FOOLS, JESTERS & GODS

THE ROLE OF THE CLOWN IN PUPPET THEATRE
This catalog was produced in conjunction with an exhibition at the Center for Puppetry Arts.

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**COVER PHOTO:** David Zeiger  
The Center for Puppetry Arts Museum is committed to presenting the world of puppetry to our audiences. Each special exhibition has concentrated on a particular puppeteer or puppetry tradition in great detail. In this exhibit we bring together many diverse puppetry traditions to focus on a common thread, an important character found in many puppetry performances, the clown. The clown, when presented in the puppet theatre, takes on many shapes and forms. He may present himself as a fool or jester or he may be a god hiding his divinity behind a shield of force. This exhibition seeks to explore the many roles and functions the clown plays in the puppet theatre.

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— VINCENT ANTHONY —
Executive Director

— KERRY MCCARTHY —
Museum Director
"The clown is the child of duality, of paradox, of the eternally two-sided nature of man. He is at once wise and foolish, benign and cruel, holy and sinister, seductive and lecherous, spontaneous and calculating, comic and tragic. That he can comfortably embrace all these contradictions at once, and yet be so familiar and understandable to us, says something important about the human condition. And the tension that arises from our recognition of these contradictions generates the kind of knowing laughter that can come only from the most intimate and unspoken understanding."

- Paul Cline -
Cline's statement, while referring to the human clown, perfectly describes the centuries-old role of the clown in puppet theatre. As the Sherzers note in the introduction to their wonderful collection of papers on "Humor and Comedy in Puppetry," puppets in and of themselves are funny. The small hunch-nosed hunchback with the big stick besting the devil, the playful puns of the court jester twisting the King's words, the farts and bellows of the noble lord's fat servant defeating a column of mighty ogres - these scenes and situations provoke laughter for many reasons. The Sherzers continue, "Puppets constantly and dangerously test the boundaries of the licit and the illicit, the permitted and the unpermitted. Puppets are a parody, of customs, of proper social behavior and rules of etiquette and politeness, of the very textual sources that they are based on, and even sometimes, of themselves."

Comic puppet traditions revolve around incongruities of size, language, class, and situations. This exhibition and catalog attempt to isolate the puppet clown in order to closely examine the elements which for generations have inspired a conspiracy of laughter in performance, both traditional and contemporary. Here we will examine the clown puppet from the perspectives of character types, movement, language and plot situations, as well as delve beneath their structures as puppets to reveal the cultural, social and political contexts in which these merry, ribald and often grotesque figures perform.
or Western audiences perhaps the most familiar puppet clown is England's Punch, recognizable by his long hooked nose, prominent hunchback, pointed hat and bulging belly. Punch's cousins from Italy (Pulcinella), France (Polichinelle), Germany (Kasperle), Russia (Petroushka), Greece (Karaghiozis), Turkey (Karagoz), and Egypt (Aragez) bear certain family resemblances whether in the form of a marionette, glove or shadow puppet.

Scholarly sources debate which nationality of the famous clown puppet developed earliest. Two points of view focus the debate: that this bawdy character was patterned upon the Italian Zanni - the clown preceding commedia dell' arte performances - to which local and regional variations were made; or that these characters were based primarily on the Turkish folk comic/hero Karagoz, who is said to have derived from central Asian traditions.

Every culture has fool/buffoon characters with ancestral roots in rituals of fertility, harvest, spring and planting. These characters of folk and oral traditions naturally become featured performers in early puppet plays. As itinerant troupes of puppeteers performed in the royal courts, fairs and villages throughout the Mediterranean and the continent, particularly during the 16th and 17th centuries, there can be little doubt that one tradition influenced another, borrowing conventions that proved delectably successful with audiences.

PUNCH AND HIS RELATIVES

George Speaight in his book Punch and Judy describes the overwhelming popularity of "Punchinello" performances by an Italian marionette troupe in Covent Garden in the late 1600's. One of these boggart, baffish zanni (who by the way did not have a hunchback) danced and caroused, generally interrupting the performance of the main play. Soon this character blended with the traditional Merry Andrew, Jack Pudding and other fools, and began wreaking havoc on the English puppet stage with the shortened moniker of Punch.

Like the French, the English clown already featured the grotesquely prominent hunchback and this physical trait was incorporated into the marionette and glove puppet figures.

Over the centuries, Punch and his cousins developed similar character traits as well as appearances. A comparison of Greek Koraghiotis and Turkish Karagöz provides a good example. Both these traditions grew from the folk tales and mimes of the early Ottoman empire. The puppets are one-dimensional shadow figures traditionally made of animal hides. Both Koraghiotis and Karagöz have a bald head, strong body, and one enormous long arm that is constantly in motion. A prominent feature of both is the dark coloring around the eye, called 'black eye,' the word from which both derive their names. Their occupations change from play to play, but both are usually unemployed, though blatantly opportunistic. Koraghiotis is often a thief whose time is spent teaching his son the trade. The voice of Karagöz/Koraghiotis is also a distinctive part of his characterization. As in the Punch tradition, the puppeteer creates the unique squeaky and often unintelligible speech of the puppet by altering his own voice with the use of a reed or swazzle placed on the back of the tongue. This kind of voice modification is used throughout the world for comic effect in puppetry performances.
Ilhan Basgoz describes Karagoz’s personality in his catalog *

Karagoz: The Turkish Shadow Play Theatre: "...He is quick

tempered, bold, aggressive, ready to express his emotions

in word or deed, at one and the same time stupid and
clever...His language is vulgar and full of obscenity...[He

and his cohort, Hajjvat] describe with their appearance

and behavior two constant and opposing components of

the social structure - conflict vs. order, stability vs.

volatility, tension vs. peace, protest vs. compliance." In

her dissertation on Greek shadow puppet theatre, Linda Suny

Myrsiades explains that Karaghiozis”...is preoccupied with food,

money, sex, and revenge against those who abuse

him...Karaghiozis expresses the absurdity of chance

occurrences and thrives on chaotic situations in which his

function as an agent of anarchy is undertaken with impunity,...providing a safety valve for

rebellious feelings both in the world of the play and in his audience." 

Each of these comic characters is supported by a cast of stock

characters: high ranking members of society; foreigners such as

French, Armenian, Kurd, Arab, Jew, Negro; women, including

concubines, prostitutes, honest housewives; young lovers of

romance tales; street bully, dwarf, drunk, drug addict;

entertainers such as jugglers, minstrels, acrobats; supernatural

beings such as witches, demons and jinnies; and lastly, animals.

In both the Greek and Turkish traditions, the plays these characters

perform revolve around situations in which Karagoz/Karaghiozis

interfere thereby causing confusion, misdirection, and absurdity.
DIVINE CLOWNS

On the other side of the world, glove, shadow, rod and string puppet clowns have been a part of the puppetry tradition for centuries. In China, there are references to puppet performances taking place during the Sung Dynasty, and in India the sacred text of the MAHABHARATA contains passages describing the first puppet being created from the mouth of Brahma. The clown puppet tradition in Asian countries typifies Cline's statement that "for centuries, the fool was regarded not merely as a figure of fun but also as a being under heaven's protection, a creature privy to secrets denied other men." In performance of sacred texts, religious cycle plays, folk tales and songs, the clown in Indonesia, China, India and other Asian countries is the irreverent sidekick of the noble lord, a brother to the gods, the savior of the kingdom.

In Indonesia performances of WAYANG KULIT (shadow puppets), WAYANG GOLEK (round wooden rod puppets) and WAYANG KLITK (flat wooden puppets) are seen as the link between the knowable world and the imperceptible reality behind the universe. The plays follow a set pattern: they begin in a princely court where a problem emerges, move to the depths of the forests where the hero subdues demonic foes, and build toward a culminating war in which the forces of refined justice defeat greedy enemies. Clowns such as Semar, Petruk and Gareng bridge the epic plots of the plays with humorous interjections on current events, social and political satire, and uproarious asides to the audience about the action of the play. During the all-night-long performances the clowns usually make their first appearance at midnight, bursting into the story with wild antics and fights.
Semar, the chief clown in Javo and Sunda, is described by Kathy Foley in her catalog essay The World of the Wayang: Puppetry of Indonesia as..."the oldest being in the universe, half male and half female, a divinity who hides his glory behind his distorted form and low humor. His prodigious fort may knock out a demon who pursues him in battle. His flat singing and jerky dance evoke howls of laughter. Semar serves the aristocratic characters appearing in each story, but every audience member realizes that this puppet is divine. He is proof that the common people are the power behind a kingdom, and affirms the truth wisdom found in an ordinary person's pragmatic response to life." 

The clown, Goreng, of Indonesia has a ridiculous appearance which rivals that of Punch. In the wayang kuli form, his most prominent feature is his large bulbous nose, set high on his face between wide, wild eyes. He wears a loin cloth slung beneath his fat belly (sometimes he is shown with a large phallicus) and his long articulated arms drag the ground. He is the son of Semar and shares in the role of advisor to the aristocracy in the plays. The wayang golek style has similarly long arms and bulbous nose, but the trunk is long and slender in the style of the golek tradition.

A central comic character in Chinese puppetry, both shadow and glove, is Sung Wu-K'un, the Monkey King featured in plays based on Journey to the West. The Monkey King has the face of a monkey and the body of a man, and the power to turn himself into
anything he pleases. In the heroic/comic tale "The Mountain of Fiery Tongues" the Monkey King has a humorous "changeling" battle with an evil spirit who can also change into anything he pleases. The Monkey King becomes the evil spirit in order to take advantage of the spirit's wife; the spirit becomes a bull to attack his double; finally, the Monkey King becomes a reed so that the bull will eat him. This last event causes the bull to have a terrific stomach-ache and the spirit surrenders to the Monkey King.

Often in the heroic comedy or romantic comedies there is a shrewish old woman or a doddering old scholar who provides comic interlacing into the plays. Usually these characters are asked for advice or to perform a service for a central character. Their response is often sly word play which always work the situation around to their own advantage. Their physical gestures are often staccato and they stamp their feet, slam objects around the stage, and speak in shrill voices.
As with other forms of puppetry, the American comic tradition is based on those forms which were brought over to this continent, as well as the practices of the Native American population. The Native American traditions in puppetry were based in the rituals associated with harvests, hunting, and battles and, as with the Indonesian worldview, puppet performances were seen as directly connecting the people to the gods. The trickster was an important character who not only entertained with havoc, but also provided relief from worry about pleasing the gods. Among the white immigrant population, the European influence was predominant. There are lithographs and woodcuts of Punch performances at pubs, fairs and on street corners dating from the 1700's so we know that this was a popular form of entertainment as in Europe.

As the country developed so did its comic puppetry traditions. Stage shows usually featured a comic puppet segment as an opening or intermission act. Trick puppets and satirical sketches of daily life or political events dominated these performances. The clown figure as we know it today probably derived from the original English Punch as these figures usually feature the large round nose and the jester's motley costume. During the heyday of vaudeville, comic puppets became a more frequent sight and companies of puppeteers began forming to create elaborate stage shows for the traveling circuit. Dancing clowns, juggling clowns, and acrobatic girls in tutus all became standard figures of delight for audiences.

Television brought about widespread popularity for clown figures, such as Burr Tillstrom's famous Kukla and Ollie, Margo and Rufus Rose's Howdy Doody and Clarabelle, and later, Jim Henson's Miss Piggy and Kermit. These famous comedy duos endeared themselves to American audiences.
through their sophisticated banter and tension-filled but friendly relationships. Puppeteers performing for children and adults continue refining the clown in plays based on classic literature, legends, historical events, and contemporary issues.

It has been said that all the world loves a clown; we would amend this statement to include the puppet clown. Regardless of its form, history or style of performance, the puppet clown continues to be an enduring figure in popular entertainment. These fools, jesters and gods reveal our human foibles as well as our greatness. They transport us to a world of suspended reality where we can revel in absurdity, rebel against authority and lose ourselves in gaiety. Audiences cherish the moments when the puppet clown takes the stage because the laughter is remembered long after the curtain is drawn and the lights go down.


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