

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:           THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RACIALISM:  
   BLACKFACE PUPPETRY IN AMERICAN THEATRE,  
   1872-1939

Benjamin Daniel Fisler, Doctor of Philosophy, 2005

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In 1872, a company headed by English theatrical entrepreneur William John Bullock introduced the first full marionette minstrel show to the American stage. Throughout the following sixty-seven years, puppeteers presented a variety of productions featuring ostensibly African or African American characters, including: traditional blackface minstrel shows, adaptations of Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo*, numerous "Punch and Judy" plays, and productions of such ostensibly "authentic" portraits of black persons as Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* and Joel Chandler Harris's "Uncle Remus" stories.

This investigation employs phenomenology to explore the "essence" of specific blackface puppets, maintaining that none of the objects or plays discussed here are necessarily examples of authentic black representation. Rather, this investigation adopts the shifting perspective of phenomenology to show that what some past puppeteers thought were authentic African or African American characters, were, with but a single exception, consistently racialized exaggerations derived from the heritage of minstrelsy. Phenomenology, in its emphasis on the essence of "things," permits the scholar to

investigate both the physical existence of empirically verifiable objects, such as the puppets that are still in existence long after the deaths of their creators, and the meanings their observers embed them with, such as the character the puppets were imagined to be during their manipulators' careers.

Phenomenology helps explain the interaction between the puppet's corporeal form and its perceived dramatic meaning, which is often a result of apportioned, or as some critics call it, atomized components, including: object, manipulation, and voice. Thus, while phenomenology is useful in explaining how an early twentieth-century puppeteer might see Topsy as an authentic representation of a young African American woman, even if an early twenty-first century scholar would see it as a minstrel stereotype, it is equally useful in explaining how different components of a single puppet performance could contribute to a contradictory essence for a single blackface character.

This investigation details the careers of a number of puppeteers and puppet companies, using the phenomenological method to explain the diverse essences of their work. Included are companies spanning a history from the Royal Marionettes to the Federal Theatre Project.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Erica Joy Fisler. Without her never-ceasing love, I would not be able to bear the burdens of existence.

## Acknowledgements

I offer my sincerest thanks to all who helped this dissertation on its long journey. I offer my great thanks to my advisor and mentor, Franklin J. Hildy, to the members of my committee, Karen Bradley, John Fiscella, Lawrence W. Mintz, and Heather S. Nathans, and to all the faculty of the University of Maryland that I have had the great pleasure of working with on this research, among them Carol Burbank, Merle Collins, and Judith Markowitz. I offer my thanks to several organizations and their faculty/staff that were especially generous throughout my research. The David Driskell Center for the Study of Africa and the African Diaspora provided essential money and support for travel to archives in Detroit, Albuquerque, Atlanta, and Cambridge. The staffs of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, the University of New Mexico, the Center for Puppetry Arts, and the Harvard Theatre Collection were surprisingly helpful. Special thanks go to: Melissa Hurt, who provided photographs of inaccessible private-collection marionettes from the Federal Theatre Project, Lawrence Baranski, who dedicated a portion of an especially busy period in the Detroit Institute of the Arts's schedule to allow me direct access to its archive, as well as providing electronic copies of a number of collection photographs, and Lawrence Senelick, who not only opened the remarkable collection at his home and provided copies of the Royal Marionette playbill, but has, in our occasional meetings, provided feedback and contacts that have been instrumental to this work.

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## **Chapter I (Introduction): The Phenomenology of a Puppet**

One of the most surprising, and arguably problematic, puppet traditions in American theatre history is puppet blackface. A great multitude of marionettes and other objects developed after the introduction of William John Bullock and Lambert D'Arc's full marionette minstrel shows into the United States. So troubling are they that John Bell excluded nearly all of the "minstrels," "Uncle Toms," "Jim Crows," "Sambos," and "Fridays" from his photographic history, *Strings, Hands, and Shadows* (2002).<sup>1</sup> As much as a twenty-first century humanist would like to brush these objects under the rug of time, they remain an undeniable part of American puppet-theatre history.

This curious invention of mid-nineteenth-century English *Punch and Judy* shows appeared in American puppet plays for nearly three quarters of a century. An African puppet had been a regular feature of Punch shows since at least the mid-1700s. This character was renamed "Jim Crow" shortly after 1843, the year the Virginia Minstrels first played in England. In 1869, waxworker Lambert D'Arc and entrepreneur William John Bullock formed The Royal Marionettes. Their bill combined the Italian fantocinni (a puppet circus/vaudeville featuring acrobatics, songs, and dances), with a marionette fairytale pantomime (after the English tradition) and "The Christy Minstrels." The D'Arc and Bullock company inaugurated a tradition of puppet minstrelsy with "The Christy Minstrels," a full-scale marionette minstrel show inspired by American live troupes.<sup>2</sup> From 1872-74, the company toured theatres in the United States; the Newark Opera

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<sup>1</sup> See: John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000). Bell did discuss some of the puppeteers who created blackface puppets, using deprecating language, but did not include any photographs.

<sup>2</sup> Edwin P. Christy's minstrels visited England in 1857.

House and the Brooklyn Academy of Music were among their destinations. In the following decades, numerous American companies presented shows under the name Royal Marionettes. Walter E. Deaves's Puppets (ca 1875-ca1880s), Till's Royal Marionettes (1878-1882), Semon's Royal Marionettes (1882-1884), and Daniel Meader's Royal Marionettes (1902-1908) presented fairy tales, vaudevilles, and minstrel shows across the United States. Dozens of artists created counterfeit black characters, their miniature actors ranging from direct copies of live white actors in burnt cork, to relatively realistic portraits of such African American actors as Charles Gilpin.<sup>3</sup> The most recently recorded company, to have presented an original minstrel show with puppets, was a part of the Federal Marionette Theatre of 1939.<sup>4</sup>

These objects and their plays challenge twenty-first century scholars to theoretically excavate past notions of puppets, even as archival work excavates the texts and their wooden performers. The puppets inspire a multitude of questions. One might wonder if live minstrel actors inspired the design for blackface puppets, or if exotic characters, in European and early American puppet plays, exerted more influence. Another might ask if the artists believed they were representing authentic black characters, or if they produced their puppets to be fictions. Still another might ask about the racial agendas present in the activity of building the puppets. Coupled with the

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<sup>3</sup> Gilpin originated the role of African American imperialist Brutus, in Eugene O'Neil's *The Emperor Jones*.

<sup>4</sup> Two companies use the name Royal Marionettes today. The Royal Marionette Company, stationed at the Puppetry Arts Center in New Orleans, and Gregory Knipling's Excelsior Royal Marionettes of Pittsburgh, do not perform minstrel shows, but continue the other two-thirds of the tradition, with pantomimes and fairy tales. Some decades after the Federal Theatre closed, the Detroit Institute of the Arts produced a minstrel show, using the puppets of Walter E. Deaves in their collection. Other unrecorded productions may also have appeared after 1939.

aforementioned questions are any number of others regarding the social life of the artists, the themes in their plays, and the material concerns of nineteenth and early twentieth century American puppetry. Answers to any of these questions depend on understanding both the physical qualities of the puppets and their documented productions. Answers also require understanding the meanings given them by their creators. Phenomenology, a semi-scientific model that investigates the “essences” of “things,” may guide scholarly investigation to some answers.

Phenomenology is, in the words of philosophy scholar Laurie Spurling, “an archaeological effort to excavate pre-scientific life experiences.”<sup>5</sup> The meanings of phenomena become at least as important as their empirical existence, as the phenomenologist explores the unique essences of each phenomenon. By virtue of this method, a puppet has several essences. It is a tangible object of wood, paint, and fabric, a representation of a character in a play, and a sort of performing proxy for its manipulator. As the phenomenologist emphasizes each individual essence, he/she places brackets around that essence, performing what is called the phenomenological reduction.<sup>6</sup> The phenomenologist then attempts to describe the pre-scientific meanings that human beings assign to the phenomenon, that is, the meanings that precede the empirical divisions created by scientific explanation, according to the essences that are pertinent to each investigation.

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<sup>5</sup> Laurie Spurling, *Phenomenology and the Social World: The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and its Relation to the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1977), 9.

<sup>6</sup> David Stewart and Algis Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology: A Guide to the Field and its Literature* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1974), 26.

Bert O'States expands on the method, in order to specifically orient the “phenomenological attitude” to theatre.<sup>7</sup> The notion of “frontality,” in the phenomenological method, clearly identifies the perceptual puzzle of theatre studies. One is always forced to look at one essence of a thing at a time. Theatre is, at its core, frontality; each production is one frontality of a given play. In O'States's own words:

[T]his problem takes us to the base of all our concerns with the problematics of meaning: the central terms of our critical discourse [...] can be treated as variations on the principle of frontality. For frontality is not simply the perception of the surface facing us; it carries with it what Husserl calls the “apperception” of the rest of the object which is, in “a kind of” way, “co-present” even though unseen.<sup>8</sup>

When O'States speaks of frontality, he is describing what people normally refer to as perception, that which is perceived as an essential fact of the object being perceived. One perceives Sir John Gielgud playing the King Lear who grieves for his lost daughter Cordelia, in act V of a present production. As one perceives this actor in this moment of the character's life, one also “appreceives” the previous moments in the production that contribute to a complete understanding of Gielgud's interpretation of the role. In turn, one also appreceives other performances of the role, as well as one's own readings and outside study of *King Lear*. Co-present in every present frontality of Lear are all the previous frontalities that contribute to shaping one's total understanding of the character,

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<sup>7</sup> Bert O'States, “The Phenomenological Attitude,” *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992), 369.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 371.

what O'States calls “the law” of Lear.<sup>9</sup> This broader essence constitutes a “field of behavioral potentiality” that is constant, to greater or lesser extents. Within this law may exist any and all frontalities that contribute to shaping the essence.<sup>10</sup>

Phenomenology, then, offers an incremental system for fulfilling the demands of current theories posited by the like of Pierre Bourdieu. While Bourdieu’s notion of cultural production is complete, rich, and comprehensive, it can be intellectually taxing, as it draws the scholar inexorably toward a mesh of interdependent constituent elements on a weighty cultural map.<sup>11</sup> Phenomenology agrees with Bourdieu, that theory ought to account for the impact of each surface ripple on the river of culture, but in its emphasis on bracketed essences, allows the scholar to take each ripple as a present essence. Thus, one need not be compelled to consider each production within the context of a national or international field, but can instead begin from the obvious qualities of the frontality, determine its special essence, and then expand one’s brackets gradually.

For the purposes of this investigation, then, a particular blackface puppet is one frontality of blackface puppetry. It is related to all blackface puppetry by virtue of its essence. Previous frontalities, that is, previous incidents in the current performance and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 373. To be clear, O'States refers only to immediately identifiable co-presences, such as previous performances of a present role. I wish to expand his interpretation to include other frontalities. Thus, while O'States's reading of Punch would only incorporate other Punch and Judy shows, I would include other puppet works that bear on the present performance. Theoretically, one could expand beyond my own limitations, and include virtually any event that contributes apperceptions to a present frontality, so long as one does so incrementally, according to the principle of phenomenological reduction.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>11</sup> It is not my goal to undermine the efforts of Bourdieu or those who hold a particular affection for his premises. I do not consider Bourdieu lacking nor unnecessarily hyperbolic, but I find phenomenology to be more manageable. Both theoretical models lead scholarship toward a more complete understanding of theatrical practice. I personally find temporal models easier to manipulate than spatial ones.

previous related performances, are co-present with the object itself. Apperceptions steer the development of, what O'States calls, the law. The law includes the general characteristics of the blackface puppet as conditioned by all blackface puppets and their shows. Each puppet is one frontality that may be bracketed to explore, in logical sequence, a series of essences. The law is the sum of all frontalities in the larger field of activity identified here as blackface puppetry.

Blackface is a slippery term, referring originally to white actors who donned burnt cork makeup in order to counterfeit the racial identity of black Americans. However, the word has been recently redefined by the like of W. T. Lhamon to include both painted and unpainted fictions of blackness. For Lhamon, whenever a white person adopts a stereotyped dialect or shapes his posture to the perceived behavior of African Americans, he/she participates in a tradition stretching across time to the early Republic.<sup>12</sup> His expanded definition helps to delineate the law of blackface puppetry, and articulate essential differences between the modern scholar and the pre-World War II American puppeteer.

As this essay chronicles the development of a rich body of puppets featuring ostensibly black characters (including such geographically-contingent categories as black African, black Caribbean, and African American), it becomes obvious that said puppets, whether direct representations of white actors blacked up for the minstrel stage or representations of ostensibly real black persons, are universally fictions. They are always exaggerated, archetypal characterizations. To distinguish between a black puppet

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<sup>12</sup> See: W. T. Lahmon, *Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

and a blackface puppet, would imply that the black puppet is an authentic representation of a racially identified group. In the entire history of puppetry prior to 1939, there is no extant example of a puppet that can be dubbed an “authentic” representation of a black person, at least not by the standards of twenty-first century criticism.

This terminological distinction should not reduce the analysis to a mere catalog of racial stereotyping. Rather it should provide a context for the naturally shifting perspective of phenomenology. It is common to the phenomenological method to shift from the essence of the thing as it appears to the scholar, to the essence of the thing as it appears to the subject(s) of the investigation. By examining what an individual puppet’s essence is from a twenty-first century perspective, in this case, one of a body of counterfeit images of black persons, and what its essence is to the nineteenth or early twentieth century puppeteer, a phenomenological investigation can catalog, more or less effectively, the historically contingent essences of individual puppets.

As the investigation progresses, different artists reveal particular notions of their puppets. For some puppeteers, these are indeed mirrors held up to black life. They call them Negro puppets, or pejoratively, Nigger puppets. For others, the puppets are unquestionably fictions. Their essences are golliwogs or fantasies, not real African Americans at all. This study uses blackface to explain the logical twenty-first century eidos, the general, categorical essence of the phenomenon, contained in the mental activity of contemplation.<sup>13</sup> The current eidos is distinct from the eidos of the period in question, and that distinction is clarified through a Lhamon-inspired application of

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<sup>13</sup> David Stewart and Algis Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology: A Guide to the Field and its Literature* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1974), 40.

“blackface” as counterfeit performances of blackness. Blackface distinguishes organic black actor Charles Gilpin as Brutus from Federal Theatre Project puppeteer Ralph Chesse’s carving of an exaggerated figure of Charles Gilpin as Brutus. Like the similarly vague relationship between the few African Americans that inspired white burnt-cork performance and the white counterfeitors who donned burnt cork, blackface puppetry was always a fiction, to greater or lesser degrees divided from empirical reality.

In addition to providing a clear grasp of the historical contingencies of a puppet’s, or puppetry’s, essence, the bracketed nature of the phenomenological reduction, more than any other theoretical model, articulates the atomized essence of puppetry.<sup>14</sup> Puppetry shows its audience characters in pieces. The figure, its kinesthetic energy, and its voice exist in the same environment, but they originate from different sources. Puppets’ voices never project from the objects. Most often, the manipulators speak their lines from offstage or somewhere near the objects onstage. Occasionally, a separate voice-actor will speak the role. In many cases, the individuals who create the puppets’ physical forms are distinct from those that shape their physical motions. The essences of puppets depend on this practice of atomization. Phenomenology, by providing a bracketed reduction to each element, takes the analysis step-by step through each, and explains how the vocal frontality of the puppet (its words and sounds) may have an essence subtly, or even markedly, different from its sculptural form and kinesthetic

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<sup>14</sup> The atomized nature of the puppet is posited by Henryk Jurkowski in, *Aspects of the Puppet Theatre*, edited by Penny Francis (London: Puppet Centre Trust, 1988).

energy.<sup>15</sup> Once conflated in the act of performance, these disparate elements may be dealt with as the essence of the puppet. However, as will be demonstrated, the essence of a particular puppet, specifically a blackface puppet, is often complicated by the process of atomization.

Given the utility of the phenomenological reduction for explaining both the historically contingent essences of blackface puppetry as particular events in a sixty-seven-year aggregate of productions, and the practice-contingent essences of individual puppets, the chapters in this investigation follow an imperfect chronology. Each chapter investigates a particular puppeteer or group of puppeteers, taking the reader step-by step through a series of phenomenological reductions. Each begins with the particularities of specific blackface puppets in a given puppeteer's repertoire, in order to define the specific essence of the puppet.

It is important to remember that the essence of blackface puppetry, what Husserl might call “the eidos of blackface puppetry” and O’States might call its “law,” is not equivalent to the essence of any individual blackface puppet.<sup>16</sup> By analogy, no individual book qualifies as the universal standard of book, as one might imagine the ideal book in the Platonic tradition of transcendent forms. Rather, there is a notion of “book” that transcends particular books. An object cannot be identified as a book unless it meets the

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<sup>15</sup> Jurkowski uses semiotics to model the meanings of these atomized features. I am unsatisfied that notions of signifier/signified fully articulate some of the puppets in this investigation. Some characters, such as the Pig, in Edgar Caper and Paul McPharlin’s *Lincoln and the Pig*, exhibit indelible differences between their voice and figural qualities, such that they represent different characters. Depending on which component the spectator is focusing on, the Pig will appear to be shifting character types, thus, two or more different phenomena.

<sup>16</sup> Extrapolated from: David Stewart and Algis Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology: A Guide to the Field and its Literature* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1974).

demands of this transcendent notion. Likewise, specific blackface puppets constitute a great variety of essences within the boundaries of the eidos of blackface puppetry.

O'States selects "law" from Husserl, for its utility as an actor-oriented explanation of eidos. In artistic creation, a specific performance of a character, such as William Shakespeare's Othello, is both the present side revealed in a specific scene, and the absent sides revealed in previous and subsequent scenes. The particular interpretation of the role, or frontality, exists within the boundaries of the law established by the playwright. This law is the sum of the limitations and possibilities available to a particular presentation of a specific role, as exhibited in its immediate, present creation.<sup>17</sup> By referring to this as "law" rather than "eidos," O'States articulates the perspective of the actor. Each time a new actor plays Othello, he/she considers the possibilities available, but must limit herself/himself to choices within certain preset boundaries.<sup>18</sup> Given the nature of character recreation through actor embodiment, law is a useful term for live-actor theatre criticism.

However, the activity involved in creating a puppet play seldom includes recreation in the sense of actor embodiment. Rather, the eidos of any tradition of puppetry is constituted by production-specific creations. Thus, the puppeteer does not choose to reproduce a certain role contained by certain limitations best referred to as its law. The puppeteer chooses to create a new character, or a new play for a stock character such as Punch, whose characteristics connect it to a tradition of puppetry. In the case of

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<sup>17</sup> Bert O. States, "The Phenomenological Attitude," *Critical Theory and Performance*, edited by Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1995), 369-79.

<sup>18</sup> The actor playing Othello will not be able to wonder "what a piece of work is man."

blackface puppetry, the production of an exaggerated, racialized sculptural body connects that body to the tradition. Thus, eidos better articulates the overarching consciousness of the tradition, since the essence of an aggregate of constructed bodies and their performative actions is pertinent to this study. Actor-specific choices executed to reenact a predrawn character are the subjects of live-actor theatre history.

The bracketed nature of phenomenology is essential to an investigation of blackface puppetry, for it encourages a progressive investigation of essences. Each chapter and subsection of the following monograph will survey particular blackface puppets in the repertoire of individual artists, since these are, in effect, the corporeal forms of blackface characters. Stanton B. Garner, a noted scholar of literature and drama, argues for the centrality of corporeal form in theatre studies. Essentially, the variables of subjectivity are contained in the clumsy presence of the body on the stage. To quote Garner directly:

Theater ‘stages,’ ‘puts into play’ variables and issues that have comprised the special province of phenomenological inquiry from its inception: perception and the constitution of meaning, objects and their appearances, subjectivity and otherness, presence and absence, body and world.<sup>19</sup>

The puppet’s corporeal frontality encapsulates these phenomenological wonderings, putting a constructed face (and body) on its creator’s sense of these fundamental questions of existence. Thus, to ask the question “how does a puppeteer represent blackness” is to use the puppet as a lens into its creator’s sense of race as a theatrical construct.

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<sup>19</sup> Stanton B. Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 12.

To manage such an investigation, the phenomenological epoché, Husserl's characteristic project of bracketing, becomes useful. In each particular essence, as it is revealed by the objects, their plays, and the individual puppeteer's articulated perspective, lie multiple potential discoveries. Thus, the plan herein is to take the reader, step-by-step, through: the essence of the given puppet, the essence of the character that is represented by the blackface puppet, the essence of the play being presented, and the essence of the atomized character, a conflation of its various frontalities (voice, object, movement).

The essence of the given puppet or its character depends on the influences that bear on individual puppeteers. However, the perceived essence of a tradition requires its own bracketed analysis. Unless one understands the precise essence of pertinent sources as understood by the artist, one cannot understand how he/she incorporates those essences into new work. This follows from the Husserlian notion of co-presence. Co-presence explains the relative visibility of the essence of influences within the essence of the current performance. When possible, this investigation will attempt to explicate the essence of sources for individual puppet productions before examining the essence of the puppet productions themselves.

Phenomenology is especially useful given the fragmentary nature of the materials at hand. Some artists were careful to preserve their work and, in their memoirs and biographies, discuss their influences directly. Some works exist only as photographs, drawings, or descriptions. The influences of others can be speculated on based upon available evidence. In a select few cases, time graced the investigation with complete productions and the reflections of their creators. Generally, only fragments of complete

productions exist (a few marionettes by one artist, a few plays by another). The available evidence is sufficient to support a tentative reading of the meanings of the objects, both the meanings understood by their creators and audiences, and the meanings that might be drawn by a twenty-first century observer. At the same time, reasonable limits must be placed on the analytical project, especially where primary source material is in short supply.

While there is as much variety of puppet essences in this sixty-seven-year history as there are names of puppeteers, there are a handful of historical threads that weave many of the artists together. These threads are the overarching essences of puppetry practice (tendencies rather than universal or transcendent qualities) that span decades but are adapted to the specific needs of particular productions. The most visible of these is the overarching essence of exaggeration. Since blackface puppetry has its origins in a marionette reconstruction of the minstrel show, the essence of exaggeration that is fundamental to much puppet theatre becomes inextricably linked to humor. Throughout the history, the most grotesque blackface puppets seem accepted as natural agents of minstrel buffoonery, while less exaggerated images tend to be employed in plays that purport to showcase authentic black life. The less the puppeteers wish their “negro puppets” to play the fool, the more likely they are to try to shape their vestiges within the boundaries of photographic realism.

While many of the very definitions of humor include the terms “exaggerate” or “exaggeration,” theorists have investigated the use of exaggeration in humor at length. Experts have explained exaggeration as targeted ridicule, an attempt to make the subject seem ludicrous in order to empower its opposite. The delight referred to as “laughter” is

a celebration of superiority.<sup>20</sup> The exaggeration of racial signifiers has the effect of reducing the dignity of the blackface puppet, and its referent, the black body, in order to serve as a more effective agent of laughter, by having more of an essence of “clown.”

Thus, the investigation cannot separate the essence of exaggeration in humor from the essence of exaggeration in puppetry. It would seem only common sense to the puppeteers of the past that more ridiculous blackface characters should be more radically distorted, and such exaggerations would inevitably target the corporeal signifiers of race (shape and size of the nose and lips, characteristics of bone structure, body position, and skin color and tone). While these distortions, which target racialized puppets as objects of ridicule, will likely trouble the twenty-first century scholar that is sensitive to the relationship between minstrelsy and racism, they are evidence of an important aspect of the historical context of blackface puppetry.

The notion of “authentic” as defined by past puppeteers and revised by the twenty-first century mind is a second overlaying essence in the field of activity. Many of the puppeteers in this investigation were determined to produce “real black culture.” They reveal this intent in their biographies, present it in advertisements, and mandate it in their guidebooks for other puppeteers. The twenty-first century scholar would be quick to contradict their viewpoint. Minstrelsy was never authentic African American culture, since it was always a product of white America. However, it was this imagined authenticity that drove much of the blackface puppetry of the period under investigation.

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<sup>20</sup> For further explanation, see: Arthur Asa Berger, *An Anatomy of Humor* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1993).

In some cases, the minstrel show images were imagined to be the “real Negro” culture that puppeteers tried to reproduce in wood and paint. In other cases, puppeteers clearly distinguished minstrels from “real” African Americans, believing instead that other characters, such as Topsy or Brer Rabbit, were authentic. At least by twenty-first century standards, the exaggerations reflected in puppet productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or the “Uncle Remus” stories are still fictions. However, in order to explicate fully the eidos of blackface puppetry in this period, the investigation must compare the goals of the artists, in many cases “authenticity,” to the revised perspective of the twenty-first-century.

In order to maintain manageability, this investigation will not engage the phenomenological epoché beyond a comparison between the essences of specific blackface puppet characters as conceived by the artists who created them, and the essences of specific blackface puppet characters as conceived by the author of the investigation. Husserl’s method might allow the scholar to, in bracketed fashion, expand into the essence of African American, or even worldwide Black, culture. This would compel the scholar to deal with the indelibly complicated question of defining authentic black culture. Instead, the investigation will look only at the essence of a blackface puppet for the artist which includes characteristics of exaggeration, humor, imagined authenticity, and atomization, and compare it to the essence of a blackface puppet for the author.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines the circumstances that brought D’arc and Bullock’s Royal Marionettes to the United States and analyzes their interpretation of blackface characters and plays based on the company’s puppets, its

playbill, minstrel show script, contracts, publicity, and reviews. It articulates their inspiration in examples of the Jim Crow puppets of Punch and Judy tradition, as discussed in general sources on the English form. Examples of nineteenth-century Punch performances are selected from George Speaight's *History of English Puppet Theatre*. Representations of the Bullock puppets, from the collection of Douglas Hayward, extant reviews and notices, represented in contemporary periodicals, and an incomplete play-text of its British/American tour production, archived at the Harvard collection, are also available to study.

This first example showcases the disagreement between imagined authenticity in the initial essence of marionette minstrelsy and the perspective of the twenty-first century scholar. Reviews and publicity reveal a belief that the marionette minstrels were authentic. Bullock's notices claimed that his wooden figures were the "original Christy Minstrels," a nearly ironic claim when applied to marionettes based on the live-actor shows. Reviews of his production claimed that the objects danced and sang in "true Negro fashion."

Despite these claims of authenticity, the D'Arc/Bullock Royal Marionettes appear to the present-day scholar as subhuman grotesques, frontalities whose essence exaggerates the already counterfeit exaggerations of live-actor blackface. Their manipulators shape the dance-like motion of these marionettes as the voice-actors sing sentimentalized recreations of live minstrel songs. The performance essence produced by these two atomized frontalities is one of nostalgia, a harmless recreation of the "charming" live-actor minstrel show. It is neither authentic minstrelsy nor authentic African American life.

The first chapter later considers the American-born Royal Marionette companies that manifested during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, showing how American artists co-opted the racialized fictions generated by English puppeteers. For these, three-sided views of all major puppets for Daniel Meader's Royal Marionettes, from the Detroit collection, and records of the work of Walter Deaves, from Perry Dilley and Paul McPharlin's histories, exist for the purposes of inquiry.

Together, Meader and Deaves show a deep sentimentality for blackface and its presumed target of representation, the African American body. Both artists produce frontalities that are, at their essence, increasingly less grotesquely exaggerated blackface puppets. Though significantly more distorted than the bodies of real human beings of any race, they are nonetheless indicative of a sentimental effort to create less exaggerated portraits of African American characters.

The second chapter surveys the Italian American Lano family, broadening the study into the realm of traveling "showpeople," what McPharlin has cited as a more representative example of puppetry in the nineteenth century. This more financially insecure vocation was an unstable environment for racism and racist views. Although many of Lano's puppets originate in the minstrel tradition, he discusses (at least in his unpublished archival diaries at the Detroit Collection and his 1957 published memoirs) actual black Americans (such as the black stagehands he employed and the black deckhands he associated with during his travels on showboats). Members of the Royal Marionette companies make very few references to the actual persons depicted by their puppet shows.

Lano fancies himself an advocate of the African Americans in his long career. Many of these individuals were his employees or financial partners; at least two were his employers. Yet the Lano blackface puppet is surprisingly different from the sentimentalized vestiges of Meader or Deaves. Lano produces a “Negro puppet” that is more radically distorted. However, Lano’s unusual form of distortion reveals an attempt to illustrate the “exotic” nature of African American culture. As he fancies himself an advocate of his African American associates, he also fancies those African American associates as members of a culture that is foreign to white culture. This “orientalizing” essence of blackness pervades both his puppets and his choice of texts.

Lano also brings the study into the twentieth century, since he continued making puppet plays well into the 1930s. The third chapter investigates Paul McPharlin’s career in the 1910s and 20s, in the context of the “revival of puppetry” leading up to the first international puppetry festival held in the United States.<sup>21</sup> McPharlin was a major organizer of the revival, founding the Puppeteers of America and organizing important summits. A number of McPharlin’s puppets and playtexts exist, and he was unquestionably the most prolific author of books and articles on puppetry before the middle of the century.

McPharlin seldom created his own blackface puppet shows, but his professional activity established a core division between highbrow and lowbrow puppetry, one that had resounding impact on the eidos of blackface puppetry. This categorical division is what the modern scholar might see as the high/popular categories that have driven, and at times burdened, American aesthetics for more than a hundred years. For McPharlin,

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<sup>21</sup> I am not discussing McPharlin’s entire career, which continued to his death in 1948.

puppetry can support either highbrow art or lowbrow farce, but there are special rules for each type of work. The grotesque minstrel is a lowbrow fool, a “golliwog” appropriate to farce. The “negroes” of more exotic or, as he imagines it, “authentic” works are highbrow dramatic characters, fully realized characters appropriate to rich works of puppet drama. This categorical distinction became a leitmotif for the aesthetics of puppetry in the early 1900s.

The fourth chapter details the blackface work of four important American puppeteers, of the 1910s, 20s, and 30s: Tony Sarg, Susan Hastings, Remo Bufano, and Forman Brown. These puppeteers participated more regularly in blackface puppetry than McPharlin, but like the latter, did not dedicate the majority of their repertoire to these types of productions. The fifth chapter looks at a number of puppeteers in this period that did base their careers mainly on productions such as *Little Black Sambo*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or the “Brer Rabbit” stories, including: Edith Carter, Marion Flexner, Lenore Hetrick, and Antonio deLeon Richardson. In the sixth chapter, the author examines the works of the Federal Theatre Project’s marionette units. The FTP included the single recorded production of a puppet minstrel show entirely by a group of African American puppeteers.

The categories of highbrow/lowbrow play upon the aesthetics of this multitude of American puppeteers in complicated ways. Some, like Hastings, circulate an unnuanced reflection of its consequences. For Hastings, the essence of the blackface puppet is clown. Local blackface images have no place in serious puppet drama. Others, such as Richardson or Brown, use the humorous qualities of the “Negro” to challenge racism in the United States. For them, blackface puppets should be realistically detailed portraits

of the African American race, and should perform in narratives that thematically assault the then subordinate position of the people they represent. For still others, such as Bufano and Chesse', the blackface puppet is a canvas on which highbrow art can be painted.

The conclusion reviews the general thoughts of the specific chapters, identifying the major characteristics of the eidos of blackface puppetry throughout the sixty-seven-year period. While it is impossible for an investigation of this nature to successfully encompass all issues of racial representation between 1872 and 1939, it is possible for such an investigation to detail much about the variety of essences of racial representation in puppet theatre.

## **Chapter II: The Royal Marionettes**

### **The Roots of Blackface Puppetry**

While it was the American stage that produced the troublesome vestige known as blackface, puppeteers on the other side of the Atlantic were the first to render it in wood and paint. Thanks to an unusually visible series of marionette productions, one can trace the introduction of blackface puppetry to the United States from its loose origins in *Punch and Judy*, to the standards set by Lambert D'Arc and William John Bullock's Royal Marionettes, and finally to a complicated dissemination in late nineteenth-century American theatre.

For Paul McPharlin, the eidos of blackface puppetry begins with the Jim Crow figure of English “Punch” shows. He identifies its origin, somewhat erroneously, in T. D. Rice’s 1836 visit to London.<sup>22</sup> George Speight argues that the Jim Crow puppet is really an invention of the English stage renamed to draw on Jim Crow’s popularity. In either case, the black character of *Punch and Judy* is at least an important footnote to the development of blackface puppetry. The theatre’s first “Negro puppet” is a black servant who tries to silence Punch’s incessant ringing of a bell, at the instruction of his unmet master. Like nearly all his fellow supporting characters, the servant is made a fool by the protagonist. Sometime in the 1850s he came to be called Jim Crow, and his appearances would occasionally feature the figure dancing and singing to Rice’s popular song.<sup>23</sup>

It would be easy to make too much of its American heritage, which is influential

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<sup>22</sup> See: Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1949).

<sup>23</sup> George Speight, *The History of English Puppet Theatre*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Carbondale: Southern University Press, 1990), 218-20.

in creating the first connection between American minstrelsy and the puppet theatre. It represents the first recorded example of blackface puppetry in theatre history, one that has appeared inconsistently in English Punch plays throughout the last two-hundred-plus years, but it is not as directly connected to blackface puppetry in the United States as the Lambert D'Arc and William John Bullock marionettes. No records show Shallaballa, the unnamed black domestic, or the Jim Crow minstrel puppet traveling to the United States. George Speight notes: "The Negro servant or the nigger minstrel [was] in every case a typical foreign resident [...] in England [...] the characters of the Punch and Judy show are of unquestioned English descent."<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps Speight and McPharlin are being equally hyperbolic. McPharlin certainly oversimplifies the origin of the Jim Crow puppet, by suggesting it was an adaptation of American minstrelsy without giving fair consideration to its English precedent. Speight, however, neglects the significance of the Jim Crow character in changing the essence of the "Negro puppet." The nineteenth-century puppeteers transformed the blackface character's name, and certain characteristics, from those of an African foreign resident, to those of an American blackface clown. Thus, it is important to cite this first example of blackface puppetry, at least for its influence on the minstrel marionette tradition. The puppet black of Punch and Judy shows likely exerts some influence on marionette minstrel shows, associating the blackface puppet with dancer/singer, exotic other, and object of ridicule, all fundamental essences of blackface puppetry.

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<sup>24</sup> George Speight, *The History of English Puppet Theatre*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Carbondale: Southern University Press, 1990), 220.

While previous examples of blackface puppetry stage notions of black characters, the act of introducing traditions from across the Atlantic, through the reference in its new name and occasional “Jump Jim Crow” dances, enhances the eidos of the blackface puppet. According to O’States’s notion of co-presence, the observed “Jim Crow” puppet reminds the viewer of the “African” Shallaballa character and, simultaneously, reminds the viewer of the American minstrel player. Each new blackface puppet contributes to an eidos that has its origins in an image that is, in turns, a naïve domestic, an exotic African immigrant with a bristling beard whose only vocabulary is “Shallaballa,” and the T. D. Rice clown of American minstrelsy.

Of all the minstrel shows that toured England in the early 1800s, the most important influence on the development of this form was the most direct, the company founded by Edwin P. Christy, known as Christy’s Minstrels. This troupe played in London in 1857, and a year after the death of E. P. Christy in 1864, played there a second time. The Royal Marionettes would take up residence in the same stagehouse that housed the Christy band, St. James Hall, a mere seven years later. So successful were the Christy Minstrels’ London performances that for at least the next two decades, English artists and audiences called all minstrel shows “Christy Minstrels.” Historian Carl Wittke catalogs: “In May, 1871, the Royal Christy Minstrels were playing in Ross, England, the Queen’s Christy Minstrels in Hereford, and Matthews’ Christy Minstrels in Glasgow.”<sup>25</sup> The Christy Minstrels established a tradition, in name and style, which the Royal Marionettes would adapt to the particular needs of puppet production.

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<sup>25</sup> Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1930), 53. Quoting *The New York Clipper* (27 May 1871).

In order to explain the interaction between minstrelsy and marionettes that occurs in 1870s London, Husserl's phenomenological epoché becomes a useful organizing method. In order, the author will attempt to survey the essence of both forms in the period under investigation. The following section will explore the broad characteristics of minstrelsy and the contemporary state of puppetry. This will demonstrate how minstrelsy's essence of exaggeration and nonlinearity, conditioned by the co-presence of various images of minstrel players, and clowning, conditioned by the co-presence of humor in both puppetry and minstrelsy, are affected by the requirements of innovation necessary to survival in late nineteenth-century puppet theatre.

## From America to England

William John Bullock's Royal Marionettes opened at St. James's Hall, London, in July of 1872. A contemporary arts newspaper, *The Era*, advertised an evening of "the most marvelous Fantoccini, Blondin's tight rope feats, the amusing Contortionist, 'Chorus Tommy,' etc. Also the Great Troupe of Christy Minstrels [sic] the funniest Niggers in the World."<sup>26</sup> He would continue to advertise his miniature blackface players with the namesake of E. P. Christy's company throughout his career.

The band of blackface players that began with E. P. Christy, George Harrington, and T. Vaughn, and whose popularity later standardized the classic minstrel "line," visited London in 1857.<sup>27</sup> At least fourteen years before their English tour, the "Christys" were presenting full minstrel shows with an apparently high level of sophistication. According to H. P. Grattan's 1882 article in *The Theatre*: "The Orchestral implements of the troupe (they all played double) were a banjo, a violin, a tambourine, a triangle, and the immortal bones [...] I not only laughed till my sides fairly ached, but [...] I never left an entertainment with a more keen desire to witness it again."<sup>28</sup> The company brought a fully detailed minstrel show to England, inspiring a lengthy history of marionette

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<sup>26</sup> W. J. Bullock, "Notice: The Royal Marionettes," *The Era* 34 (London: 28 July 1872).

<sup>27</sup> W. T. Lahmon Jr., *Raising Cain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 59-60. Since the 1800s, there has been much disagreement as to the originators of the "line." Two companies carried the name, The Virginia Minstrels, Dan Emmett's and E. P. Christy's. While Christy's is likely not the original, the summit of his popularity, and their ten-year New York residency, coincides with establishing a standard band starring Mr. Interlocuter, Tambo, Bones, and Middlemen. See Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Tulsa: University of Oklahoma, 1962), 143-46.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in: Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Tulsa: University of Oklahoma, 1962), 145.

performance.<sup>29</sup>

Marionette minstrelsy represents an attempt to render in wood and paint what had previously been represented through the faces and bodies of live actors in minstrel shows. Examining the various images of nineteenth-century minstrelsy, one finds a broad variety of images to inspire the marionette artist.<sup>30</sup> Disturbingly grotesque countenances, the most visible remnants of nineteenth-century stereotyping, show blackface players more simian than human (see figure 1), a correlation to Petrus Camper's "The Evolution of



Figure 1. Cover of "De Ole Jawbone." Copied from: Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Tulsa: University of Oklahoma, 1962), 150.

Man" (1821).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> While I will be focusing on D'Arc and Bullock's companies, any number of related marionette artists may have participated in minstrelsy, including James Shaw and Fred Lawson, who accused Bullock of plagiarism, and the Tiller Clowne family Marionettes, for whom two minstrel puppets exist at the London Theatre Museum.

<sup>30</sup> To sufficiently encompass the many illustrations and photographs of the Virginia minstrels, the Ethiopian Serenaders, T.D. Rice, and so forth would be beyond the scale of any dissertation, and of only tangential merit to an investigation of puppetry. It is enough to note that, by 1872, any number of images were available to English puppeteers.

<sup>31</sup> Petrus Camper's image places "Negro" to "White" races on a hierarchy from least evolved to most evolved.

This sketch appears on the cover of the minstrel song “De Ole Jawbone” (1840).

While the curvilinear position of the spine and legs is characteristic of the counterfeit black dances of minstrelsy, the extremely exaggerated size of the brow, lips, and nose demonstrates not the actual appearance of the performer, but an artist’s conception of the “negro minstrel.” There are no records throughout the history of minstrelsy that suggest any application of prosthetic facial features. Painting one’s complexion with burnt cork and extending the boundary of the lips were the limits of live-actor exaggeration. A more radical transformation becomes possible only when artistic license replaces the decorated, live, white actor with a wholly constructed figure. Thus, while organic actors would not have presented these strongly exaggerated images in performance, they are possible on the puppet stage.

On the other hand, many depictions of blackface players show the artists as simply white actors in burnt cork, with little or no exaggeration. A useful example is the



Figure 2. Cover sheet from “Music of the Ethiopian Serenaders,” 1847. Copied from: William J. Mahar, ed., *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1999), iv.

cover sheet of a traditional minstrel songbook. Their wide eyes and black, curly hair are perhaps more indicative of the illustrator’s impression than the performers, but the nose, brow, and lips are not characteristic of the same exaggeration in “De Ole Jawbone.”

Nonetheless, it maintains the crisscrossing, curved legs and nonlinear positioned spine common to minstrelsy.

Artistic depictions of minstrelsy reflect an essence that is exaggerated, though on a broad scale from nearly simian to mildly realistic, and an essence that is nonlinear. Both essences strike the twenty-first century investigator as racialized fictions of the black body. The blacked-up actors of minstrelsy present themselves in contrast to the perceived essence of “whiteness.” Their makeup and wigs generate vestiges that are characteristic of the perceived essence of the black body. Their nonlinear body postures and movements mimic the perceived essence of black performance, indeed, of African American culture itself.

To the nineteenth-century puppeteer, however, these essences become fundamental signifiers that introduce to the frontality of an individual blackface puppet the co-presence of blackface performance made standard on the minstrel stage. While the individual puppeteer may or may not imagine these as the essences of authentic African American cultural life, that puppeteer cannot imagine producing the artistic product that is a “Negro” or “minstrel” puppet, without embedding it with the signifiers of those essences. Artists will inevitably conceive the minstrel puppet as a nonlinear object, a being whose spine will be off-center from its body, and whose legs will be crossed and curved. Whether a puppeteer’s goal was to recreate what that puppeteer imagined, as an “authentic” minstrel show or “authentic” African American life, the puppeteer would be compelled to embed any puppet designated as a “minstrel” or a “Negro,” with the essences of nonlinearity and exaggeration.

The essence of humor at the core of minstrelsy would also influence blackface puppetry. By the 1870s, the humorous antics of T. D. Rice had given way to the standard Interlocutor/Tambo/Bones witticisms that would condition American humor for decades. The essence of humor was founded in such traditional exchanges as:

Bones: Mistah Interlocutor, I just happen to think.

Tambo: So dat's wot I heared rattlin.<sup>32</sup>

An aspiring puppeteer would wish to adapt the buffoonery as a signifier of the essence of blackface performance, introducing to blackface puppetry similar witticisms, enlivening the entertainment credit of the performance and drawing a clear line of connection to the popular tradition of minstrelsy.

The essences of blackface puppetry, exaggerated features, nonlinear posture and movement, and the humorous antics established by previous T. D. Rice and other minstrel performances, contribute to an overall eidos of the blackface performer as a clownish, more or less distorted exaggeration of African American humanity.

Within such an eidos there are many possibilities, but these possibilities were not transformed directly into puppets, despite the convenience of sculpture for creating whatever image the artist desires. Instead, puppeteers filtered the characteristic essences of minstrelsy through the conventions of nineteenth-century English marionette production.

Prior to 1872, marionettes had evolved from simpler, one or three-string models (head only, or head and right/left arms) originating in eighteenth century Italy (see figure

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in: Arthur Leroy Kaser, *Baker's Minstrel Joke Book: Containing Thousands of Smiles and Chuckles and Roars* (Boston: Walter H. Baker, 1956), 1.

3), into more complex types. By the late nineteenth century, marionettes with as many as eight separate strings connected, in turn, to the head, right/left shoulders, right/left arms,

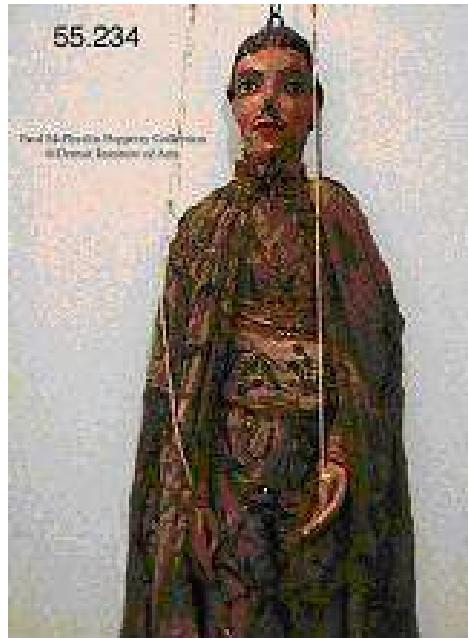


Fig. 3. John Bell. “Italian Marionette, 18<sup>th</sup> century.” Unpublished Collection Photograph. Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1989.

lower spine, and right/left legs, played on the puppet stage.<sup>33</sup> In the previous types, the body and legs could be manipulated only by bobbing the whole object, which would make the figure seem to bounce and the legs dance, however crudely.

Later types allowed for the body and legs to be manipulated separately, permitting more elaborate and controlled movements. Dances and acrobatic stunts appeared in nineteenth-century plays preceding the 1870s, and the popular “Grand Turk” puppet performed a variety of circus acts and pantomime. The new strategies brought forth the “trick puppet,” an exclusive delight of the puppet stage. Some objects could separate into pieces and be manipulated individually, others allowed operators to shorten or lengthen

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<sup>33</sup> John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 14-17.

the neck or arms.<sup>34</sup> Innovation and elaboration became the order of the day, and puppeteers competed vigorously to introduce the newest and most exciting techniques into their productions.<sup>35</sup>



Fig. 4. John Bell. “English Marionette, 19<sup>th</sup> Century.” Unpublished Collection Photograph. Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1989.

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that marionette artists would be drawn to the aspects of minstrelsy that would most allow for interesting movement, such as its “challenge dances” and large musical numbers.<sup>36</sup> Such sequences would allow the operator considerable occasion to demonstrate a sophisticated level of depiction. By increasing the number of strings on each object, one could maximize the level of exaggeration to accord with this essence of minstrelsy. The body strings, when separate

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<sup>34</sup> John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 17.

<sup>35</sup> Evidence of their competitive nature is contained both in the rapid development and dissemination of techniques, and the regular accusations of plagiarism and jealous guarding of secrets suggested in the various histories. Paul McPhalin provides useful biographical examples in his: *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History 1524-1948* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1949).

<sup>36</sup> For a description and example of minstrelsy “challenge dances” see: Gary D. Engle, *The Grotesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 13-20.

from the head and leg strings, can recreate nonlinear images beyond the limits of the actual human spine. Though Jim Crow likely appeared as a simple glove puppet in the Punch shows of the 1850s, the larger scale of full marionette minstrel shows would await advances in puppet design adequate to show off the most appealing essences of the tradition.

The first historical example of a full minstrel show presented with puppets would take the characteristic essences of minstrelsy, i.e., clowning, nonlinearity, and exaggeration, and emphasize the specific manifestations of them that most benefit marionette production. Such puppeteers were drawing upon two traditions, the blackface Shallaballa/Jim Crow, and the live minstrel show. For Lambert D'Arc and William John Bullock, the present marionette would emphasize the co-presence of the blackface puppet as a singer/dancer, deemphasizing the usual humorous banter and comic sketches. They would incorporate the nonlinearity and exaggeration of live minstrelsy, and the exotic singer/dancer of the Jim Crow puppet, to produce the first clearly identifiable eidos for the blackface puppet in the first marionette minstrel show.

## The “Celebrated Christy Minstrels”

British scholar John Phillips has done puppet theatre history a considerable service by filling in a major gap in Paul McPharlin and George Speight’s research. Prior to Phillips’s article in *The Puppetry Yearbook* (1998), Paul McPharlin had traced the progress of the D’Arc/Bullock Royal Marionettes and companies carrying their namesake, while George Speight had detailed the development of the D’Arc and Bullock companies in English theatre. In addition to providing extant photographs of the D’Arc puppets, Phillips corrects an important inconsistency in their research. According to him, both historians confuse the marionette company of William John Bullock with that of Lambert D’Arc, erroneously identifying Bullock as the originator of the Royal Marionettes.<sup>37</sup> More likely, Phillips concludes, Lambert D’Arc, a Parisian waxworker who established a marionette company in 1869 Dublin, originated the company, and then sold it to Bullock.<sup>38</sup>

Extant historical records support Phillips’s conclusions. Speight attests that Bullock ran a marionette theatre in Dublin (1868-1871), but no records of a Bullock company located in Ireland exist.<sup>39</sup> Advertisements in *The Dublin Advertising Gazette*, however, show that D’Arc established a permanent waxwork exhibition at the Rotunda in Dublin, 1868, which presented marionette shows for the next four years.<sup>40</sup> Bullock

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<sup>37</sup> John Phillips, “The Origin and Progress of W. J. Bullock’s Royal Marionettes,” *Puppetry Yearbook* 4 (1998): 145.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid: 144-49.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid: 145.

<sup>40</sup> John Phillips, “D’Arc’s in Dublin,” *Theatre Notebook* 48 (1994): 19-35.

leased Queen's Hall in Liverpool from 1870-1881.<sup>41</sup> In January of 1872, D'Arc was seeking operators for a marionette production to play at Queen's Hall.<sup>42</sup> These overlapping events may well be the cause of previous confusion. Ultimately, Phillips makes a strong case for D'Arc as the progenitor of the figures that would later achieve international fame as Bullock's Royal Marionettes.

In Phillips's revised history, D'Arc organized a band of operators. He rehearsed through February for a marionette show that a contemporary described as "the largest and best made [...] we have ever seen."<sup>43</sup> It played successfully through the following months. Proprietor William John Bullock then offered an adequate sum to purchase the entire production, with marionettes, stage, and operators.<sup>44</sup> Phillips finds no definitive reason for the sale, other than a few inconclusive references to two competing waxwork companies managed by James Shaw and John Springthorpe. Phillips believes this suggests that D'Arc may have returned to Ireland to rescue a withering exhibition.<sup>45</sup> Whether D'Arc returned to Dublin for financial or personal reasons, it is clear that the Royal Marionettes were in Bullock's hands after late April 1872.

A mere two months later, Bullock's Royal Marionettes, with their Fantocini,

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<sup>41</sup> R. Broadbent, *Annals of the Liverpool Stage* (FIX), 262-67.

<sup>42</sup> John Phillips, "The Origin and Progress of W. J. Bullock's Royal Marionettes," *Puppetry Yearbook* 4 (1998): 145-46.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Ibid: 146.

<sup>44</sup> An announcement in *The Era* (21 April 1872) unambiguously states "Although Mons[ieur] D'Arc's marionettes have been performing twice daily for over two months, yet such is their popularity that the Lessee of the Hall has purchased the entire exhibition from Mons[ieur] D'Arc whose personal attention was required in Dublin. The comic mannikins will therefor remain for some time."

<sup>45</sup> John Phillips, "The Origin and Progress of W. J. Bullock's Royal Marionettes," *Puppetry Yearbook* 4 (1998): 147-48.

pantomime of *Babes in the Wood* and/or *Little Red Riding Hood*, and “Christy” Minstrel show, opened at St. James’s Great Hall. An opening night review in *The Era* provides the first close description of minstrel puppets:

In the second part we are introduced to “the great troupe of Christy Minstrels,” who give a wonderfully correct and laughable imitation of their neighbours who “never perform out of London.” The Marionette Christys can sing, play the tambourine and bones, and dance a breakdown in true Nigger fashion and their jokes and conundrums are of the raciest description, and invariably provoke a roar of merriment.<sup>46</sup>

At first glance, this review reveals the marked difference between the essence of the marionette minstrel in the nineteenth-century and the essence of the marionette minstrel in the twenty-first century. To the *Era* reviewer, the marionette show was an effective recreation of what that reviewer imagined was authentic African American performance in minstrel shows. Though the reviewer recognizes that the marionettes are an imitation, rather an authentic example, of minstrelsy, the same individual makes no such distinction between the staging of minstrelsy and “true Nigger fashion.”

Furthermore, if this review is to be trusted, then it reveals how minstrel marionette shows took full advantage of the advances in nineteenth-century puppetry at the moment of their introduction to the field. A close study of the only extant photograph of the marionettes (the objects themselves have been lost to history) further demonstrates sophisticated possibilities (see figure 5).

D’Arc integrates the essences of live minstrelsy and contemporary marionette production. He produces a blackface puppet that captures, and perhaps, accelerates the racialized exaggerations established by minstrelsy. Simultaneously, he employs modern marionette techniques to both compete in a demanding theatrical market, and to

effectively capture the nonlinear performance style of minstrelsy. The single visible set of control rods on the second figure from the left, and visible strings on the hands and knees of three of the figures, suggest a very modern style of manipulation, at least for



Fig. 5. Douglas Hayward. "D'Arc Christy Minstrel Marionettes." Copied from: John Phillips, "The Origin and Progress of W. J. Bullock's Royal Marionettes," *Puppetry Yearbook* 4 (1998): 160.

1870. Each set of jaws appears to be jointed to the head, allowing for the appearance of speech, whether achieved by a separate string or by bobbing the head. The second technique might suggest that each object employed two operators. Both are equally possible, especially since Bullock's company numbered in the twenties.<sup>47</sup> Without extant puppets, it is impossible to be certain. However, both show evidence of sophisticated

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Ibid: 151.

<sup>47</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 157. Though the number may not have been fixed, by the time of the company's residence in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, it employed a total of twenty-five, including puppeteers, musicians, and stage hands.

application of the most advanced techniques in nineteenth-century puppetry.

Harder to determine is the relationship between these objects and the form that Christy's Minstrels made standard. If the photographer arranged these objects, as is likely, according to the standard formation of minstrel shows, than the central figure was the interlocutor, and the far left and far right marionettes were Tambo and Bones.<sup>48</sup> It seems likely, given the open hand on the leftmost puppet, that it was Tambo, built deliberately to hold the appropriate instrument. The bones could easily be attached to the rightmost puppet's hand to create the illusion that the figure is holding them. These are relatively straightforward mimics of the essential characteristics of minstrelsy.

"Mr. Interlocutor" is more of a conundrum. In terms of order, the central, and largest, object, with its top hat and American flag uniform, should be Interlocutor.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the figure immediately to the right of center, carrying what appears to be a conductor's baton, seems to be most aligned to the standards of the Christy minstrel show, which tended to feature only Tambo and Bones in blackface. The Interlocutor tended not to don the wig and burnt cork of his fellow players. While both puppets have faces painted to mimic burnt cork makeup, the American flag puppet has the wide eyes and exaggerated lips of its counterparts. The other has half-closed eyes and an abnormally bulging nose, suggesting exaggerated characteristics of perhaps an elderly European. His nose has a sharper, more pointed quality than the others, whose noses are flat, a sign that seems to suggest something other than racialized blackness. In addition, his mouth, unlike every

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<sup>48</sup> Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1930), 136.

<sup>49</sup> Wittke also points out that the interlocutor was usually a particularly large individual, attired in formal evening wear or dressed in "some very conspicuous uniform." *Ibid.*, 139.

other puppet, is not slack and seems to be no more than half their length and width. Closer examination reveals a smaller cut along the jawline. On stage, this object's mandibles would have been less obvious, when they were opening and closing during the performance. Of all the marionettes, this seems least like the counterfeit black images of minstrelsy. This would place it closest, aesthetically, with the Interlocutor. It could be a separate conductor for the orchestra, but it was not unusual for the Interlocutor to serve as both emcee and "maestro." On the other hand, the costume of the figure just right of center is almost exactly the same as the figure to the left of center. It does seem likely that the Interlocutor's costume would be distinct from its counterparts.

Both possibilities represent peculiar interpretations of blackface minstrelsy, one which makes the Interlocutor marionette a logical extension of minstrelsy convention, the other which creates a connection between authority figure and buffoon, in a fascinating intersection of puppet and minstrel aesthetics. If the Interlocutor is the "orchestra leader," then this marionette is clearly meant to be distinguished from its more "blacked up" partners, according to the conventions of the standard Christy minstrel show.

If, on the other hand, the Interlocutor in this case is the center puppet, then D'Arc has decided to make him as much a clown as his endmen. Since Interlocutor represents authority, and, according to many accounts, Tambo and Bones usually made him the "butt" of a number of jokes, D'Arc is interpreting Interlocutor according to the essences of both minstrelsy and the Punch tradition.<sup>50</sup> As Carl Wittke summarizes, it was a commonplace of the standard minstrel show produced by Christy's to ridicule:

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<sup>50</sup> For examples of the Tambo/Bones vs. Interlocutor convention, see Dailey Paskman's "Working Model" of the minstrel show in "*Gentlemen, Be Seated! A Parade of the American Minstrels*, revised edition (New York: Crown Publishers, 1976), 89-146.

The pompous interlocuter, whose nimble wits always suffered in comparison with the nimble wits of the burnt cork stars on the ends [...] it has been suggested that this practice of having the interlocutor put down [...] may have been borrowed from the circus, where the main function of the clowns is to bring the guffaws of the crowd down on the stately ringmaster.”<sup>51</sup>

D’arc’s aesthetic builds on the essence of minstrelsy, which itself may be adopted from the essence of circus, and the essence of Punch shows, both of which depict authority as target to be made appear foolish. D’Arc has chosen to create his image according to aesthetics that lampoon the authority of the interlocutor, in a manner consistent with both traditions. His uniform represents a nation, specifically America; his top hat suggests luxury. At the same time, top hats are a common accessory for clowns. Likewise, these symbols of greatness are juxtaposed against the ostensibly “ethnic” look of the figure, which associates him with the “comic Negro” look of the endmen. The interlocutor is portrayed as a blackface character, a change from the standard format of the formulaic minstrel show, where Mr. Interlocutor usually appears without these faux-ethnicity trappings. In this case, one essence of humorous exaggeration, the ridicule of authority, which here debases a symbol of national identity and wealth, intersects with another essence of humor as degradation, in the exaggeration of stereotypical characteristics of blackness.<sup>52</sup> If D’Arc’s Interlocutor is the central figure, and this is a strong possibility considering the live Interlocutor was usually played by a larger man (this is the largest marionette pictured) clothed in formal wear or a specific uniform, then minstrel puppetry

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<sup>51</sup> Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1930), 138.

<sup>52</sup> This interaction of polar aspects of humor has been noted throughout the history of minstrelsy by such scholars as W. T. Lahmon, Jr. and Eric Lott. While D’Arc’s approach, if indeed this is his approach, was nothing new to minstrelsy in the 1870s, it would have been a step forward for puppetry.

was already showing considerable artistic innovation at the moment it began.<sup>53</sup> The essence of D'Arc's minstrel marionettes deviates from that of its precedents, by integrating the newest techniques of late nineteenth-century puppetry, with more exaggerated versions of the co-present aesthetics of minstrelsy and general clowning.

D'Arc engages the constructed quality of the object to create an image for the blackface performer that is wholly constructed, an idealized version of the already counterfeit image of the black character. The act of adaptation here is a synthesis of essences. In performance, the D'Arc blackface puppet makes co-present the anti-hierarchical impulses in its roots. The character enacted by this marionette incorporates the comic degradation of authority that is essential in Punch plays. Likewise, it incorporates the essence of blackface performance that makes the central authority figure a target of humor. He embeds these impulses in the corporeal form of the object by mixing symbols of clown, racialized image, and world power.

The twenty-first-century scholar cannot help but be troubled by the racialism of the comic strategy. The tendency to divide the target of humiliation from blackface signifiers in live minstrelsy might have allowed for a less clearly drawn landscape. Similarly, many scholars have discovered inconsistencies in the assumed racism of nineteenth-century blackface. In this case, however, the puppet has been made more of a clown by being given the signifiers of blackface. It seems D'Arc has made it more of a fool by making it more Black. This use of blackface to indicate comic fool was consistent with the heritage of both puppetry and minstrelsy. It was an eidos that the

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<sup>53</sup> Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1930), 139.

field would not leave behind for three quarters of a century.

## The Marionettes in Performance

The D'Arc/Bullock "Christy" minstrel show was an important addition to the Royal Marionettes. Indeed, once it was added to the program, it not only remained throughout Bullock's fifteen-year career, it was placed at the front of a number of advertisements, and featured prominently in several reviews as a highlight of the show.<sup>54</sup> McPharlin notes the applicability of minstrelsy to puppet production and speculates on specific techniques that could have been employed by various companies, as well as the economy of such techniques:

The minstrel show was [...] perfectly suited to puppet technique. The row of darkies could be strung in two tandem groups, one on each side of the center man; he, Tambo, and Bones, the end men, would be separate so that each could rise and cavort by himself. When a specialty dance took place in front of them all could be hung so that they would sit and watch. Thus two or three puppeteers could animate eleven to fifteen puppets [...] a critic in the *Times* [...] occasion[ed] to remark [in considering the presence of a human minstrel show in the smaller St. James Hall stage during the residence of Bullock's company in the larger]: "One painful reflection forces itself upon the mind. Are we to have a new instance of the collision between labor and capital?" He was thinking of technological unemployment, of five actors replaced by one string puller.<sup>55</sup>

Yet, despite their popularity and usefulness to puppet production, the extant Royal Marionette program suggests that Bullock employed a simplified version of the minstrel show.

The published Bullock program contains the lyrics to six minstrel songs: "Hunkey Dorum," "Jolly Little Nigger," "Belle Mahone," "Old Runaway Jack," "The Old Nigger," and "We'll all Skedaddle." Except for "Belle Mahone," which appears to be a traditional

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<sup>54</sup> John Phillips, "The Origin and Progress of W. J. Bullock's Royal Marionettes," *Puppetry Yearbook* 4 (1998): 159; Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 163-64.

<sup>55</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 159. Quotation from *The London Times* (2 August 1872).

Irish ballad, no other extant records of any of the songs seem to exist, nor is it possible to connect individual numbers to the various minstrel companies. "Belle Mahone," is listed in the *Christy Minstrel's Song Book* and archived at a handful of libraries throughout the U.S. If the remaining songs have not simply been lost, it may be that the other five are inventions of the company, or adaptations of other popular minstrel songs. The program contains the titles and lyrics to the songs (figure 6 and 7).

PROGR A M M E.

PART I.

THE CELEBRATED CHRISTY MINSTRELS.

OVERTURE.

*Song and Chorus—HUNKEY DORUM.*

*Chorus.* I was out one day for a lark,  
    Hunkey dorum, we am de boys.  
*Chorus.* I met a girl in Central Park,  
    Hunkey dorum, doodle dum da.  
*Chorus.* Her hair was frizzed all over her head,  
    Hunkey dorum, we am de boys.  
*Chorus.* She nearly killed this darkey dead,  
    Hunkey dorum, doodle dum da.  
*Chorus—*Her hair was frizzed all over her head,  
    She nearly killed this darkey dead;  
    And her maiden name it was Brown,  
    She lived with her mother in Brooklyn Town.

*Chorus.* Can I see you home? She raised her fan,  
    Hunkey dorum, we am de boys.  
*Chorus.* Oh, fie, for shame, you naughty man,  
    Hunkey dorum, doodle dum da.  
*Chorus.* We walked and talked till the sun went down,  
    Hunkey dorum, we am de boys.  
*Chorus.* When we found ourselves in Brooklyn Town,  
    Hunkey dorum, doodle dum da.  
*Chorus—*Her hair was frizzed, &c.

*Chorus.* She said, oh dear, I must leave you here,  
    Hunkey dorum, we am de boys.  
*Chorus.* Not if I know it, my pretty dear,  
    Hunkey dorum, doodle dum da.

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*Chorus.* And since that time I 've settled down,  
    Hunkey dorum, we am de boys.  
*Chorus.* We got married one day in Brooklyn Town,  
    Hunkey dorum, doodle dum da.  
*Chorus—*Her hair was frizzed, &c.

JOLLY LITTLE NIGGER.

There's a merry little nigger, I know, know, know,  
That lives not a mile from the Bow, Bow, Bow;  
He is happy as a king, and laughs at everything,  
And is always, how come you so, so, so?  
    Ha, ha, ha, &c.

Now, this merry little funny little fellow,  
One day got very mellow;  
They took him to the beak, and could not make him speak  
For his merry little ha, ha, ha.  
    Ha, ha, ha, &c.

Now, this merry little funny little toper—  
'Cause you know he was no joker—  
Being a man of renown for his wits about the town,  
With his merry little ha, ha, ha.  
    Ha, ha, ha, &c.

Now, a word to all you jokers,  
Oh! never become such topers:  
If your health you wish to prize, be merry and be wise,  
And never get how come you so, so, so?  
    Ha, ha, ha, &c.

BELLE MAHONE.

Soon beyond the harbour-bar  
Shall my bark be sailing far,  
O'er the world I wander lone—  
Sweet Belle Mahone!  
O'er thy grave I weep good bye,  
Hear, oh hear, my lonely cry;  
Oh! without thee, what am I?  
Sweet Belle Mahone!

*Chorus—*Sweet Belle Mahone!  
    Sweet Belle Mahone!  
    Wait for me at heaven's gate,  
    Sweet Belle Mahone!

Lonely like a wither'd tree,  
What is all the world to me?  
Life and light were all in thee,  
Sweet Belle Mahone!

Fig. 6. William John Bullock. *Bullock's Royal Marionettes Programme and Words of all the Songs and the Grand Pantomime of Little Red Riding Hood*. London: W. J. Bullock, 1872. 1-2.

The most obvious characteristic of the songs is their sentimentalism, ranging from a happy story of courtship that ends in marriage ("Hunkey Dorum"), to the reminiscences

of an aged former slave who has escaped to “freedom’s shore” and longs for universal abolition. William John Bullock, or the unnamed composer of his company, captures the

<p style="text-align: center;">3</p> <p>Daisies pale are growing o'er, All my heart can e'er adore-- Shall I never meet thee more, Sweet Belle Mahone ? <i>Chorus—Sweet Belle Mahone, &amp;c.</i></p> <p>Calmly, sweetly, slumber on, Only one I call my own ! While in tears I wander lone, Sweet Belle Mahone ! Faded now seems every thing, But when comes eternal spring With thee I 'll be wandering, Sweet Belle Mahone ! <i>Chorus—Sweet Belle Mahone, &amp;c.</i></p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>OLD RUNAWAY JACK.</b></p> <p><i>Sung by the Great Song and Dance Artist—OLD SNOWBALL.</i></p> <p>I 'm from the land of cotton, Afar across the wave ; Where the white man is the massa, And the poor black is the slave : How often this poor nigger Has wished that he was free ; But now I stand on freedom's ground, The land of liberty, Then O, I, O, I 'm now on freedom's shore ; And I guess this black, “ Old Runaway Jack,” Will never go back no more.</p> <p>When a little picacaninny, From my mother I was torn : And sold for fifty dollars, To work among the corn ; 'Twas then I heard it whisper'd That, far across the sea, There was a little island, where The poor black might be free.—<i>Chorus.</i></p> <p>I 'm almost now decrepid, My wool is turning grey, But still this child of nature, Yet hopes to see the day, Where blest emancipation Reigns on every shore, And slavery be abolished Ne'er to be seen no more.—<i>Chorus.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>THE OLD NIGGER.</b></p> <p><i>Sung by the Great Song and Dance Artist—OLD SNOWBALL.</i></p> <p>I am a poor old darkie man, 'Tis long since I was born ; I have grey wool upon my head, And my teeth are nearly gone. When I was young, the darkies said A handsome nig was I ; But now, like Annie Laurie's friend, I must lay me down and die. <i>Chorus—I 'm a jolly old nigger from old Kentucky,</i> I 'm a jolly old nigger from old Kentucky, I laugh and sing both night and day, I 'm a jolly old nigger, you see !</p> <p>Those youthful nigs that laugh and scoff, And call me poor old buffer, Forget that they in time like me, Will surely have to suffer. If they can laugh, and dance, and sing, As well at eighty-two, Oh, golly, I 'll tink dem cleber And handsome darkies too. <i>Chorus—I 'm a jolly old nigger, &amp;c.</i></p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Song and Chorus—WE 'LL ALL SKEDADDLE.</i></p> <p>Oh! boys, our work is ober—we 'll all skedaddle, all skedaddle, Skedaddle am de cry ! We 'll away and lib in clover—all skedaddle, all skedaddle, Skedaddle am de cry ! We 'll take unto our homes, de tambourine and bones, De banjo and de fiddle, boys, played in harmonious tones ; Oh ! a darkie's life 's a merry one, on dat you may rely. Den all skedaddle — skedaddle am de cry !</p> <p>Ob work we 've had a plenty, oh ! all skedaddle, all skedaddle, Skedaddle am de cry ! Den to fill the bowl that 's empty, we 'll all skedaddle, all skedaddle, Skedaddle am de cry ! We 'll take unto our homes, &amp;c.</p> <p>Den for our homes we 'll make, boys, oh ! all skedaddle, all skedaddle, Skedaddle am de cry ! Our old joys to awake, boys, oh ! skedaddle, oh ! skedaddle, Skedaddle am de cry ! We 'll take unto our homes, &amp;c.</p>
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Fig. 7. William John Bullock. *Bullock's Royal Marionettes Programme and Words of all the Songs and the Grand Pantomime of Little Red Riding Hood.* London: W. J. Bullock, 1872. 3-4.

essence of music as defined by their use of Stephen Foster's songs, despite not using any songs that can be directly attributed to Foster's compositionship. Foster tried to encourage more dignified portraits of African Americans in song, by writing more sentimental, less degrading pieces.<sup>56</sup> Unlike the Christy Minstrels, The Royal

<sup>56</sup> See: Charles Hamm, “Stephen Foster and Indigenous American Song,” In *Music in the New World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983).

Marionettes did not adopt any of the preeminent nineteenth-century American composer's actual songs. However, they did apply the essence of Foster's technique by portraying a tamer, more sentimental version of "Negro music."

To the twenty-first century scholar, the first two seem like sterilized versions of minstrel songs. They deal with the same subjects as their counterparts: courtship, love, and ostensibly black life. Yet they deal with them without many of the more scandalous qualities exhibited by other troupes. In "Hunkey Dorum" and "Sweet Belle Mahone," references to female subjects only vaguely suggest the "comic obsession with [...] woman's physical qualities" noted by scholars.<sup>57</sup> The refrain emphasizes Ms. Brown's "frizzed" hair, and suggests that her morals are looser than she otherwise proclaims. She accepts the young man's offer to walk her home and they walk all night. She tells him she "must leave" him outside her home, and the young man submits his skepticism.

Yet this single, ambiguous suggestion of sexual availability, and the references to hair, hardly compare to the far more explicit depictions in many minstrel selections. In songs like "Miss Lucy Neal," Sambo discusses the taste of his lady's lips and, when taking her home, discovers she is engaged to another man when the unnamed suitor thrashes the unwitting Sambo. Though both songs end in marriage, "Hunkey Dorum" ends in a happy one, with the protagonist "settling down." "Miss Lucy Neal's" marriage ends with Sambo abandoning her, when Sambo sees that her first child looks like the unnamed suitor.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burt Cork Mask* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1999), 302.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 305.

The criminal acts and dishonesty depicted in many of minstrelsy's counterfeit images of black life have been replaced by equally vague references to a Jolly Little Nigger who "one day got very mellow" and was hauled before the local magistrate. It pales in comparison to a song like "Jimmy Crack Corn or The Blue Tail Fly" (1846), which describes a slave who murders his master and fools the court into believing a "Blue Tail Fly" is responsible.<sup>59</sup> Instead of a parody of police authority or even a more profound example of antisocial behavior, "Jolly Little Nigger" depicts an alcoholic, who was merry and known for his wit, running afoul of the law when his drinking gets excessive. The conclusion is thematically a very simple moral, advising the listener to be temperate. The Bullock/D'Arc troupe has adapted the Foster-inspired essence of late nineteenth-century minstrel music, and toned down the more morally problematic qualities of blackface texts.

Granted, the structure suggests an attempt to capture a second essence of Foster's music. In songs like "Nelly was a Lady," Foster criticized slavery, deviating from the seemingly proslavery attitude of other minstrel songs. In "Jolly Little Nigger," the marionettes challenge simplistic depictions of the comic Negro minstrel. The "ha, ha, ha" refrain creates an expectation for the audience that runs contrary to the theme of the song. When told of an individual who is "happy as a king," the listener imagines the laughter as the joyous exaltation of a genuinely happy black character, a nearly stereotypical example of the wide-eyed, happy plantation slaves depicted throughout minstrelsy. Yet as that listener discovers the circumstances of the "Jolly Little Nigger's" life, he/she sees that his "ha, ha, ha," is no proclamation of joy, but the mad, drunken

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<sup>59</sup> William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burt Cork Mask* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1999), 242-243.

ravings of an unfortunate fool, who is, “how come you so, so, so.” Despite the narrowly conceived themes of the song, the author manages to create an amusing surprise to organize the audience’s experience with it.

The second two songs suggest richer themes, but in sterile fashion. “Belle Mahone” is uncharacteristic of other, more racialized, minstrel songs in the showcase here. Owing to its roots in traditional Irish folk music, it is a mournful song of lost love. It is neither bawdy nor objectifying, nor does it celebrate idleness or vice. Loneliness, an overgrown gravesite, and a longing for the death that will reunite the divided lovers are the intrinsic images/themes. When performed by grotesquely exaggerated marionette clowns, it must have been a compelling juxtaposition of meaning. Like a sentimental turn by the circus clown, an audience that would be expecting to laugh at these figures might feel nearly sympathetic toward the counterfeit sculptures of blackness, as they lament their lost true love.

“Old Runaway Jack” provides a rather tame celebration of black emancipation. The narrator apparently ran away from enslavement and now dwells on “freedom’s shore.” Though, in 1872, this could have referred to any number of places, including England, the United States, and Canada, it seems to be the nostalgic memory of an aged former slave, rather than a reference to the western world of the 1870s, when black slavery had been almost universally abolished.<sup>60</sup> His identification of himself as a man “from the land of cotton [...] where the white man **is** the massa and the poor black **is** the slave” (emphasis by the author) turns the clock back to a time before the abolition of slavery in the United States and after abolition in England.

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<sup>60</sup> In 1872, institutional enslavement in America existed only in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Brazil.

Antislavery songs in a marionette production playing in England or the United States in the 1870s would hardly qualify as revolutionary propaganda. But again, the author seems to have introduced a co-presence of the Foster-inspired Christy Minstrel music. The exaggerated clownish puppet blackface vestige of Runaway Jack plays in the same theatrical environment as the antislavery references in the song. Co-present in performance are the racialized degradations of grotesquely exaggerated puppet blackface and the advocacy of antislavery music. The Royal Marionettes produce a messy composition by integrating the disparate essences of puppetry, minstrelsy, and new American music.

The following song, “The Old Nigger,” is also for Old Snowball, guiding the audience back from tearful lamentations to the more simplistic sentiment of the happy black at the end of his life. With the exception of a touch of fondness drawn from Snowball’s prediction that he will soon be dead, this song captures the most stereotypical and problematic essences of the “plantation melodies.” It is a tale of a man who loves only to laugh, sing, and dance. Likewise, the farewell song “We’ll all Skedaddle” reassures the audience that the “darky’s life is a merry one, on dat you may rely,” and promises that the figures will collect their instruments and return to their homes in the clover. Coming full circle, the songs now reinforce the most racialized essence of minstrelsy.

The eidos of blackface puppetry inaugurated by the D’Arc/Bullock Royal Marionette minstrels was a curious combination of exaggerated and elaborate objects, and sentimentalized and sterilized songs. On the one hand, they are demonstrative of a more controlled and focused exaggeration, since sculpture allows greater freedom to

produce a stereotyped illusion than the combination of burnt cork and wig seen in live-actor minstrelsy. Moreover, the nonlinear body positioning seen in minstrel dances can be extended beyond the limits of the human body, the great advantage of puppetry being manipulated to represent blackness as even more “other.” By contrast, they make co-present the anti-hierarchical essences of Punch shows and some minstrel shows, in the likely candidate for Mr. Interlocutor. His outfit and top hat contrast with his exaggerated “negro” features, making him as much the clown as his foils, Tambo and Bones.

The script follows suit in its contradictions, disrupting a clear reading of the already troublesome puppets. The image of the marionettes creates expectations of clowning and humor. The first two songs provide some innuendo and amusing surprises, but in a tame and sentimental style derived from the essence of Stephen Foster’s music. The third and fourth songs nearly challenge the expectations of the audience. They provide no humor, calling upon the audience to shed a tear for the marionette whose love is beneath the ground, and sympathize for the aged puppet that longs for a world free of slavery. Yet the last numbers return to the most problematic essences of minstrelsy, the wide-eyed, happy “darkies” that will forever associate the form with the worst aspects of nineteenth-century racial hegemony. The performance makes co-present disparate essences of late nineteenth-century minstrelsy. The initial eidos of blackface puppetry, with its essence of exaggeration, tempered with sentimentality and humor, and the struggle for authenticity, provided a landscape for contradictory meanings.

It is unfortunate that Bullock did not include the spoken dialogue that must have been recited between songs, that no published version of the complete text exists, and that no descriptions of the dances employed by the Christy marionettes are extant. It would

be useful to compare the joke exchanges between the Interlocutor and the endmen, to better articulate who is the “butt” of this production. One can only speculate that, like many minstrel shows of the Christy type, the Interlocutor probably served as “straight man” to the always-jesting Tambo and Bones. One can further speculate that the absence of the limitations placed upon live actors by gravity allowed the puppeteers to exaggerate the impressive physical displays of minstrel dance beyond the usual live-actor limits. However, without extant descriptions, these cannot be analyzed.

In the final section of this chapter, the author will explore how the particular essence of blackface puppetry produced by the Royal Marionettes was circulated, as the company made its name in the United States. Bullock was, in many ways, an exceptional promoter, manipulating audience desires through an active advertising campaign that has left a large body of notices and descriptions in nineteenth-century American periodicals.

## To America

Bullock's company traveled to the United States in the second half of 1873, opening first at a now lost auditorium called Robinson Hall, in Union Square, New York City. The *New York Herald* carried an advertisement describing a "wonderful performance of the Original Christy Minstrels."<sup>61</sup> Bullock may have chosen to advertise part one as the "original" Christy Minstrels to distinguish his offering from the several English companies carrying the Christy namesake, supposing that his audience would prefer a marionette Christy inspired by the American originals. In any case, it was a bold, perhaps even humorously ironic move to promise the originals to an audience coming to see a marionette production that shared little with the Christys, apart from certain structural characteristics and a single song.

His strategy seems to have worked. One reviewer raved about the minstrels in particular:

"The ingenuity, the humor, and the flexibility of these performances are something astonishing, and to a community of wire-pullers must open up a vast vista of possibilities. The puppets not only play dexterously upon the bones and tambourine, and execute the sailor's hornpipe and a number of other difficult dances with a grace that is quite supernatural, but they sing and discourse most reasonably and humanly-at least they seem to. A more harmlessly laughable entertainment than they provide, it would be hard to conceive."<sup>62</sup>

*The Daily Graphic* praised the minstrels, "[who] give songs and choruses in true burnt cork abandon."<sup>63</sup> Another newspaper called the marionettes "a school for actors," seeing them as models not only for the technique of performance, but for professionalism, since

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<sup>61</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 163. Quotation from the *New York Herald* (8 September 1873).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 164. Quotation from *World* (9 September 1873).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 165. Quotation from *The Daily Graphic* (8 September 1873).

the figure, once “folded up preparatory to being stowed away in her box, never says a word about the hardship of her life or the impossibility of living on her salary.”<sup>64</sup> This initial success led to financially rewarding tours that prospered well into the summer of 1874, throughout the U. S.

Having encountered no objections to his ostentatious self-promotion (ostentatious since he was promising an “authentic” Christy Minstrel show that was both a counterfeit performed by marionettes and a freely adapted version of the Christy standard), Bullock continued to advertise his performances with similar zeal. When the company played in Maryland at the Baltimore Institute, the local paper carried a notice promising the Original Christy Minstrels.<sup>65</sup> In the beginning of 1874, an issue of Harrisburg’s *Daily Patriot* promised the Original Christy Minstrels.<sup>66</sup> In April 1874, the *Pittsburgh Gazette* offered its praise: “To see the ‘Manikans’ go through all the eccentric maneuvers of a minstrel troupe, sing, dance, play and talk glibly, is certainly a novelty--and better still, to hear the fresh hearty laughter of the juveniles, is of itself entertainment.”<sup>67</sup> Nearing the end of its American tour, the Royal Marionette notice for a showing at Platt’s Hall in San Francisco still proclaimed that they offered the originals.<sup>68</sup>

This might be merely an advertising technique, and not indicative of any attempt to bypass current trends and return to any “original” minstrel format. E. P. Christy had

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 165. Quotation from *The Daily Graphic* (15 September 1873).

<sup>65</sup> J. E. McDonough, “J. E. McDonough will inaugurate a short season on Tuesday,” *The Baltimore Sun* (2 February 1874).

<sup>66</sup> William John Bullock, “Odd Fellows Hall. We are Coming. Who? Why?” *The Daily Patriot* (14 February 1874).

<sup>67</sup> “Review: Academy of Music,” *The Pittsburgh Gazette* (14 April 1874): p. 4, col. 3.

<sup>68</sup> William John Bullock, “Platt’s Hall.” *San Francisco Bulletin* (2 July 1874).

committed suicide more than a decade earlier, and the popularity of the original Christy Minstrels was threatened by a number of other companies, many of which used the “Christy” name as a generic term for the style of performance. At the same time, minstrelsy in general was expanding at an impressive rate (despite a brief downturn during the panic of 1873-1874), black troupes were forming, and dozens of companies were rising and falling in the annals of minstrel shows. By promising a genuine Christy Minstrel show format, it seems Bullock was simultaneously being ironic (since these were marionette performances) and trying to compete by promising the originals.

Bullock’s tenure in the United States was brief. It was also unusually profitable, the monthly intake being about six thousand dollars, a remarkable sum in the 1870s. By June of 1874, he had passed the control of his American performances permanently over to partners John E. McDonough and Hartley A. Earnshaw. Interestingly, Bullock trusted the two with the Royal Marionette enterprise, despite having sued them over breaches of contract in mid-February. McPharlin speculates that Bullock was simply being a good businessman, and avoiding the difficult position of possibly having to compete with his own former puppeteers.<sup>69</sup> In the coming years, the McDonough and Earnshaw Royal Marionettes and their student, Daniel Meander, with his own Royal Marionette company, would play throughout the United States, even appearing briefly in Hawaii.

And so concludes the oddly circuitous cultural exchange that initially brought blackface to the puppet theatre. The contradictory aesthetics of Bullock’s Royal Marionettes began a lengthy tradition of blackface puppetry in the United States,

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<sup>69</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 183.

beginning with a wide variety of marionette minstrel shows, but rapidly disseminating into many sorts of puppetry and many genres of puppet plays. It comes next to trace the initial dissemination of minstrel marionettes throughout the United States, in the progress of the McDonough/Earnshaw, Daniel Meader, and Walter E. Deaves Royal Marionette Companies.

## Royal Marionettes Galore

McPharlin discovered a number of possible offshoots of Bullock's Royal Marionettes in the annals of the nineteenth-century stage, the earliest being Jerome Lubin's Original Imperial Marionettes and the Royal Oriental Marionettes. These companies provide a useful point of reference, illustrating the multitude of artists that Bullock/D'arc inspired. It seems that any organization that embraced the Royal Marionette label, whether composed of former Bullock puppeteers or independent artists, maintained the program established by Bullock, which included a minstrel show, a pantomime, and, usually, acrobatic feats.

The partners of the first company, Fred and Jerome Lubin, may have been puppeteers in Bullock's American interests, or they may simply have adopted a similar name as an advertising strategy.<sup>70</sup> This troupe appeared alongside a diorama of *London by Night* at P. T. Barnum's Colosseum (35<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, New York). No records of their performances exist after July 4<sup>th</sup> at the Colosseum, and no other evidence of their work exists in any other records. It is possible that the Lubins created a waxwork display of objects in the Royal Marionette tradition, for one of Barnum's many "oddity" showcases. Fred and Jerome Lubin may not, in fact, have been puppeteers, despite the titular correlation McPharlin notes.

More information exists for the Royal Oriental Marionettes, who played at Philadelphia's Wood Museum. They posted themselves as "just arrived from the Crystal Palace, London," and promised a performance "commenc[ing] with a complete troupe of

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<sup>70</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 183.

Christy Minstrels, with their repertoire of oddities, songs, and breakdowns[.]”<sup>71</sup>

McPharlin proposes a direct connection, that the puppeteers of the Royal Orientals were former artists in one of Bullock’s American companies.<sup>72</sup> A four-month legal battle (December 1873 to March 1874) had ensued between McDonough and Earnshaw, and Bullock and one Joseph McLaren, whom Bullock had endowed with full power of attorney. As evidence of McPharlin’s speculation, the situation was exacerbated by the existence of two full Royal Marionette companies that began touring in competition with each other.

During his legal dispute with McDonough and Earnshaw, Bullock fractioned his American interests into separate troupes. He left the troupe that first toured America to McDonough and Earnshaw, and placed McLaren in charge of a new production. McPharlin supposes Bullock intentionally created the McLaren company to drive his new competitors out of business.<sup>73</sup> Bullock’s second company disappeared by June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1874, likely leaving behind a number of trained puppeteers that either joined McDonough/Earnshaw or started their own troupes. Such offshoot artists may have formed the Royal Oriental Marionettes.

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<sup>71</sup> Amusements, *Public (Philadelphia) Ledger*, 4 July 1874.

<sup>72</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 183.

<sup>73</sup> McPharlin’s research into the related legal records suggests that the court case amounted to a series of events characterized by vanity countered with spite. Bullock ordered McLaren to sue his American partners for breach of contract; McDonough debased the cowardice of McLaren for announcing the suit while McDonough and Earnshaw were out of town. McLaren responded by confiscating their puppets with a warrant. McDonough sought the court’s injunction against him, that the Royal Marionettes might continue to play during the suit, then mocked McLaren during their marionette shows. An enraged Bullock gave McLaren permission to form a new troupe, which booked stages in New York and Philadelphia to which they suspected the McDonough company was planning to tour.

There are several companies that cannot be connected directly to either of the Bullock troupes, yet, when the specific menu can be identified, the playbills and reviews show them consistently including the minstrel show. A couple, John and Louisa Till, created a Royal Marionette company that toured variety theatres throughout the 1880s. A company called the Anglo-American Combination appeared in theatres from Seattle to Philadelphia. Their show, as described in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “began with the representation of *The Broken Trust*, concluding with an allegorical tableau. The followed various carnival performances [...] after which came Ethiopian delineations of an excessively comical description.”<sup>74</sup> A review in the *Philadelphia City Item* claimed: “The troupe far surpasses anything in the marionette line ever seen in the country. It is far superior to Bullock’s Royal Marionettes.”<sup>75</sup> These overlapping puppet events suggest a wide dissemination of the Royal Marionette formula in 1870s and 1880s American stage, and a firm adherence to the combination of minstrelsy and pantomime established by Bullock.

The identifiably direct Bullock offshoots appear to have exerted the most influence. Perry Dilley details the work of Walter Deaves and Daniel Meader, both of whom had been in the employ of the Bullock and former Bullock companies. Together, they demonstrate the post-D’Arc/Bullock eidos of blackface puppetry, as the form becomes reinterpreted in proximity to a greater aggregate of live minstrelsy, and through the perspective of an artist whose father introduced puppets into live minstrel production.

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<sup>74</sup> Qtd. in: Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 190.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 190.

### **Walter E. Deaves**

Edwin Deaves, Walter's son, described a family tradition of puppetry, beginning with his grandfather.<sup>76</sup> In 1819, at the ripe age of ten, the also-named Edwin Deaves saw a Boston puppet company, and spent the remainder of his life working as a traveling puppeteer. An important highlight of the family legend occurs around 1840, when Deaves introduced puppetry to a performance by the Virginia Minstrels.<sup>77</sup> The connection to Deaves would lead to a significant transformation of the eidos of blackface puppetry, filtered through his son, Walter, and the subsequent work of Daniel Meader.

While Deaves was in San Francisco, he met McDonough, and reportedly assisted him with production improvements. The seasoned puppeteer had much insight into the logistics of frontier production.<sup>78</sup> The most important result of their interaction was that a twenty-year-old Walter E. Deaves, Edwin's son, joined the McDonough company. Though by 1875 he had set out on his own, Deaves helped transform the eidos of blackface puppetry by introducing a less exaggerated, more sentimentalized frontality of blackface than that produced by Bullock/D'Arc.

Edwin's proximity to the Virginia Minstrels seems to have deepened Walter's interest in representing blackface, as the younger Deaves's productions included stagings of minstrel shows, as well as a specialty cakewalk danced by a puppet couple and

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<sup>76</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 185.

<sup>77</sup> McPharlin's report states that Deaves worked with the Virginia Serenaders in 1838, but no playbill records exist for a company called the Virginia Serenaders prior to 1841. The Virginia Minstrels, which were sometimes called the Virginia Serenaders, formed in 1841. See: Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1930), 42-49.

<sup>78</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 185.

selections from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>79</sup> This increase in the visibility of minstrel performance and minstrelsy-related performance exerted considerable influence on the future aesthetics of the Royal Marionettes, and transformed the eidos of blackface puppetry for the coming generations.

The Virginia Minstrels and their offshoots were staples of the nineteenth-century stage. Their playbill is one of the most archetypal representations of blackface players (see figure 8). According to Wittke, the Virginia Minstrels introduced the combination



Fig. 8. Front Cover of an 1863 playbill. Copied from Stephen Railton. "Index of Popular Entertainments." *American Literature Since 1865 Syllabus*. Richmond: University of Virginia, 2004. Electronic Source. Accessed 16 May 2004. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/enam312/1860ent2.jpg>.

of banjo, violin, bone castanets, and tamborine that would become a staple of the minstrel stage.<sup>80</sup> Their image suggests more extreme transformations of the performers faces (the wigs are especially gnarled and frizzy, their faces are heavily blackened). Yet, unlike

<sup>79</sup> John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 28.

<sup>80</sup> Carl Witke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1930), 45.

some images of minstrel players (refer to figure 1), this drawing is clearly meant to depict actual white players in blackface, since the exaggeration does not exceed the limits of what can be accomplished with live-actor makeup.

The connection suggests an important distinction between D'Arc and Deaves. While D'Arc was a waxworker who might never have seen a minstrel show and based his figures on a vague idea of blackface, Deaves was an artist whose mentor father worked with the Virginia Minstrels. The younger Deaves was likely exposed to many similar productions before he began making minstrel marionettes. It is probable that his version of blackface presence was more conditioned by the circulating images of live minstrelsy than those of D'Arc.

None of Deaves' blackface objects continue to exist. Apart from a very crude drawing in the *Puppetry Yearbook* 4 (1933), that merely shows a series of blurry objects on a puppet stage, the sole survivor of his work is the following skeleton marionette (see figure 9).<sup>81</sup> Though hardly representative of the artist's essence of blackface puppets, or even puppets depicting humans, its level of exaggeration is telling. This object, with its meticulously carved chest bones and articulated fingers, suggests a genuine human skeleton. If this marionette is any indication, Deaves may have introduced more detail, what might be called semi-realism (since the object is still a puppet, but a more human-like puppet), into blackface puppetry.

Deaves' use of the cakewalk was a curious act of foresight, given that this dance had only recently been introduced to the mainstream American stage. The dance

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<sup>81</sup> This early twentieth century journal was a publication of the Puppeteers of America, not to be confused with the currently publishing journal under the editorship of James Fisher. Both are variously referenced in this dissertation.

originated as the Chalk Line Walk in 1850, and became a regular part of minstrelsy in the late 1870s. Dance historians have traced its characteristic features to a multicultural



Fig. 9. Deaves Marionette Skeleton, 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unpublished collection photographs. Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1989.

composite of Native American Seminole (couples walking together ceremonially) and African Kaffir traditions (spines bent back, wrists flaccid). The tradition developed on plantations as a mockery of wealthy white society. Later, some plantation owners created contests for the dance displays, awarding the best performers with a cake, perhaps attempting to limit the subversive potential of black parody by establishing dominion over the dance.<sup>82</sup> The dance featured a high-kicking walk around (see figure 10). Deaves, more than any puppeteer before, attempted to integrate examples of imagined authentic African American life into puppet theatre.

He continued this effort by including selections from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Since the George Aiken adaptation and others, as well as *Uncle Tom's* many parodies, offshoots, and burlesques constituted perhaps the most popular stage entertainments in nineteenth America, it is not surprising that puppeteers would pounce on the opportunity.

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<sup>82</sup> See: Thomas L. Morgan, *From Cakewalks to Concert Halls* (Washington: Elliot & Clark Publishers, 1992).

Yet, one cannot easily reduce the significance of Deaves's choice to adopt the anti-slavery rhetoric and sentimentalized African American characters that constitute the essence of Stowe's novel. This is a clear departure from the puppet stage whose blackface representation had previously been dominated by grotesque mimics of minstrel characters. It was an essence containing potentially reduced exaggeration and increased sentimentality. Certainly, as even nineteenth-century newspapers noted, the central political problem of the piece had been settled, at least in the minds of most white audiences, nearly a decade earlier.<sup>83</sup> Yet, this was a new narrative for the puppet stage, even if the twenty-first century scholar might dismiss forward motion that was nearly twenty years behind the live stage.



Fig. 11. Poster of the 1870 Boston Comedy Company production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Billy Rose Theater Collection. New York: Library for the Performing Arts, 1870.

The 1874 Walter Deaves marionettes provided a number of co-presences for the Royal Marionettes. His carefully detailed images of the human body suggest an

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<sup>83</sup> See: George W. Lederer, "Uncle Tom's Cabin is not a Stage Classic," the *New York Times* (23 May 1897): 1; "Uncle Tom's Cabin Popular: How is it that the Play has Managed to Live so Long?" the *Washington Post* (29 Oct. 1899): 26. Many would be quick to note, as would I, that, while the issue of slavery as an institution was perhaps settled, enslavement was still a concern anywhere local vagrancy laws allowed blacks to be placed on legal chain gangs, as chronicled by numerous historians.

insistence on a kind of semi-realism that may have deepened the connection between live minstrelsy and the puppet stage. His father's work with the Virginia Minstrels, and Deaves's probable proximity to it and other live companies, would provide the young artist with an essence of minstrelsy that was less divided from the work of actual production companies. These co-presences could have embedded the eidos of blackface puppetry with a greater insistence that marionettes reflect the actual appearance of minstrel players than was evident in D'Arc's waxworks.

Likewise, his introduction of the new cakewalk, with its counter-hegemonic parody and closer relationship to African American performance, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with its, albeit obsolete and sentimentalized, more positive images of African American characters, may have challenged the English-born adaptations of minstrelsy represented in Bullock's production. These co-presences would expand the eidos of blackface puppetry to include references to at least imagined black culture and positive blackface characterization. While the D'Arc/Bullock program made loose brush strokes toward the pro-African American efforts of Stephen Foster's music, Deaves made this secondary essence central to his puppetry. While D'Arc/Bullock exclusively mimicked minstrelsy, Deaves mimicked both minstrel shows, and alternative blackface and imagined authentic representation.

The next step in the journey of the Royal Marionettes involves the work of Daniel Meader. This puppeteer's extant work demonstrates a synthesis of many of the co-presences in a new, less exaggerated essence of minstrelsy. Meader's work predicts the future efforts of puppeteers to more effectively approximate imagined authentic portraits of African American life.

## Daniel Meader

Sometime after 1874, Daniel Meader joined the McDonough/Earnshaw Royal Marionettes as a reader and singer. According to archivist and puppeteer Perry Dilley, Meader was an actor who discovered an interest in puppetry;

Meader became so fascinated by the marionettes that he came to the theatre early before performances and taught himself to operate them. One night, the chief puppeteer came in too drunk to work; Meader confessed his practice and offered to step into the breach. He was given the opportunity, and later was engaged as operator as well as singer.<sup>84</sup>

As further evidence of their collaborations, McPharlin found a playbill from the company's western tour in Meader's collection, which Dilley preserved.<sup>85</sup> Like most of the company's puppeteers, Meader eventually set out on his own, creating a Royal Marionette production around 1882.

Fully thirty objects from Meader's career exist in the archives of the Detroit Institute of the Arts. His particular contribution to blackface puppetry consists of a full showcase of minstrel marionettes and a number of puppets for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Examining these objects, one finds a more deliberate attempt to recreate live minstrel players than the grotesquely exaggerated wax figures of Lambert D'Arc. The *UTC* characters are similar to their minstrel colleagues, anticipating the future of blackface puppetry. Artists would begin to integrate a great variety of texts from blackface performance, blackface-inspired works, formal drama, and even black folklore. This started in the late nineteenth century with *Uncle Tom* and the cakewalk, but would later

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<sup>84</sup> Perry Dilley, "Daniel Meader's Marionettes," *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes* 1 (1930): 16.

<sup>85</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 193.

include such dramas as *The Emperor Jones*, and works as diverse as *Robinson Crusoe* and the “Uncle Remus” stories.

Similar to D’Arc, Meader integrates the formula of the minstrel show with the essence of nineteenth-century puppetry to achieve an essence of spirited innovation. Meader’s minstrel duo is attached to the same crossbar but connected by a separate set of ten strings, allowing the objects to be manipulated as a unit or separately (figure 12). Given the typical difference in size between Interlocutor and the endmen, it seems likely that the figure to the left/rear is Interlocutor, and the figure on the right/front is either Tambo or Bones. He carries no instrument, but his loose neck and angled right leg suggest that he has been designed to permit the “wild and grotesque manuevers” expected of Tambo.<sup>86</sup>

The puppeteer could easily attach a tambourine to the right arm of the object. It is less probable that these two figures were both Tambo and Bones, since the endmen usually stood on opposite sides. If this is Interlocutor and Tambo, or even Interlocutor and Bones, Meader’s strategy is to connect the two figures that the obligatory straight Interlocutor/joking endman featured in the typical minstrel format may be more easily presented.

Thus, Meader borrowed the essence of D’Arc’s Interlocutor, giving the marionette a corporeal form similar to that of the blackface player. Both are wide-eyed. Their heads are covered in fabric suggesting the tangled hair of the most racialized images of black persons. Meader has painted both objects coal black to indicate

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<sup>86</sup> Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1930), 140.

blackface makeup, rather than authentic African American skin. Each has an exaggerated large nose and ruddy mouth. Their expressions exhibit the only constructed difference. Interlocutor is serious; the endman is smiling. This embeds the corporeal form of the object with the essence of minstrel production. One object is the straight man; the other is the comic.

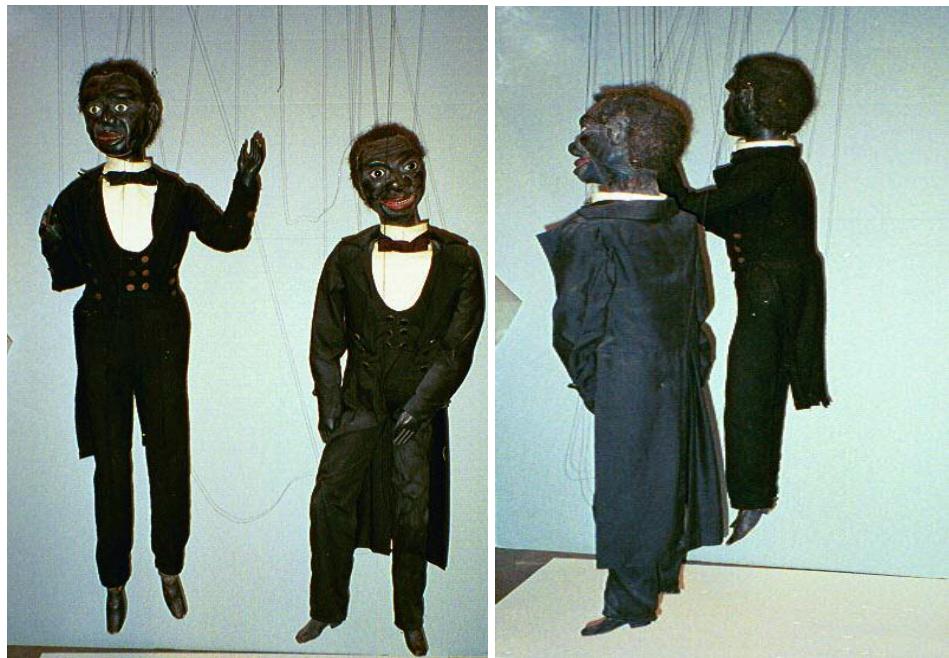


Fig. 12. Front and left side views of a dual Meader minstrel marionette. Likely candidates for Interlocutor (left/rear) and Tambo (right/front). Photographs by the Author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts.

The observer will immediately note differences between Meader's approach to blackface puppetry and that of D'Arc (see figure 5). D'Arc creates a series of images based on a messy composite of minstrel influences (Negro endmen in work clothes, an Interlocutor in an American flag costume). Meader focuses the aesthetics on the essence of clearly standardized minstrel lines. Their costumes are the formal tails and wide collars characteristic of minstrel players. Their mouths, rather than grotesquely exaggerated funnels, are delicately detailed portraits of the reddened minstrel lips, which,

when open, reveal the sparkling white teeth described by minstrelsy critics. They wear long dark slacks and have carved shoes, rather than the unarticulated wooden feet and knickers of D'Arc's objects. Their closely cropped wigs are less exaggerated than the variety of hairstyles on D'Arc's marionettes. Following the side view of the Interlocutor, one sees that the object's torso is offset from the upper legs by approximately forty-five degrees, and the lower legs are curved toward the feet, resetting the original torso line. This characteristic curvilinearity suggests the nonlinear dance exhibitions of minstrelsy, delineated from its fictional African American influence. These subtle differences in sculpture and costume design suggest a closer connection to the Virginia Minstrels that inspired Walter Deaves, and an aesthetic that filtered through his work to Meader.

Similarly, Meader introduces the minstrel band to further borrow on the essence of minstrel traditions. According to Wittke: "Whenever the minstrels came to town, their arrival was heralded by a street parade, in which the "silver" or "gold cornet band," gorgeously attired in colorful coats and trousers, big brass buttons and striking hats, led the procession through the streets of town to the theatre."<sup>87</sup> A drum major, bugle players, and snare drums were featured in this musical exhibition, which ended with a "walk around" on the stage of the playhouse, as final preparation for the inevitable cry of "Gentlemen, be Seated!"

The first marionette in question is a snare drum player, complete with his instrument (see figure 13). Meader's builds a musician marionette using the essence of live minstrel bands, but adds a co-presence from his Punch plays. This object maintains the close connection to minstrelsy's garments, makeup, and nonlinear spine shown in

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 145.

figure 12. His hair is slightly higher than the previous, perhaps a take on the “fright wigs” used by some minstrel players.<sup>88</sup> Yet a very surprising characteristic of the object



Fig. 13. Meader Minstrel Drummer. Photographs by the Author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts.

is its sharply triangular eyebrows and forward jutting chin. This may be an accidental variation caused by the unpredictability of sculpture, but if it is an intentional variation, it is curiously similar to the sharp triangular upper eyelids and jutting chin of Meader’s Punch.<sup>89</sup> Meader may have carved the drummer’s head to capture the same mischievous spirit of Mr. Punch. When the head of this minstrel player tilted toward the audience, and

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>89</sup> John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 23.

its bright white eyes and teeth sparkled in the stage lights, the audience would be reminded of Mr. Punch's antics. They would observe a theatrical frontality (the Snare Drum Marionette) that exhibits both the essence of minstrelsy and the essence of Punch and Judy, co-present in the present production. It is a clever synthesis of influences. Its co-presence has the potential to undermine the racialism at the heart of minstrelsy essence, by adding the anti-hierarchical essence at the core of Punch and Judy.

The next object, a bugle player, further suggests that Meader took the privilege of experimenting with minstrelsy's essence (figure 14). Meader sets it apart from other



Fig. 14. Meader Bugle Player. Photographs by the author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts Collection.

minstrel musicians in his troupe, by giving this object a gold, emerald, and maroon jacket. Certainly, this suggests the standard garb of the marching minstrel player. Also, it may simply be a coincidence that this object is decorative where the others are not. Meader may only have employed this marionette in the walk around, thus not requiring an exchange of the marching coat for a pair of tails. Or, when Meader packed up the

puppets for the last time, he may simply have dressed this object in its marching costume, rather than keep the puppet dress uniform in storage. For any number of reasons, this extant object may mislead the observer.

However, if Meader deliberately dressed exclusively this puppet in the colorful garb, then he is setting this puppet apart, since the other puppets are simply wearing the typical tails, white shirt, and slacks. Rather than suggesting the marching minstrel players of a typical show prologue, this object implies a deliberate connection to the Zip Coon role, with his elaborate costume (see figure 15). Indeed, the broad lapels and



Fig. 15. Zip Coon. Copied from: Michael O'Malley. "The Minstrel Show." *Center for History and New Media*. Fairfax, VA: George Mason University, 2003. Electronic Source. Accessed: 17 May 2004.  
<http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/jackson/minstrel/minstrel.html>.

hourglass figure do suggest the stock type. If the perceived connection is a correct one, then, despite an overall tendency to recreate the standard minstrel show, Meader could not resist drawing on such peripheral aesthetics as Zip Coon and Punch to create marionettes that were uniquely his own. Alternatively, the objects may represent the indubitable multiplicity of art, a field where many different influences merge in artistic co-presence, whether the artist is cognizant of her/his multiplicitous influence or not.

The essence of both D'Arc and the Deaves family's work exerts its influence, then, in Meader's present puppets. Encouraging a marionette aesthetic that is closer to the live minstrel players, Meader expands the eidos of blackface puppetry, introducing essences that are less exaggerated and vaguely representative of the human form. Meader's Uncle Tom puppet integrates a sentimental quality appropriate to the drama with the characteristics of minstrel production (figure 16).

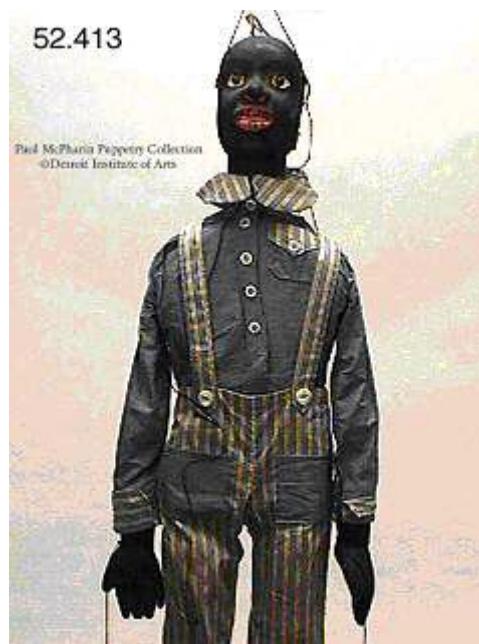


Fig. 16. Meader Uncle Tom. Unpublished Collection Photographs. Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1998.

This puppet integrates the broad collar and sharp-lined lips suggestive of minstrelsy, but wears the detailed patchwork clothes of a rustic character in sentimental melodrama. His head is bare, suggesting a bald, human head rather than a knotted minstrel wig. His eyes, though wide and pure white like Meader's Interlocuter, have slightly raised pupils, which make the eyes seem to peer, contrasting with the dull, flat pupils of the others.

The Meader Uncle Tom suggests the eidos of blackface puppetry for the coming decades. As puppeteers branched into plays and showcases that depicted human beings in less clownlike ways, and the decreased need for humorous exaggeration logically required less exaggerated representations of human beings, the puppeteers constructed frontalities for their characters through an integration of the present narratives and the co-presence of minstrelsy, the form that had produced blackface puppetry. Thus, black characters on the largely white-created puppet stage would continue to be, whether being manipulated during a minstrel show or not, a kind of blackface, constructed fictions of black Americans based only vaguely on the realities of black life.

In the following chapter, the work of David Lano will serve to deepen understanding of these conflicting essences. This puppeteer never enjoyed the visibility of playing at the major houses occupied by the Royal Marionettes. However, as Paul McPharlin notes:

The Lano family might have been typical of those scores of puppeteers whose names were allowed to vanish because they were not committed to the print of playbills or newspapers [...] but they were far from unimportant. Like other small shows on the frontier, their value as an entertainment in remote places was implicit in the delight of the audiences who saw them. In the theatre-hungry backwoods they were the theatre.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, a discussion of his family's puppetry will serve to articulate the influence of blackface puppetry in the frontier, and the differences between its interpretation by traveling showpeople who have no resources but their own industry, and the well-financed companies of the Bullock Royal Marionettes and their comrades. At the same time, Lano's eighty-year career will carry the essay into the twentieth century, when the

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<sup>90</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays Inc, 1949), 201; 220.

history of puppetry, for whatever reasons, sees the gradual disappearance of minstrel shows, and burgeoning examples of puppet productions derived from black folklore and serious stories depicting black Americans.

## **Chapter III: David Lano**

### **The Essence of Blackness in the World of David Lano**

Paul McPharlin's *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History* and David Lano's *A Wandering Showman, I*, describe the itinerant puppetry activities of the Italian-American David Lano and his family. It is serendipitous that Lano wrote his autobiography sometime between 1945 and 1957. Probably owing to the more racially conscious climate of the 1950s, Lano discusses race more than any other puppeteer of the nineteenth-century. While researchers can only speculate on the perceived essence of theatrical blackness in the minds of D'Arc, Bullock, Deaves, or Meader, by examining their creations, Lano addresses the subject directly. He seems to respect African Americans, and perceives them as human beings worthy of fair treatment. At the same time, his views are embedded with, what Husserl calls, an "apperception" of otherness. This perceived otherness is not a necessary component of the experiences he cites in his memoirs. Rather, it is an apperception that reconstitutes the essences of experiences after the fact.

An entry point into Lano's attitude toward his African American associates occurs in a segment deleted from the published draft of his memoirs. Reflecting on his internship with his grandparents, Lano describes an incident when a "loose cannon" in the audience injured an African American stagehand. In both the published and unpublished versions of *A Wandering Showman, I*, Lano describes an incident vaguely similar to a scene from the Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein musical *Showboat*.

I spotted a big mountaineer who followed the rope-dancing with attention so rapt that I was sure he had never before seen a show [...] he next watched the puppet show. He was mesmerized. In a sense he began living out the play, as part of it. I began to feel uneasy, and sure enough, there was good reason why I should be

uneasy, for when Mephistopheles came in at the end to carry Faustus away from Hell, the big mountaineer leaped to his feet, yelled “*Git back you devil!*” whipped [sic] out a pistol and *whang*, sent a bullet at the innocent puppet. The audience went straight into a panic, scrambling for the exit. The bullet [...] missed the puppet, but lodged in the shoulder of one of our Negroes helping to hang up the puppets as they came off the stage [...] we bound up our man’s wound as best we could, and sent for a doctor, but we could not find a local sawbones to treat him. The white doctors would not treat a Negro.<sup>91</sup>

In the unpublished draft, Lano dedicated a portion of text to reflecting on African Americans in theatre:

At Luray we found a Negro doctor who extracted the bullet, and our man was soon well again. But none of the Negro gang could be induced to help us at the rack after that, especially if the play was *Dr. Faust*. While there were Negro actors in those days, I never encountered a colored man who was able to handle puppets. Perhaps none had been given the chance to do it. Only within the past two years have I heard of Negro puppet companies, which were under government sponsorship. But in puppet classes which I myself have recently taught I have found colored boys and girls who were good at manipulating, and I hope that the present generation will see good plays written and produced by Negroes.<sup>92</sup>

In the published version, Lano omitted those reflections. The finished passage reads:

At Luray we found a Negro doctor. He extracted the bullet from our man’s arm. The wound soon healed, but none of the Negro gang could be induced after that to help us at the marionette rack, especially if *Doctor Faustus* was playing.<sup>93</sup>

The above quotations reveal Lano’s tendency to present himself as an advocate for African American artists. While this most telling reflection did not survive the editing process, glimmers of such advocacy appear throughout the published source.

At first glance, Lano’s work seems to contradict his attitude. His plays isolate

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<sup>91</sup> David Lano, *A Wandering Showman, I* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 1957), 6. The incident recalls the more famous scene in *Showboat*, where a drunken gunman tries to defend the honor of a heroine in a play-within-a-play.

<sup>92</sup> David Lano, *A Wandering Showman, I*, unpublished manuscript (ca 1957), 12.

<sup>93</sup> David Lano, *A Wandering Showman, I* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 1957), 7.

blackface characters for ridicule; his puppets reflect the most egregious stereotyping evident in nineteenth-century puppetry. A rudimentary response might hold that Lano's worldview clearly distinguishes between artistic portrayals of black characters, and the actual African Americans with whom Lano lived and worked. Some of Lano's artistic choices could be explained as an intellectual divergence between stage blackface and the reality of black life. Others can be identified merely as crude, for the audiences to which the showman often played were as satisfied by medicine shows or chair balancing, as by elaborate productions with Lano's innovative "trick" marionettes.

Yet, there is more at work in Lano's career. The puppeteer's approach to "Negro puppets" and "Negroes" demonstrates an attempt to exoticize other races, to set the art and culture of nonwhites apart from Euroamerican "white" culture. In this sense, Lano is a kind of folklorist, though in the most hackneyed sense of the term. During a visit to a Native American reservation, he witnessed a rod puppet show that, according to him: "handed down from [...] the days when the Indian's features were actually flatter than they are now, as were the faces of the Indian marionettes." He was a friend of Harry Houdini. The great escape artist told him of an "Oriental sketch" where a sultan had a famous magician behead his favorite wife, then ordered him, on pain of death, to restore her to life. This sketch found its way into the puppeteer's repertoire. Lano fancies himself a cataloguer of the exotic, of ethnic performance traditions.

Thus, when contributing to blackface puppetry, he creates a fiction of "the Negro" in his tales of his encounters with them, and that translates into a radically "othered" interpretation of the blackface puppet. He chooses John Payne Collier's text of *Punch and Judy*, which draws the blackface puppet back to its roots in the pre-Jim Crow African

servant. He produces a “Friday” for his shows, which integrates minstrelsy costume and faux-African features. He does not approach a deliberate effort to detail unique African American culture consistent with folklore studies. However, he shares in the spirit, believing himself an advocate for African American individuals and an explorer of “black” culture.

The previously-cited three block quotations reveal Lano’s proximity to African Americans, resulting from his family’s involvement in slavery. Lano was a third generation Italian American puppeteer. His grandfather, Alberto Lano, immigrated to the United States in 1825. He built a small plantation near Leesburg, Virginia, and purchased an unrecorded number of enslaved black workers, at least some of whom stayed as free employees after the Civil War. These African Americans worked as general servants for the plantation, and several traveled with Alberto’s marionette and circus production (including trained bears and rope feats) during show seasons. By the time David apprenticed to his grandfather, at the ripe age of ten, the family had two full productions running simultaneously, and had toured from Alaska to South America. Between the family’s plantation and its marionette shows, Lano was exposed to African Americans to a far greater extent than were the members of the Royal Marionette companies.

His early experiences shaped his view of the race as fellow human beings, but also his apperception of the culture group as quite different from whites. In the block quotes, Lano describes a concerted effort to save their black stagehand, their “man.”<sup>94</sup> They submit to the standard of segregation in Virginia, but search actively for a black

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<sup>94</sup> David Lano, *A Wandering Showman, I* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 1957), 7.

doctor. Lano then depicts the black stagehands as a timid, perhaps even superstitious, breed, unwilling to work the marionette rack again, at least during productions of *Doctor Faustus*.<sup>95</sup> Despite a family background in slavery, Lano's understands fairness and compassion for African Americans, but also understands their cultural essence as curiously supersitious. Though there are no indications that Lano exposed himself to European literature, his apperceptions of African American timidity and superstition recall the racialism of Victorian writing.<sup>96</sup>

Lano continued to represent his African American collaborators as curiously uncomfortable with marionettes. His longtime partner, Arthur (last name unstated), was a younger African American male who, despite assisting with many of Lano's projects, refused to "touch [the puppets] for love or money."<sup>97</sup> Though they fascinated Arthur, Lano maintains his friend feared the marionettes (63). A modern scholar might object to his assumption that superstition is a negative or irrational aspect of behavior. However, Lano is not condemning his partner, but asserting his trademark apperception of black culture.

His many encounters with African Americans further demonstrate Lano's resistance to outright racial hatred coexisting with his exoticizing view of the race. He notes a racist deacon who tried to encourage a crowd to pay Lano for his services, by

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>96</sup> For a cursory discussion of colonial ideology in Victorian literature see: Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Race," *Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

<sup>97</sup> David Lano, *A Wandering Showman, I* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 1957), 63. For the remainder of this section, I will use parenthetical documentation for the lengthy selections from this source.

reminding them he was “sho’ ‘nough white” (16). He willingly worked for time in the employ of an African American circus proprietor, named only Mr. Williams. In Scotland Neck, North Carolina, his company discovered the charred corpse of an African American man chained to a poll, a sign warning all not to touch the body, clearly the victim of a public lynching. Fearing for their African American workers, the company stayed on the rented lot until they could safely flee town in the night (227). In another town where a recent lynching had occurred, Lano successfully fought alongside his African American partners when the circus was attacked at night.

Yet, even when he describes defending the lives of his partners, he characterizes them as a culture group. Sometimes he uses negative terms, such as during his description of the aforementioned battle, when he claims that the “badly frightened negroes” reduced the effectiveness of their “circus army” (237). But whether positive or negative, he describes members of the African American race in contrast to white, from the “knappy headed black man” who drove him to an Atlanta show (84), to an unusually captivated audience of “peculiar [looking] old mammies” and “simple-hearted male Negroes” in Shreveport (56).

Most telling are his descriptions of the performance activities of African Americans, which show a romantic nostalgia for such beauties as “their rich music” (57). In New Orleans, he worked for, and had a brief flirtation with, a widowed night-club owner “with a trace of Negro blood” (92).<sup>98</sup> Memphis Kittie booked Lano’s puppet show as part of an elaborate evening of entertainment. While there, the puppeteer witnessed several performances by African American artists:

A colored quartet now sang. They were followed by a Negro with a real plantation banjo—not a mongrel four-string affair, but a handmade instrument with a cheese-box rim, five strings and a skin head attached by a twisted catgut. The strings, too, were catgut [...] the performer, an old cornfield darky, could really play. He twanged out combinations of old melodies in which you could hear jungle tones and rhythms such as brought witch doctors and tribal dancers to mind. I thought he was great. (91)

The comparison between a definitively American musical tradition, the banjo, and the tribal culture of Africans is a very telling fantasy of black Americans. “Great” performances by African Americans are characterized by their uniqueness. While a true folklorist might trace characteristics of African American culture to African civilizations, Lano completely overlooks the American influences, seeing his black colleagues as talented, fascinating, and ultimately foreign.

In the tradition identified by Edward Said, Lano articulates a false-African, racialized orientalism. As Said has famously argued, the orientalist position is not necessarily the result of correspondence with the reality of the Orient, but “despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a ‘real’ Orient.”<sup>99</sup> Lano focused most of his orientalizing efforts on the essence of African American culture. In accordance with Husserl’s notion of apperception, Lano introduces notions that shape his experiences with African Americans beyond the particularities of the experiences themselves. The essence of blackness, in Lano’s case, is neither a direct result of the representation of fictional blacks in minstrelsy or puppetry, nor the vague result of a combination of theatrical impressions and sentimental advocacy. Rather it came from an intellectual

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<sup>98</sup> Lano adored her, claiming it was the first time he had ever thought of getting married, but, according to him, “no man ever won her love.”

<sup>99</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 5.

effort to adapt his memory of specific experiences to suit his orientalist leanings.

Yet there is an enigma present in this puppet orientalism. His view of African Americans amalgamated with the mountebank spirit of his varied performance experiences. From his first day as an independent showman, he determined to personify the pitchman. His wide travels, jobs in medicine shows and circuses, and his cabalistic approach to puppetry's secrets, as surveyed in the next section, had a profound impact on his notions of the purpose of shows. All contribute to a belief that shows must be innovative rather than richly detailed, and must constantly catch the audience's eyes and ears, rather than serve up a profound artistic experience. The two apperceptions unite in blackface puppetry that is both crude and clever, manipulating the pecieved, or rather apperceived otherness of the black body for artistic expediency.

## The Career of David Lano

While three generations of the family (Alberto, his son Oliver, and Oliver's son David) toured both North and South America for nearly one hundred and fifteen years, most of the available evidence details David Lano's activities from 1884, when he was apprenticed to his grandparents at the age of ten, to 1900, when he settled in Flint, Michigan, working winters in automobile factories and summers with the John Robinson circus.<sup>100</sup> Lano exhibited his marionette shows from Virginia to Utah, from North Dakota to Louisiana, at fairs, schools, seminaries, hotels, Native American reservations, and ranches, independently or in association with circuses, museums, and medicine shows. The puppets presented adaptations of such standard late nineteenth-century texts as: *William Tell*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and, of course, *Punch and Judy*.

Lano learned much from his parents, grandparents, and own professional experiences. He learned to rely on clever, but fairly simple performances. He learned to guard his secrets as might a magician. He learned that formal theatres were troublesome places, where other artists might steal your ideas.

The artist's comprehension of the essence of "puppeteer" is sometimes as useful to understanding a puppeteer's art as her/his understanding of the essences of specific influences. In Lano's particular case, the essence of being a career puppeteer was a romantic, nomadic, and, in some ways, cabalistic, life. Like his notion of black culture,

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<sup>100</sup> Both Lano manuscripts fail to mention the names of Alberto's "Danish" first wife or "Portugese" second wife, and only vaguely indicate the contributions of any of the Lano wives. As all four Lano spouses, Grandmothers, Mother, and David's own wife, toured variously with their husbands, their contributions to the art may have been considerable.

this essence of the puppeteer may be mainly apperception rather than perception. In some cases, he seems to rationalize his experiences beyond the scope of the experiences themselves. This more cynical explanation for his romantic essence of frontier puppeteering must be added to the discussion here.

Lano understood from his earliest years that the puppeteer is one who plays to audiences nearly starved for entertainment. He describes how his grandparents attracted an audience at night, describing frontier folk that were relatively easy to please:

The yellow flames of our flares lit the tent so brightly that they soon attracted crowds as any bright light draws insects [...] we had no other footlights or border lights. The tallow-pot lights helped to keep the marionette strings invisible, but they made the little people themselves none too clear to the eye. Our audiences were not critical of such matters as lighting.<sup>101</sup>

When Lano started presenting his own shows, he remembered these lessons and provided his audiences with simple treats for their money. On November 7, 1887, he made a small sum by performing a quick acrobatic act on the street. With only a chair and a carpet, he drew a crowd by assuring passersby that he was neither an orphan nor a beggar, neither a runaway nor an ailing child, but a showman who had “something real to show them.”<sup>102</sup>

After four passes of the hat, he did a tumbling routine. Then, the thirteen-year-old requested another ninety-five cents for “the greatest feat ever performed by a boy-a feat that grown men, after trying for years, have been unable to do.”<sup>103</sup> The exploit proved to be a one-hand balance on the chair. Lano then promptly rolled his carpet and departed. This ostentatiously framed, but artistically limited offering marked the beginning of

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<sup>101</sup> David Lano, *A Wandering Showman, I* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 1957), 6.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 34.

Lano's solo career.

One of the last incidents in his career prior to 1900 demonstrates an attempt to seize on the growing popularity of movies. While touring in Wisconsin, Lano presented a shadow puppet performance designed to capitalize on interest in the motion picture. His description warrants quoting at length:

Word reached me that the movies were now a reality [...] and nickelodeons [...] were springing up in the big cities. I worked up a shadowgraph show which I called animated pictures, and presented a playlet of a ship that caught fire and burned to the waterline. Its crew escaped by small boat while the beam of a lighthouse flashed on and off and the bell tolled. We charged fifty cents admission to this show, guaranteeing to each purchaser the value of his ticket in medicines. (I was carrying a supply of Salvino remedies at that time.) The show proved so attractive to the public that I had to write to Salvino for more remedies.<sup>104</sup>

This simple storyline is markedly similar to descriptions of the early nickelodeons. Patrons would pay a nickel for a mere thirty seconds of a boxing match or a sunrise. Lano's choice to present a puppet variation on early film seems a clever marketing technique for a challenging field. Like any superlative mountebank, Lano adapts his performance to the immediate needs of a frontier audience. According to his essence of the puppeteer, Lano models himself on the showman, the mountebank, or the carnival barker. The puppeteer is an artist who gives his audience clever tricks that fascinate and surprise. That which is clumsily referred to as "substance" is of secondary significance, if any at all.

Indeed, his work with medicine shows and circuses furthered deepened his reliance on simple innovation. Though the medicine shows with which he worked exist today as merely references in his memoirs, the mere fact that he worked them is telling.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 174.

The medicine show was ostensibly a promotional project for the medicines themselves.

However, the incredible body of extant ephemera, from broadsides to ticket stubs,

suggests that medicine shows were as much an entertainment as an advertisement.<sup>105</sup>

Lano's experiences with these wandering charlatans must have shown him that some audiences are so starved for entertainment that they will gather for the mere novelty of seeing the mountebank's polished pitch.

The circuses with which he played were, like all such entertainments, equally obsessed with novelty. Early in his career, Lano presented shows with the Great Wallace circus, which would later become one-half of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, a



Fig. 17. Edward J. Kelty. "Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus (Group Portrait)." *Inside Out: 50 Years of Collecting*. Rochester: Century Flashlight Photographers, 1931. Copied from: Janice Madhu. "Edward J. Kelty." *Photography Collections Online*. Rochester: George Eastman House, 2002. Electronic Source. Accessed 8 June 2004.  
[http://www.geh.org/fm/inside-out/htmlsrc/m197500630001\\_ful.html](http://www.geh.org/fm/inside-out/htmlsrc/m197500630001_ful.html).

subsidiary of Barnum and Bailey. As a contemporary photograph indicates, the Hagenbeck-Wallace circus integrated minstrelsy, sideshows, novelty entertainments, and

<sup>105</sup> See: Ann Anderson, *Snake Oil, Hustlers, and Hambones: The American Medicine Show* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 2000).

human oddities. Like many of its kind, the Great Wallace Circus survived on novelty, always seeking to provide its spectators with a new freak, clown, or specialty act. The Lano blackface puppets would have fit nicely.

Toward the end of his career, Lano worked regularly with the John Robinson Circus (during the summers when factories in his chosen hometown of Flint, Michigan were closed), which a contemporary resident of Georgia remembered as having the only elephant with ivory tusks to tour there.<sup>106</sup> Its ten big-tent shows featured a variety of novelties, and likely contributed to Lano's interest in novelty and variety, which became quite evident when the puppeteer produced his own shows.

Lano also shared in his family's jealous efforts to guard "the tricks of the trade," which according to Lano, were characteristic of a fairly standard mentality among early puppeteers. The essence of the puppeteer captured here is a cabalistic one. Lano has joined a kind of secret society of magic makers.<sup>107</sup> This is evidenced by his description of an early experience in a "real theater," which occurred in Ronceverte, West Virginia, in the mid-1880s:

[Grandfather] had been lured by a fraternal organization to Ronceverte, a town big enough to boast of a real theatre. Putting the marionettes on a regular stage brought a problem – how to keep the public from finding out how the marionettes worked; that was important in those days. Sometimes the curious would even bribe stagehands in order to get a closer look at the marionette apparatus [sic ... troupes] guarded the secrets of their craft jealously, believing that the mystery of the operation of the marionettes increased their attractiveness [...] In regular theatres the [sic] strings which enable the little people to be actresses and actors

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<sup>106</sup> Qtd. in: Albert S. Pendleton, Notes of the Lowndes County Historical Society (1973).

<sup>107</sup> I use magic makers rather than magicians to distinguish between the notion of theatrical magic broadly conceived and the more narrow term "magic," referring to ostensibly superhuman or supernatural feats performed by way of theatrical devices. At no point in Lano career did he ever call himself a magician, nor indicate that he was ever employed to perform "magic tricks."

are concealed by a “mask” [...] as a further precaution in Ronceverte, we propped up the masks with slats. Our precautions were well-taken.<sup>108</sup>

This quotation reveals a peculiar moment in the history of American puppetry. Many chroniclers agree that nineteenth-century puppeteers guarded their secrets as they traveled about.<sup>109</sup>

There are at least two obvious reasons why puppeteers would wish to protect their secrets. The economic security of having one’s own unique theatrical product has been a goal of theatre artists for as long as they have depended on a paying audience. At the same time, the artist wishes to protect not merely her/his pocketbook, but the magic of the theatrical event. If audience members know her/his secrets, the puppetry will not have the same impact.

What is most fascinating about Lano is not that he took the same precautions to protect his family’s secrets as his ancestors, but how he explains the strategy. For Lano, it is not that he is protecting his economic security or his theatrical wizardry, but that he is embodying the essence of the puppeteer “in those days.” Becoming a puppeteer means becoming a sort of object-theatre magician. Magicians protect their secrets.

Certainly, Lano may simply be rationalizing his material circumstances for the purpose of enriching his autobiography. In the words of Bourdieu, human intellect

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<sup>108</sup> David Lano, *A Wandering Showman, I* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 1957), 23.

<sup>109</sup> Certainly, this narrative will need to be reconsidered in future studies, as it may be more colloquial than factual. It is surveyed in: Marjorie Hope Batchelder, *The Puppet Theatre Handbook* (London: H. Jenkins Ltd., 1947); Paul McPharlin, *Aesthetic of the Puppet Revival* (Detroit: Wayne University, 1938); Paul McPharlin, *Puppets in America 1739 to Today* (Birmingham, MI: Pharlin, 1936).

“continually transforms necessity into virtue.”<sup>110</sup> It is possible, and likely, that his material circumstances, both economic and artistic, became translated into the essence of the nineteenth-century puppeteer. Whatever its foundations, Lano’s belief that a true puppeteer protects his secrets led him to build his career around a body of carefully guarded puppet tricks.

Thus, both Lano and McPharlin note how, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, several puppeteers published books and articles revealing the “tricks of the trade” to American consumers. This process culminated in the shows of Tony Sarg, who often showed audiences the construction techniques he used to make the puppets and the strategies he used to manipulate them in performance. A few American puppet theatre historians (McPharlin, Batchelder) have identified this shift as generating a change in the popular attitudes toward puppetry. After the 1920s, puppetry circulated far more widely in schools and community fairs, and traveling companies could no longer depend on the novelty of their work for financial reward. Given Lano’s place in this history, as one of the old cabal, he would wish to protect his simple, unrefined tricks.

Lano’s habitual simplicity and desire for innovation combined with his exoticized portrait of African Americans, and generated his own essence for blackface puppetry. In the next section, close examination of Lano’s single extant blackface puppet and the records of his plays will reveal his contribution to the eidos of blackface puppetry. Lano’s quasi-folklorist perspective encourages him to break with the textual practices that resulted from minstrelsy’s influence on puppet theatre. It also produced a much

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<sup>110</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Translated by R. Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 410.

more idealized ethnic version of the blackface puppet. This intersects with his professional values, which encouraged him to stay ahead of the competition through innovative tricks and style. The exoticizing may originate in a disassociated fascination with “Negroes,” but it becomes a convenient tool for financial gain.

## **David Lano's Work**

Lano's extant puppets are evidence of his dedication to innovation. He continues the artistic development of the late nineteenth century in his skeleton marionette for the "Ballad of Jesse James." His standard puppet uses no less than eleven strings, and parts of the torso, head, and arms are not connected to the rest of the puppet. During the "Ballad of Jesse James," Lano's skeleton puppet could dance and sing, then break into pieces when James was shot, then reform for the final chorus. His Chinese ball-juggler is a marionette whose hands disconnect to allow the balls to shift from left to right. By shifting the arm strings left and right, and gently bouncing the object up and down, the puppeteer causes the wooden "balls" to bounce in tiny circles, giving the impression of juggling (see figure 18). Lano describes another such marionette as a "lady into acrobat" trick puppet. The marionette seems to cover its acrobat pants with a skirt while suspended. The controller manipulates the figure by two sets of strings, each holding it from a different side. By raising his left arm over his right arm, the controller can easily transform "lady" puppet into "acrobat" puppet. By raising his right arm over his left, the controller can switch the figure back. With each vertical flip of the object, the "skirt" becomes the shirt of the acrobat or the shirt of the acrobat becomes the skirt of the "lady."

Looking closely at the "Chinese Ball Juggler," the scholar sees that its essence fulfills Lano's apperceptions of the essence of puppetry. It is a clever trick of puppet illusion. The puppet will not juggle the object. Indeed, the ball will never touch its wooden hands. Rather, the controller's precise manipulations will make the painted globe twist and bounce between them, giving the impression of juggling motion. At the same time, one can immediately notice the crude articulation of the figure itself. While

Lano introduces a clever trick that would captivate audiences unfamiliar with the craft of puppetry, the object's head is uneven and its fingers are only vaguely articulated. The outfit appears to reflect some sort of Chinese robe, but the fabric lacks decoration and is unevenly attached. Finally, the hair is nothing more than a painted line high on the irregular scalp. Lano's strategy is to focus on a few interesting manipulation techniques,

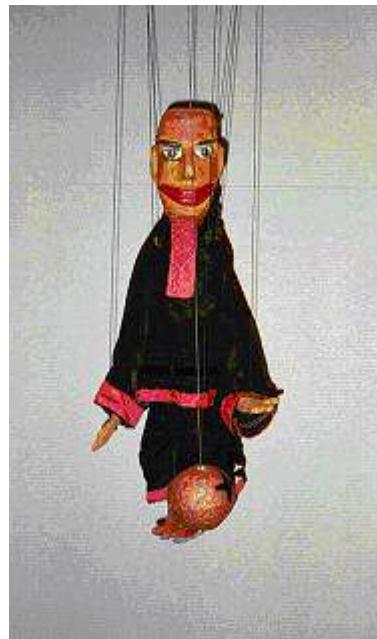


Fig. 18. "Chinese Ball Juggler." Photograph by the Author. Detroit Institute of the Arts Collection.

but otherwise spend little time perfecting the design of the figure. Its simple genius is the product of a puppeteer who believed that clever tricks were the essence of the frontier puppeteer's craft.

The single extant blackface puppet in Lano's collection is described as a "Lano Friday, dressed as a Negro minstrel with a gardenia in his lapel." It is a crude and wildly exotic image. Perhaps the most conspicuous feature is the unusually exaggerated hair. Lano draws on the characteristic fright wig of minstrelsy to produce a spiked comb for his "Friday." The bushy tangle is vaguely reminiscent of traditional ceremonial masks,

such as the *kakunga* of the Suku people.<sup>111</sup> Lano does not mention having encountered African artifacts, and it is entirely possible that the puppet's thatch was a coincident result of the essence of exaggeration at the core of blackface puppetry in general, mixed



Fig. 18. Lano "Friday." Photographs by the author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts Collection.

with a vague notion of "ethnic hair," rather than a deliberate attempt to integrate African style. In either case, the puppeteer's notion of the object synthesized the copresent exaggerating principles of blackface puppetry with a present view of African Americans as exotic other. Blackface puppet hair had previously been a carpet of short, if similarly

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<sup>111</sup> The Suku people are indigenous to the Southwestern Congo. The *kakunga* is a particularly large mask, with a strong forehead and elaborate, untamed attached hair, used in circumcision ceremonies. See: Arthur P. Bourgeois, *Art of the Yaka and Suku* (Meudon, France: Alain and Francoise Chaffin, 1984).

frayed, locks. Lano created what signifies a more exotic look and produced a more exotic frontality for his essence of the blackface puppet.

Analogous to his Chinese ball juggler, the “Friday” is a rough sculpture. Its ears are mere ridges on the sides of the head; the mouth is adequately articulated but without the moveable jaw of the Lambert D’Arc minstrel marionettes (see figure 5). Its nose is a semi-triangular bulge and its feet are rounded clubs. The teeth are set in a rounded white ridge that is disconnected from the jaw line. The object is a coarse grotesque of the human form.

Granted, it is difficult to distinguish between deliberate exaggeration and accidental distortion caused by limited skill or artistic ambivalence. Some of the aforementioned details may be intentional, designed to deepen the humorous burlesque of the blackface body through the disproportionate features of a specific puppet frontality. Yet there are subtle differences between details that are clearly exaggerations, such as the wide, toothy grin, and the physical structure of the skull. As one sees from a side view, the distended tooth line is less clearly detailed on the side than on the front. From the front, a specific amount of shading, consisting of dark etchings in the upper and lower sections of the mouth, and three layers of carved white wood, consisting of two higher, framing rows and one deeper, central row, produce a sophisticated illusion of the grinning minstrel mouth. Whether intentional or habit, Lano creates puppets that have some specific, articulated details and some perfunctory characteristics. The features that make the object more human, its ears and nose, for example, are perfunctory. The features that make the object an exaggerated minstrel stereotype, such as its mouth, or an exotic foreigner, such as its hair, are more carefully articulated.

The clothes are a curious blend of circus clowns and minstrels. Images of standard minstrel shows largely suggest formal dress, and the blackface puppets of the Royal Marionettes were dressed in tuxedos, slacks and work shirts, or the D'Arc's American flag costume. Lano's puppet wears a costume reflecting neither of these. However, nineteenth-century clowns, such as Dan Rice, routinely performed in both blackface and whiteface.<sup>112</sup> Lano may have gotten the idea for this puppet's costume from his father, who worked with the Dan Rice Circus, or from any of the several circuses with which David himself worked.<sup>113</sup> The costume is not precisely that of a nineteenth-century clown, though it does incorporate the colorful "flounce" collar fringe and loose-fitting material. Instead of decorative "pom poms," the puppet wears two large white buttons and one large white flower. The belt serves to separate the two halves of the clown's costume and suggest the more formal garb of the minstrel player. Most obviously, the garments, including the gloves, shoes, and suit are all black, suggesting both the formal costume of minstrelsy and the racial identity of the icon. Lano has creatively combined the aesthetics of both outfits, producing an object dressed simultaneously as clown and minstrel player.

The final, most ambiguous component of the puppet is the massive wooden mallet in its hand. Lano may have used this object in multiple plays, perhaps both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Punch and Judy*. For *Crusoe*, the mallet provides an exotic tool for the native black male. It is similar to the bead and cowry shell decorations of the Congolese Kuba

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<sup>112</sup> See: David Carlyon, *Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard of* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).

<sup>113</sup> David Lano, *A Wandering Showman, I* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 1957), 7.

people, the painted white dots suggesting shells and the carved multicolored nodes suggesting beadwork.<sup>114</sup> Once again, Lano has introduced an ostensibly tribal characteristic that, whether intentionally or not, exoticizes the blackface body.

For Collier's Punch and Judy, this further marks a logical deviation from the middle eighteenth-century Jim Crow puppet. Lano particularly chose the John Payne Collier text for his Punch shows, an interesting choice given that its blackface puppet is a "Moor." Lano's decision to use this version, at a time when the Jim Crow character had become standard on both continents, further illustrates his commitment to capturing the "authentic" foreign character of "Negroes." He may have added the mallet to give the "Moor" a humorous alternative to African tribal weaponry. A hammer fits nicely with the bashing fights of Punch shows. Lano may have meant this to be entirely decorative, since the Collier text never explicitly calls for the Moor to beat Punch with the Moor's own weapon. On the other hand, it would not be a drastic transformation of the text for Lano to allow the exotic mallet to come into play during the Moor/Punch fight. In either eventuality, its decorative qualities fit equally well with the representation of a then-antiquated blackface character. Lano cleverly produces a bodily form for his blackface puppet that is, at its essence, minstrel, faux-tribal, and clown, serving the needs of the selected Punch text.

Most of Lano's choices of subject in his lengthy career illustrate a commitment to the innovative and exotic, often leading him to unusual plays with blackface character opportunities. When Lano first played a show independent of his grandparents' troupe, at

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<sup>114</sup> The cowry shell and beadwork of the Kuba is discussed in: Hultgen and Zeidler, *A Taste for the Beautiful: Zairian Art from the Hampton University Museum* (Hampton, VA: Hampton University, 1993).

the age of ten, he presented his own adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, despite urges from his parents that: “It was hardly a thing to play in the South.”<sup>115</sup> He decided to press on with this potentially controversial piece, suggesting an early commitment to ostensibly African American narratives. In his memoir, he waxed nostalgic about the rustic simplicity of the production:

My first marionettes were made out of corn cobs and corn husks. Eva was a small doll. I whittled Simon Legree and St. Clair out of alder wood, and [my sister] helped me make the costumes. I improvised a stage in the barn, and in May I hung out my bill, announcing a grand dramatic spectacle, admission ten pins. The children in the neighborhood were my audience. I played the show three times. Then I gave my puppets away to members of the audience.<sup>116</sup>

From the very beginning, Lano’s artistic activities combined the exotic (at least for 1887 Leesburg) with aggrandized self-promotion only supported by the novelty of the subject matter. The visual art was crude, if apparently satisfying.

Shortly after setting on his own, the puppeteer found himself in northern Ohio. After spending the night in a wood, or, as he called it, “the hobo jungle” (a sort of civilization of homeless poor), he offered a Punch and Judy show to a band of construction workers who were building a bridge. In return for \$1.90, food, and transportation to Hamilton, Ohio, he presented Punch as the foreman of a crew of construction workers. This early puppet play demonstrates the most prosaic effects of his exoticized view of African Americans.

Lano incorporated humorous jibes at the construction foreman with a scene of a comic “Negro puppet” sawing through a bridge tie. Lano’s description is useful:

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<sup>115</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History 1524-1948* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1949), 205.

<sup>116</sup> David Lano, *A Wandering Showman, I* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 1957), 32.

The puppet foreman ordered another unfortunate puppet – to take a handcar off the track.

“Now put it back again,” yelled the foreman puppet, “I’ll show you who’s boss here!”

Another roar of laughter.

Then I showed a Negro puppet, sitting on the other end of a bridge tie, sawing it through. I made him fall with the sawed-off end into the creek – simulated by a splash in a pail of water. This bit went so well that I have used it ever since.<sup>117</sup>

Lano never again mentions this specific bit, but, in a slippery way, it speaks volumes about the unique essence of his blackface characters. His first blackface puppet was divided from the main action of the play, isolated for ridicule, a natural result of humorous exaggeration in puppet theatre. To Lano, African Americans are members of a uniquely separate culture, and blackface characters are most interesting when segregated.

At some stage of Lano’s career, he began to use the John Payne Collier *Punch and Judy* text. Though this document has come into disrepute, along with many of Collier fabrications, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century it was a widely recognized playtext.<sup>118</sup> Collier calls his blackface puppet “a Servant in foreign livery.”<sup>119</sup> The foreigner visits Punch at the behest of his master, to ask Punch to cease ringing a sheep bell and singing “Morgiana in Ireland.” A lengthy conflict ensues, ending with

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>118</sup> Marion Flexner, Alice Cane, and Dorothy Park Clark mention the Payne Collier text in their “Hand Puppets: A Practical Manual for Teachers and Children” (New York: Samuel French, 1935), 17. Their careers spanned the development of the Puppeteers of America, even if their book was not published until late in the period under consideration. George Speight argues that the playtext is too verbose to be a street play, despite Collier’s attestation that he got the script from Giovanni Piccini, a mountebank “Punch Man.” See his: *The History of English Puppet Theatre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).

<sup>119</sup> John Payne Collier, *The Tragical Comedy, or Comical Tragedy of Punch and Judy*, typescript (London: S. Prowett, 1828), 21.

Punch murdering the Servant.

Lano could have chosen a different frontality for Punch's blackface nemesis. A standard version of the play by Henry Mayhem published in 1851 depicts the blackface role as "Jim Crow." He enters singing "Buffalo Gals," is struck by Punch, sings two other minstrelsy tunes, is beaten by Punch, and exits. He returns briefly to help the hangman drag Punch offstage to his fate.

Yet Lano chooses to borrow his present blackface text from the pre-Jim Crow years. Replacing Jim Crow with a "Moor" deepens the referential exoticism of Lano's blackface puppet. The language is a stereotype of black dialect common to blackface performance; "My master, he say, he no lika da music, Mr. Punch."<sup>120</sup> Punch refuses to admit he carries the very bell the servant complains of, and when the servant presses him, Punch hits him to make him agree that it is an organ. Punch than coerces the servant into agreeing, in turn, that the instrument is a fiddle, a drum, and a trumpet. The Servant agrees, but says: "But bell, organ, fiddle, drum, or trumpet, my master he say he no lika da music."<sup>121</sup> Punch tells him the unseen master is a fool, and beats the Servant with the bell until the Moor exits. The Moor returns with a stick and tries to retaliate, but Punch once again strikes him, this time through the booth curtain itself.<sup>122</sup> The angry servant calls Punch a "blackguard" twice, referencing the servant's own race through humorous irony. Finally they fight to the finish. Punch beats him about the head and body several

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>122</sup> When Lano produced the play, the "stick" was probably the same wooden mallet archived with his puppet at the Detroit Institute.

times; the figure proclaims: “Me Dead!”<sup>123</sup> Punch finishes him and throws the body offstage.

Unlike the Jim Crow puppet, this blackface role does not merely sing a few minstrel songs and exit. He lives out a text very similar in action to the other roles in the play. He enters with a complaint against Punch; Punch makes a fool of him and murders him. Like the Jim Crow puppets, the Servant does speak the stereotypical “black dialect” of blackface performance. This breaks, overall, with the American tradition of minstrel puppetry by giving the object agency. Unlike the Jim Crow character, whose purpose is but a song and dance relief, this blackface puppet is a real threat to Punch.

Lano may have been the first American puppeteer to use the “Moor” character, though such a conclusion can only be drawn from omission.<sup>124</sup> If so, Lano reached into Punch’s past to expand the exotic characteristics of his puppet’s essence. His audiences witnessed an object with a bushy comb of hair (significantly more exaggerated and “ethnic” than previous blackface puppets), carrying a beaded mallet, enter the stage and battle Punch. By using a text where the blackface role is a foreign servant who does not sing the traditional blackface songs, Lano engendered a more exotic principle in the eidos of blackface puppetry.

The D’Arc/Bullock Royal Marionettes and post-1850 *Punch and Judy* narrowed the possibilities of blackface puppetry by reducing the servant to a song and dance, T.D. Rice clown. They also disrupted this limited essence of the blackface puppet’s corporeal

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<sup>123</sup> John Payne Collier, *The Tragical Comedy, or Comical Tragedy of Punch and Judy*, typescript (London: S. Prowett, 1828), 24.

<sup>124</sup> There are simply no examples of this character mentioned in records of American *Punch and Judy* work prior to Lano.

form by introducing sentimental music choices into performance. Lano romanticized the blackface puppet by attaching its presence to his exoticized view of the black race. As with those of Meader and Deaves, Lano's images are fictional, often stereotypical images of the race. However, like Meader and Deaves, Lano did expand the possibilities of blackface puppetry and open the field to a broader spectrum of blackface images.

Lano breaks with the previous eidos of blackface puppetry, which had been shifting toward a more sympathetic portrait of African Americans, enigmatically, in an implicit effort to capture the spirit of “the Negro.” To him, African Americans are foreign, tribal, even African. This introduces an essence of otherness into the eidos of blackface puppetry, which adds the potential for crude and wildly exotic performances, where before there had been deliberately elaborate and quasi-sympathetic ones. Though Lano’s romanticizing produced an excessively exotic imagination of authentic Black culture, it may have contributed to the future of blackface puppetry, by connecting, aesthetically and ideologically, the need for innovation in puppetry with explorations into the imagined culture of black persons. Lano lays the foundation for the work of Sarg, McPharlin, Brown, and others by deepening the idea of what they would call “Negro puppets.” A menu that previously consisted of minstrel shows, Jim Crow clowns, and occasional serious plays, became an aggregate of explorations in imagined black culture. However, Lano’s descendants drew on the same minstrel stereotypes to present these explorations, no matter how far their dramas strayed from the minstrel show.

## Chapter IV: Paul McPharlin

Paul McPharlin was the single most influential force in the first revival of puppetry. John Bell provides a useful summary of McPharlin's impact on the accelerating interest in puppetry that occurred in the early 1900s.

A fine record of [the early twentieth century revival] is the puppet collection at the Detroit Institute of the Arts, based largely on the accumulation of puppets and related materials put together by Paul McPharlin [... which] lays out clearly and in rich detail the complex paths followed by puppeteers in the twentieth century as they redefined traditional forms from Europe and around the globe in order to reflect the changes brought about by the modern world. McPharlin was more than an interested observer [...] in fact, he was a major player in its development and in the first half of the twentieth century perhaps the most important single force in establishing puppet theater's legitimacy and continuing presence in American culture. Like many puppeteers, he was a multi-talented individual: not only a performer, but a designer and builder as well. He was also a writer, editor, historian, curator, and organizer [...] He published books and articles, organized exhibits, conferences, and festivals; helped found the puppeteers of America; and above all built and performed puppet shows of remarkable artistic integrity and beauty.<sup>125</sup>

It would be difficult for Bell to overstate the significance of McPharlin's contribution to puppetry. Investigation of the activity that McPharlin labeled "the puppetry revival," demands serious consideration of the impact of McPharlin's work, but also his perspective, which, it is easy to argue, probably exerted great influence on the values and trends that characterized that revival.<sup>126</sup>

This study has reached a moment in the history of American puppet theatre that Husserl might accept as one of primordial genesis, an originary point that leads to

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<sup>125</sup> John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 8-11.

<sup>126</sup> See: Paul McPharlin, *Aesthetic of the Puppet Revival* (Detroit: Wayne University, 1938).

creation on the basis of active motivation.<sup>127</sup> It is necessary to take a different path through phenomenology than that taken in previous chapters. Efforts to analyze the essences of various objects, or of copresent objects in their special categories is, for Husserl, the business of descriptive or static phenomenology.<sup>128</sup> The goal of the second branch, “explanatory phenomenology,” is to comprehend the “general structures and modalities that encompass all categories of apperceptions.”<sup>129</sup> While the two categories do not depend on mutually exclusive considerations, they are distinct in emphasis.

In the previous chapters, this investigation has focused on the artistic creation of specific objects, and commented mainly on their influence on each other. This chapter’s emphasis on McPharlin’s contribution finds itself mainly commenting on the impact of the categorical apperceptions of an important author/organizer. McPharlin may have made only one blackface puppet in his lengthy career. Yet his ideas about blackface puppetry and puppetry in general, likely exert marked influence on the twentieth-century eidos of the field.

What previous puppeteers had been struggling toward, however unintentionally, were two branches of puppet theatre, conditioned by dynamic changes in the field of representation. In large context, it was part of an ongoing branching of highbrow away from lowbrow, in the traditions beginning in American civilization during the nineteenth

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<sup>127</sup> Edmund Husserl, “Static and Genetic Phenomenological Method,” *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*, after *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, translated by Anthony J. Steinbock (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 321.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 318-19.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 318.

century.<sup>130</sup> Its impact on puppetry was to relegate the majority of activity to schools and children's entertainment circles, while only a handful of artists, whose works were of, in Bell's words, "remarkable artistic integrity and beauty," would be accepted in the professional world.<sup>131</sup>

Though blackface puppetry clumsily followed both trails, the trend throughout the 10s, 20s, and 30s was, in many cases, toward a curious division between exotic and local blackface images. This corresponded with a division between richer dramas with "realistic" images of blacks and simpler dramas with cruder images of blacks drawn from minstrelsy. Exotic black roles (moors, Fridays, and other "foreign blacks") increasingly became the fare for full-length plays presented for paying audiences. By the 1930s, artists like Ralph Chesse and Frank Paris were creating puppets from actual black Americans, basing their images not on the crude designs of minstrelsy, but on the living African American actors and entertainers around them. Traditional minstrel images did not disappear, but became increasingly relegated to educational and children's theatre.

McPharlin, more than any other, contributed to the establishment of this division within blackface puppetry, by introducing his peculiar apperceptions (the observations one has regarding a lived experience that is not self-evident in the reality of that experience) to the developing discourse. His idea of blackface puppetry is clearly

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<sup>130</sup> For a deep analysis of this process, see: Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of a Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). Levine positioned supposedly "natural" cultural distinctions of elite and popular art, specifically in the historical dynamics of the late nineteenth century. Levine demonstrates how, in the United States during the 1800s, much of the arts, particularly Shakespearean drama and opera, was enjoyed with great interest by both the lower and upper classes. Intellectual and social discourse in the late nineteenth century produced a rigorous distinction between high and low art.

<sup>131</sup> John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 11.

divided between the “Sambo” and the “black,” which he clarifies in his *Puppet Heads* (1931). In this source, one of McPharlin’s many books that take the reader through the step-by-step process of making puppets, he offers drawings of Sambo and Topsy, describing their qualities. These articulate his understanding of their essences.

Sambo (figure 19) is bald and round-faced, with an exaggerated wide, toothy grin, closed eyes, and a wide, flat nose. McPharlin describes him as:

The minstrel-show darkey [who] bids for a place as an American puppet type. Good-natured, even when his wooden head is wacked, he is always happy to shuffle a dance or sing. A golliwog, not a real Negro, his beaming face may be painted with black enamel, his lips vermillion and his teeth white.<sup>132</sup>

In McPharlin’s mind, the essence of the Sambo character is a true minstrel, the extreme exaggeration of blackface stereotyping.



Fig. 19. Paul McPharlin. “Sambo” *Puppet Heads, Hands, and Feet and their Making*. Birmingham, MI: Paul McPharlin, 1931, 8.

On the other hand is Topsy, described as one of the “stage and book characters

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<sup>132</sup> Paul McPharlin, *Puppet Heads, Hands, and Feet and their Making* (Birmingham, MI: Paul McPharlin, 1931), 8.

[that] may be drawn to fit conventional conceptions neatly.”<sup>133</sup> McPharlin’s drawing has unnaturally exotic hair, an archetype of otherness (see figure 20). A figure-eight knot, decorated with beads and patterns suggesting Kuba or other African textiles, ties off each of nine individual spikes on her brow. Her eyes are wide and round, and her nose and mouth, though racialized, are significantly less exaggerated than those of Sambo. These present images suggest an apperception of the “black” as exotic ideal, and the “sambo golliwog” as grotesque clown.



Fig. 20. Paul McPharlin. “Topsy.” *Puppet Heads, Hands, and Feet and their Making*. Birmingham, MI: Paul McPharlin, 1931, 28.

For Mc Pharlin, Topsy is an authentic “Negro,” distinct from the inauthentic Sambo. The imagined authenticity he embeds in his reading of Topsy mandates that more “true-to-life” puppet portraits of black persons should be less distorted in their human features and more exotic in their trappings, than the decidedly fictional minstrels, which should be more distorted, adding to the humorous exaggerations conducive to a “happy, shuffling” clown.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 28.

Though they share in the apperception of exoticism, McPharlin is not of the same mind as Lano. Where Lano promoted himself as an advocate of black Americans, despite contradictions between this image of himself and his approach to artistic representation of blacks, McPharlin promotes himself as an advocate of all instances of puppetry, no matter how problematic their relationships to social justice might be. In his chapter on the introduction of Punch and Judy to America, he demonstrates an outright myopia regarding race relations, when discussing a pre-surrealist P. J. Beranger verse and illustration. He characterizes what is likely a parody of the slave trade, by a man from a Europe entrenched in abolitionism, as the suggestion that puppetry might have been presented on slave ships. McPharlin describes the illustration; “Punch [is] confronted by a very dark devil after he has killed the Policeman; to one side of the booth, acting as a presenter, stands a portly John Bullish sailor; of the audience one sees six chained Negroes, the front row, intently watching.”<sup>134</sup> The verse, as published in the first puppetry yearbook, reads:

A Slave-ship cargo, bored to death,  
Was badly on the dwindle.  
The captain yelled till out of breath,  
“You blackamoors, you swindle!”  
You’ve got to land alive you know-  
Perk up and watch this puppet show!”

A booth was brought and battened fast  
The blacks began reviving  
Punch popped up-they laughed at last;  
The cargo was surviving.  
“It’s good for you to grin, you know-  
Keep an eye on that puppet show.”

And so they sailed day after day

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<sup>134</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History 1524-1948* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1949), 154.

Until they hailed Nantucket.  
The captain knew that puppets pay.  
    No slave had kicked the bucket.  
His profit share was lots of dough,  
Thanks to Punch and the puppet show.<sup>135</sup>

To McPharlin, the sole significance of Beranger's verses lies in the suggestion that Punch may have been produced on slave ships. He neglects the unique qualities of the piece, which satirize the slave ship captains and the trade itself, by humorously reducing the cause of fatalities on board to nothing more than boredom. The goal of the piece is either to trivialize the loss of life on slave ships, or to mock those who would trivialize what was the result of physical abuse, atrocious overcrowding, poor supplies, and disease. In any case, McPharlin missed the point of the passage likely because he was entirely interested in advocating puppetry wherever it manifested itself in American history. He is not at all interested in the heritage of slavery in the same land.<sup>136</sup>

The noesis, or act of perceiving, that brought McPharlin to this divided eidos was, in many ways, the sum of what preceded him. When writing his first history, *Puppets in America 1739 to Today* (1936), McPharlin investigated the work of the Royal Marionettes and the Lano family, exposing himself to the grotesque exaggerations of puppet minstrel shows and the crude exoticism of Lano's "negro puppets." Historical commentaries in McPharlin's research reinforced McPharlin's understanding of the essence of Jim Crow as clownish and lowbrow. In one, Henry Mayhew commented with

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<sup>135</sup> P. J. Beranger, "Untitled," *Puppetry, A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes* 11 (1942-43): 63.

<sup>136</sup> McPharlin made another interesting comment during the radio program *Free for All* (21 January 1943). According to him, his patriotism and opposition to Nazism are driven by his artistic work; "I want to do all I can to keep the American way of life. As a teacher and an artist, I must live in a free world to work." This further illustrates how a vaguely ambivalent social politics circulates with an intense artistic advocacy.

mild embarrassment on his use of Jim Crow, stating: “Everybody liked to hear *Jim Crow* sung, so we had to do it.”<sup>137</sup> In another, Albert Smith lamented the “taste for spectacle” that had replaced more ostensibly “legitimate” characters with the clown Jim Crow.<sup>138</sup>

McPharlin reviews the history in accordance with these perceived essences. Taking the position of puppet theatre apologist, he summarizes the history of the Royal Marionettes as articulated, professional, “unique in size and importance,” and with “many imitators.” He distinguishes them from such frontier “Punch men” as the Lanos, who, though nearly “forgotten [...] were the theatre [...] in the theatre-hungry backwoods.”<sup>139</sup> He seems to agree with the debasing commentary of his nineteenth-century authors, yet he feels that even these low-culture activities are important to the history of puppet theatre.

McPharlin produces, what Husserl calls, a “law of genesis” for blackface puppetry.<sup>140</sup> He rapidly breaks with the achievements of the Royal Marionettes, despite his lengthy nod to their marked artistic success. By the time his history reaches the “contemporary” world, he has articulated a simultaneously thematic and quality division between forms of blackface puppets. He carefully distinguishes between low versions of blackface puppetry, which he attaches to a body of fictions, explained as “minstrel

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<sup>137</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History 1524-1948* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1949), 147.

<sup>138</sup> Albert Smith, *Comic Tales and Sketches* (London: Bentley, 1852), 19.

<sup>139</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History 1524-1948* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1949), 220.

<sup>140</sup> Edmund Husserl, “Static and Genetic Phenomenological Method,” *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*, after *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, translated by Anthony J. Steinbock (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 320.

golliwogs,” and “real Negroes” depicted in ostensibly authentic narratives. He reinforces the distinction by using “darky,” “Negro impersonator,” or “blackface” when discussing minstrel puppets and their kin, and Negro or black when speaking of real people, or of puppets derived from real, or ostensibly real, persons.<sup>141</sup>

The twenty-first century scholar might not agree with McPharlin’s dualistic essence for black representation in puppetry. Foremost, McPharlin declares that the essence of Topsy is authentic Negro character, while the essence of the minstrel is fiction. Yet Topsy’s historical essence was more minstrel clown than sympathetic African American character. Indeed, when she first appears in Stowe’s novel, St. Claire compares her to Jim Crow. In later decades, minstrel shows featured Topsy as a stock role, a dancing coquette. McPharlin’s dualistic essence depends on a false impression of the ostensibly black characters in puppetry. He supposes that certain character types are authentic while others are not. Yet all these types prove to be exaggerations, fantasies of greater or lesser extremes.

But McPharlin’s goal is to arrange the great body of activity for historical understanding and, within his newly arranged categories, promote both low comedy and high drama. Indeed, in his discussion of the values underpinning the puppetry revival, he promotes himself as an advocate of puppetry, supporting all activity from puppetry in education to its use in Maeterlink’s plays. However, he manages to consistently divide it into constituent categories. He quotes New York editor and educator William Patten;

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<sup>141</sup> The chapter “Vaudeville Manikins” illustrated this well. Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History 1524-1948* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1949), 262-303

“The marionette can be anything or anybody [...] high tragedy or low burlesque.”<sup>142</sup>

McPharlin’s blackface puppetry categories are related to his advocacy. He organizes the field into a broadly inclusive dichotomy where both high and low art have their places.

In the same passage, McPharlin suggests that this inclusive dichotomy might encourage artists who currently produce lowbrow puppetry, to consider the alternative.

McPharlin references one John Collier (of no verifiable relation to John Payne Collier) speaking of a “tendency [...] toward symbolism” in puppetry. Collier continues:

“Marionettes will seem to many people crude and ludicrous, adapted only to the amusement of children, but that is because they [...] are in this country wholly underdeveloped to suit our present-day civilizations.”<sup>143</sup> By injecting his history with this comment, McPharlin encourages the reader to understand the essence of puppetry as a form that can be both children’s amusement and avant-garde art.

Thus, McPharlin’s commentary on the variety of puppet theatre in America carries with it an ideologically positioned eidos for blackface puppetry. It implies a law of genesis that is categorically conditioned. On the one hand are puppet plays with minstrel golliwogs, generally lowbrow and appropriate to the uninitiated audiences of frontiers, schools, and children’s fairs. On the other hand are puppet plays with rich, articulated characterizations, usually less grotesque and often more exotic, appropriate to the more demanding audiences of professional stagehouses.

Indeed, many moments in the history do seem to back up his categorical distinctions. One important example is Walter Deaves, one of the preeminent

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 327-28.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 328.

entrepreneurs in the Royal Marionette tradition. While he relied heavily on the puppet minstrel show in the late 1800s, he quickly replaced the Royal Marionette formula with a vaudeville mimic. He eliminated the minstrel show, which, with only a few exceptions, seems to have universally disappeared from the Royal Marionette companies and their descendants after 1900.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, he satirized lowbrow audiences by introducing a hand-puppet audience, who mimicked the behavior of the vaudeville audience “at its rowdiest.”<sup>145</sup> Incidents of minstrel shows in the broad field of American puppetry between 1931 and 1939 are few. Minstrel derived plays, such as *Little Black Sambo*, exclusively manifest within schools and in children’s leisure, during this time period.

McPharlin collected a number of historical surveys of world puppet theatre. These seem to have had the potential to reinforce similar connections between exoticism/highbrow and clowing/lowbrow. In Dion Calthrop’s *Punch and Judy: a Corner in the History of Entertainment* (1926), the author discusses Punch with a “showman of to-day” and two relics at a curio shop. Calthrop describes a showman who has lost touch with the grand tradition of the puppet play. He has abandoned the Devil in favor of a crocodile, “because some folks didn’t believe in the Devil, and some did and didn’t like him in the show.”<sup>146</sup> The contemporary Punch man has no idea where the “Nigger” puppet came from. He collects songs for the racialized clown from “wherever

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<sup>144</sup> Perry Dilley, “Deaves’s Marvelous Manikins,” *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes* 2 (1933): 39-45.

<sup>145</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History 1524-1948* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1949), 270.

<sup>146</sup> Dion Clayton Calthrop, *Punch and Judy: a Corner in the History of Entertainment, with an Essay on the Art of Keeping People Amused* (London: Dulau & Co., 1926), 32.

he [can] find them.”<sup>147</sup> Calthrop condemns the contemporary Punch man for having lost touch with the supposed African roots of the Punch and Judy Negro. Both Calthrop and Smith lament the loss of a grand tradition that has descended into lowbrow entertainment.

In “The Old Curiosity Shop,” Calthrop meets two aged showmen seated upon the grass, while “perched cross-legged behind them was a figure of that hero himself, his nose and chin as hooked, and his face as beaming, as usual.”<sup>148</sup> There is no mean artifact of audience pandering in their collection. The “foreign gentleman” (Shallabalah) is present, as is the devil. These artists care for their objects, “binding together a small gallows with thread [or] fixing a new black wig.”<sup>149</sup> The exotic foreigner, relic of a lost golden age, deserves to be cultivated. Jim Crow, the clown of Punch’s pewter age, does not.

The drawing of the “foreign gentleman” further displays Calthrop’s idealizing of the past (figure 21). Shallabalah stands behind Punch, dressed in a loose-fitting cloth that covers his head. He has a jagged, toothy grin upon his face; his eyes are beady and focused upon the back of Punch’s head. His tiny arms are raised above his ears in fury. The drawing is a caricature of a raging moor. Since Calthrop does not report actually seeing the curio shop Punch men present any portion of the show, the drawing must be from his imagination or he must have placed the objects in these positions. In his mind’s eye, he sees a feisty, aggressive blackface puppet, draw from foreign fantasy, which is quite different from the sanitized singer/dancer of the contemporary Jim Crow.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

Forman Brown's *Punch's Progress* (1936) furthers the lowbrow status of the Americanized blackface clown. Critiquing a diverse program of puppet plays, which included Tony Sarg's *A Night in Delhi*, he notes "a pair of negro entertainers—an Uncle Tom sort of gentleman with a banjo, and a decidedly Topsyish gal with many lace petticoats. They were frankly low-brow, but, [their creator] assured everyone, 'in the genuine puppet tradition.'"<sup>150</sup> Brown clearly reinforces the idea that Americanized

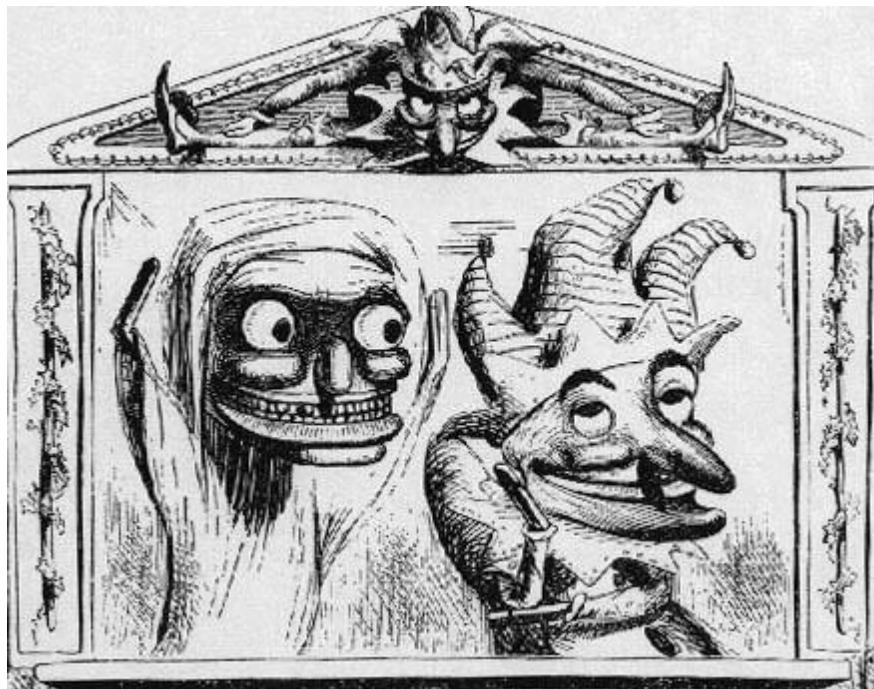


Fig. 21. Dion Layton Calthrop. *Punch and Judy: a Corner in the History of Entertainment, with an Essay on the Art of Keeping People Amused*. London: Dulau & Co., 1926, 32.

blackface characters are less sophisticated fare than the exotic, supposedly Middle Eastern sketches of the like of Tony Sarg. This source, alongside Calthrop's, would help reinforce McPharlin's categorical distinction. McPharlin divides the local fantasy of the American "negro puppet," who is no more than a low comedian, from the foreign fantasy

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<sup>150</sup> Forman George Brown, *Punch's Progress* (New York: MacMillan, 1936), 11.

of the Moor, who is, though still made foolish by Punch, part of a grand tradition of rich puppet theatre.

Assorted puppets and masks in his collection would further have reinforced this distinction in the eidos of the blackface puppet. McPharlin owned four nineteenth-century blackface puppets that appear to be minstrel players, but without any tag to identify their author or source play.<sup>151</sup> They are among the crudest of objects from the repertoire (see figure 22). Their eyes are drawn on carved concave scoops in the face.



Fig. 22. “Marionette, 1870-1890.” Unpublished Collection Photographs (Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2002).

Their noses are large but only vaguely articulated. In the case of the “female Negro,” the nose is a half-cylinder in the center of the face. The object has only dots on the flat bottom to represent nostrils. The crudeness of these objects intersects with their semiotic

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<sup>151</sup> The extent of their descriptions is “marionette, 1870-1890.”

identity as American blacks. Each object wears a costume suggestive of local, lower class socioeconomic status. The female wears a calico gown and an apron, indicative of impoverished areas of the nineteenth century Mississippi valley. Thus, the objects further reinforce a semiotic connection between signs of poverty and coarseness, and puppet characters derived from American blackface stereotyping.

Reinforcing the other category for McPharlin are many documents and objects from international tradition. For example, he preserved a charcoal drawing an exotic mask that suggests Asian racial characteristics (figure 23). It is far more elaborate and

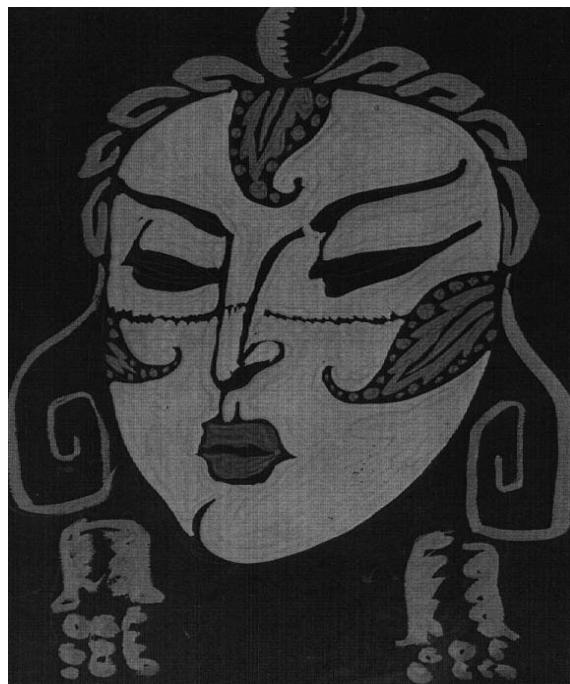


Fig. 23. "Untitled." Unpublished Collection Sketch (Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1915-1948).

beautiful than the American blackface puppets in his archives. Though it is not in the same category as blackface, it helps to explain McPharlin's developing distinction between two approaches puppetry. It shows a painted face, with an exotic, woven hairstyle, and decorative tassles attached to the hair. At the same time, the eyes are

slanted and sharp, the nostrils are small, and the nasal ridge is thick and protruding. The mask is racialized, but it is also far more appealing than the crude blackface puppets of the nineteenth century.

In his lecture to the Western-Southeastern Arts Association, McPharlin articulated the distinction in considerable detail, while still maintaining his advocacy of both approaches. Since this speech summarizes the central argument of this chapter, it merits quoting at length:

Comedy, parody, burlesque, because of their exaggeration of life, belong to the puppet. On the other hand, solemn tragedy also belongs to it. Most of us are accustomed to thinking of the puppet only as a light-hearted creature, forever skipping about in farcical or melodramatic situations. If we have ever seen it in a sober Biblical play, or in a piece by Maeterlinck, we realize that its unhuman dignity, its poise, its timelessness, make it a much more impressive tragedian than any human being [...] certain plays are best suited to certain types of puppets.<sup>152</sup>

While he spends the speech discussing forms of puppets and their suitability to specific plays (rod puppets are most useful in “declamatory plays”), his categorical distinctions seem to organize all his views on puppetry.

The impact of McPharlin’s categorical essence of blackface puppetry on his own art is difficult to identify, since the artist/author’s collection provides almost no examples of his own blackface objects. One drawing of a minstrel finger-puppet is preserved in the first Puppetry Yearbook (see figure 25). Its head is a variation on the cartoon images of blacks that circulated in the early nineteen hundreds. The head fits onto the index finger, while the left hand, which is connected to a tiny saxophone, attaches to the thumb. A wrap costume attaches around the hand, suggesting the formal wear of the minstrel

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<sup>152</sup> Paul McPharlin, “Puppet and Marionette Making and Play Production,” Unpublished Typescript of Address at the Western-Southeastern Arts Association Convention, Nashville, TN (2 April 1936): 1.

player. This is certainly not a traditional minstrel puppet. In fact, it may be intended to portray a jazz musician. The cartoonish bubble nose and broad mouth do suggest the racialized features of minstrelsy. Yet, the shoulder plumes and sharp tails suggest a specialized uniform, connecting the object not to formal minstrel shows, but to the regal jazz bands of the early twentieth century. Furthermore, the wavy hair and gold earring suggest a more exotic image than the crude designs of minstrel puppets. McPharlin's design is not wholly consistent with the essence of blackface puppetry he promotes.



Fig. 25. Paul McPharlin. "A Hand-Puppet Show." Advertisement in *Puppetry* 5 (1936-37): 83.

Ultimately, the context of this object is more significant than its form. It is a toy for readers of the yearbook to purchase. The advertisement promises "notes on the making of simple puppets and a booth for them, prepared for the needs of a child, the teacher, or the beginner."<sup>153</sup> McPharlin intends this object to serve schools or children, or

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<sup>153</sup> Paul McPharlin, "A Hand-Puppet Show," Advertisement in *Puppetry* 5 (1936-37): 83.

perhaps the beginning puppeteer, who may move on to more sophisticated designs at a later date.

One more sophisticated design provided by McPharlin is “*Nounou*,” a puppet sketch for a play called *Witch Moon* (figure 26). *Nounou* is a colloquial French term for a



Fig. 26. Paul McPharlin. “Witch Moon.” Unpublished Collection Sketch (Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1915-1948).

nanny. A Witch Moon is what some pagan traditionalists call a harvest moon. Though no copy of the corresponding playtext is extant, McPharlin may have derived the plot from New Orleans folklore, and/or from the nature religion referred to as Voodou, given the combination of French terminology and blackface characterization. In any case, this image speaks of McPharlin’s distinction between the blackface roles of minstrelsy and other clowning traditions, and more serious plays derived from American folktales. From the scarf upon the nanny’s head, and her large hoop style earring, to the unusually flowing and wide dress, the sketch suggests the ceremonial garb of a voodoo witch. The

elaborate decorations on the gown and the jewelry upon the object suggest McPharlin's view of blackface puppetry, exoticizing the characterization of blackface roles in serious plays. Furthermore, the exaggerations indicative of racialized images are present but more nuanced. Though the nose is out of proportion to the rest of the face, suggesting the artificial exaggeration of blackface, the lips are human-sized, suggesting an attempt at an attractive and sympathetic, perhaps even realistic image. Thus, while this study cannot account for the specific impact of McPharlin's categorical distinction on individual blackface puppets, his apperception that exotic blackface images belong in serious plays, while clownish minstrel-derived images belong in meaner entertainments, clearly inhabits these two drawings of puppet designs, whether those designs became the basis of actual constructed objects.

Two of his extant playtexts, *Lincoln and the Pig* (1931) and *The Drum Dance* (1929), provide this chapter's final illustration of McPharlin's categorical distinction. *The Drum Dance* showcases his connection between exotic imagery and sophisticated drama. *Lincoln and the Pig* suggests a connection between burlesque and the characteristics of minstrel clowns. Together, they frame the categorical distinction drawn from McPharlin's apperceptions of previous blackface puppetry, and demonstrate that distinction in McPharlin's aesthetic activity.

*The Drum Dance* is a traditional Chinese shadow play. Though not an example of blackface puppetry, it illustrates the categorical distinction that McPharlin circulates. Its exotic/highbrow status determines that McPharlin must avoid excess exaggeration in its frontality, and embed it with the innovative artistic strokes. McPharlin translated it from the collection *Chinesische Schattenspiele* (1915) by Bertold Laufer, who claimed to have

taken it from playwright Tsou Ku Chan Mien.<sup>154</sup> John Bell describes the puppets as “lacquer-painted celluloid [objects] that reflected both Chinese design motifs and McPharlin’s own sense of modernist minimalism.”<sup>155</sup> In his introduction, McPharlin discussed the original production at the Marionette Fellowship of Evanston, Illinois (1929) and emphasized the authenticity of the event. “One manipulator also spoke a part, and two readers, not manipulating, did the others. Genuine Chinese music, performed on flute, cymbal and gongs (as well as the drum and bells that sound during Hsia Ying-Ch’un’s dance) accompanied the action.”<sup>156</sup>

This is a remarkably sophisticated playtext. The language of the piece is formal and fantastic. Lines such as “My Lord, let us formulate a plan whereby I may be put in better countenance” and “With winged step I mount the dragon and the phoenix drums.”<sup>157</sup> It includes assorted references to mythic subjects, such as “the sprits of the four quarters of the firmament,” and “Buddha and the Bodhisattva.”<sup>158</sup> There is a complicated display of traditional Chinese dances, including: the Dragon Melanchrome That Tests its Talon Thrice, the Snowy Tiger Nearing Tortuously, the Graceful Swallow Swiftly Darting over Water, Boy who Prays to Kuan-Yin, the Yaksha Diving in the Sea,

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<sup>154</sup> I was unable to find any references to this playwright in any source.

<sup>155</sup> John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 69.

<sup>156</sup> Paul McPharlin, “The Drum Dance: A Chinese Shadow Play,” *A Repertory of Marionette Plays* (New York: The Viking Press, 1929), 303.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 305; 310.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 310; 313.

the Carp Stems the Rapids Toward the Dragon Gate, and the head-standing Hawk that Circles Like a Top.<sup>159</sup> McPharlin's puppets would reinforce the richness of the script.

As Bell writes, McPharlin committed his most considerable puppet designs to this performance. In his words:

It is important to note that McPharlin's approach to Chinese puppet theater was quite novel—even revolutionary—especially in comparison to the nineteenth-century European and American marionette traditions of presenting Chinese characters as clownish circus oddities. McPharlin, benefiting from the increasing volume of new scholarship on Asian theater, took a Chinese play and attempted to do it justice, not by using traditional Chinese shadow puppets, but by building his own in a manner that at once respected Chinese techniques and styles but also translated them into a modern American idiom.<sup>160</sup>

There is a complicated process of integration at work in McPharlin's puppetry, indicative of an attempt to move the field of puppetry forward by using the best of eastern and western art. Though this has been a common technique in western puppet theatre of the twentieth century, it is telling that McPharlin only chooses to commit these mature artistic strokes to the exotic Chinese shadow play.

*Lincoln and the Pig* is a burlesque on Abraham Lincoln, “wherein Abe Lincoln is altruistic and his horse Ned isn’t,” which McPharlin co-created from an apparently “well-known legend.”<sup>161</sup> The satire manipulates minstrel-derived stereotyping to accord with the new eidos. It occurs in a mud-hole. Abe Lincoln enters riding his horse, Ned, Lincoln’s head “bent in thought” (3). He laments the injustice of the world to the equine

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>160</sup> John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 10.

<sup>161</sup> Edgar Caper and Paul McPharlin, *Lincoln and the Pig* (Birmingham, MI: Puppet Plays, Inc., 1931), 9. From this point forward, I will rely on parenthetical citations for lengthy selections from this text.

figure, who dismisses his complaint since: “The sun is shining [...] we’ve had dinner [...] and] you can’t do nothing about it” (3). Abe assures the beast that he can rectify the situation, which he reveals to be a “poor old pig stuck in the mud,” some “four-score and seven paces back.” Ned suggests that the pig “wanted to be stuck there,” and Abe counters: “The mud was holding it tight. Maybe it was quicksand [...and] the critter is being sucked to a miserable death.” (3) He notes that the Constitution guarantees that all are free and all are equal, but the horse argues that the Constitution only guarantees this to humans, “not pigs nor horses.” Finally, Abe reflects: “It’s almost unconstitutional in spirit, the way that there grunter is deprived of his rights to run around free. I *could* do something to help him. I *can* pull him out of the mud. I got on my best clothes, but I can, anyways” (4). The humorous take on Lincoln’s antislavery efforts, conditions the viewer to laugh at the serious historical conflict. It also trivializes Lincoln’s famous speech, which, by all historical accounts, transformed a war that had previously been about preserving the union into a war to end slavery. At the same time, the humor coincides with a more basic structure, a combination of historical references that asks the viewer to associate freedom for the pig with freedom for enslaved black Americans.

Abe decides to free the pig, despite his misgivings that he will have “a little mud on [his] boots and pants” (5), suggesting the blood on the hands of the presidency, a symptom of the Civil War. Ned notes that this will amount to “work for Mrs. Lincoln” and Abe acknowledges the probable “tongue-thrashing” (5). By reducing the effects of the War Between the States to a mere mudstain that the wife of the President will have to clean up, McPharlin and Caper criticize Lincoln, suggesting that he did not fully comprehend the serious consequences of intranational military conflict. The developing

condemnation of Lincoln begins with this passage and continues into the following scene, where Lincoln actually frees the forlorn hog.

As Abe pulls it from the mud, he suggests that black Americans were freed too quickly, saying: “I guess I’ll free it gradual-like. Sudden release wouldn’t be the best thing. He’s got to get used to his liberty by degrees” (6). Though the pig makes only animal sounds before it is freed, such as “eek,” “oink,” and “eee yee,” it cries out its gratitude upon release in the stereotypical black dialect of minstrelsy: “Oh, Massa Lincoln! Oh, Massa Lincoln! Oh, Massa Lincoln” (6)! This last asserts three semiotic connections for the viewer, relating the pig to black humans, and thus relating the clowns of minstrelsy and subhuman beasts to the entire body of enslaved African Americans. Thus, as a consequence of McPharlin’s desire to employ minstrelsy exaggeration in lowbrow comic plays, the humorous exaggerations in the play begin to shift it in a more aggressively racist direction in its theme.

The pig exits, and Ned laments the waste of effort on “an or’nary razorback” (7). By calling it this, the authors deepen the connection between the pig and black Americans, in a disturbingly racist way. Or’nary is suggested by the only time in the play Ned speaks with a dialect-derived contraction, and or’nary suggests it is a cantakerous beast. Razorback is a term for an American breed of pig, which is semi-wild animal, thus suggesting its American character, and its inability to behave in a civilized manner without external controls. Thus, it is a special type of humorous referential exaggeration that carries with it a viciously dehumanizing abuse of African American individuals.

The final scene depicts the pig being roasted alive in a log cabin called “Uncle Tom’s Barbeque.” Lincoln laments his decision to free the creature “too sudden” (8).

Thus, the structure of the play presses the viewer toward the vigorously anti-civil-rights view that slavery was a force that protected blacks from harm, and that releasing them guaranteed that they would suffer at the hands of their enemies. The play, though making a humorous pun on the novel that many claimed started the Civil War, suggests lynchings and other brutal murders of African Americans, in its barbecue of the symbolic “Negro puppet.” McPharlin’s decision to help develop this production is problematic by modern standards. Yet it does seem logical, since he was an advocate of all puppetry no matter its challenges to social justice. His decision to have the pig speak with the dialect of minstrel shows further indicates his apperception that “Negro puppets” derived from American minstrelsy are most appropriate to clown roles.

Paul McPharlin participated directly in blackface puppetry only occasionally. Yet his massive authorship and organizing efforts must have exerted considerable influence on the shifting characteristics of blackface puppetry in the early twentieth century. One finds in the records, both in his influences and his own writings, in his artistic creations and archived works by others, apperceptions that divided blackface into two polar categories. These equate American minstrel characterization with lowbrow entertainment, designed for schools, children, or amateurs, and equate exotic racial characteristics, particular those of foreign blacks, with highbrow, sophisticated, innovative artistic work for professional endeavors. He owned some of the crudest objects from nineteenth-century puppet minstrelsy and some of the most fascinating works from Asian mask tradition. He read histories that debased the Jim Crow puppet and ennobled the Shallabalah, and wrote books distinguishing sophisticated work from burlesque. His own artistic projects reserved blackface buffoonery for children’s plays

and amateur artists, and serious, albeit racialized, art for exotic tales of the Far East and mythic stories from New Orleans legend. He may have advocated all puppetry, but his preconceptions of blackface puppets led to an essence that helped contribute to the cultural divide still born by modern puppeteers. That cultural divide relegates most puppetry to schools and children's entertainment. Only occasional works have the privilege of being accepted in the mainstream.

The coming chapter focuses on four major puppeteers: Tony Sarg, Susan Hastings, Remo Bufano, and Forman Brown. In it, this categorical division in the eidos of blackface puppetry will prove to have considerable impact on the careers of four of the most famous and successful American puppeteers. Each adopted, refined, or undermined the categorical division according to her/his unique essence of puppetry, as well as her/his specific essence of blackface puppetry.

## **Chapter V: The Majors**

The major puppeteers of the 1910s, 20s, and 30s contribute to the eidos articulated by Paul McPharlin. Tony Sarg, arguably the most important American puppeteer of the twentieth century prior to Jim Henson, applied his high work ethic to blackface puppetry, and produced more aesthetically rich exotic portraits of black life than those of Lano or McPharlin. His puppet frontalities were detailed, nearly realistic images of tribal blacks. They were fantasies of “negroes” based vaguely in the anthropological artifacts of foreign cultures. Sue Hastings produced blackface clowns in the tradition of the Royal Marionettes and, curiously, segregated them from the more “realistic” images of her other plays. Remo Bufano created radically nonrealistic abstractions for shows that are emceed by one Mr. Julius Caesar, a virtual classic of minstrelsy. Forman Brown published more plays with blackface characters than any other puppeteer in the period under investigation. While his dramas depicted simple-minded characters in the tradition of the Topsy or Uncle Tom stereotypes, Brown’s puppets remain the most humanlike of the four puppeteers surveyed in this chapter. Together, they show how artists in the most visible areas of the puppetry field interpreted McPharlin’s categorical distinction that exotic images are appropriate to more sophisticated plays featuring blackface puppets, and that local images drawn from minstrel plays are appropriate to less cultivated productions.

## Tony Sarg's Background

Tony Sarg took a circuitous path to American puppet theatre that produced a puppeteer who envisioned himself as an artist first and a showman second.<sup>162</sup> He was born in Coban, Guatemala on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April, 1880, the child of planters Francis Charles Sarg of Germany and Mary Elizabeth Parker of England. At least two generations of his family were artistically inclined, his father and grandmother painted, and his grandfather made carvings of wood. He claimed, in interviews he held in 1924 and 1932, that his grandmother's rich paintings of domestic life on the family plantation embedded his art with high standards for characterization, and an appreciation of local culture.<sup>163</sup>

When he was seven, his family returned to Germany. Sarg's father sent the boy to Litchterfelde Academy to train for an officer's commission. He was a lieutenant in the German army from 1897-1905. Secretly, he moonlighted during his service as an illustrator, living what one biographer would call "a Jekyll and Hyde" existence.<sup>164</sup>

Finally, his desire to pursue an artistic career took full charge of his industry and he left the military behind. For the next nine years, he lived in London, where he worked as an illustrator, cartoonist, and theatrical artist for *Sketch*. During this time, he leased a two-story house in Lincoln's Inn Field. Reportedly, it was the original "Old Curiosity Shop" of Charles Dickens. Sarg latched onto the opportunity to sell admission to tourists. Untold numbers enjoyed the second floor doll's house Sarg called "Little Nell's

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<sup>162</sup> I chose to begin with Sarg due to his visibility and influence. If I were following a strict chronology, I would have begun with Susan Hastings. While her career began earlier, her most visible contributions actually post-date Sarg's.

<sup>163</sup> Qtd. in: Tamara Robin Hunt, *Tony Sarg: Puppeteer in America 1915-1942* (North Vancouver: Charlemagne Press, 1988), 13.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 14.

Bedchamber.”<sup>165</sup> Sarg described: “A quaint little four-poster bed [with] old engravings [...] on the walls, some curious toys placed in the corners-all was true of the Dickens period and spirit.”<sup>166</sup> This was the first time Sarg’s toy collecting habits turned a profit.

His interest in dolls and other toys led to a career in puppetry after he saw Thomas Holden’s marionettes. Sarg was fascinated by their hollow bodies (soft stocking torsos), and their wooden heads and arms. These hollow shells allowed the figures to turn and bounce while moving, giving a greater illusion of humanity than did the bodies of wooden objects. Around the same time, he read a Dorothy Neville book in which the author complained about the current state of the marionette stage and begged for an “enthusiast [that] would revive [the] ancient art of the theatre.”<sup>167</sup> Sarg took it upon himself to be that enthusiast.

From the beginning, Sarg was dedicated to advancing the artistic standards of puppet theatre. He sought to improve on the Holden productions, which he believed were limited by the skill of Holden’s manipulators; “Obviously, from the costumes and scenery and the things they did, the puppet showman was an uneducated person. I could see great possibilities, which the Holdens were completely overlooking.”<sup>168</sup> It is not entirely clear where this particular apperception, that the mediocre manipulators were poorly educated, comes from. But the efforts Sarg made to increase direct control over the object’s motions likely stemmed from this early combination of fascination and

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<sup>165</sup> F. J. McIsaac, *The Tony Sarg Marionette Book* (New York: Viking Press, 1929), 3; Sarg claimed that the admissions exceeded the cost of rent for the entire building fivefold.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>167</sup> Qtd in: Ibid., 4.

<sup>168</sup> Otd in: Ibid., 6.

disappointment. Those efforts would lead to considerably increased possibilities for reproducing humanlike motions in marionettes.

Sarg improved on the standard marionettes by introducing a set of crossbars that could hold twenty-two strings. Simply called “the controller,” it permitted Sarg’s marionettes to replicate the motions of a living human being. He claimed: “My dolls could pick up articles and put them down again, smoke pipes, blowing the smoke out of their mouths, even play musical instruments and do very good dances.”<sup>169</sup> The hollow bodies Sarg appropriated from the Holden company and Sarg’s own expanded controller would later serve both Sarg’s desire for realistic detail, and a competitive market driven by audiences demanding innovative tricks.

Some of Sarg’s early designs, as described in *The Tony Sarg Marionette Book*, show other puppeteers how Sarg’s advancements in marionette construction support new “trick puppets.” He thus built on the traditions established by nineteenth-century artists. For his Vedder, the Innkeeper of *Rip Van Winkle*, Sarg inserted a tube into the hollow torso of the object that ended at its open wooden mouth. When the innkeeper sat smoking his pipe, the puppeteer could take full advantage of the object’s extra joints and strings, lighting and raising the pipe to the object’s mouth. After Vedder “inhaled,” the puppeteer could smoke a cigarette and blow the smoke through the tube, mimicking an exhalation. Thus, detailed human behavior and a delightful design technique combined in the Vedder marionette to serve both Sarg’s desire for aesthetic detail, and the demands of a competitive theatrical market.

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<sup>169</sup> Otd in: Ibid., 6.

Critics and fellow puppeteers praised Sarg's exceptional marionette designs and the dramatic quality of his plays. Paul McPharlin, referencing Sarg's synthesis of carefully detailed production and sound dramatic material, called him "an ideal for American puppetry."<sup>170</sup> Sarg certainly lived up to this reputation, mounting such ambitious productions as *The Mikado*, *The Rose and the Ring*, and *The Adventures of Christopher Columbus*. He may have expanded the dramatic possibilities of the puppetry field by demonstrating, at least more profoundly than other puppeteers before him, that epic plays were suited to the puppet stage. At the same time, his choices reveal an interest in exotic stories. This interest naturally led him to blackface puppetry.

Sarg's first production was *A Night in Delhi*, a simplistic portrait of Hindu Indian culture featuring two Indian snake charmer puppets and a serpent puppet. He presented this humble example of exoticism at the Old Curiosity Shop, where he created a small puppet stage for the occasion. The piece would figure prominently in his early career.

When World War I broke out, Sarg was ostracized from English society for his German heritage. In 1915, he emigrated to the United States. He converted rooms on the top floor of New York City's Flatiron Building into a studio. Sarg then made his first impact on the theatrical field when he reproduced *A Night in Delhi* there, along with a few of his other short plays. Producer Winthrop Ames visited Sarg's studio. He was so impressed with Sarg's work that he invited the puppeteer to take over an engagement

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<sup>170</sup> Qtd in: John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 60.

previously occupied by the Munich Artist's Marionette Theatre.<sup>171</sup> Sarg had many subsequent successes with more detailed productions based on exotic tales, as well as western tales set in exotic lands.

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<sup>171</sup> F. J. McIsaac, *The Tony Sarg Marionette Book* (New York: Viking Press, 1929), 7.

## Sarg and Blackface

Though Sarg never presented a minstrel show, or the newly standardized *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Little Black Sambo*, many of his “foreign” pieces featured blackface characters. His *A Stolen Beauty and the Great Jewel* (1917), a supernatural tale involving Eastern merchants and kidnapping, featured a black slave marionette alongside the same snake charmers designed for *A Night in Delhi*, in a stage environment Sarg called The Temple of the Jewel God. In 1937, Sarg presented *Robinson Crusoe* on a bill with his *Mikado*. Though not the first puppeteer to attempt *Crusoe*, Sarg deepened its exoticism with a series of “native warrior” marionettes patterned after Guinean tribes. Sarg’s most original contribution to blackface puppetry was a production of Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus Stories* (1933). With assistance from one of his numerous company puppeteers, one A.C.M. Azoy, Sarg produced a sequence of several of Harris’s collected African American folktales. The production included selections from *Uncle Remus*, *His Songs and Sayings*, *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, and *Nights with Uncle Remus*.

The essences of Sarg’s blackface puppets are constituted by the collaborative co-presence of his desire to detail human life in puppetry and his interest in ambitious narratives. The objects are exoticized and exaggerated, but far less distorted than those previously examined in this study. They are logical object actors for a puppeteer that wished to advance the field by introducing both a sort of “realism” and new, challenging texts.

The Uncle Remus tales, subtitled *Legends of the Old Plantation* in Harris’s first publication (1881), are stories told in dialogue by an elderly African American man named Uncle Remus. He relates the tales to a young African American known only as

the Little Boy. The Little Boy listens intently, occasionally interjecting questions or comments, as Uncle Remus relates the adventures of Brer Rabbit, his key nemesis Brer Fox, and more than a dozen other characters. Critics and literary scholars have compared Harris' metaphoric uses of animals to the struggles in human conflicts, to traditional African trickster tales, as well as to European works by Aesop and Chaucer.<sup>172</sup>

Some general similarities to *Punch and Judy* suggest the attraction such stories might have held for a puppeteer. Like Punch, Brer Rabbit thwarts all attempts to control or capture him. In perhaps the most famous story, Brer Fox creates a sculpture of a baby in tar. Brer Rabbit arrives and attempts to have a chat with the baby. Enraged by the child's refusal to discourse with him, Brer Rabbit strikes it and becomes trapped. Victory for the fox seems certain, but Mr. Rabbit fools him into the hare's release, using what has become one of the most famous acts of trickery in all of American popular culture:

“Well, I speck I got you dis time, Brer Rabbit [...] You been runnin’ ‘roun’ here sassin’ atter me a mighty long time, but I speck you done come ter de cen’ er de row [...] ‘en dar you is, en dar you’ll stay twel I fixes up a bresh pile and fires her up, kaze I’m gwinteter bobbycue you dis day, sho,” sez Brer Fox, sezee.

Den Brer Rabbit talk mighty ‘umble,

“I don’t keer w’at you do wid me, Brer Fox,” sezee, “so you don’t fling me in dat brier-patch. Roas’ me, Brer Fox,” sezee, “but don’t fling me in dat brier-patch,” sezee.

“I ain’t got no string,” sez Brer Fox, sezee, “en now I speck I’ll hatter drwon you,” sezee.

“Drown me des ez deep es you please, Brer Fox,” sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, “but do don’t fling me in dat brier-patch, “ sezee.

“Dey ain’t no water nigh,” sez Brer Fox, sezee, “en now I speck I’ll hatter skin you,” sezee.

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<sup>172</sup> “Biography of Joel Chandler Harris,” In *Harper Anthology of American Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1994).

“Skin me, Brer Fox,” sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, [...] “but do please, Brer Fox, don’t fling me in dat brier-patch,”

Co’se Brer Fox wnater hurt Brer Rabbit bad ez he kin, so he catch ‘im by de behime legs en slung ‘im right in de middle er de brierpatch [...] Brer Rabbit wuz bleedzed fer ter fling back some er his sass, en he holler out: ““Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox--bred en bawn in a brier-patch!”” en wid dat he skip out des ez lively as a cricket in de embers.<sup>173</sup>

The heroic underdog and his humorous victory connect the piece thematically to the puppet theatre’s most famous protagonist. Though Sarg’s production is the only recorded example of *The Uncle Remus* stories in early twentieth century American puppetry, it was a logical addition to the marionette pantheon.

It is a marked departure from previous examples of blackface puppetry, as it is the first example of an African American text presented by object theatre. Harris’s writings, likewise, were an important contribution to the nineteenth-century American literary cannon, which offered few works from African American tradition. Harris preserved tales from black American enslavement culture at a time when industrial expansion was steadily encroaching on the local culture of agrarian America.

For these reasons, literary historians have characterized the stories as symbolic of the burden of enslavement. Debates have centered on themes of subordination/resistence,

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<sup>173</sup> Except from: Joel Chandler Harris, “How Mr. Rabbit was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox,” *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1881), reprinted in: Melissa Murray and Dominic Perella, “Uncle Remus’ Songs and Sayings (Selected Text),” *Uncle Remus: Social Context and Ramification* (Richmond: University of Virginia, 1997), accessed 16 July 2004, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/remus/toosharp.html>.

of the tarbaby as racial icon, and celebrations of anarchy.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, not all the stories are merely symbols of enslavement that close reading may reveal. In one tale, “Why the Negro is Black,” Uncle Remus explains that racial distinctions occurred when some humans, who were all originally black, bathed in a pool of water. This parable directly subverts the genetic racialism of the nineteenth century and celebrates an ancient world of racial egalitarianism. Essentially, it denaturalizes the ideology behind nineteenth-century racism.<sup>175</sup>

The introduction of these examples of African American folklore to the 1880s literary field was a significant contribution on Harris’s part. Yet the introduction of those same tales to puppetry more than half a century later was a more significant addition to the specific eidos of puppet theatre, than to the eidos of literary culture. By 1933, individuals at black universities and artists of the Harlem Renaissance had expanded African American literature, and essentially left Harris behind.

Nevertheless, it was an important essence for puppet representations of blackness. Building on a single character in *Punch and Judy*, whether Shallaballa or Jim Crow, the Royal Marionettes provided American theatre with full productions featuring blackface characters. David Lano had improved on its humble beginnings by introducing more serious dramas such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Tony Sarg’s intense desire to expand the

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<sup>174</sup> For two useful takes in the discussion, see: Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2001), and Hugh T. Keenan, “Br’er Rabbit Redux,” In *Sitting at the Feet of the Past: Retelling the North American Folktale for Children* (New York: Greenwood, 1992).

<sup>175</sup> Michele Birnbaum, “Dark Dialects: Scientific and Literary Realism in Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus Series,” *New Orleans Review* 18 (1991): 36-45. Other interpreters might argue that Uncle Remus’s ignorance of biological history suggest a simplemindedness indicative of racist ideology.

possibilities of puppetry led him to take another step, introducing actual black folklore, even if he did so several decades late.

Tony Sarg's interest in dolls and detailed realistic behavior had a similar impact on the object frontalities he created for his productions. Images from one photograph that exists, that of the aforementioned "native warrior" marionettes of *Robinson Crusoe*, suggest, by comparison to other objects, that Sarg tried to humanize the blackface representations as he tried to humanize his marionettes (see figure 28). Since most of *Robinson Crusoe* takes place in South America, the tribes depicted by Sarg must be the natives who pursue Crusoe while he is sailing along the coast of Africa. Defoe's hero provides little explanation apart from vague reflections on the foreboding otherness of the



Fig. 28. "Scene from a Dramatized version of *Robinson Crusoe*." Photograph by Tony Sarg's Marionettes. Copied from: Cyril W. Beaumont, *Puppets and the Puppet Stage* (New York: Studio Productions, 1938), 66.

"Dark Continent." He believes where he is:

must be that country which, lying between the Emperor of Morocco's dominions and the negroes, lies waste and uninhabited, except by wild beasts; the negroes having abandoned it and gone farther south for fear of the Moors, and the Moors not thinking it worth inhabiting by reason of its barrenness; and indeed, both forsaking it because of the prodigious number of tigers, lions, leopards, and other furious creatures which harbour there; so that the Moors use it for their hunting only, where they go like an army, two or three thousand men at a time; and indeed

for near a hundred miles together upon this coast we saw nothing but a waste, uninhabited country by day, and heard nothing but howlings and roaring of wild beasts by night.<sup>176</sup>

Crusoe is unclear as to where his pursuers hail from. Geographically, he is probably imagining the traditional peoples of Western Sahara, but the dominant tribe of the region, the Saharawi, is never mentioned by name in, nor suggested by descriptions in, the text.

Sarg seems unconcerned with geographical accuracy. His images may be based on an authentic African tribe, such as the Azande, the dominant tribe of the southwestern Sudan. Images of African warriors would have been available to Sarg as a consequence of Colonialism. Yet, given the elaborateness of the skin and face paint on Sarg's marionettes, it seems more likely that he drew his from the elaborately painted bodies of Papua New Guinea's tribal warriors, an island nation just north of Australia.

It is a matter of speculation whether Sarg used careful research, general collections of influence, or an exceptional imagination to develop his images. He was notoriously cosmopolitan, using African drums and Chinese wind harps in his puppet orchestras. He was equally noted for his high artistic standards and his willingness to share his puppetry secrets. If he was given to multicultural research, he never mentioned this as a necessary strategy for puppeteers, despite numerous publications on the subject. His exoticism succeeds in limiting stereotypes, but it seems unlikely that cultural authenticity was ever on his mind.

What definitely influenced Sarg was his vast collection of dolls. His marionettes have the wide eyes of early twentieth-century dolls (see figure 29). Building on the same copresence, Sarg limits their racial characteristics to one or two specific qualities. As

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<sup>176</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 14.1-11.

was common with the so-called “Topsy” puppets of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these objects are essentially the same biological representations, with subtle differences. Both have plump cheeks that jut slightly forward, suggesting a baby’s facial fat deposits. Both have humanlike dark hair, as well as detailed feet and hands. The differences are in clothing and skin color. The Chinese puppet’s eyes are more angled than the other, but only slightly. These dolls are archetypes of human children. Their racial differences are cosmetic.



Fig. 29. “Negro and Chinese Dolls.” Photograph by Anonymous. Copied from: Mary Benbow, Edith Dunlap, and Joyce Lucklin. *Dolls and Doll-Making*. Boston: Plays Inc., 1968.

Sarg adopted this strategy for many of his puppets, combining minuscule details, character-specific costumes, and an essentially human base. His Portia and Shylock marionettes for William Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* demonstrate this (see figure 30). Shylock has the hooked nose of the “Jew” stereotype, and he wears exotic robes suggestive of traditional Jewish dress common to Venice. Yet, apart from his bald head

and his beard, which show his age, his body shares many characteristics with that of Portia.



Fig. 30. "Scene from *The Taming of the Shrew*." Photograph by Tony Sarg's Marionettes. Copied from: Cyril W. Beaumont, *Puppets and the Puppet Stage* (New York: Studio Productions, 1938), 67.

Likewise, his blackface puppets are wide-eyed with otherwise human forms. They have sculpted torsos indicating a muscular human physique. He painted their skins with the darkest black, the single detail that suggests their race. They stand tall and one even smiles, leaving aside any stereotype of angry, threatening cannibals or of subhuman African genetics (walking with a hunch, for example). As a total costume, their decorative body paint, spears and shields, and grass skirts indicate a broad fantasy of African tribal warriors. Yet they are less distorted than any previous blackface puppets under consideration in this essay. It seems that efforts to embed the field of puppetry with greater realism can lead to more human-like depictions of black characters.

Sarg's techniques show an interaction between the strains of exaggeration and imagined authenticity, governed by McPharlin's categorical distinction. His efforts to

present his particular imaginations of authentic black life (tribal African warriors and African American folklore) lead him to attempt to represent these works more realistically than he might a minstrel show. Sarg makes an aesthetic distinction between humorous distortion and sympathetic realism. As he attempts to set aside trivial puppet shows in favor of artistically rich works of drama, he also sets aside the most egregious distortions of blackface puppetry. Excess exaggeration would lead the spectator to think of the puppet as an icon of humor; Sarg wishes his blackface puppets to act in serious, epic dramas. The essence of the Sarg blackface puppet is a realistically detailed, exotic object-actor for a serious dramatic production.

Sarg's greatest contribution to puppetry was in breaking up the cabalistic mentality of the nineteenth-century showpeople. By constantly revealing his tricks, in books and articles, or in post-production demonstrations, Sarg laid the foundation for organizations like the Puppeteers of America, and influenced generations of American puppeteers, among them Sue Hastings.

## The Background of Susan Couch Hastings

Sue Hastings, for her part, adopted many of Sarg's tricks. When it came to blackface puppetry, however, Hastings internalized the imperative that minstrel-derived blackface images belong in lowbrow entertainment. She demonstrates this consequence of McPharlin's categorical distinction more than any prior puppeteer does. The result is that the second most important American puppeteer prior to Jim Henson only produced the most egregious stereotypes of blackface. Yet, this is interesting as well. Her career demonstrates most visibly how the aesthetics of minstrel stereotypes managed to persist, despite efforts to enrich the artistic vocabulary of puppetry as a whole.

Susan Couch's (her birth name) early experiences wove curiously around the experiences of Tony Sarg.<sup>177</sup> Like Sarg, she was strongly influenced by early artistic experimentations. Also like Sarg, she faced her father's opposition to becoming an artist, opposition she would take decades to reject. Though the Couch family was not artistically inclined (her father opposed most theatrical fare), Hastings was able to present pageants for their Methodist ministry as early as the age of fourteen.<sup>178</sup> These early experiences smoldered a surreptitious desire to pursue theatre as a future career.<sup>179</sup>

However, Hastings stalled her ambitions for more than twenty years, in favor of an ultimately doomed marriage to George Aubrey Hastings, a promising public relations consultant. The marriage failed when Hastings was almost forty. Suddenly, she found

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<sup>177</sup> Dorlis M. Grubidge observes the marked similarities between Sarg and Hastings in her biography: *Sue Hastings: Puppet Showwoman* (North Vancouver: Charlemagne Press, 1993).

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 22.

herself in need of independent economic support. She looked to puppetry once more. After two decades, her financial needs outweighed her father's anti-theatrical prejudices.

Beginning in 1922, she returned to the professional stage, writing one failed full-length play. Mildly daunted, she enrolled in playwriting course. There, she heard of Tony Sarg's company, with whom she would later apprentice herself. At this time, Hastings was generally rankled by her experience as a playwright, a failure she blamed on "everyone and everything except her script;" She thus migrated toward puppetry for reasons worthy of Edward Gordon Craig.<sup>180</sup> Without having seen a live puppet show:

She was intrigued at the prospect of having complete control over a theatrical production. She facetiously speculated that the marionettes suited her needs in that she could be a playwright, designer, director, actor, and producer. Then, if her production failed, she theorized, she would have no one but herself to blame.<sup>181</sup>

Her biographer supposes that Hastings may have investigated puppetry through the many books and articles that were then available.<sup>182</sup> Similarities between her perspective, as quoted above, and Craig's essay on the ubermarionette, further suggest that Hastings made use of the written puppetry texts available in the 1920s.

She either read voraciously or had an extraordinary natural aptitude for the form, for she produced her first puppet show before she ever saw another's. That show, a burlesque on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was a surprising success for a beginner. The audience at Columbia University's McMillan Theatre responded enthusiastically. She gave a

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>182</sup> Tony Sarg's articles and McIsaac's book on the artist, as well as Edward Gordon Craig's "The Actor and the Ubermarionette" (1908) and Helen Haimon Joseph's *A Book of Marionettes* (1920) were in print and available to Hasting.

second showing for a New York City church. The leading Soprano of the Metropolitan Opera, Alma Gluck, attended the church production. Gluck later invited Hastings to play the show for a society gathering in her home. Other socialites quickly followed suit.<sup>183</sup>

Hastings's company at the time, the Banbox Puppets, received increasing requests for performances. Seeing the same icons of New York society at these events, Hastings soon realized she would need new material. At long last, she sought out her fellow puppeteers, witnessing Remo Bufano's production of the Italian marionette classic, *Orlando Furioso*, and a performance by Teatro Dei Piccoli. She apprenticed briefly with Sarg's studio, but grew disillusioned with perpetual lessons in manipulation, with seemingly "simplified" puppets.<sup>184</sup> In 1924, she committed fully to professional puppeteering, reforming her company under the title of The Sue Hastings Marionettes.

Hastings went on to produce nearly fifty different productions, including: such traditional western tales as *Aladdin*, *Cinderella*, and *St. George and the Dragon*, modern works like *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *Peter Rabbit*, and *Winnie the Pooh*, and varieties/revues like *Under the Big Top*, *Old English Ballads*, and *Zulieka, the Oriental Dancer*. At its height prior to WWII, Hastings's company included eleven troupes, playing at dozens of stages with as many as a thousand puppets. She exhibited most of her productions in New York City, but Hastings's troupes also toured, hitting the the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition (1933-34) the Texas Centennial Exposition (1936), and stage houses in Great Britain throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>183</sup> Dorlis M. Grubidge, *Sue Hastings: Puppet Showwoman* (North Vancouver: Charlemagne Press, 1993), 27-28.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 30.

## The Essence of Puppetry for Sue Hastings

Sue Hastings's career was marked by a complicated structural system of perspectives built on a variety of interpretations of the essences of theatrical roles. As a puppet maker, she felt that puppet frontalities should showcase a modest level of nonrealistic exaggeration. As a designer, she advocated illusionism. As a director, she embraced the atomization of the marionette stage. As a performer, she suggested semi-realistic approaches to representing the emotional state of the character, but in an overall context that insisted on the ceremonial fantasy of stylized marionette manipulation. The result was an energetic espousal of the marked contradictions of puppet theatre. The synthesis of her complicated and contradictory understandings of the different components of puppet production implied an essence for puppetry worthy of some of its most fervent apologists.<sup>185</sup>

In her book, *How to Produce Plays* (1940), Hastings characterized puppetry as a blend of illusionism and fantasy. She advised the puppeteer to create objects that are archetypal exaggerations of their characters, but warned her/him to maintain a "certain restraint."<sup>186</sup> The correct balance occurs when the puppeteer emphasizes specific qualities of a character's identity and moral code. She provided an example.

Suppose you are doing a play about a long-haired Giant who steals a flax-haired child, only to be stopped at the oven's mouth by a Knight with Knobbly Knees. By all means sketch Long-head with a mean expression, but concentrate your

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<sup>185</sup> The contradictory aesthetics of puppetry is a core point in the following sources: Peter D Arnott, *Plays without People: Puppetry and Serious Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), Henryk Jurkowski, *Aspects of the Puppet Theatre*, edited by Penny Francis (London: Puppet Centre Trust, 1988), George Latshaw, *Puppetry: The Ultimate Disguise* (New York: Richard Rosens Press, 1972), Michael Menschke, in collaboration with Margaretta Sorenson, *In Search of Aesthetics for the Puppet Theatre* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private, 1992).

<sup>186</sup> Sue Hastings and Dorcas Ruthenburg, *How to Produce Puppet Plays* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1940), 31.

emphasis on his superb cranial index. Make Flax-hair all big-eyed beauty, but crown her with a mop like a football chrysanthemum. Give Knobbly a profile like a Galahad [...], but specialize on kneecaps that stick out like motorhoods. Simple, emphatic lines building up to a major trait will help to establish clearly not only the identity of your characters but their moral codes.<sup>187</sup>

Hastings went on to argue that the puppeteer should suggest the general emotional state of the character when carving/painting its face. A generally bloodthirsty, raging giant can be made to laugh when the puppeteer turns its back to the audience and shakes its shoulders. Hastings advocated an approach to puppetry that combines both nonrealistic exaggeration in construction and realistic touches in performance.

As a director, she blended atomization by splitting voice actor from puppeteer, careful selection of character-specific actors, and ceremonial realism in manipulation. Hastings sought professional actors for her company. Auditions consisted of singing, voice acting, and marionette manipulation, in the stated order. If an actor could not sing, he/she was asked to leave. If an actor could sing, but was unable to embed her/his voice with appropriate characterization, that actor was asked to leave. Only when the actor proved capable of the first two requirements was he/she invited to show off puppet skills.<sup>188</sup> Thus, Hastings integrated two contradictory elements, actors whose voices fit, in a realistic sense, the appropriate puppet character, and the markedly antirealistic division between puppeteer and speaker. To this already messy blend, Hastings added stylized movement. She advised the puppeteer to emphatically shake the hand, and jostle

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>188</sup> Dorlis M. Grubidge, *Sue Hastings: Puppet Showwoman* (North Vancouver: Charlemagne Press, 1993), 65-66.

the head to the right and left, to mimicking speaking.<sup>189</sup> The hand would have been a delightful reference to the gestures humans make while speaking and the head bobbing would have given the object energy. But neither of these motions is precisely realistic, since people do not simply move their hands and heads while speaking. A system of biological responses accompanies any single emotional response. Hastings's approach to puppetry would produce a sort of ceremonial realism that mimics basic features of an emotional response, but also embraces the limits of object performance for producing the complete details.

Hastings managed to build a career on these contradictions and ambiguities, circulating to audiences throughout the country her combination of ceremonial realism, atomization, realistic casting, and mild exaggerations. These joined with illusionistic design choices. She carefully concealed stage conventions in performance, masking the stage wings and flooding the stage with light from the upper sides, in order that the marionettes would be wholly visible and their strings would be concealed.<sup>190</sup> The result was a style of marionette performance that embraced aesthetic paradox.

Hastings's search for a superior alternative to live actors drove her to this distinctive style of puppetry, but there was one major influence that led her along the path, the Teatro Dei Piccoli of Signor Vittorio Podrecca. This marionette company was based in Rome, but resided briefly at the Frolic New Amsterdam Theatre while Hastings was in New York. As her biographer argued:

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<sup>189</sup> Sue Hastings and Dorcas Ruthenburg, *How to Produce Puppet Plays* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1940), 91.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 23.

Inescapable similarities exist between the Piccoli style and that adopted by Sue Hastings for her company [...] First, Sue's marionettes reflected the Piccoli design, a delicate verisimilitude for which the Piccoli figures were famous. Second [she adopted the Piccoli combination of] interchangeable short plays and numerous variety acts.<sup>191</sup>

Podrecca formed his company in 1913 and achieved international recognition by the middle of the following decade. His marionette shows emphasized dancing objects and puppet tricks in programs that included such characters as "Geisha," from the Sydney Jones work of the same name.

Podrecca himself explained the marionette aesthetic as a slippery balance of reality and fantasy. "There is something in the actor that aspires to the status of marionette; there is something in the puppet that aspires to the status of actor."<sup>192</sup> Indeed, Podrecca saw the marionette as an opportunity to explore the power of deep feeling, in his words, to be "an instrument [...] of music, of pleasure, of color, rhythm, poetry, technic [sic], and of passion. Above all, of passion."<sup>193</sup> Hastings adopted both the techniques of the Piccoli and Podrecca's romantic essence of the marionette.

The twenty-first century scholar cannot help but note similarities between Podrecca and Craig's notions of the marionette's essence. Both embed it with a self-conscious fantasy of volition. Podrecca rationally acknowledges that the puppet is not capable of striving for anything. Yet, he confounds rationality by imagining a Pinocchio spirit in the puppet, one that would break free of its dead wood to become a living, breathing actor. When Craig dubbed the marionette an "echo of a noble and beautiful

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>192</sup> Issac Goldberg, "For Interview: Mr. Podrecca's Own Monologue," In collected documents of The Paul McPharlin Puppetry Collection (Detroit: DIA Library, ca 1945).

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

art,” and “a descendent of the stone images of the old temples,” he mirrored Podrecca’s semi-rational simultaneity.<sup>194</sup> The puppet is a lifeless wooden miniature, a figure on the same level as a child’s toy in life’s great chain of importance.<sup>195</sup> But to its artists and admirers, it becomes concurrently, at least in performance, a religious symbol, granted shamanistic significance and significations.

While the influence of Podrecca’s company explains the aesthetic contradictions in Hastings’s approach, it further explains why Hastings did not apply the same “delicate verisimilitude” to her blackface projects. Photographs of her puppets for *Cab Calloway*, *In the Jungle* (1926), and *Sinbad the Sailor* (1929) suggest that she adopted nearly wholesale the clownish exaggerations of minstrel puppetry.

A publicity sketch of the Teatro Dei Piccoli reveals how Podrecca’s artistic practices may have contributed to Hastings’s essence of the blackface puppet (figure 31).

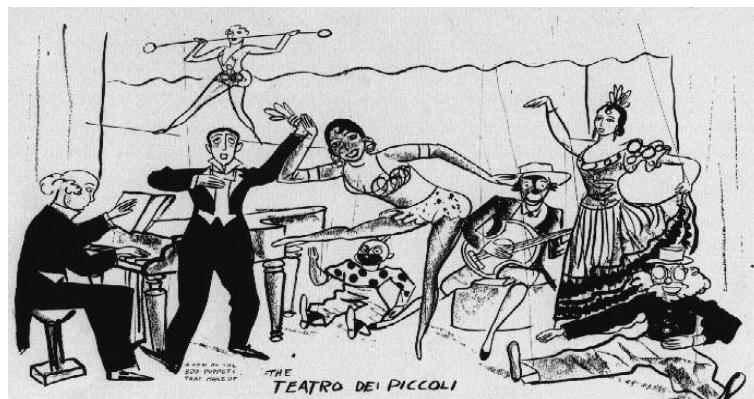


Fig. 31. Publicity Sketch for the Teatro Dei Piccoli. Copied from: Paul McPharlin. Collected documents in the Paul McPharlin Puppetry Collection (Detroit: DIA Library, Date Unrecorded).

It seems she adopted their principle that different characters demands different aesthetics

<sup>194</sup> Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: Mercury Books, 1962), 82.

<sup>195</sup> I am using this image metaphorically. I intend no historical connection between this notion of a social hieracharcy and the more literal, Renaissance notion of the Great Chain of Being.

Illusionistic sketches of two dancers, an acrobat, a singer, and a pianist mix with sketches of three clowns, one a blackface guitar player. The blackface clown's exaggerated facial features seem almost apelike next to the smooth, naturalistic features of the ballerina. The ballerina's light cocoa complexion, provocative outfit, and delicate form suggest the cultural hypocrisy that made Josephine Baker a star.<sup>196</sup> The whiteface clowns are more exaggerated, suggesting that more humorous displays by the Podrecca marionettes were accomplished by more distorted objects. At a time when only African American female performers with light skin and less visibly ethnic features were enshried with the emblem of stardom, Podrecca's star puppet is only vaguely stamped with the exaggerations of blackface. At a time when more ethnic-looking actors were relegated to more stereotyped roles, Podrecca's minstrels are radically ethnicized.

Hastings would have been attracted to Podrecca's variety style. She reported disliking every quality of Remo Bufano's *Orlando Furioso in Fantastic Fricassee* except the comedic action, rejecting his "hurriedly made and crudely finished" folk puppets.<sup>197</sup> Bufano's work, discussed in the next section, was radically experimental. Hastings may have been rejecting what was not, as she perceived it, a lack of artistic integrity, but a lack of realism. But this distinction does not appear to have entered her mind. For her, it seems, professionally made puppets must be realistic. In her guide, she advised

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<sup>196</sup> One characteristic of white/black relations in America is a cultural politics that make light-skinned African American women acceptable for "celebrity status," and forced darker women to play domestics or other stock roles. The interesting contradiction of Josephine Baker's career is that she was considered a little too dark at first, but later accepted as "light enough." Discussed throughout: Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

<sup>197</sup> Dorlis M. Grubidge, *Sue Hastings: Puppet Showwoman* (North Vancouver: Charlemagne Press, 1993), 28.

puppeteers to avoid complicated and expressionistic productions like *Peer Gynt* and *The Emperor Jones*.<sup>198</sup> While she occasionally presented works like *Crime and Punishment*, her revues, specialty acts, and children's plays outnumbered her serious works more than ten to one.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Hastings produced a large number of light-hearted plays with blackface characters. In addition to the four already mentioned, her complete list of such works is as follows: *Aunt Jemima and the Pickaninnies*, *Dance of the Golliwogs*, *The Golliwog's Cakewalk*, *Harlem Madness*, *Little Black Sambo* (1926), *The Merry Minstrels*, *On a Cannibal Isle*, and *Pickaninny Songs and Dances* (1926). Clearly, she was attracted to the type of plays that featured a large percentage of comedic action.

What is surprising, however, is that Hastings's marionettes for such characters were so markedly different from her others. Unlike Lano or Sarg, whose puppets are essentially variations on Lano or Sarg's characteristic puppet construction filtered through the logic of blackface puppetry, Hastings produced a series of objects that seem suspended in artistic time. Her *Cab Calloway* puppet, as pictured in an issue of *Puppetry*, is locked in a pose similar to some of Al Jolson's solo performances (head titled to the left, open palms on either side of the head facing the audience). It has dark brown "skin" and bright white teeth. Its upper jaw is thick and juts forward, closer in shape to a canine's snout than a human face. The real Cab Calloway had a slightly triangular nose, but given the breadth of exaggeration and the comparison to Calloway's skin color, which was fair for an African American, it is unlikely that Hastings based her puppet on

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<sup>198</sup> Sue Hastings and Dorcas Ruthenburg, *How to Produce Puppet Plays* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1940), 26.

the jazz showman at all.

It is possible that she based it instead upon the popular caricatures of Calloway. Many early twentieth-century posters and notices, advertising Calloway's celebrated orchestra, show its leader with an unnaturally long chin and broad smile. It is possible that Hastings was merely carving a caricature of an artist ever described as "larger than life."<sup>199</sup> However, this particular choice seems to have still been conditioned by a more general understanding of blackface puppetry's essence.

Hastings advised her fellow puppeteers to use brown paint for "Negroes," even suggesting subtle touches of white on the forehead and cheekbones would give the features more depth.<sup>200</sup> Yet she also felt that "a Negro, pugilist, or pugnacious type" should have a thick jaw, drawing an essential connection between the archetype of the giant and the archetype of the Negro.<sup>201</sup> That she equates archetypal qualities of blackface figures with a violent disposition is telling. Hastings sees the "Negro puppet" as a part of an object category of its own. Somehow, the visual essence of that category is something apart from the semi-realistic stylings that characterize the essence of non-blackface objects.

Further evidence of a categorical imperative for the essence of blackface puppetry comes from her marionettes for *In the Jungle* and *Sinbad*. This object also has an extremely large upper jaw and nose, reminiscent of a simian's mandibles. It wears a light brown grass skirt and has hair to its knees. Hastings did not attempt the same type of

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<sup>199</sup> Albert Murray, Interview by David Ossman (Washington: National Public Radio, 2004).

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 40.

delicate verisimilitude for blackface objects as she intended for those outside the tradition. A photograph from her *Sinbad the Sailor* further reveals this (see figure 32). Like the sketches from Teatro Dei Piccoli, Hastings distinguishes the black slave as clown from the dancer and the other, more substantive, characters. The unusually dark skin of the slave, as well as his unnaturally broad smile, divides him from the less striking features of its fellow objects.



Fig. 32. "Sinbad the Sailor." Photograph by The Dallas Puppet Theatre. Copied from: Dorlis M. Grubidge. *Sue Hastings: Puppet Showwoman*. North Vancouver: Charlemagne Press, 1993, 91.

This distinction goes beyond the mere heritage of minstrelsy that exists copresent whenever a puppeteer attempts a blackface character. It is an inconsistency in the endeavors of this puppeteer. Hastings' contemporaries criticized her for creating marionettes that were too realistic. Such egregiously stereotyped blackface puppet frontalities, juxtaposed with such delicately naturalistic non-blackface puppet frontalities, suggest that Hastings had so internalized the aesthetics of lowbrow, comic blackface that she was unable, as McPharlin or Sarg were able, to rethink them. Given Hastings's

proximity to the African American populations of New York City, this cannot be the cause of mere ignorance. This example demonstrates how the general eidos of blackface puppetry can transcend the aesthetic essence of individual puppeteers. The categorical association between minstrel-styled blackface puppets and lowbrow entertainment so embedded itself in Hastings's perception of the essence of the form, that she was unable to apply her characteristic verisimilitude to it, despite a dozen ventures into it.

### **Remo Bufano: The Local Emcees the Exotic**

Remo Bufano, the puppeteer that both Hastings and Sarg noted in their memoirs, was an enthusiastic experimenter. Where Hastings preferred variety, Bufano aggressively pursued the most impressive dramatic subjects. He presented the Sicilian classic *Orlando Furioso* (ca 1920s) and, most famously, contributed ten-foot rod puppets for Robert Edmund Jones's production of Igor Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1931). Though Hastings called his objects crude, no one could say that he did not brave challenging material.

Remo Bufano created a remarkably intimate example of McPharlin's categorical distinction. His productions, no matter their subjects or themes, always began with Mr. Julius Caesar (see figure 33). Bufano described this marionette as "the darky master of

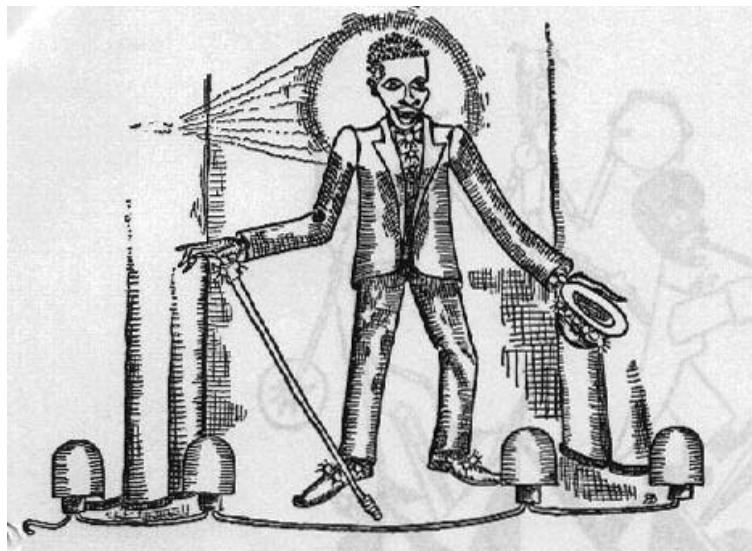


Fig. 33. "Mr. Julius Caesar." Sketch by Remo Bufano. Copied from: Remo Bufano. *Be a Puppet Showman*. New York: The Century Company, 1933, 2.

ceremonies, manager and announcer of [the] marionette theater."<sup>202</sup> Despite any expectations created by Bufano's use of the term "darky," Mr. Julius Caesar was not a

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<sup>202</sup> Remo Bufano, *Be a Puppet Showman* (New York: The Century Company, 1933), 2.

typical minstrel puppet, although he shared many of its qualities. In several productions, Mr. Julius Caesar did appear in the guise of a minstrelsy interlocutor. But Mr. Julius Caesar was a puppet frontality in flux. Sometimes he was dressed in the umbrella and wing-toed finery of the title character illustrations for Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo*. He was a sort of intersection of the various types of blackface puppetry. Whether for a serious drama or such variety pieces as *Julius Caesar's Circus* (1929), the object provided a "droll, friendly" introduction to Bufano's artistic endeavors.<sup>203</sup>

For the most part, Bufano used blackface puppets as a frame for his larger productions. There exist only two records of productions featuring blackface characters in the central narrative. Bufano may have included a tribal figure for his WPA production of *Treasure Island* (1935) and a publicity photograph preserves his "Voodoo Doctor" puppet. In general, he seems to have relegated his blackface marionettes to the status of a lowbrow frame for his elaborate productions.

Mr. Julius Caesar was the beginning, but he was not the end, apparently. Another Bufano production drawing shows a blackface piccolo player standing next to a third variation on Mr. Julius Caesar (see figure 34). This time, Caesar wears tightly knotted locks suggesting the ethnic features of the Caribbean. His musical partner is a typically exaggerated depiction of an African American instrumentalist, with his thick plume of what is likely, on the actual marionette, tightly curled hair, dark black features, and contrasting white eyes and mouth.

For Bufano, the minstrel marionette served to frame his productions, structuring them as complete entertainment events. His production at the Morningside Country

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 2.

Club's stage (ca 1932) began with Mr. Julius Caesar, followed by a marionette "impression" of the Spanish dancer Escudero. Selections from *Julius Caesar's Circus* concluded the first act. After the first intermission, audiences viewed *The Little King* (based on O. Soglow's story). The third, and final, act featured *Orlando Furioso*. A blackface emcee and a "live" "Harlem" band, depicted with the aesthetics of lowbrow blackface puppetry, added lightheartedness to the evening. This would provide comedy,

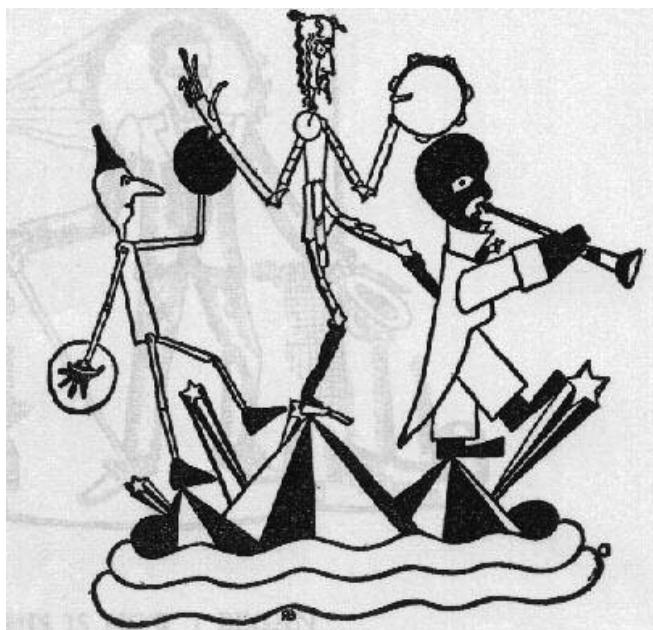


Fig. 34. "The Band." Sketch by Remo Bufano. Copied from: Remo Bufano. *Be a Puppet Showman*. New York: The Century Company, 1933, 1.

or at least ease, to a production dominated by heavy themes of myth, honor, chivalry, and sacrifice. Given that jazz musicians are not featured in the traditional tale, Bufano probably added the musicians to certain scenes of the large drama. If so, their appearance in this mythical tales would have provided a referential connection back to the present day, amusing the audience with anachronism, but also reinforcing its awareness of the artificiality of the event. Less fortunately, it might have created a thematic contrast

between the idealized world of honor in a classic tale, and the racial inequalities of modern New York City.

Unlike Lano, Bufano never mentioned his feelings toward actual African Americans, but it would be counterproductive to question his motives in introducing these “darkies” to his marionette productions. What is clear, is that he adopted the artistic division articulated by McPharlin. Bufano had his Mr. Julius Caesar, but he also produced the most impressive blackface puppet available to this investigation. It was a breathtaking contribution to the exotic, highbrow tradition of blackface puppetry. Bufano produced it for an exhibit at the Hall of Pharmacy for the New York World’s Fair, 1939-40 (see figure 35). This “Voodoo Doctor,” when fully standing, towered at twice the



Fig. 35. “Voodoo Doctor.” Photograph by Anonymous. Copied from: “These are Giant Puppets.” Paul. McPharlin. Collected documents in the Paul McPharlin Puppetry Collection (Detroit: DIA Library, ca 1939), 7.

height of the puppeteer himself, approximately twelve feet from its toes to the horns on its mask. It was constructed of papier-mache, sheet copper, wood, and wire. The object was one of several giant marionettes representing physicians throughout history and

world culture, including a Medieval Alchemist. Though generally camouflaged, its long legs indicated its faux Afro-Caribbean identity.

Bufano applied to this megapuppet an aesthetic of marked exaggeration, exotic elaboration, and magnificent size. This object's qualities indicate quite a different essence of blackface than Mr. Julius Caesar or the musicians. Into the essence of more aesthetically demanding blackface puppet frontalities, Bufano introduced an essence of artistry. Bufano seems to have felt that aesthetically rich puppetry must take a step forward, adding new innovations to a long history of progress. Thus, a highbrow blackface puppet must exhibit greater performance possibilities than its predecessors do. A lowbrow blackface comedian could be as crude as the puppeteer wished.

This may have resulted from Bufano's apperceptions of puppetry history, which interpolated progressive motion into a long, complicated tradition. Bufano detailed the history of puppet theatre as a consistent process of development from single-string, terra cotta objects, to six-string, jointed, wood marionettes. In ancient Rome, he argued, puppets were "simply jointed," the limbs attached by wire and loosely fastened through holes.<sup>204</sup> By the Middle Ages, marionettists used two strings, woven horizontally through the figures. These objects had articulated legs but the same crude arms as their classical counterparts.<sup>205</sup> Renaissance figures of Southern Italy incorporated three vertical strings. Their arms and legs were fully jointed at the elbows, shoulders, hips, and knees. Finally, twentieth century puppeteers achieved the modern, fully stringed object, whose jointed

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<sup>204</sup> Remo Bufano, *Magic Strings* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 497.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 498.

limbs could be manipulated together or separately.<sup>206</sup> While Bufano was correct that some objects reflect his progressive model, he surveyed far too few to constitute conclusive evidence of a developmental process, and neglected inconsistencies.

But Bufano was not an historian. He was a puppeteer whose apperceptions of some representative puppets embedded his artistic principles with a progressionist perception. He saw himself as a modern heir to a long process of development, and this drove him to produce increasingly elaborate objects throughout his career.

Indeed, Bufano was New York's most acclaimed puppeteer during the 1930s.<sup>207</sup> He began with detailed life-size and sub-life-size puppets for such high-culture productions as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Manuel de Falla's opera *El Retablo de Maese Pedro*. He quickly progressed to his greatest innovation, the megapuppet, or what Bell calls the over-life-size marionette. From his thirty-five foot Jumbo for the *Billy Rose Circus Musical* (1935), to his woolly mammoth and dinosaur puppets for Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of our Teeth* (1944), Bufano was "clearly the most spectacular figure of the puppet renaissance."<sup>208</sup> His Hall of Pharmacy exhibit carried the title *From Sorcery to Science*. It lasted thirty minutes, playing continuously throughout the day, on a revolving stage dressed as a medicine cabinet. It featured original music by Aaron Copeland.

Like Sarg, Bufano regularly pushed the puppetry envelope. Unlike Sarg or Hastings, Bufano did not pursue more detailed verisimilitude. Bufano embraced the most

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 499.

<sup>207</sup> John Bell, *Strings, Hands, and Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 64.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 64.

impressive aspects of elaborate, larger than life objects. One critic praised his objects as “more alive and animated than [the human] players.”<sup>209</sup> Another celebrated the “gawky, heroic bodies and wide-open eyes [and] the genuine passions which these little figures counterfeit[ed].”<sup>210</sup> Another, most telling, review, commended the “contrivances of that engaging business” in Bufano’s performances.<sup>211</sup> Nonrealistic and impressive exaggeration was certainly the standard in Bufano’s showings.

Thus, for his “Voodoo Doctor” megapuppet, Bufano combined the same aesthetics that had made him famous for Jones’s *Oedipus Rex*, with an exotic fantasy of African American culture (see figure 36). Both objects are elaborately costumed; both have heads that replicate culturally specific masks appropriate to each event. As the “Voodoo” Doctor’s animal and human, and boldly painted, features are reminiscent of many masks from the Haitian and Liberian Voodou traditions, Bufano may have researched these during the design phase of his Hall of Pharmacy exhibit. In the final marionette, Bufano incorporated imagined Afro-Caribbean authenticity (the details representative of Voodou masks) with the characteristic magnificence of his work.

Finally, the two megapuppets share Bufano’s innovative strategy of using both above (marionette string) and below (rod) controls. The strategy gave the megapuppet a

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<sup>209</sup> Heywood Brown, “Review of *Puppets*,” *New York World*. Quoted in: Remo Bufano, “What the Critics Say of Remo Bufano’s Marionettes,” publicity notice (New York: Remo Bufano Marionettes, ca 1930)

<sup>210</sup> Stark Young, “Review of *Puppets*,” *New York Times*. Quoted in: Remo Bufano, “What the Critics Say of Remo Bufano’s Marionettes,” publicity notice (New York: Remo Bufano Marionettes, ca 1930).

<sup>211</sup> John Anderson, “Review of *Puppets*,” *The Evening Post*. Quoted in: Remo Bufano, “What the Critics Say of Remo Bufano’s Marionettes,” publicity notice (New York: Remo Bufano Marionettes, ca 1930).

majestic quality, causing it to appear to float. The “Voodoo Doctor,” then, rather than having the same emotional impact as the frivolous Mr. Julius Caesar, would have a



Fig. 36. “String Puppet from *Oedipus Rex*.” Photograph by Maurice Goldberg. Copied from: Cyril W. Beaumont, *Puppets and the Puppet Stage* (New York: Studio Productions, 1938), 52.

supernatural, even god-like quality. Theoretically, this would encourage the audience to respect the object’s powers, rather than laugh at the ignorance of a superstitious “witch doctor.” This would conflict with the assumed purpose of the event, that is, to show the development of genuine pharmaceutical sciences from ancient and tribal medicines.

Thus, while most of Bufano’s blackface puppets were adaptations of minstrel clowns, the marionettist did produce one object that furthered the artistic possibilities of blackface puppetry, by applying his critically acclaimed artistic strategies to aesthetics derived from an African or Afro-Caribbean cultural traditions. This could not have been more than a visual fantasy of tribalism, however, since one magnificent puppet could not

capture the great variety of black tribal, or even Voodou tradition. Still, like McPharlin's Priestess for *Witch Moon*, this demonstrates a meaningful break with the comic stereotypes of minstrelsy.

### **Forman Brown: Puppets Speak Out**

Forman Brown rounds out the variety of puppets produced by the major puppeteers of the early twentieth century, by defying the distinction shared by the other three in this chapter. The dialect and thematic characteristics of minstrelsy stereotypes are co-present in his work. However, Brown's objects are surprisingly humanlike. His plays, though firmly grounded in stereotypical characterization, suggest Brown, more than other puppeteers of his generation, may have been concerned with racial matters.

Forman Brown was one of the three founders of the Yale Puppeteers, with Harry Burnett and Richard Brandon. Credit for the company's successful career (1923-1941 as the Yale Puppeteers and 1941-1956 at the Turnabout Theatre) goes to all three of the artists, certainly, but Brown was the most important figure for this study. Brown wrote all the company's dramas that featured blackface characters. During the early 1930s, these included: *My Man Friday*, *Uncle Tom's Hebb'n*, and *Mister Noah*. Given his leadership of the company, he was likely the dominant vision in producing each play's required puppets.

Brown appears to have been interested in the puppet as a substitute for the human actor, much as Hastings and Sarg were in their individual ways. However, where Sarg and Hastings wanted the puppet to serve aesthetic purposes that live actors could not, Brown imagined the puppet as a performer very like the human actor. In his first history of the Yale Puppeteers, *Punch's Progress* (1936), he described his puppets as beings with their own psychology.<sup>212</sup> While presenting a throne room scene, one of the puppeteers

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<sup>212</sup> Forman Brown, *Punch's Progress*, reprinted as *Small Wonder: The Story of the Yale Puppeteers* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 6.

tangled a Prime Minister marionette with its Queen marionette. Brown describes independent action on the puppet's part:

The Prime Minister, quite regal in his way, in a sweeping gesture of Prime-Ministerial elegance, caught the queen's right foot and pulled her gently but firmly from her throne. Imagine the Queen's position! And the Prime Minister's! But the court took no notice. Even the King was unmoved, and the prime minister, without even so much as an apology, continued his peroration to the end of the scene hanging resolutely to the queen's ankle. The show, however, despite this strange interlude of puppet psychology (a psychology, let me say, that no scientist has yet studied) was a success.<sup>213</sup>

Though the comment is more likely fanciful hyperbole than evidence of an irrational belief in the puppet as an independent agent of behavior, it is telling in the context of the artistic endeavors of the Yale Puppeteers.

Throughout the company's career, the proprietors experimented with various strategies to increase realistic illusion. Burnett devised a stringing method for the marionette's knees that "provided a lifelike gait."<sup>214</sup> Later in their career, the puppeteers developed a great body of near-photographically realistic "portrait puppets" of various famous persons. In 1929, the company produced marionettes of Toscanini, Martha Graham, Helen Hayes, and Greta Garbo. Some of their models actually posed for photographs, in which they stood next to their puppet dopplegangers (see figure 37).

Thus, it is not surprising that Brown produced blackface puppets that have a similarly naturalistic correlation to living African Americans. A photograph of the Turnabout Theatre's collection shows a number of objects for blackface plays, some with

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 6-7. Prime Minister capitalized by the author.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 10.

bald heads, some dressed in formal wear, others decorated with material suggestive of middle eastern garb.<sup>215</sup> All the objects have features well within the limits of the



Fig. 37. "Two Disraelis-George Arliss and his Marionette Portrait." Photograph by the Yale Puppeteers. Copied from: Forman Brown. *Small Wonder: The Story of the Yale Puppeteers*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980, 106.

appearance of real human beings. They are partially archetypal rather than realistic, since the skin color is consistently the same shade of brown. No attempt has been made to capture the diverse complexions of human beings. But they are closer in basic form to the empirical reality of human beings than Mr. Julius Caesar or Hastings' slave. Even when compared to Sarg's native warriors, the Yale Puppeteers seem to have avoided some of the softer exaggerations common in blackface puppetry of the 1930s.

The aesthetics of blackface for the Yale Puppeteers are partly explained by Forman Brown's attitude toward minstrelsy. As previously selected from his autobiography, Brown described a high school program conceived by Burnett: "The

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<sup>215</sup> Forman Brown, *Small Wonder: The Story of the Yale Puppeteers and the Turnabout Theatre* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 236. I have elected not to reprint this photograph, as the book copy is of very low quality. It would be impossible for a tertiary photocopy of the image to be deciphered.

program continued with a pair of negro entertainers—an Uncle Tom sort of gentleman with a banjo, and a decidedly Topsyish gal with many lace petticoats. They were frankly low-brow, but, Barton assured everyone, ‘in the genuine puppet tradition.’”<sup>216</sup> Brown would later revise his objection for the second history, *Small Wonder* (1980), stating that “by present standards [they] would have been unthinkable.”<sup>217</sup> In both cases, Brown tolerates the minstrel puppets only because they are part of a historical tradition of performance. Brown’s objection to minstrel puppets may have discouraged the company from participating in such fare. Certainly, with Brown as their main playwright, the company would not have been likely to experiment with true minstrel shows or their descendants.

Many of the plays the company did produce are founded on minstrel stereotypes and their descendants, but they adapt those stereotypes to more profound themes. *Mister Noah* (1931) was a parody of the ancient Judeo/Christian tale of Noah and the great flood.<sup>218</sup> It included wisecracking pairs of animals, Albert Einstein as a stowaway, and a final destination of Ellis Island. It proved a very popular production on tour, on Broadway, and even in a private showing for the great scientist it satirized.

The first incident in the play suggested a surprising connection between peripheral mythology, which developed around scripture, and racial hierarchies. Brown represented the great crowds of wicked human beings, suggested by Genesis 6:5, as “a

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<sup>216</sup> Forman George Brown, *Punch's Progress* (New York: MacMillan, 1936), 11.

<sup>217</sup> Forman Brown, *Small Wonder: The Story of the Yale Puppeteers* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 9.

<sup>218</sup> Since the three plays premiered within a two year period, I have chosen to follow the order in Brown’s published collection, *The Pie-eyed Piper and Other Impertinent Puppet Plays* (New York: Greenberg Press, 1933), rather than their historical chronology. I believe Brown intended his public to think of the plays in this order.

crowd of Negro sinners.”<sup>219</sup> Brown combined the stereotypical dialect produced by minstrelsy and a simplistic worldview to characterize the Sinners through comic exaggeration. Noah warns them of the coming flood and the Sinners deride the threat, assuring themselves that they “got umbrellas” and that Noah has “got watuh on de brain” (89). Brown seems to have connected race, ignorance, and wickedness thematically in this play. While Brown’s Noah indicates that all will be drowned, “both black and white alike,” the substance of the representation makes a clear connection between “the Negro” and an impure society.

Later, a young black female, the future wife of Noah’s son Ham, defies her sister and joins the Ark. Brown seems to be building on the legend of Yonah, a servant girl of the race of Cain, who stowed away on the Ark and later became wife to one of Noah’s sons.<sup>220</sup> If familiar with the legend, the audience would have expected Scram to secretly hide in the Ark, to be revealed later by Ham. If familiar only with scripture, the audience would be surprised by the adaptation, since in the scripture only Noah’s son’s wives were permitted on the Ark.

Despite beginning the play with a racist implication, that the world must be purged of black humans to achieve moral purity, Brown establishes a structure that reverses many expectations. In Brown’s version, the young girl, Scram, loves Ham and will follow him even if he never returns her affection. Scram’s sister warns that it “ain’

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<sup>219</sup> Forman Brown, “Mister Noah,” *The Pie-eyed Piper and Other Impertinent Puppet Plays* (New York: Greenberg Press, 1933), 89. From this point on, I will use parenthetical documentation for the lengthy selections from this play.

<sup>220</sup> The story is not even indicated in the scripture, but it is often used to explain why the sins of humankind did not wholly disappear after the flood. The notion is that Yonah’s presence prevented the complete purification of the Earth.

no good messin' aroun' wid white folks," (91) exacerbating a circumstance already suggesting miscegenation. Brown's Noah embraces Scram's presence in the family, confiding with her about Ham's difficulties finding a wife. For Ham's part, he fails to find a spouse not because of his secret love for Scram, but because he is too inept to succeed in wooing one. Rather than stowing away, Scram is made an open part of the Ark's staff, serving dinner to the passengers and giving the alarm when the rain ceases.

Brown's dramatic liberties applied to both religious legend and zoological history. Two dodo birds board the Ark. They explain to Noah that they are there by mistake since, unfortunately, they are both males. In a song titled "I'm a boy, and I'm a boy," they lament the fate that brought two birds who are "nothing more than friends" together (103), with the responsibility of repopulating their species. The comic incongruities would have been delightful. Brown both anachronistically ascribed the disappearance of the dodo to an ancient bureaucratic error and placed a reluctant male "couple" on the ancient Ark. Later, Noah's Dove returns with evidence of dry land. It is not the olive leaf described in Genesis but a gin bottle. Noah proclaims; "Thank God, we're among Christians" (107). Brown, in his characteristically irreverent style, did not shy away from the suggestion of homosexuality, or from mocking intemperate Christians, in his desire to create mirth from reversing expectations.

The conclusion of *Mister Noah* reverses the negative racial themes indicated at the start of the play. Given co-present themes from the legend of Yonah, the audience would be prepared for a conclusion that implicates Scram's presence in the perpetuation of human sin, and, by extension, in the continued impurity of the human species. Instead, the Ark arrives on Ellis Island, where the crew is questioned about their "daughter-in-

law's complexion" (117). Noah sweeps to her defense, declaring himself "a modern parent [who] sanctions things that other parents don't" (117). He continues; "Why we wouldn't trade our Scram, sir, for all the Hoover Dam, sir, while we've anything to share, she'll have a share in't" (117). The cast sings a celebration of modern America to the tune of "My Country 'Tis of Thee." So long as they promise "to abide by the Constitution, suspect the Jap and mistrust the Rooshian," they are welcome in their new nation (115). Brown's comic parody of American jingoism rounds out the social consciousness of the play. What began in the judgement of God on the "Negro" race, ends in a comically exaggerated celebration of extreme-nationalist American racial unity. Brown's comic reversals drove the play in a surprisingly progressive direction, nation-state paranoia notwithstanding, for mainstream puppetry of the 1930s.

In *My Man Friday* (1930), Brown continued his strategy of parodying canonical texts. He centered his adaptation of Defoe's novel on relationships between Crusoe, four native characters named Jojo, Zuzu, Friday, and a "Voodoo" Doctor, as well more speaking animals, this time a Nanny Goat and two Ostrich Sisters. Brown's Crusoe, pensive from loneliness, builds a saxophone out of wood. He uses the instrument to lament his circumstances in "I'm Robinson Crusoe, E. S. Q." He blames Defoe for his problems, capturing the self-referential essence of puppetry in general:

I'm Robinson Crusoe, E. S. Q., as everybody knows.  
It's not my fault, however, but one Daniel Defoe's.  
He wrote a book about me, and sent me off to sea.  
But the boat hit a rock with an awful sock,  
and look what happened to me!<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Forman Brown, "My Man Friday," *The Pie-eyed Piper and Other Impertinent Puppet Plays* (New York: Greenberg Press, 1933), 122. From this point on, I will use parenthetical documentation for the lengthy selections from this play.

By inaugurating the action with this marionette musical complaint against the author, Brown prepares his audience for a play that disrupts the thematic structures of Defoe's novel, using the self-referential character of puppet theatre to potentially undermine the text.

Brown then makes a directed point of challenging the nature of civilization, suggesting that part of Crusoe's role in bringing modernism to the island is to accustom the people to the racial inequalities of the modern world. His servant, Jojo, announces the arrival of the Ostrich Sisters, who wish to be present at an upcoming celebration. Crusoe explains to the "dimunitive colored boy in a grass skirt" (122) why the Ostriches cannot attend. "I'm a democratic soul, of course, JoJo, and I have tried to rule this island in an impersonal manner, but as I said in my inaugural address last March 'Democracy without Discrimination is Disasterous'" (124). In a parody of a novel that is, in many ways, a metaphor for Christian conversion and modernization, Brown used a targeted comedy of relief to disrupt the source text's cultural hegemony.

The first appearance of Friday in the puppet play is part of a comic scene reminiscent of more misogynistic moments in minstrelsy, which quickly turns into a mockery of wage-earning capitalism. Friday enters decrying a "woman [who will] be de death o' me yit." Crusoe calls him a "lady killer;" Friday responds that there is "one lady [he would] lak' to practice on." (128) The thematic recurrent on homicide disappears when Friday flees, Zuzu enters, and Friday's erstwhile suitor demands to know what Crusoe has done with **her** "man Friday" (129).

After an argument, Zuzu breaks into a song where she affirms that, while Friday might be Crusoe's the rest of the week, he belongs to her on Saturdays. Zuzu's

comparison of the work Friday is obligated to perform Sunday through Friday, suggests both his romantic responsibilities to his lover and his responsibilities to his ethnic group. Zuzu acknowledges that Saturday may be “no dey” but “at don’ mattuh a mite” (130). Friday’s systematic indoctrination into the wage-earning routine of industrial capitalism undercuts, but does not eliminate, his responsibility to commit his “leisure time” to family, and, by extension, the traditional values of the island.

The critique of modern values is reinforced by a parody of Crusoe’s name. When Zuzu accidentally calls him Caruso, Crusoe laments introducing phonographs to the island, an obviously reference to Enrico Caruso, the opera singer who almost singlehandedly made the gramophone a success. The anti-modern theme is confirmed when, privately, Zuzu encourages him to participate in a tribal ceremony. Though she silences him when he speaks candidly of the “Voodoo Doctor,” Zuzu predicts that Crusoe will have to “ac’ lively” to avoid harm (133). Brown writes into his play dangerous consequences stemming from Crusoe’s efforts to civilize the island. While he adopts a humorous look at Defoe’s metaphor of modernization, he does not wholly discount the more threatening conditions of modernization exhibited in the original text.

In accordance with this characteristic of Defoe’s narrative, *My Man Friday* concludes with a reestablishment of tribal order, but adds a humorous twist to it. Crusoe abdicates, but also convinces Friday to make the European visitor the island’s municipal band director. As Crusoe settles into paradisiacal simplicity, to only play his saxophone and rest, Friday celebrates the “lawd [who] lak’ me so well he name a day aftuh me” (140-41)! As in *Mister Noah*, the play enjoys a happy ending. In contrast to *Noah*, this play began in modernization and ended in agrarian tribalism. Both plays demonstrate

blackface stereotypes, but also marked thematic contradictions that undercut the material structures that blackface stereotypes developed in association with.

Brown never wrote a script for a minstrel show or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He did, however, write several comic pieces that feature the *Uncle Tom* characters, including a farce on the very Harriet Beecher Stowe novel he invoked to deride minstrelsy. *Uncle Tom's Hebb'n* was a paradigmatic example of ironic humor. Brown reversed the moral characters of Topsy and Eva, making Topsy a “pure and maligned heroine” and Eva “a sophisticated flapper.”<sup>222</sup> The play goes further than the previous in mocking racial stereotypes and the structures of literature.

Brown placed the theme of his adaptation on the surface of the text when his Eva questioned Ophelia’s behavior, commenting: “How queerly Auntie’s behaving! She must be sublimating a repression!”<sup>223</sup> Later in the action, Topsy and Eva ridicule Stowe, and color themes, in a duet titled “Never Trust your Favorite Writer.” They note the irony that Topsy, the morally pure of the two, is as “black as cinder,” and Eva, the experienced one, is “as white as snow.” (156) Topsy protests the assumption that her skin color is indicative of her moral character, maintaining that her “coloration’s no indication [of] a sinful soul.” They summarize the point by calling Topsy a “lil’ black saint” and Eva a “lil’ white devil.” (157) Compared to the other plays, this is an aggressive assault on linguistic connections between color and morality, and by implication, between race and morality.

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<sup>222</sup> Forman Brown, *Small Wonder: The Story of the Yale Puppeteers* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 118.

<sup>223</sup> Forman Brown, “Uncle Tom’s Hebb’n,” *The Pie-eyed Piper and Other Impertinent Puppet Plays* (New York: Greenberg Press, 1933), 153. From this point on, I will use parenthetical documentation for the lengthy selections from this play.

Brown uses his strategy of having his puppets mock the author, as seen in *My Man Friday*, to challenge hegemonic themes in literature. The pair warns the audience that they should not trust writers, since they often lie. They claim that Rosalind, Juliet, Lysistrata, and Salome were all “done wrong” by their authors. (158) Thus, they implore the spectators to be “judicious till it hurts” and find out the true character of the individuals they witness (159). The specious premise that literary or dramatic characters have a life beyond the imaginations of their creators presses the spectator to consider not the injustice done to fictional persons, but the need for audiences to participate in the creation of art. Brown makes a nearly postmodern argument here, claiming that audiences have the responsibility to challenge the stereotypes and assumptions circulated by artists. The suggestion at its core is that associations between the morality of a fictional character and her race help produce associations between the idea of morality and the skin color of actual persons. This may be a naïve view of the contribution of art to society, but it is a notably progressive objection for 1930s American puppet theatre.

The conclusion of the play shows how Brown’s artistic reversals, driven most likely by comic incongruity, led him to racially progressive images in his blackface plays. Brown rewrote Topsy to be the character who dies and ascends to heaven. He replaced the image of Little Eva ascending to Heaven to meet the white, bearded Saint Peter, with the image of Topsy ascending on black wings to meet a black Saint Peter. *Uncle Tom’s Hebb’n* incorporates the same minstrelsy-derived dialect stereotypes as Brown’s other plays, but challenges the foundation of those stereotypes more aggressively than its predecessors do.

Brown's puppetry work is enigmatic. He adopts the categorical distinction established by McPharlin, by using local blackface characters in comic plays and incorporating into their speech the dialect exaggerations of minstrelsy. At the same time, he undercuts the lowbrow status of the local blackface puppet by representing it with more realistic images and adding direct challenges to the racial stereotypes and hierarchies of the 1930s.

Where Bufano and Hastings adopted minstrel puppetry uncritically, Brown introduced critique. Where Bufano and Sarg segregated their artistic innovations to exotic blackface puppets, Brown applied his dramatic innovations to local blackface puppetry. In the following chapter, explorations in the great variety of nightclub, school, and community blackface puppetry will show how the circulating categorical distinction exerted considerable impact, but, similarly, did not bind puppeteers from individual interpretations of the blackface puppet's essence.

## Chapter VI: The Many

Records compiled by the Puppeteers of America 1934-1939 show an impressive aggregate of plays with blackface characters. In 1934 alone, dozens of companies and individual puppeteers presented a diverse menu of plays, including: *Robinson Crusoe*, *Little Black Sambo*, *The Emperor Jones*, *Casper Among the Savages*, and *Aladdin*. From the Indianapolis Tabernacle Presbyterian Church, to the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, to private stages throughout the country, thousands of spectators viewed diverse racialized fare. Nearly twenty-five percent of the companies depended on blackface puppets for their livelihood.<sup>224</sup>

In subsequent years, the percentage of such plays declined steadily. In 1935, only twenty percent of puppeteers showcased plays with blackface characters. Less than ten percent of companies incorporated blackface material by 1937.<sup>225</sup> In 1939, only Marjorie Batchelder (*Mrs. Bones*), the Proctors (*Adventures of Sambo and his Hound Dog*), Antonio de Leon Richardson (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), Philadelphia's Stellar Marionettes

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<sup>224</sup> Estimated from records in: Paul McPharlin, *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes* (Detroit: Puppeteers of America, 1934), 80-94. Kay's Marionettes adapted *Aladdin* (1934). George Berden, Peggy Bridge, Harry Ferris, Grace Gilden Macduff, Charles Mack, the Proctor Marionettes, and W. Norris Wenworth staged plays titled *Punch and Judy*. The Ep-Wep Puppeteers, the Roy Elbert Marionettes, and the University of Washington Puppeteers staged *Robinson Crusoe*. Harrisburg's Community Theatre Puppeteers produced *Cannibal Gold*. Richard R. Casady presented a piece titled *Casper Among the Savages*. The Marionette Guild of New York presented *The Emperor Jones*. John Bastick Hanna showed the Marionette Follies of 1934. George R. New created *In the Sultan's Palace*. The Maycourt Club produced the *Clown Revue* and Stanley Thompson produced *The Clown Circus*. Ruth Trappan created *Juke's Jungle*. Harry Fowler, Sue Hastings, Edith and Romaine Proctor, Clara Sipherd produced school productions of *Little Black Sambo*.

<sup>225</sup> Estimated from records in: Paul McPharlin, *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes* (Detroit: Puppeteers of America, 1936), 98-108 and Paul McPharlin, *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes* (Detroit: Puppeteers of America, 1937), 8-16.

(Marionette Minstrel Show), and Bruce Inverity (*Robinson Crusoe*) ventured into the genre.<sup>226</sup>

The development of more inclusive social assistance programs and arts partnerships may explain why, at the same time Frank Paris and Ralph Chesse' were producing the most sophisticated blackface puppet representations, the overall field of puppet theatre was increasingly devoid of related subjects. Some puppeteers, such as Harry Fowler, joined the staff of social service organizations including the Good Teeth Council for Children, spending their remaining careers presenting dental-health hand puppet shows. Others, such as George Berden and Grace MacDuff, stopped producing in the mid-1930s, perhaps to join the more financially stable non-artistic divisions of the WPA.<sup>227</sup> A few companies, among them the Tatterman Marionettes, allied themselves with corporations. The more specific needs of companies like General Electric would narrow the field, and eliminate some components of a repertoire developed in the highly competitive entertainment circles of the early 1900s.

In the years of declining activity, puppeteers applied various aesthetics to their work representing black persons, illustrating that a wide variety of individual productions could exist within the categories that dominated the eidos of blackface puppetry. Frank Paris and the Lauer Sisters demonstrate some of the innovations that manifested in professional productions. The majority of amateur productions fulfilled the categorical distinction by producing lowbrow entertainments derived from minstrel stereotypes. The

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<sup>226</sup> See: Paul McPharlin, *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes* (Detroit: Puppeteers of America, 1939), 98-109.

<sup>227</sup> Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History 1524-1948* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1949), 396-483.

many productions of *Little Black Sambo*, occasional minstrel shows, such varieties as *Darktown Doin's* (1937), and such simplified adaptations of novels as *Poor 'Ol Robinson Crusoe* (1934) far outweighed more sophisticated endeavors. Nonetheless, such productions as Antonio de Leon Richardson's 1939 adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Weaver Dallas's *De Courtin' Couple* (1935) deviated from the categorical standard.

Frank Paris enjoyed the most visible success of the nightclub puppeteers. He claimed to have read one of Tony Sarg's magazine articles before launching a career that spanned the Great Depression, WWII, and the Golden Age of Television.<sup>228</sup> In New York City alone, he appeared at Radio City Music Hall, the Palace Theatre, the Roxy, and the Strand.<sup>229</sup> By 1939, he had produced three full professional marionette varieties: *The Lost Ruby* (1931), *Bimba the Pirate* (1932), and *Stars on Strings* (1937). His characters included portrait puppets of Carmen Miranda and Josephine Baker.

Though he is remembered mainly for the puppets of the children's television program *Howdy Doody*, the work Paris did in the 1930s expanded on the realism of Sarg and the Yale Puppeteers. At this time, an essence of individuality drove his inventions, and he asserted, in his writings, that each object should be produced with unique characterization. Looking back on his career, Paris described puppets as "not simply dolls or toys but [...] theatrical figures that are moved by human hands."<sup>230</sup> He compared puppet actors to live actors, and encouraged the puppeteer to articulate a peculiar vestige

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 452; Later references pinpoint the magazine article as "How to Make and Pull the Strings" (1927).

<sup>229</sup> Milton R. Stern, "Puppets and Marionettes: A Workshop," Publicity Notice (New York: New York University, 1957), 1.

<sup>230</sup> David G. Turner, "Frank Paris: The Art of the Puppet," *Looking for Art* (Amarillo: National Endowment for the Arts, 1978), 1.

and personality for her/his creations.<sup>231</sup> At a New York University workshop, Paris instructed students to create puppet copies of live models, then practice manipulation by similarly mimicking the human being's behavior.<sup>232</sup> He circulated the portrait puppets that made him famous, such as Vera Zorina, based on the Goldwyn Follies dancer, and Sonja Henie, based on the 1930s Olympic ice skater. He showcased his puppets at exhibits from New York City to his native town of Amarillo, Texas. Though he was not the first puppeteer to produce marionettes depicting live performers, he took new generations of amateur and professional puppeteers through the construction/performance strategies step by step, potentially investing realistic detail in the broad future of puppet theatre.

The result of his unusual dedication to puppet personality was the most photographically realistic blackface marionette produced prior to 1940. He devised his Josephine Baker (see figure 38) for *Stars on Strings*, which included Sonja Henie and a reproduction of the Ostrich ballerina from Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. The marionette is a richly detailed and delicately articulated portrait of the famous African American star. It is free of the grotesque exaggerations of minstrelsy. Paris carved its facial features precisely to depict the high cheekbones, teardrop eyes, and light brown skin of the star of *Princess Tam Tam* and Zou Zou, who enjoyed the status of celebrated singer/dancer on two continents (see figure 39).

Paris synthesized her tightly cropped, straight black hair with an elaborate red headdress. Her costume is appropriately revealing, reflecting the objectification

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 2.

characteristic of media representations of the performer. Granted, Paris dares not carve bare breasts. Indeed, the most feminine of Baker's features have been deemphasized. The object's wooden "bustline" is smaller than the cabaret performer's. But the marionette's split front skirt and bare stomach suggest a creative combination of near ceremonial costuming, and a reference to the more provocative photographs of Baker herself.

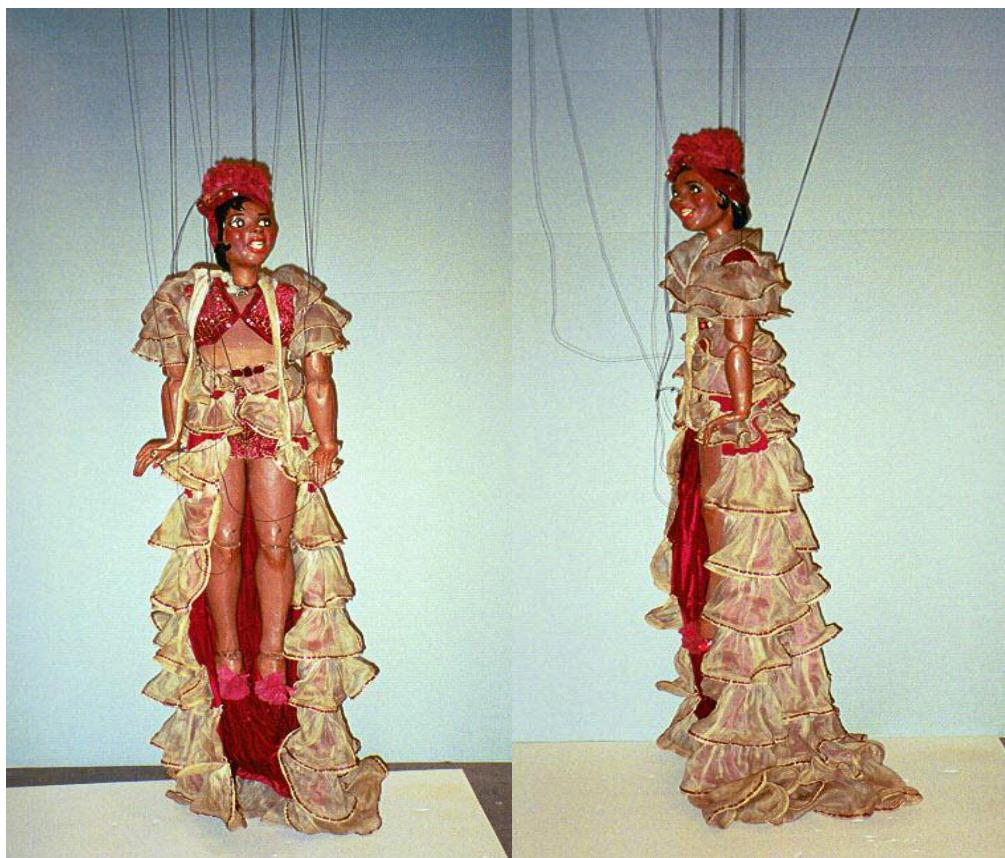


Fig. 38. Front and side views of "Josephine Baker" from Frank Paris's *Stars on Strings*. Photographs by the author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts Collection (Detroit: DIA, 2003).

The result is a sort of associative titillation. This is not to argue that any audience member would be likely to observe the jointed legs and unchanging expression of Paris's marionette, and subsequently feel anything approximating a sexual desire for it. Rather,

Paris's semiotic choices introduce a co-presence of the authentic desire audience members might have for the human performer. This marionette, rather than being a target of arousal, serves as a present reference to the co-present actor, and is a reminder, to the observer, of the arousal that observer has felt for the living human being. The portrait puppet cannot be observed by anyone who has seen its referent, without encouraging associations with the said referent.



Fig. 39. "Josephine Baker." Copied from: Morill Cody. *The Women of Montparnasse, The Americans in Paris*. New York: Cornwall Books, 1984.

While this phenomenological co-presence of real-life desire is troubling for its objectifying qualities, it is a logical consequence of an effort to encourage puppet audiences to imagine the miniature actors as real people. Paris's contribution to blackface puppetry, then, was to draw an arrow away from the egregious minstrel stereotypes that founded its existence toward a possible future in realistic portraits of

black Americans. That arrow may have lead to a puppet that represents its target as a sex object, but it drew the tradition away from subhuman grotesques. Paris's object demonstrates that racialized exaggerations are not inevitable results of depicting a race in performance. The Josephine Baker marionette proves that, for all the impact the co-present heritage of minstrelsy might have on puppeteers, there were alternatives to blackface stereotyping even in the 1930s.

Paris broke with the standard categorical distinction by applying his highest artistic practices to a local blackface puppet. Granted, Josephine Baker's European performance credits placed her vaguely outside the idea of a standard American "negro" that a marionettist might imagine. Nonetheless, she was an African American woman.

Paris depicted this African American woman through a puppet, with the same realistic detail he applied to marionettes of Henie and Zorina. Other vaudeville puppeteers, among them the Lauer Sisters, manifested the distinction Paris rejected. The Lauer Sisters did so with nearly schizophrenic visibility.<sup>233</sup>

Little is known of the career of the three nightclub performers/puppeteers known as the Lauer Sisters. Sometime prior to 1937, they played an elaborate variety production that included two "Spanish Dancer" marionettes, as well as portrait puppets of the sisters themselves. These objects performed with a portrait puppet depicting popular screen actor Greta Garbo on roller skates, a Tap Dancer, a Ballerina, a Music Professor at a piano, and a Seal marionette. The amusing diversity of the Lauer Sister acts and

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<sup>233</sup> I am using this word in the linguistic (referring to any psychotic disorder characterized by a withdrawal from reality), rather than the medical sense (the delusion that imaginary persons or beings communicate with the patient inside her/his head). From a medical perspective, the Lauer Sister puppets capture an artistic impression not of Schizophrenia but Multiple Personality Disorder.

characters were common to the variety stage.

Their self-portrait marionettes suggest a dualistic interpretation of McPharlin's categories. The standard realistic detail of the portrait puppets gives way to the aggressively racialized image of the "mammy" stereotype (see figure 40). By



Fig. 40. Front and side views of "The Lauer Sisters" portrait puppets. Photographs by the author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts Collection (Detroit: DIA, 2003).

manipulating a pair of strings attached to the masks, the puppeteer can shift a blackface mask from its invisible place above the marionette's head to hang in front of the object's face. If the Lauer Sisters followed the thematic essence of the categorical distinction to its logical conclusion, they would have used the unmasked portrait puppets to perform more sophisticated material and then added the masks for lowbrow moments, such as bawdy jokes.

If the Lauer Sisters added blackface masks to their portrait marionettes only when the marionettes were behaving more like "clowns," then they interpreted the categorical

distinction as a mandate. That mandate holds that blackface minstrel grotesques must only play the fool. Such a choice would support John Bell's dismissive reading of their purpose:

While perhaps not as blatant as nineteenth-century minstrel stereotypes, which had become dated with the demise of actual minstrel shows, these three marionettes indicate that issues of race and identity still could not be seriously addressed in the realm of popular entertainment. That left the art-theaters, with productions of such fare as O'Neill's expressionistic *Emperor Jones*, to try to focus on race in a meaningful and thought-provoking way.<sup>234</sup>

Bell indicates the divided attitude toward the appropriate depiction of race in professional/amateur circles. Yet, since he is motivated by conventional notions of "blackface," Bell's reading of nightclub representations requires expansion here. It is limited to only the most egregious racist stereotyping. While he may be correct in his assessment of the Lauer Sisters, he neglects the efforts of Frank Paris and other "popular entertainers" in driving the aggregate of African American puppet representations toward more realistic representation.

The Lauer Sisters may well have used the categorical division to produce a more immediate aesthetic shift. The change between masked/unmasked portrait puppets would provide a semiotic announcement of changes between portions of the performance that hinged on aesthetic innovation, such as dance and acrobatic displays, and portions that hinged on buffoonery. If that was the case, the Lauer Sisters used the very categories common in American puppetry to frame their production, by designing "mammy" masks whose presence and/or concealment would alert the audience to shifts from lowbrow to highbrow material.

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<sup>234</sup> John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000), 86.

However, the essential realism of the portrait puppets does not disappear with the appearance of the masks, and audiences would not experience the same brand of grotesqueness seen in more traditional blackface marionette performance. Compared to other minstrel-derived blackface puppet images, these objects contradict racial stereotyping with their still visible red hair and pink skin. Even if the Lauer Sisters adopted the standards of puppetry that placed a “mammy puppet” in a debased aesthetic position for no other purpose than a convenient performance frame, they complicated the tradition by adding masks to their own portraits rather than replacing them with actual mammy puppets.

The addition of masks suggests the fictional character of minstrel-derived puppetry, commenting directly on the nonrealistic nature of the form. The audience, observing a marionette whose body and hair are European, and whose masks are black, would be encouraged to associate blackface with both clowning and artificiality, to laugh at both the blackface repartee and the fundamental artistic concept of blackface. Where other puppeteers created wholly corporeal representations of a tradition that was essentially a mask, these puppeteers create marionettes that call direct attention to the mask. Comic exaggeration here targets blackface puppetry, where previously it had targeted race through blackface representation.

While Frank Paris was constructing portraits of Josephine Baker, and the Lauer Sisters were using mammy masks that may have commented on the artificiality of minstrel shows, other puppeteers were reproducing the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century with nostalgic fervor. In professional circles, minstrel puppet shows seemed to be largely a phenomenon of the previous eon. With the advent of marionette fellowships

and community organizations, it was inevitable that many puppeteers would revive the form for the delight of collective recognition.

Romain and Ellen Proctor, the Springfield proprietors of the Proctor Puppets, demonstrate a paradigmatic example of minstrel-derived blackface puppetry. The Proctors developed a minstrel show with a singing Tambo and banjo-strumming Bones for their children's shows, advertising events, and promotional programs (see figure 41). Characteristic of the tradition, the objects wear a variation of formal dress suggestive of minstrel clowns, with comically large bow ties and baggy checkered pants. Their faces are painted dark black. The eyes and mouths reflect the exaggerating makeup of minstrel players, but are extended to cartoon proportions. The heads are covered with an unnaturally tangled fabric pad, only vaguely reminiscent of human hair. The Proctors have adopted the most grotesque essence of the D'Arc/Bullock minstrel marionettes.



Fig. 41. "Tambo and Bones." Photograph by Jean Star Wiksell. Copied from: Jean Star Wiksell. "About Puppets and Marionettes." Publicity Notice. Philadelphia: Puppeteers of America, 1942.

The Proctors were not the only puppeteers producing traditional minstrel shows. A school group created another, equally paradigmatic, example of minstrel marionettes.

A ninth grade Art Club in Oshkosh, Wisconsin designed wooden marionettes in the minstrel tradition, as profiled by Marjorie Bathelder (see figure 43). These objects

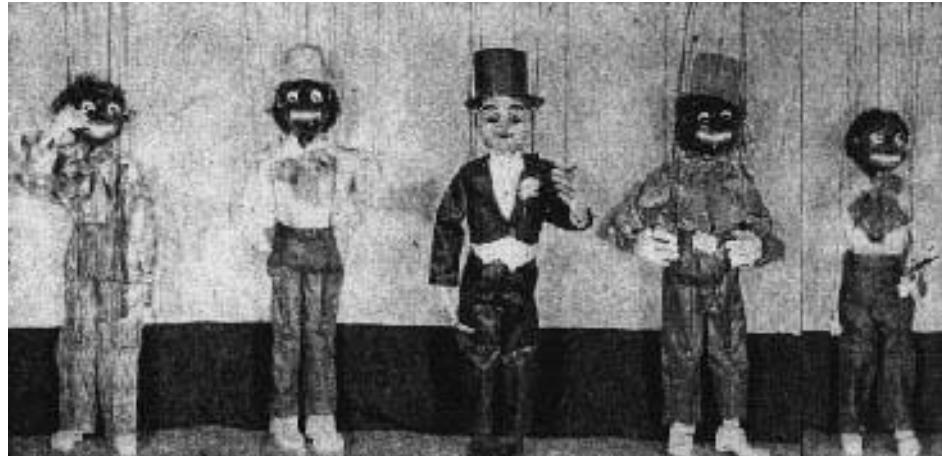


Fig. 43. "Wood Constructed Marionettes." Photograph by Marjorie Batchelder. Magazine and Newspaper Clippings. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1930s.

represent the most radical stereotyping of the minstrelsy tradition but, more importantly, demonstrate how blackface puppetry was as widely circulated as puppetry itself.

The latest original minstrel show presented with puppets is preserved only as a listing in McPharlin's *Puppetry 1939* as *Minstrel Show: Epaminondas*.<sup>235</sup> Its name suggests that, by 1940, conventional nineteenth-century minstrel shows has lapsed so completely into obsolescence that visible puppet companies could not present one without attaching it to another narrative.

Epaminondas was the title character in a children's book similar to *Little Black Sambo*.<sup>236</sup> In this illustrated novel by Sara Cone Bryant, young Epaminondas visits his Auntie frequently, each time unsuccessfully returning with some gift. Each time he tells his mother of the loss of first a cake, then a stick of butter, then a dog, then a loaf of

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<sup>235</sup> Paul McPharlin, *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes* (Detroit: Puppeteers of America, 1939), 108.

<sup>236</sup> Sara Cone Bryant, *Epaminondas and his Auntie* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938).

bread, his mother chastises him and gives him explicit instructions as to how to correctly deliver the item. But when the foolish boy melts the butter trying to keep it in his hat, drowns the dog trying to keep it cool in the river, and loses the bread to scavengers trying to pull it on a leash, “Mammy” despairs and goes to see Auntie herself. He leaves the boy in charge of a series of pies, telling him to be very careful how he steps on them. Epaminondas “carefully” steps in the middle of each one. The story ends with the narrator affirming that “no one knows what happened next.”<sup>237</sup> It has the same simple moral lessons of *Sambo*, and Bryant’s text contained the same style of bold, exaggerated illustrations made popular by Bannerman’s tale.

The significance of this particular minstrel show is difficult to determine without extant puppets or descriptions. Clearly, it was not a standard adaptation of Bryant’s work, but was a performance that integrated variety acts or included satirical evocations of Bryant’s characters. Yet, it demonstrates how blackface puppetry had changed by the 1940s. The eidos of blackface puppetry, which had been inaugurated with Jim Crow clowns and Lambert D’Arc’s grotesque images of minstrelsy actors, would no longer tolerate the simplist golliwogs of blackface.

The Stellar Marionettes only played for two seasons in Philadelphia. Their proprietor, Sidney Friedman, produced two productions, suggestive of his interest in using puppetry to recapture nineteenth-century musical theatre. In addition to *Minstrel Show*, the company made the impressive choice to produce the W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan operetta *Trial by Jury* (1940). It seems likely, then, that their *Minstrel Show* was a combination of the traditional Interlocutor/Tambo/Bones/band format established by

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 11.

the Royal Marionettes, with some reference to the youth novel. It was the final incidence of an original minstrel marionette production, and it may have come into being more due to the amateur nostalgia of the 1930s, than out of a desire for professional innovation.

Fanciful nostalgia for nineteenth-century puppetry was common in the 1930s. This nostalgia inevitably led to reconstructions of past puppet shows. One particularly telling example of this spirit of nostalgia in the 1930s occurs in *Puppetry* (1931). McPharlin reprinted Diogener's narrative titled *A Light Upon Many Subjects* (1853) in which an "every puppet" narrator discusses his transformation from Orlando to Uncle Tom to Black Doll. He mentions his "horror" when he discovered he was to "play the part of a negro" and laments when his "beautiful hair was taken off, and a nasty curly woolen thing substituted."<sup>238</sup> He goes on to describe being cast as Uncle Tom, a play in which he was obliged to raise his "hands in attitudes of supplication."<sup>239</sup> Next, he is stripped, broken, and discarded. Finally, he is adopted as "Black Doll," a toy for a carpenter's daughter (see figure 43). The daughter abuses him by beating his head



Fig. 43. "Black Doll." Illustration by Paul McPharlin. Copied from: *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes*, ed. Paul McPharlin (Detroit: The Puppeteers of America, 1934), 52.

against tables and chairs. The long-suffering puppet concludes his narrative with a plea;

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<sup>238</sup> Diogener, "A Light Upon Many Subjects," In *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes*, ed. Paul McPharlin (Detroit: The Puppeteers of America, 1934), 50.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 50.

“View with compassion any Black Doll you may chance to see in your walks, as it might once [...], have been in its better days a Marionette.”<sup>240</sup> The fantasy tale has all the characteristics of hyperbolic nostalgia. It imagines the object as a living being and creates a fictionally interconnected, historical adventure from disconnected moments in the changing landscape of nineteenth-century puppet theatre. It also demonstrates how the Puppeteers of America encouraged productions that would reconstruct the puppet theatre’s past.

The amateur subdivisions of the puppet theatre field hosted the last hurrahs of the traditional puppet minstrel show. Like the professional subdivisions, however, they synthesized the aesthetics of the puppet minstrel into a considerable body of productions. The most common example was *Little Black Sambo*. Nearly ten percent of companies in the 1930s presented adaptations of the tale made famous by Helen Bannerman.<sup>241</sup>

Bannerman’s *Story of Little Black Sambo* (1900) was an unprecedented success, mainly due to its revolutionary format, which alternated between simple illustrations and compact text, making it ideal for young readers.<sup>242</sup> It told of a young child named Sambo, who convinces a band of tigers not to eat him, by giving each an article of his fine outer garments (shoes, an umbrella, a coat, etc.). Eventually, the tigers fight over the different pieces of finery, their bout culminating in each latching its teeth onto the tail of another and chasing each other around a tree. While they spin faster and faster, Sambo

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>241</sup> Estimated from records in multiple issues of: Paul McPharlin, *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes* (Detroit: Puppeteers of America, 1934-39).

<sup>242</sup> Phyllis J. Yuill, *Little Black Sambo: A Closer Look* (New York: The Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Educators, 1976), 7.

slips away with his clothes. The tigers spin so fast they melt into butter, which becomes part of an impressive meal of pancakes at Sambo's household.

The story was republished dozens of times in the coming century, and inspired a large number of related children's stories. Well into the mid-twentieth century, reviewers and educational specialists cited the book as exceptionally well-crafted, and highly recommended. Some went so far as to claim that the book helped raise racial consciousness in the minds of white children.<sup>243</sup>

In the 1930s, Sambo was a staple of children's entertainment. Many puppeteers adopted the minstrelsy characteristics of the Bannerman tale in their productions. However, theatre historians are fortunate that Martha Perrine Munger, of the Munger family of puppeteers, published her version of the play in *A Book of Puppets* (1934), else no contemporary scripts would have been preserved.<sup>244</sup> Munger provides detailed descriptions of her family's production, explicating their stage, costumes, sounds, properties, and music.

Munger's adaptation was a telling blend of minstrelsy-derived stereotyping and faux-eastern exoticization. To begin, the puppeteer introduced "Negro songs and

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<sup>243</sup> Selma G. Lanes, *Down the Rabbit Hole* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 161-62. In later decades, objectors to the story grew to outweigh its defenders. Among the targets were the story's many illustrations, which seemed to make Sambo's mother into the "Aunt Jemima" or "Mammy" character, a stereotyped domestic, obese, Southern black mother, and depicted Sambo in his finery similar to a minstrel costume. Attempts to quell the controversy without sacrificing the book included renaming the book *Little Sambo* or *Little Brave Sambo* (in which Sambo is a white boy living in the African jungle) but by then the name was too well known for its connections to counterfeit ethnicity. By the mid-1970s, the title had been removed from most lists of recommended books.

<sup>244</sup> Puppeteers who drew their plays from well-known texts seldom printed their adaptations. Munger's is the sole contemporary adaptation of *Sambo*.

humming” offstage in the opening scene, a scene set in the fore of Jumbo’s hut.<sup>245</sup> This hut was a grass structure Munger also used for her *Three Little Pigs*. She added an awning to the hut, upon which she hung “oriental” wares (decorative Chinese-inspired cloths). Despite the fact that Bannerman did not engage the “black dialect” of minstrelsy, Munger enriches her characters with said speech:

Mumbo: Jumbo! Jumbo! You Black Jumbo! Look-a-heah and see ef’n dis coat looks fitten to wear. I ain’t made anything so litty bit as dis heah coat in all my life befo’. That Sambo looks so scandalous in his lil’ white shirt, I ‘lowed I bettah make him shore ‘nuff clothes. What he wearin’ right now don’t come furder dan his waist.<sup>246</sup>

Munger’s decision to have Mumbo call Jumbo “Black Jumbo” in the opening of the play was likely a pun on the Bannerman text, which refers to Sambo’s mother as Black Mumbo and his father as Black Jumbo. Munger’s playtext lists him simply as Jumbo. Such language also would have located the characters in the African American tradition, articulating the psychological weight of a racially divided nation. Thus, the audience, at the same time as the Jumbo puppet, was reminded of Jumbo’s racial identity.

Munger’s juxtaposition of eastern symbols with blackface stereotypes continued to immerse the audience in fantasy. Mumbo predicts that the new outfit will make Sambo “look like a Rajah’s son pretty soon.” Rajahs were members of the Indian Royalty. Since there are no rain forests in the Punjab Region, the mention of an Indian nobleman would have enhanced an already fictional portrait of “the eastern jungle.”<sup>247</sup> In

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<sup>245</sup> Munger suggests “I’ve been Workin’ on the Railroad,” but leaves the specific selection to the conscience of individual puppeteers.

<sup>246</sup> Martha Perrine Munger, *A Book of Puppets* (Boston: Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard, 1934), 125. From this point, I will use parenthetical documentation for lengthy selections from this play.

<sup>247</sup> The Punjab region includes the countries known as Pakistan and India.

the same moment, Mumbo commented on circumstances at the local school. According to her, “teachers are mighty ‘ticular ‘bout the ‘pearance of de school chillus, now dey got chers to set on, stid of squattin’ on de floor.” (126) A character that in Bannerman’s text was merely visually associated with the Mammy stereotype, became Mammy in her entirety, integrating simple-minded motherliness and minstrel-derived speech. Munger’s play seems to have placed a family of minstrel puppets in a fantasy jungle where assorted eastern references collided.

Continuing the audience’s exposure to a messy blend of exotic symbols, the puppets travel to a faux-eastern bazaar to complete Sambo’s outfit with a pair of slippers. Munger composed her bazaar of a slipper, rug, and umbrella merchant hut. The slipper merchant is a markedly Middle Eastern construct, the puppet wears a turban, short top decorated with vaguely Koranic symbols, and trousers that bag to the sides at the upper thigh. Munger added no dialect signifiers, either minstrel or Oriental, to the merchant’s single line: “Here are some very fine sensible shoes for the young gentleman” (128). Quasi-Asian fabrics, what Munger refers to as Chinese brass pots from Woolworth’s, and the curved-toe slippers of Turkish stereotypes surround the Merchant’s booth (121). The final portrait is a simplistic transcultural vision of the “Far East.”

Munger was consistent in producing a visual and dialogic narrative that introduced the audience to a minstrel puppet family living in a suspended fictional Far East. Her characters were inspired by a host of minstrelsy stereotypes (see figure 44). Mumbo wears a scarf and apron as well as a spotted dress, as might the Aunt Jemima or Mammy domestic. Jumbo wears stripped overalls suggesting Uncle Tom. All three have exaggerated facial features suggesting minstrelsy tradition. Sambo’s costume fits nicely

into the general frame, combining a western-style coat and trousers with a pair of Turkish slippers to be added in Act II scene one. Munger's Sambo was clearly a black American living in a Far Eastern jungle.

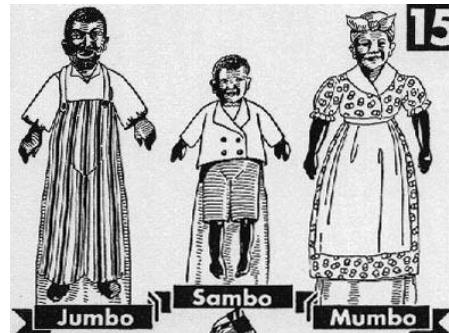


Fig. 44. Plate 15, "Characters in *Little Black Sambo*." Illustration by Martha Perrine Munger. Copied from: Martha Perrine Munger. *A Book of Puppets*. Boston: Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard, 123.

Yet the addition of ostensibly Turkish slippers challenges the easy identification of Sambo as Zip Coon or another well-dressed minstrelsy stereotype (see figure 45). He



Fig. 44. Plate 7, "A Doll Becomes a Puppet." Illustration by Martha Perrine Munger. Copied from: Martha Perrine Munger. *A Book of Puppets*. Boston: Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard, 1934, 116.

wears a red jacket that suggests the minstrel player in the tradition of Bannerman's text. At the same time, he wears a pair of bluejean overalls and "oriental" slippers. The result is an ambiguous assortment of various western and eastern stereotypes.

Munger also introduced a range of aesthetic possibilities by instructing her reader to borrow Sambo's head from the popular "negro doll." She was most likely referring to the type of doll show in figure 29, Chapter V, of this investigation. Her illustration is more exaggerated than the dolls previously featured here, but it opens the door for more or less stereotyped images of black Americans. A puppeteer might have selected the clown heads circulated in the 1930s by the American Crayon Company (see figure 45). Or that same puppeteer might have selected a more naturalistic image from other dolls on the contemporary market (see figure 29). Munger's design technique allowed for the direct intervention of a variety of heads, leading to possible challenges or inscriptions of minstrelsy based stereotypes.

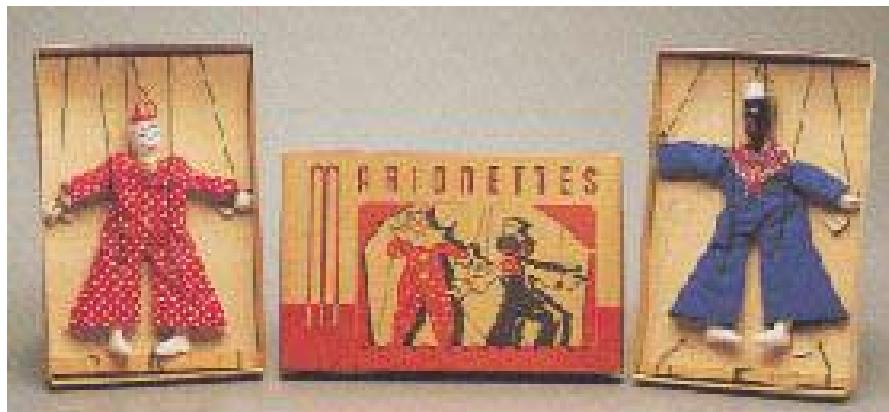


Fig. 45. Dolls of the American Crayon Company. Photograph by John Bell. Copied from: John Bell. *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History*. Detroit: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2000, 110.

Finally, Sambo and his parents both wear capes of material hanging from their waists that may have challenged minstrel stereotypes. As these were hand puppets, they were likely designed to disguise the wrists of the puppeteers, rather than contribute to the costume. If audiences understood the convention, they may have simply ignored it. If not, the capes would add a regal quality, perhaps understood as "oriental" style, to otherwise minstrelsy-derived costumes. While many of Munger's designs deepened the

connection between *Little Black Sambo* and minstrelsy, her decision to place the play in a fantasy of the Far East challenged, or had the potential to challenge, the minstrel stereotype by introducing the characteristics of Oriental stereotypes. In Munger's case, one oversimplification of culture may have been enriched by another oversimplification of culture.

The dialect of Munger's Sambo lapses at points in his struggle with the Jungle beasts. This may reveal Munger's shortcomings as a playwright. It may also reveal an intentional reference to the cultural specificity of ostensibly "black language." Indeed, Sambo only deviates from the language when speaking to outsiders. Sambo waltzes to the jungle's edge in his finery, proclaiming: "Oh man! Is I happy? Yes Sah! I is. I'se got me a coat, I'se got me trousers, slippers and an umbrella." When Mr. Tiger menaces and threatens to eat the boy, Sambo offers: "Oh, please! Mr. Tiger, don't eat me, and I'll give you my bee-u-ti-ful red coat." (129) Munger combined an exaggerated outburst of "beautiful" with what is essentially not a dialect line, devoid of logical uses of "don'" or "mah." The negotiation is in dialect-free English; the description of the finery is in exaggerated minstrelsy language. In later scenes, Sambo continues to use more racialized language to converse with his parents or himself, and less racialized language to negotiate with his assailants. The language implicitly suggests that "black language" is community specific, that conversations with outsiders require translation.

Like Lano, Munger may have imagined black society as a unique civilization, whose language, like any foreign one, must be translated for outsiders. Such artistic choices would have challenged easy associations between *Little Black Sambo* and

minstrelsy. They would also permit alternative experiences to simple laughter at the expense of stereotyped African Americans.

Bannerman's text provided a range of possibilities. Other puppeteers chose to embed their productions with much cruder versions of blackface, increasing the lowbrow status of the local blackface puppet (see figure 46). The grotesquely large mouths and



Fig. 46. "Black Jumbo and Black Mumbo." Copied from: Marion Flexner, Alice Crane, and Dorothy Park. *Hand Puppets: A Practical Manual for Teachers and Children*. New York: Samuel French, 1935.

noses of the Flexner/Crane/Park hand puppets may be partly the work of poor designers rather than intentionally representative of nineteenth-century minstrels. However, the crude simplicity is so visually similar to the Bullock designs that it would have helped circulate the copresent aesthetic of the most grotesque nineteenth-century blackface puppetry to the schools. Teachers and youths engaging in the creation of such objects would be encouraged to perpetuate the stereotypes that other productions of *Little Black Sambo* were helping to reduce.

Amateur puppetry continued to be a place of contradictions. Munger's *Little Black Sambo* deepened the cultural connection to, albeit imagined, African American life by introducing music she attributes to black tradition. Her choice of music, "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad," was not the most innovative selection nor even necessarily authentic African American music.<sup>248</sup> However, other puppeteers, who used her published text, might have chosen an authentically African American musical background.

Efforts to advance the artistic quality of local blackface puppetry were significant but not representative of the majority of productions. Marjorie Batchelder's collection at the University of New Mexico preserves dozens of puppet plays, many of which feature blackface characters. Many are either literally or essentially Jim Crow puppets derived from the Punch and Judy tradition. James Juvenal Hayes's blackface object provides a useful reference. Hayes was a major figure in the Junior Leagues, a division of the Puppeteers of America that arranged projects for such organizations as community groups for underprivileged children and hospitals. His *Punch and Judy* (1927) script included a blackface character named "Rastus" (see figure 49). Hayes took the dialect and basic action of the Shallaballa scenes in pre-1930s *Punch and Judy* and depicted it as a composite of blackface puppet traditions. McPharlin's illustration of the object suggests a combination of Sambo's child-like vestige and Uncle Tom's dress. The object's lines are in the faux-African speech of Shallaballa: "Me Master [...] gwine hab

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<sup>248</sup> Having explored a number of accounts, I have determined that the author of "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad" has been lost to history. Thus, it is impossible to determine if this song is from the African American musical tradition.

yo all arrested.”<sup>249</sup> In the same vein, the objects engage in the same argument/fight/exit pattern of the Collier version. Punch mocks the figure’s racial characteristics; “I dented my club [...] His head must be solid ivory - or ebony.”<sup>250</sup> Hayes deleted the brutal consequences of the original and reduced this blackface puppet’s essence to comic relief. Fundamentally, Hayes’s production was a tamer version of the Punch show, despite his introduction of some of its characteristics.



Fig. 49. “Rastus.” Illustration by Paul McPharlin. Copied from: Frank Marshall. *Hand-Carved Punch & Judy Puppets, Marionettes, Ventriloquial Figures*. Chicago: Theo Mack & Sons, 1930s.

Other puppeteers used blackface puppets more arbitrarily, for comic effect. Tom Fool’s *The End of Mr. Fish and Mr. Bones* (1928) incorporates an interesting version of this classic minstrelsy role. He does not speak in minstrel language but makes a casual reference to Topsy, and complains that his hair will not curl.<sup>251</sup> In an Anonymous play

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<sup>249</sup> James Juvenal Hayes, *Punch and Judy* (Detroit: Paul McPharlin, 1931), 12.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>251</sup> R. C. Rowson, *The Lion and the Mouse*, unpublished collection scripts (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Majorie Batchelder Collection, 1968). Pages unnumbered.

titled *Eastern Market*, a host of ethnic stereotypes in puppet form, including a Chinaman, an Italian, and a blackface father and son, meet at the market. The boy, upon seeing the fruit vendor's wares, proclaims: "Um-m-m! Does I love watermelon! And I hasn't tasted none for a coon's age."<sup>252</sup> This combination of the most egregious stereotypes of African American taste and references to racially pejorative terminology is a marked example of theatrical degredation. It demonstrates the co-presence of the most appalling heritage of minstrelsy in amateur blackface performance.

Lenore Hetrick's plays showcase the standard form of lowbrow comedy, within the general blackface puppetry categories. In her *Henry's Old Schoolmate*, she set Mr. Punch loose on a farming family's household. She introduced the Topsy stereotype as the family's domestic, describing her as "a Negro puppet. She has frizzled black hair and a big, red mouth. For her eyes use dark brown buttons that shine. She wears a bright purple dress and a yellow turban. Also, a little yellow apron."<sup>253</sup> Topsy uses minstrelsy language in less exaggerated form than most productions, but contradicts the Topsy stereotype by behaving more like the Mammy or Aunt Jemima. "Now I got a lot of cleanin' to do. Yes, ma'am! I'se got plenty of cleanin' to do" (33). Like any domestic, she has control over the children and the household, but it is the white characters, Henry and Mrs. Gunderson, who hold dominion over her.

She provides a useful comic straight woman for Hetrick's Punch, but lacks the spirit of the Stowe-derived Topsy role. Punch steals her groceries prompting her

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Lenore Hetrick, *Puppet Plays and Peephole Shows* (Dayton, OH: Paine Publications, 1938), 32. From this point on, I will use parenthetical documentation for the lengthy selections from this source.

exclamation; “Oh, my lan’! Now the groceries is gone” (33). She promptly blames the family horse, Arthur. It is up to Henry to determine that his “old schoolmate,” Punch, is the actual culprit. Hetrick used the name Topsy merely as the designation for her blackface puppet. She ignored the obvious associations her audience might have expected between the flirtatious Stowe character and her object. Hetrick’s Topsy is closer to a generic domestic stereotype than the then-recognizable Stowe character.

Hetrick continued to integrate such nominal signifiers while fundamentally transforming their subsequent characters. In *The Crocodile and the Bear*, she sent Sambo and Koko, a “little African” brother and sister, into a dangerous jungle, where several beasts, including a bear and a crocodile, menace them. Hetrick’s Sambo bears little resemblance to the Bannerman hero apart from his designation and his racial identity. The text reads: “Sambo is black. He wears a carelessly arranged shift such as the African natives wear. Take a piece of tan material and wrap it around Sambo’s waist and upper legs with one piece over the shoulder” (40). Hetrick produced a curious fantasy of the African native. In addition to this variation on Mediterranean dress that has little stylistic relationship with the native populations of sub-Saharan Africa, Sambo speaks in a child’s voice, devoid of the racialized speech of minstrelsy.

Hetrick’s combined Bannerman’s story and contemporary tales titled *Little Brown Koko* to produce the action of this marionette play. *Koko* told of a farm boy who, among other activities, tries to bypass his Mammy’s authority in order to acquire chocolate. The clever Koko becomes Sambo’s sister, drawing into the event a large body of blackface references. The reference fits nicely into the fanciful lowbrow comedy of children’s marionette plays. Koko bears no resemblance to her namesake, other than guile. Her

language is formal, pervaded with declamatory prefaces like “let us” (46). Hetrick set her linguistically apart from Sambo, perhaps to distinguish between the ne’er do well brother and the motherly sister. Indeed, it is Koko who saves her brother from the jungle beasts, by finding a magical fruit that gives them power over the animals for a day.

As King and Queen, Koko and Sambo introduce a code of laws that civilize the jungle, promising that “both people and animals are better for [living by rules]” (47). The animals may not quarrel among themselves nor may they eat humans. The animals agree to abide by the rules and further promise to always “live in peace” (47). Hetrick decided to introduce an easy moral lesson to the play, undermining the threatening mystery of the dark continent that is reflected in *Little Black Sambo*, by suggesting that all the untamed jungle needs is the rule of law. And yet, her characters facilitate the rule of law with native African magic, a surprising element of paganism. Hetrick’s play shared little with the blackface stories that inspired her main characters. It seems that *Little Black Sambo* and *Little Brown Koko* provided Hetrick simply with a vague context for her African fantasy. She may have used the titles and character names to add touches of familiarity. These signifiers would provide a comfortable frame, not to mention a disingenuous, but probably effective, advertising ploy, in which Hetrick could have investigated some unusual themes for 1930s blackface puppet theatre.

One of the most enigmatic blackface puppet texts is Antonio deLeon Richardson’s *Uncle Tom*. It starred a puppet construct of the title character Tom Careless, from the novel *The Life and Times of Tom Careless* (1800). Richardson also included a portrait puppet of African American actor Stepin Fetchit in the role of Uncle

Tom. Simon Legree was a puppet based on Groucho Marx. Richardson's cast list was only the first tier of a whole structure of bizarre artistic choices.

Parody and contemporary references mark the dialogue, producing a transhistorical portrait of racial representation. To begin, Richardson parodies Uncle Tom's cries for mercy. Tom Careless enters and reflects on meeting Uncle Tom long ago. He then falls asleep to the sound of "Negro spirituals." Uncle Tom enters, kneels, and begs: "Oh massa, massa, doan kill me."<sup>254</sup> Richardson prepares his audience for a humorous adaptation of the Stowe novel through the comedy of surprise. Later, Richardson adds comedy of recognition as Mr. and Mrs. Shelby argue the merits of enslavement. Mr. Shelby warns that it "is dangerous to offer the slaves a new deal now" (4). Richardson continues this strategy at the slave auction scene, when Mrs. Shelby promises to buy back Tom as soon as "Mr. Shelby gets work on the W. P. A" (4). The verbal references target the politics of enslavement next, when Mr. Shelby fears that Tom has been taught to read. Tom assures him that he "is just as ignorant as befoh" and it is only due to a blow to the head that he has "been thinkin' dif'untly" (5). The humor provides a thematic interaction between past and present, between the mirror of Stowe's novel and contemporary thinking on enslavement, as well as contemporary conflicts regarding social justice.

Fanciful humor gives way to more a radical antiracist use of transhistorical references. Richardson's play reaches the scene that, in Stowe's novel, ends with the beating murder of Uncle Tom. Tom Careless intervenes in the violence and he and

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<sup>254</sup> Antonio deLeon Richardson, *Uncle Tom*, unpublished collection scripts (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Majorie Batchelder Collection, 1968), 2. From this point on, I will use parenthetical documentation for the lengthy selections from this play.

Legree argue socioeconomic theories in commonsense language. Legree reminds Careless that the slave owner is “a free man” with rights; Careless counters that an abused servant cannot work very hard (11). Careless twirls Legree’s efforts; Legree exits to get his hounds. Eliza, played by a Greta Garbo portrait puppet, enters and laments that slave traders have sold her boy. As she discusses the evils that have been left behind by history, such as the burning of witches, her presence as Greta Garbo blurs the distinction between antislavery rhetoric and 1930s efforts toward political equality.

Richardson’s text interacts with his charming puppetry strategies to increase vertical interest in the play’s sociocultural themes. Uncle Tom does not die; he flees to freedom with Eliza across the ice. In the final sequence, Simon Legree beats his hound puppets, focusing on one beast called Little Liberty. The hounds, appropriately, revolt and attack Legree, symbolizing the rise of the oppressed against the oppressor. In a play where Topsy is a representation of white American actor Martha Raye and Uncle Tom is a representation of a living black actor, the revolutionary impulses would have had immediate reference to the modern world. Richardson’s adaptation shapes what would otherwise be a nostalgic reproduction of a nineteenth-century abolitionist text so that audiences could perceive the events before them as part of a larger thematic comment on modern struggles for social justice.

The context of amateur puppetry encouraged lowbrow artistic projects. However, as evidenced by the work of Richardson and others, it also led to occasional ventures into thematically challenging, even socially conscious blackface puppet shows. Weaver Dallas is a prime example of the latter. In 1927, Weaver Dallas produced a puppet show based on the “Uncle Remus” stories, at the University of Georgia, Athens. This single

event led to a full season of productions based on traditional African American folklore.

*De Courtin' Couple* demonstrates the efforts of a white puppeteer to engage the spirit of black culture in puppetry.

Dallas designed hand puppets based on the animals featured in the African American folktales. A photograph in *Puppet Plays* (1931) shows Sis Goose and Brer Rabbit as the plush hand puppet bodies of a child's stuffed animals. Dallas described Sis Goose, Brer Fox, Brer Rabbit, and Brer Dog in the words of Joel Chandler Harris, even going so far as to quote Harris's *Uncle Remus Stories*. Dallas deepened the metaphoric reference of the characters by making their "live" representations of animals, rather than blackface objects.

Simultaneously, Dallas makes the connection between black culture and the action of *Couple* evident from the first scene. Sis Goose sings the traditional African American spiritual "Oh, I Went Down into the Valley to Pray" as she washes clothes. The dialect is proven to be a direct adaptation from Harris: "Law, ef Ah ain't done forgot eber las' one er dem dirty dish towels!"<sup>255</sup> From the start, the audience is encouraged to anticipate connections between African American culture and the events of the puppet show.

Thus, when Brer Fox corners Sis Goose at the laundry line, the audience has been prepared to consider the attempted "seduction" in the context of African American history. What would otherwise be a story of a fox currying the favor of a goose, by kissing her hand and complimenting her home, in order to eat her later, becomes a

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<sup>255</sup> Weaver Dallas, "De Courtin' Couple," *Puppet Plays*, ed. Paul McPharlin (Detroit: Paul McPharlin, 1931), 5.

suggestion of white oppression. The audience is encouraged to see Brer Fox's false charm as a symbolic reference to the efforts of white society to couch its domination of blacks in amiable language. Their suspicions would be confirmed by Brer Dog's chastizement of Sis Goose: "We, he ain't de kind uv man Ah laks fer de lady Ah pays court ter, ter be hangin' roun' wid! Low-down trash-er bamboozlin' you wid his flattersome words."<sup>256</sup> When Brer Rabbit defeats Brer Fox with his usual guile, this time using a bag of clothes sculpted to look like Sis Goose, the audience has been fully prepared to cheer the triumph of African American ingenuity over white deception.

Efforts on the part of white puppeteers to introduce black culture to puppet productions were too seldom to be referred to as anything more than complications in an overall field that is properly called blackface puppetry. Nonetheless, the great body of blackface puppet productions had some very interesting complications, leading to: transformations of the meanings in traditional puppet minstrel shows caused by the introduction of newer texts, the potential integration of African American music to blackface fictions, anti-racist themes, and experiments with presenting puppet productions of black folklore.

Most puppeteers adapted to the demands of the general categories. Even the occasional innovations were strongly influenced by the heritage of minstrelsy. The stereotyped exaggerations of minstrel puppets found their way into productions of *Little Black Sambo* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and were not merely phenomena of minstrel puppet shows. Yet, even while puppeteers understood that local blackface puppets=lowbrow/comic and exotic blackface puppets=highbrow/serious, many used the

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 9.

comic context of their puppet plays to comment on the struggle for social justice, the heritage of enslavement, and the culture of black Americans. Amateur culture remains too slippery for the ideological standards of major figures to dominate it, whether those figures are historians/critics/organizers like Paul McPharlin, or the most influential puppeteers in American history, such as Tony Sarg or Sue Hastings. In the final chapter, examination of the Federal Theatre Project's marionette units will further nuance the contribution of local interpretations to the national eidos of blackface puppetry.

## Chapter VII: The Federal Theatre Project

The herein-considered complex and contradictory historical process of developing blackface representation comes to an end with this study of the Federal Theatre Project's puppetry and marionette units. 1935-1939, America's four glorious years of state-sponsored theatrical performance, marked the largest aggregate of puppetry activity in the United States since the founding of the Republic. The FTP sponsored more than twenty marionette units, hundreds of productions playing an average of a hundred shows per week, and as many as a thousand individual puppeteers and assistants.<sup>257</sup> New York City's marionette unit alone employed more puppeteers than the non-relief job market.<sup>258</sup> Over two dozen productions featured blackface characters, from some of the last recorded original puppet minstrel shows, the *All Colored Review* (1936), to Ralph Chesse's *The Emperor Jones* (1937-38).<sup>259</sup> More detailed records and photographs exist for these four years, than any other in puppet theatre history.

While the FTP marionette units provided a forum for the tiny actors as none that had existed before, it is especially significant to this history for providing what was, in many ways, the final nail in the coffin of puppet minstrelsy. Though racialized

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<sup>257</sup> John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, eds. "Free, Adult, Uncensored," *The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), 24; It is difficult to determine the actual number of workers involved in the FTP's puppetry units. While twenty were on the official hiring list for the first unit (formed San Francisco, January 1936), many puppeteers were unofficially employed (especially if they were underage or did not qualify for relief) and never recorded in any program or report. See Bob Baker's comments in: Bonnie Nelson Schwartz and the Educational Film Center, *Voices from the Federal Theatre* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2003), 155-59.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>259</sup> The Detroit Institute of the Arts reproduced a minstrel show in 1957, using the puppets of Daniel Meader. I found no records of original, traditional, puppet minstrel shows after 1936. The scenes of *Minstrel Show: Epaminondas* (1939) were likely too intimately blended with the children's story to be a traditional minstrel show.

representations of blacks would continue to be common in the field of puppetry (the *Amos and Andy* show is a commonly recognizable example), the narrow, truely “minstrelsy” blackface tradition that had begun with Bullock and D’Arc in the 1870s would conclude with the FTP. The stewardships of Paul McPharlin, as director of puppetry activities, and Ralph Chesse’, as regional director of California’s puppet units, finalized and circulated a connection between minstrelsy’s blackface roles, and the assumed mediocrity of school and frontier productions. McPharlin’s apperceptions of minstrel puppetry and aesthetically challenging blackface objects were explicated in Chapter IV. Chesse’s understanding of the essence of local blackface puppetry exhibits a more vigorous elitism.

McPharlin conceived of “the minstrel puppet” as part of a quaint but valuable history of entertainments. He praised such work for providing deprived audiences of the magic of puppet theatre. Chesse’ is unconvinced of the value of such work, seeing it as a burden on those who wish to create meaningful, innovative puppet performances. From his perspective, the Federal Theatre Project improved on puppetry in general:

[It] gave me a chance to show that marionettes can be very high-class adult entertainment. We could go into the classics, which is something others hadn’t done; they were still doing fairy tales for children … the variety shows I did were adult productions. The Federal Theatre was sponsoring a whole new program in theatre, and marionettes had to get out of the rut.<sup>260</sup>

Chesse’s apperception of “others” is indicative of his impetuous desire to create a higher class of puppetry.

Imagining other puppeteers as lowbrow permits Chesse’ to imagine his own work as a superior creation. Indeed, Chesse’ conceived his work in kinship with Edward

Gordon Craig; “I intended to make an instrument of the theatre, a surrogate which would serve my purpose as an actor.”<sup>261</sup> He is careful to couch the essence of his puppets in motivational language, assuring his reader that “the marionette can take its place in the theatre with the best of these actors and make a contribution to theatre form which only it can provide” (xi). His philosophical self-promotion is a secondary consequence of his early experience creating a production of *Hamlet*.

According to Chesse’, it was Remo Bufano, whose magnificent artistic creations were discussed in chapter V, who encouraged his “wild idea” to play a marionette *Hamlet* (7). Chesse’ had trained as an amateur actor, studied painting at the Chicago Art Institute, and experimented with puppetry performance (sans construction) in a set design class with Blanding Sloan of San Francisco. However, it was not until a brief residence in New York City, where he witnessed Bufano’s *Orlando Furioso*, that he conceived a marionette production of his own. Upon his return to San Francisco, Chesse’ began work on *Hamlet*.

Chesse’ did not avoid applying his self-aggrandizing artistic standards to his reading of Tony Sarg’s *Marionette Book* (1921). He patronizes the “practical” source for its “loose and flexible” objects, but affirms that he “would have to develop a different structural pattern for the kind of marionette [he] would require for *Hamlet*” (9). This new structural pattern proved to be quite an aesthetically compelling concept.

Chesse’ envisioned a technique that would make his marionettes uniquely

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<sup>260</sup> John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown, eds. “Free, Adult, Uncensored,” *The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), 24.

<sup>261</sup> Ralph Chesse’, *The Marionette Actor* (Fairfax: George Mason University, 1987), xi; Chesse’ quotes Gordon Craig’s *On the Art of the Theatre* extensively in his argument. From this point on, I will use parenthetical documentation for the lengthy selections from this source.

impressive, and touted his enterprise in *The Marionette Actor*:

The figures would have to be slender with small heads; the completed marionette measuring eighteen to twenty inches from head to toe and at least seven heads high. The proportions were extremely important if the characters were to appear tall. Unlike other marionettes I had seen, the heads were not to be more important than the rest of the body. I had carved the heads in simple planes to indicate facial and cranial structures with deep slits for the eyes. I had observed that puppet craftsmen usually concentrated on the head [...] my ideas differed. (11)

His attention to detail may have been instrumental in his developing artistic practice. Yet Chesse's apperception of "other" puppeteers, as artistically misguided or even inferior to himself, is characteristic of his developing aesthetic principles.

Describing his performance of the Shakespearean masterpiece, Chesse' avoided the same derisive references to his colleagues, but determinedly promoted his techniques as especially effective, unique in the field of puppetry. He describes using a blood-red spot on the Claudius puppet and a cool-blue spot on the Gertrude. Chesse' manipulated all the characteristic elements of theatre. In his words, he used "dramatic lighting that painted the simple neutral settings with strong color, backing some of the scenes with appropriate mood music, and manipulating the jointed figures with a minimum of gestures, the characters came alive" (2). A ten-foot by four-foot stage floor, six-foot proscenium, and two ten-foot bridges completed the elaborate theatrical environment. With Blanding's assistance, Chesse's *Hamlet* included a sky drop, a shadow curtain, and seven ghost-spots focused from the front and sides. From Chesse's perspective, "this gave remarkable mobility to the faces and bodies, creating an illusion which [sic] was unbelievable from a short distance. The effect was magic-it held us under a spell, even from the bridge. This was a new theatre form, and not just another puppet show" (13).

His apperception of most puppet productions, as fundamentally lacking in comparison to his own, positions itself in the artist's memories of a specific performance.

Chesse' explained his negative views of fellow puppeteers in an article in *Opera and Concert Weekly*. Lamenting the misunderstandings mediocre puppetry creates in the mind of audiences, he quotes imagined spectators. "To the uninitiated the [sic] term means ... 'Oh yes ... Punch and Judy' ... or 'those little wooden dolls ... they are so cute.' Or again ... 'Little puppets ... the children just adore them.'"<sup>262</sup> He promises that such misconceptions will disappear with one viewing of a quality production. While he acknowledges the great variety of "buffoon[s]" in puppetry, which have guaranteed a place for Punch, he praises those "who have expanded the puppetry range of emotion to the point of presenting convincingly a 'Hamlet' in wood and cloth" (16). His somewhat facetious reference to his first production serves to remind his reader that his work is a cut above the rest.

If Chesse' is to be believed, he is not merely trying to compete in a difficult industry by advertising himself as a unique gem within the flock. Rather, he is expressing his solid faith in the puppet stage's ability to return the "power of suggestion" to a world dominated by the motion picture (16). Chesse' praises the marionettist who can free the object from a "category of hilarious entertainment and [bring] it to a place of significance," the artist who will "no longer depend on a motley crew of jiggling clowns," who will instead use the special properties of the figure to "[intensify] the emotional characteristics of a part in the creating of the form which [sic] represents it" (16-17). He

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<sup>262</sup> Ralph Chesse', "Marionette Theatre Par Excellence," *Opera and Concert Weekly* (January 1948): 17. From this point on, I will use parenthetical documentation for the lengthy selections from this source.

clearly believes that some other puppet makers are capable of presenting meaningful work. At the same time, he is convinced that most puppeteers play to the lowest common denominator with their jiggling clowns, an apperception that probably includes the blackface clowns of minstrel shows.

Chesse' may have praised the magic of rich, innovative puppetry, especially his own, but he was cynical toward his society. On several occasions, he lamented the collapse of the FTP puppet units, targeting the failure of American society to acknowledge the importance of the form. In his chapter on the units in *The Marionette Actor*, he maintains colloquially that "all the productions were well received and did better business at the box office than some of the legitimate shows."<sup>263</sup> He identifies his successful productions as the unqualified cause of his promotion to State Director of Puppetry. He then chastises a government that "suddenly closed all the Federal Theatres [sic]," for the vague reason that "the projects had become subversive."<sup>264</sup>

Finally, he bemoans the loss of the Federal Theatre Project in the post-war scene, once again dismissing the community puppeteers that sustained him after 1945. He adapted former stage versions of *Oliver Twist* using Cruikshank's engravings, but "found [his young assistants] lacking the spirit which I would have imparted to them."<sup>265</sup> In a 1942 speech to the Puppeteers of America, Chesse' summarized his view of the FTP puppetry units:

It was too much to hope for that [sic] a rich nation would contribute to their greater glory indefinitely, would permit them to grow and develop, add [sic] to the culture, the amusement of its people. And to expect freedom along with that

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<sup>263</sup> Ralph Chesse', *The Marionette Actor* (Fairfax: George Mason University, 1987), 53.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 55.

subsidy ... that is like asking for the moon and stars. Only as a vagabond has the marionette ever been free, only [sic] as a vagabond can he ever expect to maintain that freedom. He must only serve one master at a time.<sup>266</sup>

It is clear that Chesse' believed in the artistic richness of puppetry, even if he was skeptical that other puppeteers were able, or at least willing, to serve it. It is equally clear that he believed his own productions were unique within the mosaic of performance, and despairs of the society that had a brief but wonderful opportunity to fund them, but too soon dismissed that opportunity under political pressures.

These apperceptions of most puppetry practice seem to have led Chesse' to produce one of the most interesting productions of blackface puppetry under examination in this study. The Federal Theatre Project produced Chesse's *The Emperor Jones* twice, first in San Francisco, California, in 1936, and again in Los Angeles, California, in 1938. Meanwhile, the black theatre units footed two live-actor productions of O'Neill's play, in Hartford (1937) and Salem (1938). The records only identify the number of individual productions Chesse' supervised. The actual number of showings may have numbered as high as the triple digits.

Chesse' was particularly proud of the reception of this production. He cited it as the coup de gras that ensured his ascension to the position of regional director. Yet, this piece may not have been as marked a success for the aesthetic development of blackface puppetry as it was for Chesse's specific career. The live version of Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* was a major play in the twentieth-century theatre's portrayals of African Americans. However, within the dramatic annals of the Works Progress Administration, it was less successful. Descriptions of its sole performance in Harlem attest to the failure

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<sup>266</sup> Ralph Chesse', "Untitled," Lecture given at *The Puppeteers of America* (24 June 2004).

of the play to connect with African American audiences with intrinsically defined artistic expectations. Though Chesse's production is ultimately a fiction of blackness, it gestures toward an imagined, albeit imaged by Eugene O'Neil and interpreted by Chesse', authenticity as previous productions with blackface characters had not. He chose a live black actor as a template for the object, incorporated a reading of "The Congo," a folkloric poem by populist poet Vachel Lindsay, and applied his usual meticulous artistic strokes to this short play. Chesse's *Emperor Jones* suggests that high artistic principles draw theatre makers toward sincere portraits of race, as they drive them away from the grotesque fantasies of more commonplace art.

Chesse' chose to base his Brutus Jones puppet, his representation of the lead character in O'Neill's drama, on the living African American actor Charles Gilpin. Chesse' observed Gilpin playing Brutus in a 1926 performance. According to the puppeteer, Gilpin's performance and the play, "impressed [him] with its exciting dramatic climaxes that built gradually toward a powerfully suspenseful finale."<sup>267</sup> Gilpin, a co-founder of the Lafayette Players, won the NAACP Spingarn Medal for his performance in *Emperor Jones*. The choice of Gilpin was somewhat obvious and the practice of basing puppets on real black actors began with Frank Paris, a year before Chesse's constructed his first Brutus marionette (1929). Yet the artist's decision to base his object on someone who was both a respected African American actor and an individual lauded by a national organization concerned with African American equality, places his artistic practices in closer proximity to living black Americans than previous examples covered in this study (see figure 50).

The objects Chesse' produced are archived at the Detroit Institute of the Arts. Comparing the Brutus marionette to Gilpin's photograph as the character, one finds an object that transforms the black actor from human into archetype. Chesse' managed to preserve some of Gilpin's characteristics, such as his hairless pate, his sharp brow, and



Fig. 50. Charles Gilpin as Brutus Jones. Copied from: "Charles Gilpin." *Dionysius Theatre Complex*. New York: Dionysus Theatre Complex, Inc., 2002. Accessed 29 June 2004. <http://www.dionysustheatrecomplex.com/gilpin.html>.

the meaty flesh around his cheekbones. Yet, Chesse' interpreted the figure according to the principles of blackface puppetry, giving it thicker lips and a wider nose than was present in Gilpin's natural features (Figure 51). From the side, the photograph captures the thick neck of the popular actor, but again, Chesse' exaggerated both its thickness and

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<sup>267</sup> Ralph Chesse', "Marionette Theatre Par Excellence," *Opera and Concert Weekly* (January 1948): 23.

its length (see figure 52). Finally, he gave the object a pair of unnaturally thick, rounded jowls. Gilpin had strong jowls by photographic accounts, but this exaggeration gave the



Fig. 51. Front view of “Brutus” from Ralph Chesse’s *The Emperor Jones*. Photograph by the author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts Collection (Detroit: DIA, 2003).

object a more European, even imperial look, which incorporated the character’s delusions of grandeur into the corporal form of the character. Likewise, Chesse’s choice to increase the size and length of the neck, and to curve and thicken the eyebrows gave the object a striking vestige, suggesting both potency and perspicacity. The archetype was conditioned by the racializing qualities of blackface puppetry. Though the co-presence of blackface aesthetics racialized the object with exaggeration, the overall image was that of

a clever “negro” warrior. It was Gilpin’s corporeal form, with the stamp of minstrelsy upon him. In essence, it was more human than the average blackface puppet, but more stereotyped than the actual human being that inspired it.



Figure 52. Side view of view of “Brutus” from Ralph Chesse’s *The Emperor Jones*. Photograph by the author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts Collection (Detroit: DIA, 2003).

Similar contradictions were present in a text that had won its titular actor an award for service to the African American community a mere sixteen years previously.

O'Neill's take on Henri Christophe's unsuccessful rule in Haiti provided a vision of African American leadership and Black group agency that was hailed by the audiences of 1920s Harlem.<sup>268</sup> It is essentially a tale of an escaped African American criminal who installs himself as despot over the natives of a Caribbean island, then attempts to flee a revolt by retiring to the open jungle. There, a host of terrors, "the Little Formless Fears," accost him. They drive him to exhaust his six bullets in mad fury. When the native rebels find him, he is an easy target. With its rich use of dialect and ostensibly tribal rhythms, which plague Jones's mind in the jungle, tempered with a strong, independent, and ultimately tragic African American character, black and white contemporaries saw it a breakthrough in characterization.<sup>269</sup>

Yet, during the Federal Theatre Project, a failed live-actor performance by the Black Theatre units demonstrated the limitations of O'Neill's play. Jules Bledsoe starred in the FTP's single *Emperor Jones* performance at Harlem's Lincoln Theater. Descriptions of the event suggest that Harlem audiences since the 1920s had left O'Neill's exotic emblem of blackness behind. According to Langston Hughes:

The audience didn't know what to make of *The Emperor Jones* on a stage where "Shake That Thing" [sic] was formerly the rage. And when the Emperor started running naked through the forest, hearing the Little Frightened Fears, naturally they howled with laughter [...] "Them ain't no ghosts, fool!" the spectators cried [...] "Why don't you come [...] back to Harlem where you belong?"<sup>270</sup>

So vocal were the spectators that Bledsoe felt compelled to stop the performance and

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<sup>268</sup> See: Richard J. Powell, "Re/Birth of a Nation," In *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts and University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>269</sup> Referenced in: E. Quita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizons* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1980), 42.

<sup>270</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1984), 258-59.

lecture them on appropriate behavior in the stagehouse. Reportedly, the reprimand did not diminish their outbursts.<sup>271</sup> The African American educator and playwright, Randolph Edmunds, also reported a disastrous evening, calling it “disgusting as well as pitiable.”<sup>272</sup>

The exact cause of the Lincoln Theater flop is debatable. Many scholars ascribe it to an ultimately negative depiction of black leadership and tribal superstition. According to E. Quita Craig:

It is obvious that [Jones] has a high degree of intelligence common to con artists. When he is threatened with revolt and revenge for his misdeeds, however, the Emperor takes refuge in the woods and here his intelligence is gradually conquered by superstitious fears. Undoubtedly O’Neill [sic] dramatizes the power of superstition spectacularly. Jones’ [sic] sins and superstitions join forces, are magnified by the subversive insistence of voodoo drums that mount steadily to a crescendo, and close in on him in the shadowy darkness. Jones is unable even to find the caches he had hidden, for just such an emergency, and is ultimately reduced to stark terror. But the effects of Jones’s African religious heritage—which are precisely what O’Neill was attempting to dramatize—are all negative. Although this heritage is central to the dramatization it is completely shorn of its positive, all-powerful, life-giving force—the force vitale, and there is no sustaining strength whatever in it for the man who made himself emperor [...] Jones is robbed of all human dignity and crawls to his death, like a worm, writhing on his belly in the dust. While the play was considered to be an artistic success, which it undoubtedly was, as black drama it was a failure.<sup>273</sup>

For Craig, the failure of the production was a direct result of faults in the drama. Rena Fraden is less sure, noting that verbal outbursts were a staple of the Lincoln Theater. Fraden discusses black middle-class critics who complained about lower class black

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>272</sup> Qtd. in: Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 148.

<sup>273</sup> E. Quita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizons* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1980), 43-44

audiences, then goes on to suggest a more cultural objection to the production. In her words:

To the audience at the Lincoln, used to talking back to entertainers [...], their response to *Emperor Jones* was perfectly legitimate behavior. It was the performance [...] that seemed out of place, incongruous. When someone cried out to the Emperor, come “back to Harlem where you belong,” at least some of the people in the audience asserted their proprietary rights over the Lincoln [...] they determined the rules of decorum and the appropriate gestures [... it] could have been a rejection of the premises of O’Neill’s or any white man’s sense of black tragedy [but ...] O’Neill and Bledsoe’s sense of “art” [...] was very different from the entertainment the Lincoln crowd [...] liked.<sup>274</sup>

Both interpreters make, in essence, the same point: *The Emperor Jones* failed in Harlem because it was incongruous with the artistic expectations of the Lincoln Theater audience. Thus, while O’Neill’s play may have been a mainstream success, the self-contained African American test audience suggested that its exotic portrait of American and Caribbean blacks was inconsistent with the experience of, at least some, African Americans. Like Chesse’s Jones marionette vestige, the playtext is both a successful artistic work that advances black characterization on the American stage, but is also a drama hindered by the inherent stereotypes and marginalizations of black culture. It is more than many other dramas, but less than the true-to-life portrait of the African Americans it seeks to represent.

Chesse’ added a prologue to his production, portions of Vachael Lindsay’s poem “The Congo.” Lindsay’s composition is a fantasy of the African jungle, a foreboding series of rhymed couplets. It is in perfect kinship with O’Neill’s play. Phrases describe: “fat black bucks,” “tattooed cannibals,” warriors crying for “blood,” “witch doctors,” and

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<sup>274</sup> Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 149.

a “Negro fairyland.”<sup>275</sup> The exotic, self-conscious fictions of Africa intersect with modern depictions of slum life and lamentations of “the mumbo jumbo [that is now] dead in the jungle.”<sup>276</sup>

Its secondary characteristic is a parody of the superficiality of minstrelsy. The “minstrel river” and the “wild crap shooters [who] danced the juba,” are the tattered remnants of the lost spiritual life and forgotten war campaigns of African tribal culture.<sup>277</sup> In preparation for O’Neill’s drama, Lindsay’s poem exposes the erroneous associations between African tribal history and African American culture. The broomstick and cakewalk dancers are not of the Congolese jungle, despite a genetic connection to its lost tribal groups. Brutus Jones is not a Haitian emperor, despite his cunning but fleeting dominance over the island. Also, like the play, it flanks the boundary of a mirror on authentic African American culture, by presenting a complex portrait of blacks in civilization. In the end, it is a cut above the stereotype, but ultimately still a piece of that exoticized sculpture of blackness.

Chesse’s production choices express the archetypal approach he took to the play. He introduced the same meticulous lighting and sound choices that had enriched the environment of his *Hamlet*. He subsequently simplified the moral struggle that is potential in O’Neill’s text and embeded the action with stereotypical black masculinity.

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<sup>275</sup> Vachael Lindsay, “The Congo,” *A Little Archive of Poetry*, electronic source (Poetry Junction, 2004). Accessed 29 June 2004. <http://poetryarchive.bravepages.com/IKLM/lindsay.html>.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

Chesse's reading of Brutus was that of an antihero, indeed, the total "antithesis" of a Shakespearean hero.<sup>278</sup> Chesse' resisted the temptation to demonize his antihero with the kind of blood-red lighting he aimed at his Claudius. At the same time, he stereotyped the character by insisting on a "feeling of strength and power" and authentic "Negro dialect."<sup>279</sup> The assumption that strength is contained in a deep voice is a habit of character archetype and not necessarily a blackface stereotype, though it does suggest the early twentieth-century stereotype of the threatening "black buck." However, Chesse' failed to fully understand the complexities of the very script he used, for indeed, there are two dialects at work in the play. Brutus Jones himself speaks in phrases indicative of African American characterization, "Gimme air! I'se done up sho' 'nuff."<sup>280</sup> The leader of his enemies, Lem, speaks in phrases indicative of a primitive, tribal civilization, though perhaps not an authentically Caribbean one: "My mens dey got 'um silver bullets. Dey kill him shure."<sup>281</sup> Thus, Chesse's models for characterization may have caused him to reduce the complexities of racial representation in the play.

It is possible that he simply refers to "Negro dialect" as the generic term for black speech in all continents. Chesse's imagination of authentic black culture, then, is less nuanced than it is for O'Neill. His extent Lem puppet seems to be a more exotic marionette. Lem seems to be more exaggerated than Brutus, his broad, triangular nose, and thick, jutting lips symptomatic of the most vigorous exaggerations of blackface

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<sup>278</sup> Ralph Chesse', *The Marionette Actor* (Fairfax: George Mason University, 1987), 23.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>280</sup> Eugene O'Neill, "The Emperor Jones," *Penguin Plays: Eugene O'Neill*, edited by E. Martin Browne (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1968), 254.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 273.

puppetry. He is wearing a native-looking headdress. Thus, the object may indicate that Chesse' understood, at least implicitly, the variety of black characterization in O'Neill's drama (see figure 53).

However, his apperception of the witch doctor as a performer of "voodoo" dances, a term nowhere present in O'Neill's text, suggests a misunderstanding of the play, and by extension, of its possibilities in the category of racial representation. Chesse' imagines Voodou as an authentic black cultural tradition; O'Neill excludes it from his more nuanced imagination of blackness. Chesse' attests that the script requires an "understanding of the character's psychology," but remembers only his visual and aural techniques.<sup>282</sup> He employed colored backlighting, shadow figures, and blood



Fig. 53. Front view of "Lem" from Ralph Chesse's *The Emperor Jones*. Photograph by the author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts Collection (Detroit: DIA, 2003).

red/acid green sidelights to illustrate, in order, the shadowy environment of the jungle, the "Little Formless Fears," and the witch doctor with his tom-tom (see figure 54). His

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<sup>282</sup> Ralph Chesse', *The Marionette Actor* (Fairfax: George Mason University, 1987), 23.

meticulous artistic strokes then, created a rich visual and aural environment for the production, but may have also limited the meanings of the more complicated O'Neill characters, since Chesse' seems to have spent little or no time on the very character psychology he considered essential.



Fig. 54. “*Emperor Jones*, Vision in the Forest.” Photograph by the Federal Theatre Project (Washington: National Archives, 1937).

Chesse's efforts to improve the landscape of puppetry seemed to have been artistically successful, evidenced by his long and lustrous career. Likewise, those efforts produced the most mature puppet production featuring blackface characters produced prior to the Second World War. Nonetheless, the heritage of minstrelsy caused his object to perpetuate some of the stereotyped qualities of blackface, even as it reproduced a live actor's vestige. Chesse' also reduced the imagined authenticity in the play to a series of interesting visual and aural effects, leaving behind, at least in his interpretation of the play, the deeper complexities of O'Neill's script.

Chesse's *Emperor Jones* was an important moment in the history of puppetry, especially within the subcategory of racially representative puppets. However, the vast majority of puppetry productions featuring blackface characters, which were produced by the Federal Theatre Project, were more indicative of the lowbrow art Chesse' condemned. Among these productions was the *All-Colored Review* (1936), the first recorded marionette production created and performed by African American artists. Their participation in the form suggests that artistic traditions can perpetuate the most stereotyped essences of blackface puppetry, even when the artists themselves might be in a better position to contradict its fundamental characteristics. At the same time, the exaggerations of these objects may be partly explained by the difference between a humorous comic puppet review and a puppet production of a critically acclaimed drama.

The complete list of recorded productions that either featured or likely featured blackface characters is, in alphabetical order: *African Dancers* (1936), *Aladdin* (1937) *Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp* (1936 and 1937), *Aladdin and the Princess* (1936), *Aladdin's Lamp* (1936), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1937), *All Colored Review* (1936), the two aforementioned productions of Chesse's *Emperor Jones*, *Jubilee Singers* (1936), *Little Black Sambo* (produced variously in 1936, 1937, and 1938), the *Marionette Varieties* (1937), four *Punch and Judys* (1936-38), and two *Robinson Crusoes* (1937). Of the more than two dozen such productions, puppets exist at the Detroit Institute of the Arts for only *Emperor Jones*, *Jubilee Singers*, and one production of *Little Black Sambo*. Photographs exist for *Jubilee Singers*, *Sambo*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Emperor Jones*. No playtexts or adaptations are extant.

Many of the lost objects may have been destroyed. Bob Baker describes a puppet slaughter that occurred in 1940. The government made a bonfire out of wooden actors from the marionette unit of New York City. He reminisces: "Well, the fire went on for a long time. I watched it for a while. It was terrible; I wanted to go in there and rescue some of the stuff, but I didn't dare. I was just a little kid."<sup>283</sup> Fortunately, an adequate body of materials does continue to exist. Their particular characteristics suggest that a broad landscape of frontalities might have been drawn from the contemporary eidos blackface puppetry.

Foremost is the marionette "minstrel." He is a grotesque clown, a most vivid instance of minstrelsy stereotypes (see figure 55). From his absurdly large hands to the intensely contrasting white circles around his eyes, he is a likely candidate for Tambo or



Fig. 55. "Minstrel." Photograph by Mellissa Hurt (Fairfax: George Mason University, 2003).

Bones. Yet, an identified Endman is also present in the archive (see figure 56). He is even more exaggerated than the previous object. It is possible that this object is Bones

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<sup>283</sup> Qtd in: Bonnie Nelson Schwartz and the Educational Film Center, *Voices from the Federal Theatre* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2003), 159.

and the previous object is Tambo, given the differences in their expressions. Certainly a broadly-smiling Bones would be a more pleasing object to deliver the punch lines for its mockery of Mr. Interlocutor. The only clue to their use in production is from a Federal Theatre Project photograph (see figure 57). The baby carriage and the female dress on the minstrel indicate the parodies of domestic life common in minstrel show sketches.



Fig. 56. “Endman.” Photograph by Mellissa Hurt (Fairfax: George Mason University, 2003).

The photograph suggests the slippery representation of gender accompanied by an undercurrent of misogyny that has been well examined by scholars.

It appears, then, that the FTP produced a fairly standard minstrel show as part of its *Jubilee Singers*, a special marionette review supervised by Esther B. Wilhelm. It was a combined effort by both the puppetry unit and the black theatre units of Buffalo, New York. The next two photos further demonstrate that the FTP’s minstrel show was styled after the standard formula, in the tradition of the Royal Marionette companies of the nineteenth century (see figures 58 and 59). The musical compositions that cycled with

sketches would be well-served by the carefully-crafted representations of musicians in full blackface.

The final, strongest proof of a nostalgic connection between the 1936 FTP minstrel marionette show, and the minstrel marionette shows of the nineteenth century, is a puppet labeled “Old Black Joe.” His namesake strikes the researcher as a variation on



Fig. 57. “Puppeteers with Puppets.” Photograph by the Federal Theatre Project (Washington: National Archives, 1936).



Fig. 58. “Guitar Player.” Photograph by Mellissa Hurt (Fairfax: George Mason University, 2003).



Fig. 59. “Violin Player.” Photograph by Mellissa Hurt (Fairfax: George Mason University, 2003).

Old Snowball, the aged blackface singer/dancer of the Bullock/D’Arc productions. Thus, the FTP chose to recreate a then-defunct form of puppet theatre in its most historically accurate, nineteenth-century sense.

It is not surprising that the FTP would encourage productions that recreate the “classics” of the puppet stage. The Michigan Art and Craft project, supervised by David Lano, preserved more than a thousand American crafts in photographic form, including a number of Lano’s own puppets and those Daniel Meader. But the decision to host a full production of a more or less antiquated form of puppetry contributes a curious complication to the eidos of early twentieth-century puppetry. Its exaggerated clowns distinguish the style from the work of Ralph Chesse’, and mandate its status as a quaint folk art of the past century, solidifying the connection between minstrel marionettes, and the lowbrow art of America’s less innovative blackface puppet shows.

The FTP production of *Little Black Sambo* was an interesting contradiction. The father, Jumbo, was more radically exaggerated than the images of Helen Bannerman's popular book (see figure 60). The Sambo looks nearly human in comparison, suggesting

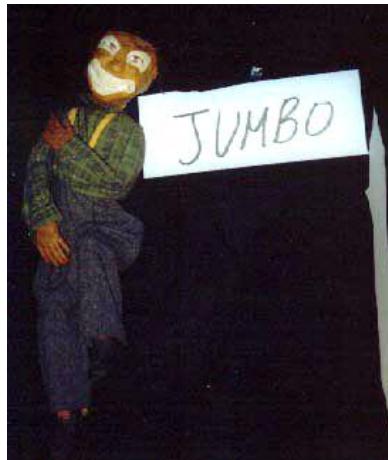


Fig. 60. "Black Jumbo." Photograph by Mellissa Hurt (Fairfax: George Mason University, 2003).

an archetype of African American humanity (see figure 61). Though crude, it seems less a blackface stereotype than a young girl with brown skin. The wide circles are not

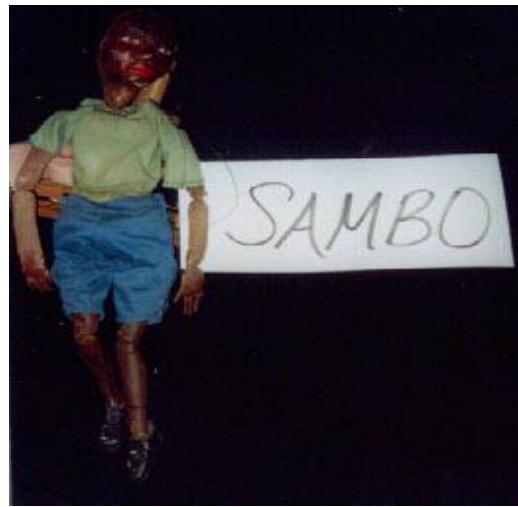


Fig. 61. "Little Black Sambo." Photograph by Mellissa Hurt (Fairfax: George Mason University, 2003).

present, her lips are within the boundaries of natural features, and her clothes are a simple pair of shorts and shirt, not the elaborate finery depicted by Bannerman's illustrator.

There appears to have been at least some effort on the part of these puppeteers to limit the most egregious exaggerations to the vestiges of the more clownish puppets. Sambo, the clever child who defeats a band of tigers, is almost human. Jumbo, the ne'er do well father of Sambo, a character without influence or agency within the tale, is as exaggerated in his blackface appearance as his minstrel clown counterparts. There is, therefore, clear agency within its essence. But the copresence of stereotype cannot be merely rejected out of hand, for the possibilities of a particular blackface frontality are conditioned by the blackface puppets that exist before them.

However, the African American puppeteers shown in the photograph of a Philadelphia production of *Little Black Sambo* were less successful in giving Sambo humanity. Their objects are similar to the exaggerated blackface toys examined in chapter VI (see figure 62). The father and mother have comically pointed noses. Sambo's eyes are unnaturally large, and his nose, though not pointed, is nonetheless exaggerated in size.

A Buffalo, New York unit's production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also illustrates the most exaggerated images of blackface puppetry (see figure 63). The Topsy depicted in the photograph is coal black and has an almost simian ridge for her brow. Counterintuitively, the fragments of history seem to suggest that white puppeteers produced less stereotyped blackface puppets than their African American colleagues, at least in the annals of the Federal Theatre Project.

The categorical distinctions drawn by McPharlin, Sarg, and other puppeteers of the early twentieth century explain this seemingly contradictory circumstance. African American puppeteers, who one might initially expect to undercut the stereotypes

transmitted to, and circulated within, puppetry derived from white-created blackface performance, cannot simply produce objects in a vacuum. Their art was as conditioned by



Fig. 62. "Little Black Sambo." Photograph by the Federal Theatre Project (Washington: National Archives, 1936).

previously constructed essences, whose co-present heritage also affected the possibilities available to white puppeteers. Thus, it was a logical choice to produce more exaggerated, clownish objects for the comic behavior of Sambo, Jumbo, and Topsy. The categorical distinction that seeded the eidos of blackface puppetry with the equation minstrel clown=lowbrow/comic blackface puppet character inhabited the essence of puppetry for

African American puppeteers. Subsequently, the richest, least clownish, most mature portraits of blackface puppet characters were the product of white puppeteers, just as the



Fig. 63. “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* supervised by Esther B. Wilhem.” Photograph by the Federal Theatre Project (Washington: National Archives, 1936).

most egregious stereotypes were the creation of white puppeteers of the nineteenth century. With the collapse of the FTP and the coming of global war, the diverse puppetry activities of the late 1930s came to an end.

## **Conclusion: Phenomenology, Authenticity, Comedy, and Essence**

Over sixty-five years have passed since American puppets presented the last recorded puppet minstrel show. In that time, the field has produced Jim Henson, avantgarde puppeteers Ping Chong and Julie Taymor, and Peter Schumann's festival productions with The Bread and Puppet Theatre. It has also seen the formation of The Crowtations, a subdivision of an African American theatre company called the Brewery Troupe. Since the 1970s, The Crowtations have been the most visible African American puppeteers. Given the current trends in the field, it is easy to dismiss the sixty-seven-year history of blackface puppetry as the remnants of, in the words of Paul Robeson, a "happily now dead" theatrical past.<sup>284</sup>

Scholars may dismiss the Royal Marionettes of D'Arc and Bullock, as the grotesque distortions of a waxworker who never met a real African American and a producer who based his showings on a vague sense of the minstrel show. However, the burden of their puppet essence, no matter its source, influenced the subsequent history of puppetry. Later Royal Marionette companies, such as those of Daniel Meader or Walter Deaves, who seem to have tried to reduce the grotesqueness of the blackface puppet's essence, only succeeded in creating more sentimentalized distortions of black bodies and culture. A half-century later, when Ralph Chesse' applied his high ideals to depict a supposedly African American body, his artistic strokes still exceeded the racial identity of the actor. His Charles Gilpin marionette was a meticulously crafted image of the African American actor, but one that distorted its likeness according to the tradition of

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<sup>284</sup> Qtd in: John Scott, et. al., *Panorama of African American Theatre*, Videorecording (Lincoln: GPN, 1991).

blackface. Though he produced a vestige more like a human being, that vestige took the racially characteristic features of its source and exaggerated them. The burden of minstrelsy persisted even in performances that twenty-first-century scholars, such as John Bell, might hesitate to associate with the tradition of blackface.

Between 1872 and 1939, dozens of artists produced their particular frontalities, revealing a variety of essences for puppetry and imagined black life. Sometimes, these seemingly disparate essences coalesced in their blackface puppet shows. David Lano's blackface-puppet essence synthesized his professional obligation to "clever tricks" with his apperceptions of African American culture. Together, these twin co-presences produced a marionette that was crudely carved, but with startlingly exoticized hair, carrying a fascinating, faux-tribal mallet. He selected John Payne Collier's *Punch and Judy*, a text that reinforced the seemingly African identity of the "Negro." When the Royal Marionette companies devised a seemingly American clown, Lano produced an exotic alternative that integrated the Shallaballa of Punch shows with the marionette minstrel of the late nineteenth century.

In other cases, the atomized character of puppetry led to contradictory essences on the same stage. Forman Brown's use of stereotyped blackface dialogue likely conflicted with the relatively realistic figures produced by the Yale Puppeteers. In Brown's case, the atomized character of puppetry would have worked to the advantage of his texts. All three of his plays featuring blackface characters, *Mister Noah*, *My Man Friday*, and *Uncle Tom's Hebb'n*, shared anti-racist themes. The audible verbal stereotypes, relatively realistic puppets, and antiracist challenges articulated by those puppets would have made evident three co-presences: the essence of dialogue from minstrelsy tradition,

the essence of less grotesque blackface puppets, and the essence of comic exaggeration. Though produced by several separate essences, the atomized portions of the production would act as constituent parts of a farce with antiracist themes. Even in the D'Arc/Bullock Royal Marionette productions, the sentimental themes of "Belle Mahone" and the antislavery themes of "Old Runaway Joe" seem to conflict with the excessively racialized marionette frontalities. Together in performance, they would produce a puppet essence that is simultaneously debased target of ridicule and sympathetic racial image. In the midst of these contradictions lay the heritage of the minstrel shows, whether the puppeteers manipulated those stereotypes for convenient theatrical turns or progressive values.

Many twentieth-century puppeteers adopted the blackface stereotype in its most grotesque essence. Bufano's Mr. Julius Caesar, the Proctors' Minstrels, James Juvenal Hayes' "Rastus," Lenore Hetrick's *Uncle Tom* characters, Tom Fool's "Negro" family, and the minstrel show of the FTP's African American puppeteers were paradigmatic examples of blackface clowns. However, the gradual decline of puppet plays featuring blackface characters and the Black Doll memoirs of Diogener suggest that more excessively exaggerated blackface work became part of annals of puppetry nostalgia.

Other works suggest that bolder artistic experiments and progressive themes may have helped undermine the most excessive blackface distortions. The blend of eastern and blackface stereotypes in Munger's *Little Black Sambo*, and the progressive themes and manipulated black folklore in the plays of Richardson and Dallas, suggest that blackface stereotypes may have given way to alternatives in the puppetry experiments of the 1930s. Efforts to stretch the artistic envelope may have brushed out the most

egregious essences of blackface puppetry, but even those brush strokes were marked by the stamp of racially contingent exaggerations.

To some extent, comedy permits these racially contingent exaggerations; to some extent, it mandates them. One can perhaps excuse the grotesque minstrel-derived blackface puppets of the Proctors, Munger, or the creators of the *Jubilee Singers*, with the argument that comedy always dismisses any need to adhere to “reality,” since humor demands exaggeration beyond “reality” in order to achieve comic effect. Certainly the categorical distinction circulated by McPharlin and shared by many puppeteers mandated the utility of minstrel clowns for comedic action.

However, the steady development of more realistic, less exaggerated blackface essences throughout the history examined in this dissertation, suggests that there was a deliberate use of exaggeration to achieve comic effect. When puppeteers like Sarg, Bufano, Brown, and Chesse’ produced less exaggerated blackface essences, their artistic practices coincided with a self-conscious commitment to serious and/or realistic puppet drama. Sarg developed a new controller and new construction methods to increase the realistic details of human behavior that could be mimicked by puppets, and adopted a body of epic dramas. Bufano designed magnificent puppets for unconventional productions. Chesse’ insisted on high quality, dramatically rich puppet productions, and despaired of those puppeteers whose variety clowns and crude fairies perpetuated the myth that puppets are children’s fare. Even Brown attempted to capture, with a degree of photographic realism, the human face, whether representing Albert Einstein or a blackface character. Unlike Sarg, Bufano, or Chesse’, Brown’s plays are definitely comedies. However, though Brown adopted the dialect exaggerations of minstrelsy, he

used them in plays where puppets celebrate biracial families, assert the supremacy of imagined Africa culture over western capitalism, and criticize great authors for equating skin color with moral purity.

Puppeteers like Lano, Hastings, the members of The Stellar Marionettes, Hayes, and Hetrick adopted the more grotesque exaggerations of minstrelsy consistently to produce comic plays. Granted, Lano was the only puppeteer of this group to leave writings explaining his intentions. As Lano articulated it, he was a “showman,” a traveling mountebank. The goal of puppetry, as Lano understood it, was to impress audiences with clever, entertaining tricks. Thus, the comedy of exaggeration would serve both the need to catch a frontier audience’s attention, and the comic goals of the John Payne Collier *Punch* text. If other puppeteers felt similarly, than it may be that the demands of comedy are as important a factor in defining the level of exaggeration executed by puppeteers as their particular ideas about blackface characterization.

Of course, realism is not an absolute artistic good. It does seem that puppeteers during the early twentieth century, especially Brown, Paris, and Chesse’, rendered puppets with more photographically realistic details. One could argue, notwithstanding, that the longterm result of experiments with increased realism, including Chesse’s Emperor Jones and Paris’s Josephine Baker, was the end of the extreme exaggerations of marionette minstrelsy, when such experiments made those exaggerations appear too ridiculous. Certainly, the steady decrease in puppet minstrel shows suggests that a field of puppet theatre dominated by more realistic images would no longer tolerate the grotesque clowns of minstrelsy. Ultimately, this investigation

cannot answer this question effectively without delving far more deeply into the changes in live-actor blackface that occurred throughout the early twentieth century.

This is a dilemma similar to the notion of imagined authenticity that has woven through these materials. Puppeteers like Lano, Hastings, and Chesse' discuss openly what they believe "real Negroes" and "real Negro" culture to be. These disparate imaginations of authenticity drive them to experiment with materials as diverse as the John Payne Collier *Punch* text and the Vachael Lindsay poem "Congo." However, it is far beyond the limits of this investigation to determine the extent to which these artists effectively approximated "authentic" African American or African life in their puppet plays. Weaver Dallas may have created a puppet production of the "Uncle Remus" stories, but even if one accepts that the Harris stories are authentic (and it is arguable that they are, at the most, a record of authentic folklore), Dallas's production can only be an approximation of the Harris stories. Once one begins to wonder the extent to which the Harris stories constitute authentic African American culture, the investigation descends into a mess of impossible questions about the nature of authenticity itself. These questions, if they are indeed answerable, must be answered in another investigation at another time.

What this study can encompass, are the imaginations of authenticity articulated by the puppeteers themselves and executed in their puppet productions. Lano imagined authentic African American culture as exotic, very different from the traditions of white society. His gave his blackface puppet a faux-African vestige and used it in a playtext as Shallaballa, rather the then-standard Jim Crow. McPharlin imagined the minstrel puppet as a fictional golliwog, while he envisioned other "Negro" puppets, including the

minstrelsy-derived Topsy, as genuine black characters. Thus, his “Sambo” is markedly more clownish than the less exaggerated design of Nounou, for his *Witch Moon*. Chesse soundly rejected the minstrel clowns, though he perhaps did so more for aesthetic than cultural reasons. He mandated the imagined authenticity of “black dialect” in O’Neill’s play, but simplified in his imagining the more nuanced representation of “black speech” in the original play. Using the phenomenological method to place brackets around the puppeteer’s notion of authentic black culture provides a more refined bracket on the essence of that puppeteer’s creation, even if it does not provide a bracket for the essence of authenticity itself, if such a thing can be said to exist in physical or even theoretical reality.

The most considerable advantage of phenomenology as a method is that it gives the scholar the privilege of placing brackets around specific materials. In cases where time has left the puppeteer’s own writings, copies of her/his plays, photographs of her/his productions, and extant puppets, the phenomenological method allows the scholar to work with each individual item in turn, and then to examine the overall essence of puppetry that manifests from the whole. In cases where most of these materials have been lost to history, such as the Stellar Marionettes’ *Minstrel Show: Epaminondas*, the scholar can instead define the essence of what is available, in this case the text of Bryant’s story, and limit conclusions to that essence.

For puppetry especially, phenomenology helps articulate the complete essence of the form, as few other theoretical models do successfully. Puppetry’s atomized nature creates the potential for curious dysfunctions within the elements. Since the constructed form of the puppet, its performance manipulation, and its voice are often produced by

different artists, the particular essences of each individual portion (puppet, movement, and text) can contribute to a convoluted essence for the puppet as a total character. This is most visibly manifested in a self-referential essence of puppetry. This investigation detailed the comment by the voice-actor for “Old Snowball,” who described the “grey wool” on his head, referencing the artificial nature of the object. Brown’s Crusoe and Topsy bemoaned their treatment at the hands of their creators. The complicated interaction of disparate puppetry elements is articulated by the notion of essence, which exists as both the nature of constituent parts and the nature of the whole coalesced in performance.

Thus, it is the fervent hope of this author that further scholarly work may find phenomenology useful for investigating the history of puppet theatre. Puppet theatre remains one of the more underrepresented of theatrical subjects. This may be due to the general marginalization of puppetry in artistic circles. It may also be due to the paucity of meaningful scholarly work on the subject. There is nothing scholars can do to respond to the first cause; there is something scholars can do to respond to the second.

Scholars interested in American puppetry will face the equally daunting challenge of a general lack of representative materials. Indeed, this investigation could only uncover fragments of a few dozen productions from nearly three quarters of a century of theatre history. This is perhaps no worse a dilemma than what faces scholars studying many theatre history subjects.<sup>285</sup> The records of the Puppeteers of America suggest that the few dozen productions unearthed constitute only a small percentage of the puppet

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<sup>285</sup> The most obvious example is 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian drama, of which only a few dozen scripts exist from over a thousand recorded productions.

productions featuring blackface characters that occurred from 1872 to 1939. That these may be the only fragments of a complicated history justify their study. Phenomenology can help maintain the scholar's lens within the boundaries of the, albeit limited, evidence.

This investigation has limited itself to the essence of puppetry for individual puppeteers and the essence of their puppet products as they appear to close reading. Future research may follow the phenomenological epoché to investigate the relationship between the essence of live minstrelsy, as an overall field rather than the narrower essence that appears to D'Arc/Bullock, Deaves, or Meader, and the essence of minstrel puppetry. Further investigation may also expand into other categories of representation (such other "ethnic" categories), to determine the extent to which other stereotyped representation embedded itself in the aesthetics of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century puppetry. Moreover, while the goal here has been to look at puppetry, there are many forms of theatre that have been tangentially referenced but not provided the same attention (medicine shows, mask performance). In the end, the hope of every scholar who commits to a project is that the resulting manuscript will contribute to an ongoing conversation. It is clear that there is far more to be said about the relationship of blackface to American puppetry than has been, or even could be, fully explored in a standard dissertation.

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