

## MARIONETTES AS SEEN BY AN ITALIAN

BY OTTORINO RESPIGHI

AS Italy has been the cradle of opera it is only natural that the musical puppet theatre should flourish there. In Venice during the eighteenth century, the marionettes of the Palazzo Grimani, which are still preserved in the Museo Correr, were celebrated for operas sung by unseen artists. Later in Rome, according to travelers in the city at that time, those of the Palazzo Fiano gave the works of Rossini with marvellous perfection. But these performances, interesting as a matter of curiosity, are relatively unimportant. It is only since the recent movement to revolutionize stage decoration, that marionettes have drawn the attention of the scenic inventors, who profess to see in them a special medium of dramatic expression.

The puppet, according to Bernard Shaw, is art reduced to simplest terms. Its mimicry, which follows human gesture with all the emphasis of caricature, gives its action an effectiveness that the living actor can scarcely attain.

Gordon Craig, who in 1918 wrote a special dissertation on the subject which was published in Florence, declares in his work *On the Art of the Theatre* that the ideal actor is a super-marionette; that the marionette seems to him to be "the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of a past civilization."

An Italian critic has also paid his tribute. The puppet theatre, according to S. A. Luciani, is the ideal theatre because it eliminates the conflict always present on the dramatic stage between the scene, which is an artificial element, and the actor, who is the representative of reality—a conflict which the Greeks sought to overcome by adopting the mask and the buskin thereby reducing the protagonists to giant living puppets.

Before the war in Munich, the marionette shows were developed into veritable works of art. Organized by famous artists they were

perfected in every smallest detail. The Teatro dei Piccoli of Rome, which was housed at the Palazzo Odescalchi from 1915 to 1922, besides its performances for children, presented new, original works which combined music and drama and were especially interesting scenically.

Among these the most noteworthy was the curious attempt at a plastic theatre, conceived by Gilbert Clavel, with marionettes designed and constructed by De Pero, the futurist, and music by Francesco Malipiero and Alfredo Casella.



But what, one may ask, is the future of this theatre and in particular what musical possibilities does it offer? To answer the question, I prefer to review my own experience with this medium. The aesthetic theories held by an artist are best demonstrated in his creations. My attitude toward the puppet theatre has been expressed in *The Sleeping Beauty*, the musical fairy-tale with words by G. Bistolfi, first performed at the Teatro dei Piccoli at Rome in 1921.

In that work inspired by Perrault's famous story, the situations are brought into comic relief musically, by certain reminiscent strains from famous operas, and dramatically, through such deliberate anachronisms as the red riding habits worn in the finale by the modern gentlemen just back from the hunt.

In the marionette theatre, I should say, I have found a means primarily suitable to comic effects. Nor is this a casual or arbitrary judgment. Whenever I see a performance by marionettes I never fail to react to their grotesqueness, their quality of caricature. Theoretically it is all very well to claim that they are the ideal actors, and consequently that the ideal actors must be super-marionettes. The fact remains that a single gesture too abrupt or too stiff suffices to render their movements ridiculous and may turn the most tragic situation into farce.

To modify the severity of this opinion, or to find a euphemism for the character of the marionette, one might venture to say that

he is the actor stylized. But this very characteristic is what makes the puppet theatre particularly effective to an art that is preeminently mannered and stylized—an art like opera. I do not mean modern opera, which seeks to be realistic even when employing fantastic themes; but rather the traditional Italian opera of the good old days, in which the passions are deliberately exaggerated and the action, built up of grandiloquent recitatives and impassioned arias, unfolds itself amid the ostentatious and pompous settings of a Torelli, a Burnacini or the prodigious Bibbiena brothers.

Moreover it is comic opera to which I find this theatre most adapted, for the reason already given; that too abrupt, too hard a gesture is an ever possible danger to the spell of more dramatic and moving scenes. Almost all the repertoire of Italian opera bouffe seems to me to be appropriate in this field—from the *Serva Padrona* to *Don Pasquale*; also the repertoire of French comic opera from *Richard Coeur-de-lion* to *The Daughter of the Regiment*. But not, as a rule, the operas of Mozart, because *Le Nozze di Figaro*, for example, although it is called an opera bouffe, is in reality a delightful comedy with music, full of delicate nuances. And *Don Giovanni* is an out and out lyric tragedy. On the other hand *Il Flauto Magico* with its mixture of the comic, fantastic and symbolic is what I would call an ideal opera for a theatre of marionettes.



These observations about the repertoire of the lyric stage are even more applicable to the choreographic productions which have always played a prominent part in the marionette theatre.

The French writer, Jal, in his book entitled *De Paris à Naples*, speaks enthusiastically of Gerolamo's marionettes which he saw in Milan in 1834 and which, he declares, performed certain dances in a way that would have aroused the envy of many a professional. I do not wish to contradict the affirmations of the French traveler, but it has always seemed to me that the grotesque nature of the

puppet is, if anything, accentuated in dancing. All feeling is lost and the dance becomes a succession of movements both angular and absurd.

For me dancing is expressive only by means of the human form. Through this instrument, musical rhythm determines the movements in a direct and irresistible way, as the melody determines its meaningful gestures. The dance is, so to speak, a passive art, that is, it is dependent on the music. It is the music itself made visible. The manifestations recently in vogue in Germany, of dancing without music are absurd unless one presupposes an interior music that is unexpressed, and appreciates certain forms that one might term "cerebral," by which the dancer seeks to imitate the conventionalized attitudes of antique plastic decoration, rather than to abandon himself and be borne along on the wave of the music.

Those who see in the dance a cerebral phenomenon may find interesting motifs and even something charming in the angular gestures of the marionette. Those to whom the dance is essentially a religious or an erotic expression will view his antics as a profanation.

On the whole I believe that the marionette theatre does not offer a wide field of experiment; its resources are too limited. It is nevertheless exceptionally suited to a small characteristic repertoire, which I have sought to define. This can be enriched of course, by new works which should be composed in the same spirit—the spirit of the grotesque and of caricature.

