

# Puppet States

**P**uppets: The word summons up joy, animation, and magic when it means us watching them, humiliation and confinement when it means someone else watching us. We'd all like to be as enchantingly free as the wood and canvas creatures onstage apparently are; the bitter joke is that we're freer, and don't know it until somebody in power tries to jerk our strings and throw our voices for us. Whether a big Somebody Up Above may be doing just that is a matter for theological, not aesthetic, debate. The magic in the microcosmic world of most puppet theater comes from its ability to suggest simultaneously that there's a bigger world for every little one and that there isn't. Puppetry's whole tradition is rich with miraculous escapes, transformations, and liberties that contradict the idea of somebody above or below manipulating the figures; it's been dialectical since Punch first outwitted the Devil. This makes it a uniquely valuable tool for viewing the world. People who do their creating with only full-size humans onstage, or pictures of humans on-screen, are stuck with what they can make us see of our own world. Having a puppet stage is like having one of those magic mirrors so beloved of medieval legends and fairy tales: It magnifies our scrutiny of whatever it displays.

Take, for instance, the magic-mirror version of America today offered by the Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes in *Tinka's New Dress*. Did I say "America today"? Sorry, I meant Czechoslovakia under the Nazis. Or maybe I meant a hypothetical future that contains elements of both. Burkett's world is an ancient, faintly sinister-looking, gilded carousel, on which some 37 puppets ride round in between scenes, set in a Europeanish city where Stephan, a dear old man, gives park puppet shows for kiddies featuring those eternal characters, Franz and Schnitzel. Scheming, bossy, red-wigged Franz is the big bully, whose schemes always end in disaster, no matter how helpfully dreamy, sweet-natured little Schnitzel abets him in between fantasies of being able to fly. The kids love Schnitzel.

The city where Stephan works has lately been taken over by a repressive, pietistic force known only as The Common Good, which dislikes, among other things, deviants, dissenters, and queers. Such people, when exposed, get moved to a district known interchangeably as "the ghetto" and "the camp." One of Stephan's two assistants plays her cards obediently and becomes a prosperous State Artist, using Franz and Schnitzel to deliver cute messages about conformity on state TV; soon Stephan's working for her. His other assistant, Carl, gay and outspoken, moves to the dubious district voluntarily, performing a lewd, satiric puppet show with the same figures, in a late-night cabaret run by a drag queen. Carl's sister Tinka, designer extraordinaire of pup-

*Tinka's New Dress*  
By Ronnie Burkett  
International Festival of Puppet Theater  
Joseph Papp Public Theater  
425 Lafayette Street  
(Closed)

*Ubu and the Truth Commission*  
By William Kentridge  
International Festival of Puppet Theater  
Joseph Papp Public Theater  
425 Lafayette Street  
(Closed)

BY MICHAEL  
FEINGOLD

Masters of the marionette art, mostly with Czech names I wouldn't inflict on our copy department, have created lifelike figures before, but never in my experience with this richness of detail and this psychological depth. Not only does Burkett conceive and build these fascinating, complex people; he creates all their voices, rarely missing a syllable even in four- and five-character scenes. Each of his marionettes has a different *walk*. Their faces, their hats, their relationships, their confusions, their silences are all meaningful and fully realized. Of course Burkett hates

about the performance, and many more ideas in it to discuss, which I hope tells you something about both the quality and the density of Burkett's amazing work, and explains why seeing his troupe every few years has just become a necessity of civilized theatergoing.

**ARTISTIC MATTERS AREN'T** so happy over in the new South Africa, where post-apartheid problems are confusingly complex, unlike those of the good old days when there was a government to hate, a race to love, and a smallish number of white liberals caught in between. Now there are economic problems, corruption cases, tribal rivalries, plus vast systems of public works to put into a newly civilized order. Not to mention decades of a hideous heritage that won't go away quietly, many of its worst memories still fresh and bitter. The peculiar institution the new South Africa has invented to deal with this last item, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is at once so informative and so ineffectual that it would constitute another problem for the new nation—if it didn't seem in small ways to be doing a lot of good.

This paradox was presumably intended as the core of William Kentridge's *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, but his focus on it seems to have been mislaid along the way. Kentridge mixes a lot of elements: puppets and live actors, animation and news footage, verbatim testimony from the Commission and tidbits of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. He mixes languages, and he mixes races—Pa Ubu white, Ma Ubu black—so cavalierly you might never know what apartheid was all about.

He gets little things right, especially in the animation, which seems to be his chief interest. (The use of the puppets is fairly perfunctory.) Pa Ubu, who seems to have been something big in the Afrikaner police, has a crocodile confidant, who naturally doubles as a bag, from which Ma Ubu extracts the detailed description of Pa's activities that she reads to the Commission. Pa gets awfully panicky about consequences, but there don't seem to be any. However valid that may be as political comment, it makes an awfully tenuous theatrical event.

This is puzzling, for in fact the somber, forgiving Truth Commission has a lot in common with Jarry's crass, vicious, unrelenting hero. Ubu's glory is his openness; he revels in his filth and rapacity. The Commission doesn't revel, but it opens its rostrum to all who have a story to tell. Either way, it's the naked truth. Kentridge's Ubu, skulking about and starting at shadows, is more like the people Jarry's Ubu runs roughshod over. No appetitive glory for him; we never get a glimpse of his motives, only his excuses. Kentridge, as jumpy as his hero, seems to leap from device to device as a way not to discuss the subject at hand. No wonder the piece has so little cumulative effect.



*Tinka's New Dress*: Ronnie Burkett's magic mirror

pet costumes, comes along reluctantly, and soon finds that drag queens offer costumers a special challenge.

Anyone who's ever seen a film or play about resistance to a totalitarian regime knows that the story will get grimmer, and it does; the one thing Burkett hasn't done as a writer is bring surprise to what's essentially a predictable system. In terms of dramatic structure, even the elements meant as surprises are predictable. But going to a puppet show for the dramatic structure is like going to a symphony concert to follow the chord sequences. Let me be frank about this: As a puppeteer, Ronnie Burkett is one of the world's geniuses. I've devoted so much space to the characters of his drama because his performance made me know and love every single one of them. I deny the existence of a puppeteer: This is a great ensemble of actors, so great that their appearance in an honest, good-hearted, somewhat predictable play is no hindrance at all to the joy of watching them work.

totalitarianism—who could perceive this much variety in life and stand for its being flattened out or suppressed?

Nor is this all, not by a long shot. The two segments we see of Carl's late-night Franz and Schnitzel act are improvised out of that day's headlines—which last week, in effect, meant a festival of Clinton-Starr jokes. Suddenly The Common Good and the Christian Right seemed awfully interchangeable. Further joke: We also get to see Franz and Schnitzel as Carl's rival conceives them for The Common Good. Her Franz and Schnitzel are minuscule; Carl's are larger than the dramatic characters themselves. And a more serious joke: Carl resembles his creator, who at one point kneels with his face in the light, sharing an intimate moment with his puppet avatar. With the big-scale Franz and Schnitzel, Burkett in essence assumes Carl's role; the puppeteer becomes the puppet, not vice versa. Take that, Pinocchio. And, though I'm forcing myself to stop for lack of space, there are many more things to praise

## THEATER

### Island Daze

**T**he title, *They Still Mambo in Havana* (The Flea Theater), is as ironic as nearly everything else in this acerbically funny satire about Cuban Americans who visit the homeland. Playwright Rogelio Martinez, a Cuban émigré, sets up a bitter tension across the chasm between those who left and those who stayed. A young New York actress is reunited with the doctor-father she has not seen since age four. A playwright returns to see his first gay lover, a violinist. Everywhere money changes hands, dollars are tucked into pockets, and sex is traded for whatever is required. The doctor vends black market medicine; the violinist panders for a gay Brit tourist whose rich father's investment is coveted. The locals ridicule the visitors' deluded idealism, nostalgia, and quest for easy sex. "They come back to what never existed . . . and we whore ourselves," one spits out.

Martinez sets his story of moral ambiguity within a noirish murder mystery in which all are strangely connected to a woman slashed on the beach. Director Eduardo Machado creates a sinister vision with smudged lighting, helicopter rumblings, and glaring spotlights. Sexuality spills out heedlessly, the pace speeds, scenes merge and break up into chaotic fragments as all assemble for Fidel's speech on the anniversary of the revolution.

Out of a mostly effective cast, two stand out: Phillip Courtney as the Brit fag-in-denial, both hilariously fatuous and touching, and Jaime Sanchez as the used-up doctor, pragmatic but sad. Martinez supplies clever, biting lines nonstop. Courtney is priceless as the ultimate innocent who adored China under Mao, but who wonders straight-faced, "Did it all fit in that little Red Book?"

—FRANCINE RUSSO

### ALSO IN THIS SECTION

FLAMINGO BAR

KATHLEEN CHALFANT

NO EXIT