normative about their bodies, both because they were intentionally shaped as non-normative, and because of the inevitable unpredictability of how a puppet will move once it has been built.

Our focus was on bringing together these layers to allow participants to shift their perceptions of the puppets' bodies and the space through which the puppets moved from bodies framed through the medical model, in which they would identify 'problems' and 'flaws' in the puppets' design and movement, to those framed through the social model, in which the space itself would shift to suit the puppet's particular body. One puppet's head was proportionally larger than its long gangly body. The proportion contrast was intentional, representative of the designing participant's personal sense of otherness. If one looked closely at the manipulation of the legs, however, an additional layer emerged: the legs were so long and thin that they easily bent and collapsed as the puppet was manipulated. This meant, in practice, that the puppet had quite a lot of difficulty walking along the floor - more often than not the legs, bending in various extreme shapes and directions, dragged along beneath the long torso. When we encouraged the puppeteers to allow the space around this puppet to shift based on how the puppet 'wanted' to move, gravity slowly became less of an issue as the puppet began circling its limbs in slow, swimming-like movements, and gradually the puppet lifted off from the floor and began swimming through the air, which had taken on the quality of a viscous liquid.

The social model of disability focuses on reshaping relevant structures and objects within the world to allow access to those with disabilities under the assertion that disability is, in Sandahl and Auslander's words, 'a disjuncture between the body and the environment' (2005, p. 8). In this workshop we were attempting to see what happens when the world - the actual space through which bodies move - reshapes itself in its entirety around the body of the puppet. This was placed in contrast to the medical model, in which the puppets' bodies would be examined for flaws that needed to be fixed to allow the puppet to move successfully through the normative space. We were explicit about this aim with the workshop participants, as many of them work in fields in which awareness of and response to both the medical and the social model would be important - teaching, arts therapy, applied theatre. Based on the discussion following the workshop, the participants found the process of silently using their bodies collaboratively to readjust the focus from 'fixing' the body of the puppet to exploring the world that the puppet's body created to be an enlightening one, as it prompted them to shift both their perceptions and their habituated individual movement schemas simultaneously in a moment of theatrical creation.

This collective approach to creating a 'world' based on the body of the puppet resonates with Fisher's approach to creating *Pupa*. To develop the puppets for *Pupa*, Fisher initially asked participants what kind of a puppet they would imagine themselves to be, based on how they imagined society viewed them. The resulting puppets, as discussed above, were disjointed and hybrid bodies that included an arm, a fish and a caterpillar, each with a human face. Fisher and her creative team then devised a world within which these puppets could exist, which Fisher describes as a surreal 'coma world'. Fisher's own puppet - the arm with a human face - was ultimately puppeteered by Fisher alone following explorations of co-puppeteering, as Fisher along with the creative team agreed that for the puppet to remain true to Fisher's experience, it had to be manipulated within the limitations of what her body could puppeteer. This discovery reflects a wider discovery within the process: while the puppets were originally designed around how participants imagined society viewed their bodies, participants increasingly felt that the puppets reflected their *own* self-perceptions, and that the coma world reflected a deeper truth of their experiences. The collective devising of the coma world based on the particularities of its inhabitant puppets led to complex and productive shifts in how participants perceived and, through puppeteering, physically engaged with their own inner body schemas. This has resonances with the ways in which the able bodied participants in my workshops reported shifts in their perceptions of and collective physical engagements with their puppets, leading them to a

more nuanced understanding of the social model of disability. When we had pointed out to participants that this was an assumption they could abandon, and invited them to explore the movement produced by the bodies their puppets actually had - and how this movement shaped the space within which the puppet lived - alternative models of embodiment were revealed.

Conclusion:

Literacy scholar and cultural theorist Delpit (1993) describes the power differentials between primary and dominant discourses as “discourse stacking”, and argues for the role of teachers in making explicit to students the ways in which this system of power operates. We draw on Delpit’s terminology here to suggest that the challenges around movement differences explored both in Fisher’s *Pupa* and in Purcell-Gates’s workshops represent an embodied form of discourse stacking in which those with normative and nonnormative bodies are stratified within society. Such stratification has implications for access to embodied codes of power, with the dominant embodied discourse represented by the ‘able bodied’ puppet, as challenged by Fisher and her creative team’s explorations of how puppets might reflect rather than mask disability. Dominant embodied discourse, as reflected through puppetry, also includes the assumption that a puppet body should work the way its puppeteer originally intended, an assumption challenged within the workshops run by Purcell-Gates and Poster.

We put forward these investigations as interventions into perceptions of the disabled body, deploying puppetry as a practice with emerging potential to shift cultural and individual perceptions of disability. Our provocation is intended to suggest that puppetry is a form with potential for multiple modes of intervention in both lived experience and cultural constructions of disability, linked through the puppet’s status as constructed body. As a puppeteer with a disability, Fisher continues to interrogate modes of embodied performance that develop a puppet’s body around the specific mobility of her body. Exploring the disruption of the medical model of disability, participants in the workshop run by Purcell-Gates and Poster found alternate ways of thinking through the ways in which their puppets moved through, and related to, the space around them. At the core of this work is the call to move beyond ‘able bodied’ figurative puppets, to harness the potential of the materially constructed performing body to engage, disrupt, and reimagine embodied realities.

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