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Breaking out of time: Dafa Puppet Theatre

ABSTRACT

Dafa Puppet Theatre works with refugee communities to enable expression and change people's lives through puppetry. Dafa's work is on the boundaries of visual arts, puppetry, music, family gathering, food and a range of different elements. The idea of the puppet is something that you can touch and sense, yet it is on the borders between reality and fiction. There is always the possibility that the gates of imagination can be opened by this object, which can have many symbolic meanings. In this article, a reflection transcribed from an interview with Laura Purcell-Gates, Husam and Réka discuss their work with puppetry in communities. They reflect on layers of meaning within the puppet, working with specific materials and found objects, the importance of cultural specificity in their approach to the work, decolonizing practices of puppetry and building community through integrating puppetry, gatherings and shared food. This artistic discussion is an insight into a very active company working with often vulnerable and displaced communities.

KEYWORDS

community-building
decolonizing
imagination
materiality
puppetry
refugees
substitution

INTRODUCTION: Dafa PUPPET THEATRE

Dafa's work started as an initiative in Jordan in 2009 with Husam Abed, a Palestinian refugee puppetry artist, to work with the refugee communities there. It was mainly focused on Palestinian communities, then Iraqi, then

Syrian. Réka Deák, from Hungary, joined in 2011, and we started to work together under the name Dafa Puppet Theatre. In 2015 it was established in Prague as a platform for alternative and puppet theatre, to explore different ways of approaching communities. Our aim is to spread puppet theatre, in terms of both the artform and community. We work in refugee camps and theatre festivals across the Middle East, the Far East and Europe.

We believe in puppet theatre and its capacity for expression and to change people's lives. The artistic side of our work involves exploring and experimenting with form and content, and finding different ways to see the potential of puppet theatre as an artistic form. We are always mixing different multidisciplinary art forms together to see what comes out of this experiment. Our work is on the boundaries of visual arts, puppetry, music, family gathering, food – we try to integrate different elements. Sometimes it can be theatrical, sometimes it is based on the realities of communities. We play with what constitutes theatre, and what does not.

WHY PUPPETRY?

Puppet theatre is immersed in imagination; it is immersed in fiction; it is a metaphor – indeed, puppets themselves are a metaphor. In their daily lives, people need metaphor – for example, we use puppetry to explore death. In *A Smooth Life* (2015), Husam's father – who is dead – is in the performance; there is no other way that he can be in the performance except as a puppet. And right now we are thinking about a project about killing – killing time, ignorance as killing – so we are researching these topics with puppets. To break out of time, we need this kind of convention, that there is something fictional that takes us away and creates another dimension of imagination, which is not reality.

You can find this in fairy tales, in mythologies, in religions – the idea of breaking out of time. People need this idea because increasingly in our daily life we are being pushed to the edge of our humanity. We have to learn to do things in reality, but the reality of the world and the image of the world are different. We are not living in reality; we are living in the image of the world. The meaning of everything is kind of virtual. We are not in direct contact with what is real and what is not.

The idea of the puppet is something that you can touch and sense, yet it is on the borders between reality and fiction. There is always the possibility that the gates of imagination can be opened by this object, which can have many symbolic meanings. A lot of associations, a lot of symbols, a lot of metaphors can be gathered in one object.

The expressivity of puppetry is another part of this: through a gesture you can express so much, so you don't need a lot of words. It is a language, but we don't need to rely on words if we are using a puppet because the puppet can tell a lot through just one gesture, one movement. It is a very visual language. How we hold an object can tell a lot; the way that we touch it can tell a lot.

We are currently in Wels, Austria running workshop with refugees. In one workshop, we were using big masks, and one of the ideas from the participants – which again is connected with death – is that one of the big masks has tears. These tears are ropes that are used to hang people. So it is a huge mask, made from cardboard, and tears are emerging from the big eyes. These tears are the ropes that hang people.



Figure 1: *The Smooth Life*.



Figure 2: Husam's father in *The Smooth Life*.

Another great imaginary thing that the puppet can give is the idea of a substitute narrative – how to access and reimagine the history of a community. At the last party at Baqa'a refugee camp in September 2019, we did a site-specific performance about home demolition using objects. In this performance, there were Palestinian, Syrian and Sudanese refugees and one Indian participants. We used an object representing a Caterpillar bulldozer, which is

used to destroy the houses, and we changed the meaning of this object. It is no longer a Caterpillar; it can be a shaving machine – it can be anything. And this rewrites the history, rewrites something that happened.

This idea of creating different endings is a way of tricking the memory. It is finding a new narrative rewrite history, You can open another way of thinking by imagining that something happened and by inventing a new narrative through puppetry.

MATERIALITY OF PUPPETS AND OBJECTS

At the beginning we were doing paper puppetry – making puppets from paper and newspaper. We worked with different communities all the time. The feeling that we got from working with people in Hong Kong and Macau was totally different from that gained from working in Baqa'a refugee camp or in Europe, because the relationships with the raw material – the paper – were different. For example, in Macau the paper with which the participants were working came from the local region, and their interpretations – qualities, feelings, characters, themes, philosophy – of the paper's raw material were very sensual. One participant had paper as a bandage on her hand, and the bandage transformed into a snake that hanged her.

WORKING WITH FOUND OBJECTS

In refugee camps, including Baqa'a, we have explored making puppets from found materials. We worked with participants to collectively find materials from the surroundings, from their environment, from what they had available. This is in contrast to the idea of going to the camps to teach children how to make Western-style puppets, which is a kind of colonization. It is important to find another way of making something that can really communicate to a community. That's why we emphasized the meaning of using something from *their* environment, something to which they could relate, something that would have meaning for them. They could then appreciate that thing.

We did puppet making workshop from recycled bottles a long time ago in Zaatari camp for Syrian refugees, where they had a lot of plastic water bottles. The children made them into hand puppets, painting them and putting eyes and sometimes heads on them. In Baqa'a camp, we did a lot of work with paper – there was always a lot of cardboard that we could use. Garbage was everywhere in the streets – a lot of cardboard, a lot of trash. This is what children play with, as there are no other toys. So they are familiar with these objects.

DECOLONIZING PUPPETRY: WONDER BOX

When Husam did puppetry for the very first time, he did Muppet-style puppetry, because under American cultural colonization puppet often means Muppet; it wasn't a conscious choice. We became conscious of trying to have an element in our work that was local – to get inspiration from local painters to research Arabic storytelling culture. We did a lot of storytelling, trying to find some elements from Arabic culture, and then we found the wonder box.

The 'wonder box' in Ottoman Syria, was a form of Arabic storytelling, primarily *Sandook aldonia*, literally translated as 'life box'. Other names include *Sandook alajab*, or 'wonder box', and *Sandook alfurja*, or 'watching box'. We have played with this form in different community settings. Three years ago, we did workshop with refugees organized by Wels Puppet Festival in Austria at the Museum of Archaeology. We had ten participants from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Each one made their own wonder box in which they drew their own journey and why they had left their countries, and connected them with their future dreams. It was very visual; they created five images and used music from their country. They started with 'My name is ...' and they ended with 'I dream ...' or 'I would like to be ...' There were a lot of stones inside this archaeology museum, so the concept was to spread the wonder boxes in the museum over the three floors. Each one each one took a corner, and they created their own intimate space where people could find them.

There were nine wonder boxes, so the audience could hear nine stories, and at the very end the whole audience met in one place and we had a story number ten physically done on the stage using newspapers and puppets.

In our work with wonder boxes, we have looked at how the box itself can be organically immersed or integrated into the story, to find some element from the story that can be the stage. For example, in Macau one participant's story was about the death of his grandfather. When his grandfather died, he remembered when he had been a child and his grandfather had looked after him, giving him a bath before bedtime – a joyful evening ritual. So the stage itself, the box, became the bathtub. It started with a ritual in which he took a piece of cardboard, which was soap, and gave it to the audience to wash their hands before he started telling the story. So this idea of the bathtub became an organic element in the story.



Figure 3: Wonder Box.

BUILDING COMMUNITY: SHARING FOOD, SHARING OBJECTS

In our work, all participants' ideas are welcomed – even when it is really challenging to put all of the ideas together. Often we find that we can take some elements from each of the ideas at least, but we want to facilitate that everyone being involved within the process. Even if some participants arrive late, we try to integrate them so they don't feel like aliens or strangers, to provide a sense that we are a community.

In almost all our workshops there is a food element. It is natural to have food there. It breaks the boundaries between people – it breaks the labels, that we are the artists who are coming to work with the community and they are the community members who have come to the workshop. In this moment, we are just sharing food, which is a human thing.

The food is really essential to our work. It is very connected to Husam's culture, to Arab culture – the idea of sharing, the idea of showing generosity, welcoming people, making them feel at home. There are many, many layers of meaning: what does it mean to feed people? That's why we have this shared experience at the very end of most workshops.

Over the past couple of years, we have also been sharing food in our home, in our living room. We started a festival two years ago; because we were living in a big old house, where we had a series of performances in our home every week. We cooked, or sometimes we just made hummus, and people would come, eat and see a performance in our living room.

We wanted to explore how to create such an encounter with people in the home environment. We are trying to find an alternative to the idea that theatre is just exhibition – the actors are exhibited in a way that they should perform something, audiences are exhibited as they have to do something, and there's no direct contact. So for us it has become about how to bring theatre to community, as theatre originally started – it's not something we are inventing. We're exploring the idea of really breaking the rules of performer and audience – everybody in one common shared place, sharing food, sharing talk.

The idea has recently evolved with another festival which happened last year in December, during Advent. In Prague, we organized this festival again, but this time it was in five different flats, and every time we had a puppetry performance – both from Dafa and invited puppeteers. After the puppetry performance, there was music or a jam session, then food. And we asked the hosts to prepare whatever they liked; we were preparing food and soups, and the audience could bring whatever they wanted to share with the other people that they met there.

As an outcome of this festival, we decided to go further with it, so beginning on February 2020 we have been running a programme called 'Living Object'. We had a puppetry performance and we asked the audience to bring with them objects from their homes that they would like to share with other people that they meet there for the first time. At the end of the performance, people get out their objects that they have brought with them and they told the story of the object, then they offered them to anyone there.

RD: Last week, Husam performed *The Smooth Life*, and a woman came who had lived for many years in Macedonia in a rural area, with Muslims and Christians; she brought a book that had been an art project between children and adults in that area of Macedonia. She really liked

that because she could not read the Macedonian – she’s a Czech lady – and there was a Macedonian girl in the performance, so they exchanged their objects. And it turned out that they had nine mutual friends from Macedonia. That’s a circle of people. The idea is that people come to see theatre, then they can share objects which facilitates getting to know each other, and they can leave with new friends. We really enjoyed the concept because we are trying to add a new memory for an object that has memory already – which is also interesting, because this can be connected to many people: on this day I got this gift, it was given to me in this place where I watched this performance. And as the object, going forward, there will be this association of ‘I watched a puppetry performance; I received an object, a gift’.

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Husam Abed is a Jordanian theatre director, puppeteer and musician, with Palestinian roots, living between Prague and Amman. He has a Master of Directing for Alternative and Puppet Theatre (CZ), under the supervision of acclaimed Czech director Jiri Havelka. For the last thirteen years he has performed in many countries and created theatre workshops to reach, empower and impact children and adults. He has directed performances in the Czech Republic, Jordan, Austria and Hong Kong, and has collaborated with non-artists and artists across disciplines. His solo performance *The Smooth Life* has toured in fifteen countries and has received two Jury Distinctions for most original artistic concept. His commitment to inspire communities, highlight urging social issues and connect across cultural differences through puppet theatre led him to co-found Hazaart, Flying Freedom Festival, LIV’in Festival in the Czech Republic and Ya Khayyal Youth Theatre Lab in Jordan. He has also curated International Dance Encounter Amman, and is an active member of Karama Film Festival for Human Rights in Jordan.

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Réka Deák is a Hungarian puppeteer born in 1985 in Romania. She holds a Master of Directing in Contemporary Theatre from the University of Art, Targu Mures, Romania. She studied stage design at the Academy of Performing Arts in the Czech Republic and has worked as a puppeteer since 2006 at the Ariel Children and Youth Theatre. She is founder and president of the Babu Cultural Association in Romania, and co-founder of Dafa Puppet Theatre and Flying Freedom Festival in Czech Republic. She has rich experience in working with children and adults as a drama pedagogue. She has performed in many festivals worldwide and has led workshops in Europe, Arab countries and Asia. She has worked as a puppeteer, stage and puppet designer in Europe and Arab countries. In her work, she investigates intimacy and miniatures in theatre.

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