SELECTED PERSPECTIVES ON THE PUPPETRY OF THEODORA SKIPITARES

by

LAUREN HOBBS SEXTON

(Under the Direction of FARLEY RICHMOND)

ABSTRACT

Although interest in puppetry in America tends to come in "waves," puppetry itself is an art form found throughout history and across many cultures. It is a form of expression that, depending on the culture, can be considered high art, popular, folk entertainment, or a bridge between these categories. This dissertation will not attempt to address all forms of puppetry in either a historic-geographic method, or by creating a taxonomy of manipulation methods. The purpose of this dissertation is rather to examine the work of Theodora Skipitares, an artist whose influence by and application of multiple artistic traditions is unique within contemporary American puppetry.

Theodora Skipitares is one of a group of New York performers, such as Jim Henson, Peter Schumann, Julie Taymor, and Lee Breuer, whose work in adult puppet theatre and experimental theatre in the late twentieth century exemplified a new way of approaching performance and a revival of interest in puppetry. Like many of these artists, Skipitares draws influence from a variety of art forms, however it is the intersection of Skipitares' specific range of influences that is the impetus for this dissertation. It is my opinion that Skipitares' productions cannot be truly understood from within one artistic tradition or perspective and, therefore, they demand an analysis which acknowledges how selected discourses and traditions intersect in her work.

Theodora Skipitares has been labeled a performance artist, a theatre conceptualist, and an innovative director, but rarely a puppeteer. Her productions represent the margins of what is an already marginal art form. The goal of my dissertation, therefore, has been to analyze specifically the puppetry of Theodora Skipitares, revealing how her work is situated within the traditions of American puppetry, performance art, experimental theatre, Japanese puppetry and Indian performance traditions. As this study is informed by materialist feminist perspectives on gender and representation, I will also consider how Skipitares' work is situated within the frame of gender studies. Overall, each of these artistic influences and/or movements affected the way Skipitares chose to create her puppets and the way she in turn uses those puppets in performance.

INDEX WORDS: Theodora Skipitares, Puppetry, Puppet, Theater, Gender, Object Theater, Performing Object, Asian Theater, Indian Theater, Performance Art, Chris Maresca, Alissa Mello

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B.A., University of North Carolina at Asheville, 2000

M.A., University of Toronto, 2002

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2007

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December 2007

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Jeremy, who kept me grounded; to my parents, who let me go; and to CB and Farley who took me so far.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Although interest in puppetry in America tends to come in "waves," puppetry itself is an art form found throughout history and across many cultures. It is a form of expression that, depending on the culture, can be considered high art, popular, folk entertainment, or a bridge between these categories. This dissertation will not attempt to address all forms of puppetry in either a historic-geographic method, or by creating a taxonomy of manipulation methods. The purpose of this dissertation is rather to examine the work of Theodora Skipitares, an artist whose influence by and application of multiple artistic traditions (both in and outside of puppetry) is unique within contemporary American puppetry.

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Theodora Skipitares has been labeled a performance artist, a theatre conceptualist, and an innovative director, but rarely a puppeteer.[1] Her productions represent the margins of what is an

already marginal art form. The goal of my dissertation, therefore, has been to analyze specifically the puppetry of Theodora Skipitares. This dissertation will specifically focus on Skipitares as a puppeteer—a designer and director of performing objects and puppet operators. Within this focus, I will address primarily Skipitares' productions elements: the puppet designs, video projections, and structure of her performances. Skipitares' dramatic texts—more accurately "storyboard scripts" or scenarios of scenes—will be dealt with in a cursory way as they are relevant to her puppet design, construction, and performance.

This dissertation will reveal how Skipitares' work is situated within the traditions of American puppetry, performance art, experimental theatre, Japanese puppetry and Indian performance traditions. As this study is informed by materialist feminist perspectives on gender and representation, I will also consider how Skipitares' work is situated within the frame of gender studies. Gender, as it will be defined later in this chapter, will therefore act as a *leitmotif* throughout this study. Overall, each of these artistic influences and/or movements affected the way Skipitares chose to create her puppets and the way she in turn uses those puppets in performance. Each of these traditions and discourses have contributed specific elements to Skipitares' production style and, therefore, each chapter will provide a new frame for her work. The concluding chapter will explore how these traditions intersect in Skipitares' multi-media productions, how she has adopted each in performance, and how each of these frames mutually reinforce her work. As the title of this dissertation suggests, my study is intended to be an exploratory investigation into specific perspectives and ways Skipitares' puppet productions could be interpreted given the progression of her career at this point in time. Though I feel these traditions and discourses are the most useful frames for Skipitares' style, they are not definitive.

Skipitares began her career as a performance artist, eventually incorporating puppets and other media into her performances. Many of the concepts that were characteristic of the performance art movement in America are found even in Skipitares' most recent works. The bulk of Skipitares' work was created and produced in New York's East Village, where she has lived for the last thirty years. Skipitares' work reflects the influences of living in the center of the Off-Off Broadway (OOB) movement (though after the height of activity) and her use of experimental and multi-media techniques reveals the evolution of the OOB style.

Her earliest performances in the 1970's were costumed extensions of her own body made of plates, walnuts, fish, or created by multimedia projections. In the early eighties, she began to create her own style of performance based on larger historical and social subjects such as the history of American invention, genetics, the culture of food, and history of medicine. Throughout her career, Skipitares has applied a syncretic method to text. Her process typically begins with months of research on a particular subject. In the case of historical pieces, the research includes secondary textbooks, special collections, archival material, and illustrations where she often focuses on the minutiae, the eccentricities of history, more than the highpoints. As one reviewer describes, "The information is then distilled into fanciful tableaux, odd monologues or snippets of dialogue" (Richards C13). Skipitares' technique of historical collage is designed with the goal of producing "a different way of looking at a period of history that has been only represented one way or even ignored'" (Stanley 43).

These "historical collages" often incorporated progressive or ambulatory theater techniques wherein audiences would wind their way through a series of tableaux or multimedia presentations, sometimes guided by a narrator, sometimes left on their own. In the 1990's, Skipitares found a headquarters, of sorts, for her work at the Annex Theatre of La Mama

Experimental Theatre Company in the East Village of New York City. She has also used found spaces and performed at the Wooster Groups' Performing Garage. Skipitares has also repeatedly served as an "artist in residence" for university theatre departments. Skipitares' allegiance with La Mama, even today, suggests the continuing influence of New York's experimental theatre tradition (specifically the Off-Off Broadway Movement) on her production style.

Several of Skipitares' productions also show influence from Asian cultures and puppetry traditions, specifically those of Japan and India. Skipitares has repeatedly traveled to other countries to work and perform. Beyond touring in Europe, Skipitares was also commissioned for productions in Vietnam, Cambodia and India. These cross-cultural interactions have had varying degrees of influence on her production style, especially concerning her narrative structure and the types of puppets she creates.

Theodora Skipitares first used puppets as "supporting cast" in her autobiographical work during the late 1970's. These first puppets were modeled on her own face and body as small likenesses of herself. From 1984 on, Theodora Skipitares performances have been cast almost entirely with puppets as the central performers. The stark look and dark actions of these performing objects are geared towards a strictly adult audience, instead of the family audiences of many puppetry performances. The unspoken goal of artists like Skipitares, as well as many associated with the Jim Henson Foundation and the Henson International Festival of Puppet Theatre,[2] was and is to break the boundaries of what is deemed "appropriate behavior" for puppets.[3] More recently, performances of *Puppetry of the Penis* and *Avenue Q,* as well as movies like *Team America: World Police* reflect the ambivalent success of this goal.

Unlike artists such as Taymor and Henson, however, Theodora Skipitares has received hardly any recognition outside of New York City. There are few articles that analyze her aesthetic

principles, and the majority of those are from earlier in her career. Skipitares' style is of specific

interest to this study because of its liminal position between the art forms of theatre, performance

art and puppetry. Also, in comparison to other current puppeteers, she has a unique take on

women's issues and political performance, an original approach to text, as well as a greater

number of female puppets/performing objects in her work. This dissertation brings to light works

of an artist with unique methods and vision, while examining how her work combines, adapts

and modifies the traditions of puppetry, performance art, experimental theatre, Asian

Performance, and gender in character construction. As a review of the literature on puppetry and

Theodora Skipitares will make clear, scholarship of this nature will greatly contribute to the

fields of puppetry and theatre.

Part 1: Review of Literature

Of the limited scholarship available on Theodora Skipitares and her work, the majority takes

the form of historical descriptions of her career, reviews of individual performances and

published interviews with the artist regarding certain performances. Skipitares has published

several articles, herself, complete with photographic documentation. Due to copyright issues,

rather than include production photographs, this dissertation will reference links to websites

where visual documentation and video excerpts of Skipitares' production may be found.[4] Unlike

Julie Taymor, no definitive book has been published on Skipitares, though her text for the 2003

production of *Helen: Queen of Sparta* was recently published in the second volume of an

anthology of plays entitled *Play: A Journal of Plays*. Recently, Skipitares has also uploaded all

of her performance scripts onto a digital database by Alexandria Street Press (VA) available,

with a fee, to all libraries.[5] Often reviews are the only available record of Skipitares'

performances, though a VHS tape of *A Harlot's Progress* is available through the Billy Rose

Collection of the New York Public Library. Finally, the performance texts (including detailed descriptions of tableaux) of *Age of Invention* (1985) and *Under the Knife: A History of Medicine* (1996) are available in hard copy through several library collections. Skipitares published these scripts in the academic journals *Theater* and *Performing Arts Journal* (see Bibliography under Skipitares). The lack of documentation of Skipitares' career is regrettable and points even more to the necessity of further study into her work.

Among the most informative articles on Skipitares are those historical reviews of her career by Joan Driscoll Lynch and N.J. Stanley. Lynch's article highlights Skipitares' work in performance art, costume design/sculpture, and puppet performance from 1977 to the performance of *Defenders of the Code* in 1987. It includes a detailed biography and descriptions of Skipitares' productions, including her early autobiographical, solo performance art. Both articles provide initial examinations of the puppet actor and puppet/manipulator relationship. Stanley's article, published in 2003, repeats some of the information presented by Lynch, but is the only record found which includes details on Skipitares' work in India and the subsequent influence of this trip on her later productions. Stanley also examines Skipitares' use of puppets as an essential element of her aesthetic and the comparisons between her career and that of Julie Taymor. These articles provide an excellent history but they also leave room for further study into the theoretical significance of Skipitares' productions.

Overall, Theodora Skipitares' pieces have received mixed reviews. By far the pieces that have been written about most frequently and received most favorably were *Under the Knife* (also known as *The History of Medicine*) and *A Harlot's Progress*. These two productions are interesting in that they show the range of Skipitares' work in terms of character creations, dramatic structure and visual style.[6] Skipitares' work challenges commercial notions of beauty

and of professional theatre style. Many reviews of her puppet theatre have commented on a "slacker quality" in her work as well as her unconventional tendency (among puppeteers) to combine many puppetry styles (Stanley 53). Many theatre critics, such as Anita Gates of the *New York Times*, have described her pieces as "works in progress" (E6). Other theatre critics, such as Bruce Weber of the *New York Times,* have commented on the lack of cohesion between tableaux or sections of her pieces (E6). Skipitares' puppets may not always be "slick" looking, but this too is an artistic choice. One goal of this study, therefore, is to dissect the meaning of these descriptors and examine how her performances work with or against conventions of puppetry. Overall, Skipitares' style reflects the liminal space between theater and sculpture in which her performing objects dwell. Although these reviews do not always present the artist in the most favorable light, they are essential to this study because they are the most consistent reference for Skipitares' productions.

With her background in sculpture and painting, Theodora Skipitares' works are also important to the field of performance art. According to Jeffrey Jones, "Theatre and performance art are like siblings separated at birth. Their convergence may not be wholly accidental, but their evolutions are fundamentally distinct and unrelated"(23). The separatist connotations of this quote, and many others by members of the fields of theatre and performing art, reflect yet another complication to the reception of Skipitares' work. Her work constitutes a site of convergence between these fields, combating the common conception of theatre as completely separate from performance art. Most references to Skipitares' work in scholarship on performance art and avant-garde theatre conform to the classifications of reviews, histories, and interviews. Her performance art work was featured in two publications, one edited by Moira Roth, *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America 1970-1980* and the other a

compilation of interviews by performance artist Linda Montano called *Performing Artists Talking in the Eighties: Sex, Food, Money/Fame, Ritual/Death.* Texts by Marvin Carlson, Philip Auslander, RoseLee Goldberg, and Henry Sayre have been consulted to form a basis for this level of analysis. Beyond discussions on performance art as an artistic movement, these texts provide descriptions of other performance artists who's work is comparable to that of Skipitares.

There are two Masters level theses written about Theodora Skipitares. Dawn M. BarbouRoske wrote her MFA thesis on her experiences working as the stage manager for the 1994 production of *Under the Knife: A History of Medicine* at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. Her insights into this collaborative project between the University of Iowa's Theatre Department and Theodora Skipitares provides useful information on the particular production. However, her journal-style presentation of productions issues interferes with any attempts at formal discussions of the production's theoretical or aesthetic importance. Jeanne Harrison, a former Masters student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, also concentrated on Skipitares' production *Under the Knife: The History of Medicine.* In her thesis, Harrison examines both versions of the production (at University of Iowa and New York City) and in particular how Brechtian techniques of dialectic, Bakhtin's theories of dialogism, and classical conceptions of didacticism are reflected within the production. Particularly interesting to my study is Harrison's work on audience reception to *The History of Medicine*, and her division of the puppet into three layers of signification: the image, the gesture, and the word or voice.

Puppetry Scholarship

Current scholarship in puppetry rarely examines the field in an analytical fashion. In general, puppet scholarship can be divided into histories, taxonomic studies classified by techniques and cultures, reviews of specific performances and certain longer studies highlighting the work of a

particular puppeteer. Many puppeteers are simply too busy dealing with current productions and their lack of funding to devote time to publications (if they even want to), thus much of the scholarship on puppetry is found in publications such as *TDR* or *Performing Arts Journal* rather than "in house" publications such as UNIMA's *Puppetry International*, and the *Puppetry Journal* published by the Puppeteers of America organization.

Leading scholars in the field, such as John Bell and Steve Kaplin, emerge after years of productive performance careers in puppetry. Both Bell and Kaplin remark that scholarly interest in the field is "scant"—there are few puppet scholars and even fewer puppet critics—and thus quite a lack in puppet scholarship that explores the subject "in its own right" (Kaplin 19). Due to this general opinion among puppet scholars, many writers fall into repetitious arguments aimed at legitimizing the art form, or presenting it as a necessary field of study. John Bell in his 2001 publication *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects* (initially published as a special edition of *TDR* in 1999) brilliantly outlines the scope of writing on puppetry. Bell divides his list into histories, theoretical works, and more recent studies which feature "particular examples of high-culture modern American puppet performance" (Bell *Puppets* 8).

According to Bell, attempts at inclusive histories of puppetry in Europe, Asia and North America soon led to more focused studies on puppetry in specific countries or regions. This trend in writing fostered interest in, and further publications on, select puppet traditions, such as George Speaight's study on Punch and Judy, John McCormick's study on Victorian Marionettes, or G. Venu's study *Tolpava Koothu: Shadow Puppets of Kerala.*

Of the larger histories, five in particular can be considered foundational works and are most useful for this study. Henryk Jurkowski's *A History of European Puppetry* is a two volume account of puppetry in Europe. The second volume specifically highlights the works of avant-

garde performers and their use of puppets in the twentieth century. However, because of the strictly European focus, and the fact that much of puppetry in Europe is state-funded and therefore allowed greater creative freedom, Jusrkowski's study is not particularly useful for direct comparison of artistic movements in Europe and America. Through he does mention cultural motivations for some of the artistic movements within European puppetry, Jurkowski does not specifically concentrate on theoretical issues within his historical accounts.

In America, publications by Paul McPharlin/Marjorie Batchelder (*The Puppet Theatre in America: A History*) and Bil Baird (*The Art of The Puppet*) stress the various influences on American puppetry and the history of the field in America up to the 1960's, while incorporating their own point of view as puppeteers. John Bell uses the McPharlin/Batchelder history and museum collection as a basis for his history, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History,* in order to provide a history of puppetry in America, until 2000, through what he calls the three waves of interest. During the first wave, which occurred from the 1910's to the 1940's, many productions were created through the Federal Theatre Project and, as such, puppetry was considered an extension of art theatre. The second wave of puppet modernism, inspired by the WPA, took place from 1940-1960. During this time, puppetry became a commercial industry (especially with the emergence of television shows featuring puppets), and gained an association with children's education and entertainment that has had negative repercussions for many contemporary puppeteers working with adult audiences. From the 1960's on, what Bell calls the third wave of puppetry, there was a revival of interest in puppet performance. The field of puppetry divided along two paths, one headed by Jim Henson (who used his successes in television puppetry to promote new technologies and new forms of live puppet theatre) and the other by Peter Schumann (who became a symbol for avant-garde puppet theatre and the

possibilities of political puppet performance). According to Bell, the series of renaissances during the twentieth century in the US proves that "puppet theatre has never fully established a fixed role for itself in contemporary American society" (*Strings, Hands, Shadows* 107). Bell's history also charts the influences of European and Asian traditions on American forms of puppetry, and includes an interesting section on religious/evangelical puppetry.

Most recently, Eileen Blumenthal (known for her publications on Julie Taymor) published a large-scope history, *Puppetry: A World History*. This new publication, what reviewer John Bell calls "a new standard in puppet histories," features 350 illustrations and is organized around specific themes instead of the typical chronological structure ("Book Review" 36). Blumenthal also incorporates more examples from contemporary puppet artists, like Skipitares, who utilize puppets as one element in multi-media productions and experimental theatre work. In a recent publication, *American Puppetry: Collections, History, and Performance*, Phyllis Dircks focuses on puppetry collections and available libraries in the United States, filling in where previous American histories left off and providing a useful catalogue for further research. Vincent Anthony's article in the collection proves to be one of the most current statements on the status of puppetry in North America.

Each of these histories, though an excellent starting point for research, forfeits detailed analysis in order to cover the large volume of material. They present overviews of the field, but do not concentrate on any particular career, nor do they deal with theoretical concerns apart from ontological discussions on the nature of "the puppet" and some aesthetic discussions. Particular studies on major names in American puppetry, such as Jim Henson (by Christopher Finch), Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre (by Stefan Brecht), and Julie Taymor (by Eileen Blumenthal) fill in gaps by supplying thorough investigations of particular genres of American

puppetry. These publications provide a model for my study on the works of Theodora Skipitares, at least as they organize their information about the arc of the artists' development and careers. However, even these specific studies often approach the work strictly from a historical perspective, providing in-depth descriptions of the artists' work without critical analysis.

Overall, close analytical studies of puppetry are uncommon. The majority of recent theoretical writings on puppetry focus on the relationship between the puppet and performer. This relationship is of interest to both puppet scholars and puppeteers seeking to publish their own ideas. The bulk of these studies are extensions of works put forth by the semioticians and structuralists of The Prague School, further elaborated upon by contributors to the journal *Semiotica* such as Frank Proschan, Jiri Veltrusky, Petr Bogatyrev, and Henryk Jurkowski.

In his article "A Puppet Tree: A Model for the Field of Puppetry," Steve Kaplin, a puppeteer who has collaborated with Skipitares on numerous occasions, attempts to create a new classification system for puppetry based on the relationship between the puppet and performer. Kaplin's system will be further examined in Chapter 5 as it functions as an alternative to the typical categorizations based on means of articulation. Beyond this new system, Kaplin's article aptly situates the role of theory (or lack thereof) in puppet scholarship stating that there have been "no attempts by non-puppet-minded theatre scholars to write about puppetry in a way that relates it to human theatre, dance, opera, vaudeville, or performance art" (19). However, Kaplin's macroscopic approach attempts to situate the puppet/performer relationship within all forms of performance, without really delving into character development or creation of the puppet character. The result is an essay that makes several good points, but seems to have no guiding thesis. His focus on technological developments in puppet performance also deviates from his attempts at an analytical study.

Both Scott Cutler Shershow's *Puppets and "Popular" Culture* and Harold Segel's *Pinnochio's Progeny* provide comparative literary studies of how puppetry or the figure of the puppet has been used as a motif in literature. Shershow searches cultural references and literature to analyze the metaphor of the puppet in popular culture and its appropriation by "legitimate" culture, also examining the status of puppetry as a feminized art. In *Pinocchio's Progeny*, Segel traces the uses of puppets in drama and literature from the 1600's to the late 1800's and the impact of puppetry on modernism and the avant-garde. Other theoretical studies like Dina and Joel Sherzer's edited collection of essays, *Humor and Comedy in Puppetry: Celebration in Popular Culture,* focus on puppetry as it applies to the field of cultural studies. In their introduction, the editors make the case for puppetry's importance to the fields of anthropology, folklore, linguistics, semiotics as well as popular culture. The essays collected in the Sherzer's anthology examine puppetry as an intertext within various cultures and societies. Many essays focus specifically on audience reception and the collaborative relationship between puppet, puppeteer and the audience. Although the essays colleted by the Sherzer's provide a thematic approach to puppet forms across many culture, the articles focus more on what puppetry communicates to the collective audience neglecting analysis of what puppetry may communicate to the individual as a statement on the construction of identity or self-hood within the collective society.

Steve Tillis is another scholar whose work has expanded the role of theoretical analysis in puppetry. His publications build on research in semiotics as well as audience reception theory, primarily investigating the role of puppet as "actor" and how semiotic elements of puppet theatre can be applied to acting theory. This topic of performer/puppet relationship will also play a part of my study as it relates to the confrontation between performed gender of the puppet and that of

the performer. Tillis' book, *Toward an Aesthetic of the Puppet: Puppetry As a Theatrical Art*, provides a close analysis of the sign systems created in a puppet performance. Although Tillis states he wrote the book to contrast Jurkowski's lack of theory, he also devotes many pages covering previous ways puppetry has been defined and described. Most beneficial in Tillis' study is his categorization of what he terms the "signs of life," those signs of design, movement, and speech that are combined in any puppet performance.

Until now, scholars have put forward theoretical analyses of puppetry through the lenses of semiotics, phenomenology, audience reception, and cultural studies. Although "the puppet" has been described as a cultural motif in some academic studies, no scholarship has been produced that focuses on this particular intersection of traditions or on the role of gender in puppetry. Interestingly, though, several articles have examined animation in the context of gender studies. These studies, such as Sam Abel's article "Rabbit in Drag: Camp and Gender Construction in the American Animated Cartoon," will prove excellent models as they examine the literal, physical creation of a gender role in an inanimate character through the combination of physical characteristics, movements and behaviors. Applications of these concepts and lexicon will provide a rich basis for my study.

My research will differ from existing studies in its interdisciplinary approach and its discussion on gender and puppetry. Within the scholarship on Theodora Skipitares, this dissertation will contribute an extensive analysis of her use of puppetry as it intersects with other traditions and disciplines in performance. Finally, my study will not only focus on the work of an innovative puppeteer, but also examine it in such as way as to add significantly to puppetry scholarship and general understanding of the construction and reception of gender in society and performance.

Part 2: Critical Method

This study will be informed by the work of scholars in fields of gender studies, women's studies, semiotics, art, performance studies and audience reception. It will be based on scholarship from a variety of applied fields, in particular theatre, puppetry, and dance. Although some context will be necessary, in order to maintain the parameters of this study, the scope of this inquiry will be primarily confined to the puppetry of Theodora Skipitares, as a case study in the ways in which these various methodologies intersect.

In the course of examining available literature in puppetry I have found the lack of concentration on women's contributions to puppetry to be virtually systemic. There are no comprehensive publications that feature the work of female puppeteers, with the exception of Blumenthal's study of Julie Taymor, who does not consider herself a puppeteer. As my research shows, there is also little interest within puppet scholarship in addressing the gender norms that serve as the basis for creating puppets for adults or children. The choice to present Skipitares' career at least in part, through a feminist lens requires that I define the particular line of discourse within feminism I apply to Skipitares' productions. I must also clearly state why Skipitares' work, in particular, warrants such a discussion.

Definitions

On defining feminism, Teresa de Lauretis states, "the female subject of feminism is constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions, and meanings, which are often in conflict with one another and inherently (historically) contradictory." (*Technologies* x). The definitions of materialist feminism used in this dissertation come from Jill Dolan's taxonomy of American feminisms found in *The Female Spectator as Critic*, and expanded upon in Gayle Austin's *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*. Both scholars identify three types of

feminism: Liberal feminism (associated with the first wave of feminism), Radical/Cultural

Feminism (which coincided with the second wave of American feminism in late 1960's) and

Materialist Feminism (which developed partly out of feminist film criticism seen in the works of

Laura Mulvey and Teresa de Lauretis). According to Austin, materialist feminists focus on the

historical, social, and economic constructs that create "Woman," (believing thereby that there is

not one woman's perspective) (5-6). Gender is therefore considered as one of the material

conditions of production and oppression in any given society. Within this definition of

materialist feminism, "gender becomes a construct formed to support the structure of the

dominant culture" and is a "socially imposed division of the sexes" (Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*

10). This understanding of feminism is in direct contrast to cultural feminism, which upholds the

traits Dolan (as well as Case, de Lauretis, and Butler among others) associates with gender as

naturally innate to women. In fact, cultural feminism is primarily based upon biological sexual

difference (*Feminist Spectator* 7; Austin 138). In its interest in gender and the social

construction of "Woman" through Skipitares' puppetry this dissertation therefore aligns itself

with the materialist feminist perspective, especially at applies to theatre.

A materialist feminist perspective in theatre centers its focus on gender and representation.

According to Amelia Jones, "Academic versions of feminism theorize the ways in which all

forms of culture condition and are conditioned by gender" (1) With an emphasis on ideology,

this line of discourse examines images of women in theatre and the production of meaning

through the apparatus of representation (Dolan *Presence and Desire* 47). Key to this argument is

the idea that "most performance employs culturally determined gender codes that reinforce

cultural conditioning" (Dolan *Feminist Spectator* 2). However, gender is not only important

within a performance context. According to Jane Flax, "The fundamental purpose of feminist

theory is to analyze how we think, or do not think, or avoid thinking about gender" (56). In the

Introduction to *Technologies of Gender*, Teresa De Lauretis while examining ways to theorize

gender beyond the limits of sexual difference, notes that the "notion of gender as sexual

difference and its derivative notions – women's culture, mothering, feminine writing, femininity,

etc. – have now become limitations, something of a liability to feminist thought" (1). One must

also consider that both terms "gender" and "performance" are historically and culturally specific,

and often un-translatable into other languages (Reinelt 211). This dissertation follows in the path

of these scholars in its belief in the importance of analyzing gender in performance.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler defines gender as follows: "gender is an identity tenuously

constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (140).

The bulk of Butler's writings since *Gender Trouble* have been centered on analyzing how the

body "comes to bear cultural meaning" ("Performative Acts" 271). This is accomplished by

attempting to recognize how gender is constructed on the body through specific corporeal acts

and determine how changes in these patterns/acts may lead to cultural transformation of gender.

By the end of *Undoing Gender*, which was published fourteen years after the first edition of

Gender Trouble, Butler had made clear that she considered the gender analyses found in her

body of writing as a set of political acts, not a campaign in undercutting feminist scholarship

with deliberately incomprehensible theories. However, Butler's ideas have been highly contested

by many critics, such as Seyla Benhabib, many of which she cites in her 1999 preface to *Gender

Trouble* (xiv).[7] Butler's theory of gender performativity is not a prescription for the right way to

see or do gender, but rather a descriptive survey into what makes gender intelligible and "an

inquiry into its conditions of possibility" (*GT* xxi). What follows are the underpinnings of my

arguments on the relationship between gender and puppetry. Though they rely greatly on

Butler's theories of gender, they are also influenced by the writings of several other scholars in the fields of performance and film studies: Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Sue Ellen Case, Jill Dolan, Gayle Austin, and Peggy Phalen.

Gender and Puppetry

"Gendering" is not a singular process; in order for one to "do gender right" she must constantly reinforce her gender coherency through a stylized repetition of acts. Initially, we can begin to look at gender as the combination of construction and reception. It is constructed through a series of symbols, which are culturally ingrained but constantly changing. Gender then remains malleable, the construction of these signs in flux, until it is codified, for a moment in time, through reception.

I do not mean to imply that human gender is only socially constructed, but in the specific case of puppetry, gender is physically constructed on the puppet body by the artist. One is forced to ask then whether the gender—or gender awareness—of the puppeteer is important to the formation of gender in the puppet. This is more than repeating the popularized notion that a puppet expresses a part of its' creator's personality, but rather admitting that the versions of "feminine" and "masculine" which the puppeteers put forth through their puppets are not original expressions.

Gender is neither what one has nor what one is. Gender is, rather, the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place; but gender is not exclusive to masculine or feminine (Butler, *UG* 42). Gender terms such as "masculine" and "feminine" are constantly being remade and redefined, and, as Butler elaborates, "there are histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending upon geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is managing whom, and for what purpose" (*UG* 10). As such, it is necessary

when analyzing the gender of a puppet to read within and between the gendered labels (such as princess or *zoftig*) and identify the latent ideologies present in those terms. It is however, difficult to identify and discuss these gendered markers because the terms, which we use to discuss gender, are based upon an essentialist, binary model, part of an ingrained tradition of dualism.

    According to Salih (rephrasing Butler), gender is *not* a performance because that would presuppose the existence of a subject or actor who is doing that performance (10). In Butler's model of performativity, the performance precedes the performer. Yet, gender is repeatedly referred to as something we "do" rather than something we "are," implying an element of agency. According to Butler, gender is "a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*GT* 43-44). There is a possibility of interpreting my argument in a way that supports claims of gender as merely surface performance versus "performative." This misconception would logically arise from the fact that there is an operator behind the performing object, a "real" behind the "performance." It must be understood, however, that the gender attributes and norms communicated through the puppet are merely transcriptions of larger cultural norms, channeling in performance the entire sedimented history of each gender marker as well as their current cultural connotations. The regulating effects of gender norms thereby reshape the body, whether it is human or puppet, and these norms are further perpetuated by their embodiment.

    Gender is never something that we know absolutely, it is rather something we can observe. According to Butler, "more important than coming up with a strict and applicable definition [of gender] is the ability to track the travels of the term through public culture" (*UG* 184). In the case of puppets it is far easier to observe gender because they are physically constructed beings, separate—however well performed—from human beings, devoid of psychological and emotional

workings, those elements of personality most often deemed "natural" or "biological." Butler asks

in *Gender Trouble,* "If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently or does its

constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency

and transformation?" (11). Analyzing gender with puppets supplies a disembodied way to look at

the construction of gender, in order to investigate the possibility of constructing gender

differently. Without the cumbersome elements of "personhood," I feel a more comprehensive

analysis of gender may be produced.

Puppeteers play at gender and often sexuality through the performance and construction of

their performing objects as well as their presentations and adaptations of cultural stereotypes. As

Judith Butler posits in *Undoing Gender,* "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of

masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the

apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized" (42). Through their blatant

use of gender codes and possible parodic expressions of these codes, puppets are extremely

useful tools in understanding the construction and performance of gender. Moreover they can

provide physical bodies wherein artists and audiences can experiment with the boundaries of

gender representations.

Gender and Skipitares

Skipitares' work is unique within a discussion of gender and puppetry primarily because of

her means of representation—both textually and in performance—her presentations of identity,

and her application of gender stereotypes. The key elements of Skipitares' productions which are

most important for this argument are her use of a female figure as the model for her puppet

designs, her approach to women's roles in her texts, and her practice of using the female

body/voice in the performance of male characters. Jill Dolan, in *Feminist Spectator as Critic*,

cites Theodora Skipitares' works as an example of materialist feminist performance technique.

Dolan praises Skipitares' treatment of history from a feminist perspective and her use of puppets

to replace live bodies in representation. In my opinion, more important than the removal of live

actors from Skipitares' stage, is *how* exactly she replaces them. Beyond removing live bodies

from representation, Skipitares repeatedly uses puppet bodies and juxtaposition between these

bodies and the bodies of the corresponding manipulators to invert gender associations. Her

fractured or collage-style narratives, her dissociation of body and voice, and her lack of scenery

deconstruct prevailing systems of representation and reception.

In basing the figures of her performing objects on her own face and figure, Skipitares

reestablishes or inverts gender norms (where the subject is understood as male, and the object,

female) whereby the "unmarked" subject becomes female and the "marked" object male.

Reestablishing gender norms refers to creating, from a semiotic perspective, a new ground, onto

which other semiotic layers are grafted. This new ground also literally refers to the female

physical form that serves as the basis for Skipitares' puppets. In her study of presence and

performance, *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan provides an approach to understanding the effects of

Skipitares' puppets:

> As Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction have demonstrated, the
> epistemological, psychic, and political binaries of Western metaphysics create
> distinctions and evaluations across two terms. One term of the binary is marked
> with value, the other is unmarked. The male is marked with value; the female is
> unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning.…He is the norm and therefore
> unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks. (5)

Central to this argument of Skipitares' use of female form as the basis or ground for her puppets

is the concept of the neutral or non-gendered subject as male. As de Lauretis explains, "gender is

usually construed as the addition of feminine markers to the morphological form of the

masculine" (*Alice Doesn't* 177).[8] In contrast, as later chapters will show, the creation of

Skipitares' puppets often included the addition of male anatomical markers on her female puppet figures.

A second concept central to understanding how gender works in Skipitares' productions is the presentation of "identity" as a particular perspective, one which is situational and positional. This concept of identity rejects the idea of a universal, objective point-of-view as a phallocentric notion, as well as that a person's identity is fixed and individual. In performance this concept of identity takes many forms of representation. It is exemplified in Skipitares' separate presentations of body and voice (where the body of the performing object is manipulated by one person, or set of persons, and the puppets voice is presented by a separate person or set of persons). This concept of identity is also related to the performance of characters across gender. However this cross-gendered presentation of identity also stems from a central concept in materialist feminist arguments (see Dolan and Austin) that, just as "Woman" is a social construct, so also is any representation of identity or socially identifying marker such as gender. In Skipitares' productions, her performers work with performing objects to create movements which are appropriate to a specific character. As I shall discuss in Chapter 5, these movements are often based upon socio-cultural stereotypes and associations on "masculine" and "feminine." These associations are related to instinct which Teresa de Lauretis defines as " a kind of knowledge internalized from daily, secular repetition of actions, impressions, and meanings whose certain cause-and-effect or otherwise binding relation has been accepted as certain and even necessary" (*Alice Doesn't* 158). As my analysis in Chapter 5 will further discuss, Skipitares' unique representations of gender through her texts, performing objects, and stage practices provide an interesting case study on gender performativity in puppetry and theatre.

Research Strategy

The foundation of my research will be formed from a synthesis of those publications described in the Review of Literature, as well as primary sources in the forms of interviews and first-person observations of Skipitares' production process and performances. The study incorporates field research collected through interviews with Theodora Skipitares, her assistants, and former collaborators—such as members of La Mama ETC. I have also interviewed other practitioners from the field of puppetry to gain a better understanding of Skipitares' reception in this specific discipline and how her constructions of gender relate to general conventions in puppetry. These interviews are necessary due to the aforementioned lack of published resources on puppetry.

Interviewing is a basic mode of inquiry, based on the premise that people are the best authorities on their own experience (Seidman 2). Interviews should be seen as occasions of fieldwork, of observation of a subject's aural and visual actions (Schwalbe 218). It is a qualitative research method most often used in anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Qualitative interviewing has been called ethnography's sister genre, and like the ethnographer, the interviewer attempts to observe and analyze the ways people act, what they say, and the artifacts they use (Warren 85). Interviewing is one of many methods that a researcher can use to approach a contemporary subject—along with examining personal records, institutional or organizational documents, or reviewing existing literature—but in order to get insight into how people understand their own experiences and make meaning of their work, the best method is through interviewing.

For this dissertation, I conducted interviews with a variety of persons within the fields of theatre and puppetry. Central to the dissertation are the series of interviews I conducted with

Theodora Skipitares between March and November of 2006. Transcripts of these interviews are found in Appendix B. During my field research, I also conducted an interview with two of Skipitares' actors/puppet manipulators, Chris (Christina) Maresca and Alissa Mello, which are integral to my analysis of performance in puppetry. Finally, within the circle of Skipitares' collaborators, I also conducted interviews with Andrea Balis, a woman who has served as Skipitares' dramaturg and scriptwriter for over twenty years.

In order, to get a larger view of the traditions and processes of puppet design and performance, I also interviewed three professional puppeteers: Lisa Sturz of Red Herring Puppets (who has also worked with The Muppets), Phillip Huber of Huber Marionettes (who worked on Spike Jones' film *Being John Malcovitch*), and Drew Allison of Grey Seal Puppets (author of *The Foam Book*). Each of these interviews was integral to situating Skipitares' work within general practices of design and performance in the field of puppetry, including the presentation of gender on the performing object. Besides formal interviews and communications, this dissertation will also draw from my personal observations from performances and rehearsals of four of Skipitares' productions during field research in 2006 and 2007: *Helen, Queen of Sparta*, *Odysseus: The Homecoming*, *Iphigenia*, and *The Exiles*. My previous work in the field of puppetry, interactions with puppeteers and scholars at conferences, and my studies abroad in India will also be serve to support my arguments.

Part 3: Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 considers Skipitares' influences within the American puppetry tradition, including a brief history of puppetry in America. This chapter also situates her career within the context of other contemporary puppeteers. In this chapter I also focus on Skipitares inclusion in the newly forming genre of object theatre, most often associated with the work of Julie Taymor.

Chapters 3 focuses on contextualizing Skipitares' work within the fields of American performance art and experimental theatre in the late twentieth century. This chapter presents a chronological account of Skipitares' production style from her first performance art pieces, through several changes in her style and methods of presentation. The chapter examines two primary influences: performance art and experimental theatre (specifically the Off-Off Broadway movement). Within each of these I examine how these influences carry over into formal elements of dramatic structure, character development, and recurring themes or motifs in her work.

Chapter 4 situates Skipitares' performance style and puppet production within Japanese and Indian performance traditions. Though the use of Japanese Bunraku-style puppets is common in contemporary American puppetry, Skipitares' adaptations to the style are particularly unique. In particular, her use of the single-person manipulation method, called Otome Bunraku, is unique within American adult puppetry. This chapter will also consider the influence of Indian performance traditions on Skipitares' productions since her return from her first trip to India in 2000.[9]

Chapter 5 analyzes Skipitares' specific design processes and puppet performance style through the creation of a performance text and a performing object's body. This chapter will also examine the puppet operator's process of developing and performing Skipitares' designs. This chapter also highlights themes of gender performativity repeated over several productions, as well as the signification of gender within specific productions. In Chapter 5 I investigate how Skipitares' performance texts are created, and how the choices of pertinent characters are made. I also explore the sources of her imagery and how these images translate into the puppet body. Part of the research for this section is the result of interviews with Chris Maresca and Alissa

Mello, performers who have worked with Theodora Skipitares for the past eight years since *A Harlot's Progress*. Through a series of formal interview with Skipitares, Mello, Maresca, and Skipitares' dramaturg Andrea Balis, I have been able to delve more into the specific processes that go into creating gendered performing objects in Skipitares' productions.[10]

    As previously stated, the concluding chapter of this dissertation concentrates on how Skipitares' style combines elements of each of the specific perspectives, resulting in a better understanding of puppetry and Skipitares' performing objects. I will summarize statements made regarding gender construction in puppetry, while assessing the usefulness of my methodology – primarily the interviews – in a study of this nature. This chapter will also propose further projects on Skipitares career, puppet performance, and gender and puppetry.

Appendices:

    A. A chronological list and description of each of Theodora Skipitares' productions
    B. A transcript of my interviews with Skipitares

CHAPTER 2

AMERICAN PUPPETRY TRADITIONS AND THE WORKS OF THEODORA

SKIPITARES

Theodora Skipitares has been working with puppets since the early 1980's. She began incorporating puppets into her performance art, and soon branched outside of the autobiographical material to larger historical, social, and thematic subjects. Over the past twenty-five years, she has experimented with rod puppets, shadow puppets, masks, bunraku-style, internally strung, life-sized puppets, as well as life-sized, realistic figures, mostly with the methods of manipulation visible. Although her latest productions have incorporated actors and more media projections, "the puppet remains her central performer" (Stanley 35). This chapter will focus on Skpitares' use of puppetry, and where her style stands within the tradition of puppetry in the United States.

Even as a costume designer in the graduate program at NYU, Skipitares' designs could be described as "headless, armless, legless puppets" (Lynch 139). According to Joan Driscoll Lynch, who wrote the first lengthy article detailing Skipitares' work, "Her first figures were a two-foot, pompous psychiatrist and a chattering lamb that functioned as a Greek chorus commenting on the action" (143). In these earlier works, "[Skipitares'] body was still a reference point for moving the narrative, but now she saw herself as merely a special stagehand, a facilitator, who saw to it that the show worked" (Lynch 143-44). Skipitares has stated in numerous interviews that she models her puppet performance persona on the Japanese Noh

stagehands and Bunraku assistant puppeteers. On her transition from performance art into

puppets, Skipitares writes:

> After a while, I felt alone onstage in these solo works, and I began to create small
> likenesses of myself to take on the supporting roles. These were my first puppets.
> Soon, there were so many 'little Theodoras' onstage that I gave up performing
> and became the director instead. My works expanded out from autobiography to
> large-scale subjects such as the history of American invention, genetics, food and
> famine, and medicine. I have always felt that puppets have an innocence and a
> purity that make them especially effective in illuminating social and political
> issues. Those qualities, in addition to their ability to express and transmit to
> audiences deeply felt emotions, have led me to incorporate, over the past 20 years,
> a wide variety of puppets in my work. ("Articulations" 125)

According to Jeffrey, Skipitares chose puppetry because she "was looking for a way to work

beyond herself with other voices, other characters, short of turning directly to other live

performers" (23). The renaissance occurring in puppetry at that time, seen in the works of

Winston Tong, Bruce Schwartz and Linda Hartinian, who designed the puppets for Lee Breuer's

Shaggy Dog Animation and *Prelude to Death in Venice*, provided a solution for Skipitares (Jones

23). Although she had used some simple animated figures in a 1981 production called *Skysaver*,

the first show which Skipitares wrote for puppets was *Micropolis: 7 Portraits and a Landscape*

in 1982. This show presented a series of tableaux based on local newspaper headlines and

magazine articles. The puppets used in *Micropolis* were "hyper-realistic,"[1] with cloth-hinges for

articulation and mechanisms that enabled them to "perform human functions such as bleeding,

vomiting, and maintaining gargantuan erections" (Lynch 145). The puppets were placed within

painstakingly-detailed environments. Skipitares used her own body and face as the model for at

least one character, Sylvia Frumkin, a vomiting puppet with a crush on Mick Jaggar. Describing

Micropolis, Jones states, "the animation, often minimal or crude—the articulations are simple

and there is no attempt to disguise the mechanisms of stick or string—are usually performed by Skipitares and her technical director Eli Langner" (Jones 48).[2]

Since 1984, when she first performed the role of stage director in *Age of Invention*, "Skipitares has relinquished all onstage performing to her puppets and their manipulators" (Stanley 35). These puppets range from small scale to life-sized forms, including many portraits of historical human figures. In addition to puppetry, Skipitares repeatedly includes multimedia elements, video, film, slides, sculpture, music, song, and dance. Skipitares openly acknowledges her influences, but they are typically not traditional puppeteers. In a 1983 interview, in response to the question "what puppet theatre influenced your art," Skipitares cites mixed media artists Winston Tong and Lee Breuer, specifically the production of *Shaggy Dog Animation* (Jenner 110). Like Tong and Breuer, she views puppetry as just one of the mediums with which she is working. Skipitares most often uses puppetry as a distancing devise, tending to juxtapose different scales.

Before we delve into specific productions and descriptions of Skipitares' puppetry style, I would like to first put her work in context of the history of American Puppetry, with specific focus on contemporary adult puppetry since the 1980's. What follows is a very brief history of puppetry in the United States, highlighting the specific works of Skipitares' contemporaries featured in the 1992 exhibit at the Center for Puppetry Arts, entitled "Breaking Boundaries: Puppetry of the 1980's." For more detailed descriptions of movements, personalities and productions, refer to histories by John Bell, Eileen Blumenthal, Paul McPharlin and Bil Baird.

Part 1: A Brief History of American Puppetry and Definitions of "Puppet"

American puppetry is primarily characterized by hybrid manipulation methods. Contemporary American puppeteers have branched out from even this hybrid, incorporating

other found and made objects into performance, resulting in a much larger definition of the puppet and puppet theatre.

According to Lowell Swortzell in his essay, "A Short View of American Puppetry," puppetry in America began with wandering showmen. Eighteenth and nineteenth century itinerant performers presented versions of glove puppetry, including a version of Punch and Joan in 1742. In 1828, the first traditional Punch and Judy show came from London, and "Punch and Judy shows remained a staple of American Puppetry with numerous exponents throughout the 19th to the mid-20th century" (Swortzell 24). Gradually, troupes of professionals made their way onto vaudeville stages, performing marionette versions of *The Black Crook* (America's first musical) and *Little Red Riding Hood* (1873) along with variety acts and minstrel shows. The twentieth century also saw the rise of new adult-oriented puppetry acts in variety clubs. Mostly cabaret style, these productions featured celebrity parodies with puppeteers in full view (similar to performances by contemporary puppeteer Phillip Huber). These performances also included ventriloquists like Edgar Bergen with the infamous Charlie McCarthy.

Regarding the expansion of puppet theatre in America during the twentieth century, John Bell states:

> The western rediscovery of puppet theatre in the early twentieth century—or its 'revival' as Paul McPharlin put it – began in Europe and involved a number of factors: a newfound valuation of the traditionally low-culture art of European puppet theatre; an appreciation of Asian, African, and Native American puppet performance as models for western artists; a renewed sense of puppet theater not only as commercial entertainment but as a cultural, spiritual, and educational element; and a sense that these older practices and purposes of puppet theater could be pragmatically combined with any machine age innovations yet to come. ("Paul McPharlin"131)

There were several big names in puppetry from the 1920's on, each of whom helped to define and give direction to American puppetry. According to many, the central force behind the

swelling of puppetry popularity in 1920's and 30's was Tony Sarg. As Nancy Staub, former

curator of the Center for Puppetry Arts Museum states, Tony Sarg (1880-1942) is considered the

father of marionette popularity in America during the twentieth century ("Museum Collection"

81). With "strong scripts and able speakers" Sarg presented shows like *A Night in Delhi* in 1916,

and, later, *Rip Van Winkle, Ali Baba, Treasure Island,* and *Alice in Wonderland* (Swortzell 26).

These shows often included trick marionettes like a dancing cobra or a come-apart skeleton.

Sarg, who taught other artists such as Bil Baird, is probably most well known for the giant

animated balloons he created for Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, sometimes called "upside-

down marionettes" because the strings are on the bottoms of the helium filled puppets. Remo

Bufano (1894-1948), was closely associated in the 1920's with the Provincetown Playhouse

where he helped produce and perform puppet plays by contemporary poets such as Alfred

Kreymborg and Edna St Vincent Millay (Swortzell 27). During the Great Depression, Bufano

headed the New York Marionette Unit of the Federal Theatre Project; part of a WPA project that

made free, public puppet shows possible. He also constructed the "over-life-size marionettes"

designed by Robert Edmond Jones for Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* in 1931 (Bell, Puppets

Twentieth Century" 38; Swortzell 27). According to Bell, the six puppet characters in the

production were each operated by wires from above and rods from below," so that the

"puppeteers manipulating the long puppet arms had to run ten feet just to raise one in an

impressive curve" ("Puppets Twentieth Century" 38-39).

Even in the 1930's there was a clash within puppetry between childhood classic

performances (featuring fairly tales and folk tales) and high-class adult entertainments: dramatic

texts, puppet opera, as well as popular culture parodies (Swortzell 28). Of the puppeteers

working in adult puppet theatre, one who helped formulate an American style of puppetry was

Paul McPharlin (1903-1948). McPharlin organized the first National Puppetry Conference in

Detroit, in 1936 which led to the formation of the Puppeteers of America organization. His

works can now be seen in the Paul McPharlin Puppet Collection at the Detroit Institute of the

Arts. Prior to Paul McPharlin's work, European style marionettes and traditional methods had

dominated American puppetry. The European tradition of puppetry (Sicilian and French

marionettes, European Pulcinella-based glove puppets, etc) typically used only one style of

puppet and puppet manipulation in a performance. Often these methods were transmitted

generation to generation, within families or small circles of artists. McPharlin's *Noel*, in contrast,

combined different types of puppetry (rod and shadow) in one performance. This combination

came to be seen as the American hybrid or montage style, in which the manipulation methods of

a variety of traditions are combined according to what is the best medium for the puppeteer's

story or message. As McPharlin, and many other puppet scholars have noted, this style of

American puppetry reflects a "world puppet theater consciousness" (Bell, "Paul McPharlin"

137).

Since the 1950's the majority of audiences have been exposed to puppetry through television

and film. The first incarnation of television puppetry was the *Kukla, Fran and Olli* show which

ran on ABC from 1947-1957. Produced by Burr Tillstrom, it was the first puppet television show

with serious popularity. Kukla, Fran, and Ollie, were soon followed by Howdy Doody, (1947-

1960), the puppet characters from *Mr Roger's Neighborhood*, and a variety of others. From the

late 60's on, Jim Henson and his band of Muppets dominated the TV screen in multiple series.

Henson's puppets were specifically designed for the television camera, with puppeteers watching

their performances simultaneously in monitors below the stage. With Henson's new methods and

technologies, puppetry seemed no longer confined to traditional stages or conventional sizes.

Puppets were also prominent in films, such as the musicals *Lili* and *Sound of Music*, as well as film productions by Jim Henson (the Muppet Movies, *Dark Crystal*, *Labyrinth*) and Tim Burton. More recently, puppet technology and animatronics, like those pioneered by Henson, can be found in Spike Jones' 2002 *Being John Malcovich*, Trey Parker's *Team America: World Police* (2004), and Paul W.S. Anderson's *Alien vs. Predator* (2004). Especially in these later films, we see a use of multiple forms of puppets and animatronics combined in one take or scene.

Definitions of the Puppet

As previously stated, contemporary work in puppetry, and especially puppetry aimed at an adult audience, has led to the need for new definitions and analysis of the ontology of the puppet. Puppet scholars Dina and Joel Sherzer define puppetry as "an expression of popular and folk culture" (1). Central to this definition is the distinction between traditional and modern or contemporary puppetry. The Sherzer's define *traditional puppetry* as "part of ongoing folk culture historically old, a continuation of the past" (1). Even without a direct line of continuation from family to family, generation to generation, the intention in traditional puppetry is to mirror the past forms without any reinterpretation (such as the Bunraku puppeteers whose performances are based on seventeenth and eighteenth century production notes). The Sherzer's offer this traditional form in comparison to *modern* or *contemporary puppetry* which involves newly invented, individual forms. Theodora Skipitares' style of puppetry clearly fits in the latter category, and she, like many artists in the latter group, draws influence from world traditions of puppetry. There is not always a sharp distinction, however, and many contemporary puppet artists also present works which feature only one form of manipulation. Even the most innovative puppet productions "draw on many features and techniques that have always been characteristic of puppets," especially in terms of scale, voice and methods of articulation

(Sherzer 1). In 1965, Bil Baird defined the puppet in *The Art of the Puppet* in a more practical way as "an inanimate figure that is made to move by human effort before an audience" (13). As Nancy Staub confirms, "This means almost anything could become a puppet" ("Museum Collection" 75-76). Indeed the most recent work in puppetry for adult audiences has fulfilled Staub's statement.

Part 2: Theodora Skipitares' Puppets in Performance

Skipitares' puppetry style can most precisely be called mixed-method manipulation. Within one show, Skipitares often presents hyper-realistic puppets (internally strung, or rod puppets) with more abstract or obviously manipulated puppets (Otome-bunraku style, shadow puppets, and sculpture/doll like puppets). As chronicler Stanley explains, "She communicates her high-powered, sophisticated ideas with media commonly associated with pure entertainment, yet her style is anything but Hollywood-esque. This disjunction between message and media is where Skipitares's unique imagination emerges" (68).

Although Skipitares' puppet design process has gone through several stages, the structure of each production as a series of tableaux or short scenes separated by blackouts has stayed virtually the same for the past thirty years. *Under the Knife* represents the most common style of Skipitares' puppet construction. This style is characterized by puppetry which mixes manipulation methods and scales, including some puppets set in tableaux or with limited movement. This hybrid form of puppetry is then combined with moveable scenery, live actors, dance and live music. For this production, Skipitares still used the first mold of her face as seen in "aquiline noses and intense brown eyes," but changed it to suit whatever character was needed (Stevens 2.4.1). Epic in scope, *Under the Knife* presented a post-modern take on the entire History of Medicine; from Medusa and Mesopotamia to a distant sci-fi future.[3] Information was

presented in roughly chronological fashion, but with varying methods or mediums for presentation: reinterpreting history as a game show or cabaret song, using live actors, dancers, puppets, film clips, and projections.

The first puppet the audience encountered in *Under the Knife* was a 12-foot-tall Medusa. At the beginning of the production, Medusa's skirt opened and the audience proceeded through it to the next theatre space, which represented an ancient healing temple. This giant, four-armed Medusa with exposed breasts was built like a "parade float on casters," and manipulated by three female operators (Harrison 29). The influence for choosing to open with Medusa was a Greek myth, which Skipitares found, stating that her blood was given by Athena to Asclepius, the founder of medicine, as both a weapon of death and an agent of healing (Stanley 44). However, Skipitares' interpretation of Medusa as a giant gateway evokes a variety of dynamic images centered on mothering and healing which are characteristic of radical/cultural feminist views.[4] Her size invokes female power through the concept of a Mother Goddess as well as ancient matriarchal traditions, while the passage through her skirts to a temple calls forth womb symbolism and essentialist notions of women as healers.

Another scene entitled "Gyno Gals" (Scene 6), featured three life-sized Venuses, each with a mini-stage in her belly which revealed a dancing fetus. These Roman sex symbols, whose togas only covered the lower halves of their bodies, danced in cabaret-style through the manipulation of both male and female operators (Harrison 20). In reality, the bodies were set in classical poses and had relatively little movement, leaving the "dancing" to be implied more by the movements of the manipulators than by the stiff line formations of the performing objects. They were accompanied by a lounge singer in medieval costume and live musicians. This tongue-and-cheek play on gender roles was centered on Galen's theory of sexual anatomy, which stated that

women were just men with their sexual organs on the inside. Skipitares' meta-theatrical techniques equate the artifice of theatre with the artifice of gender expectations and power relations. In addition, the mix of contemporary and classical images of beauty historicize gender as a culturally specific performance.

Skipitares' work truly redefines the term "performing object." Frank Proschan coined the term "performing object" to define works of art used in narrative and dramatic performances "such as scroll paintings, peepshows, masks, and narrated sculptures" ("Puppet Voices" 542). In Skipitares' productions, often simply determining what is a set piece and what is a "puppet" requires understanding not only that object's construction, but also of its use in the production (e.g is it given a voice, is it manipulated, does it interact with any other creature, sculpture, being, or character). Similarly, Eileen Blumenthal defining a puppet, states, "Whenever someone endows an inanimate object with life force and casts it in a scenario, a puppet is born" (*World History* 11). This broader definition of puppetry is aptly describes the range of Skipitares' puppets. More interestingly, Blumenthal groups puppeteers with visual artists, declaring, "Puppet designers can use all the expressive tools of sculpture;" these tools include materials, style, shape, and proportion (*World History* 98). According to Blumenthal, "Many of the past century's innovative puppeteers come out of the worlds of plastic arts rather than live actor theater" (*World History* 109). Whether these artists succeed or not, however, depends upon their ability to overcome the primary difference between sculpture and puppets, for the puppet, unlike the sculpture, is "only fully completed by movement" (Bell, "Phil McPharlin" 137). It is no wonder that visual artists, such as Skipitares, are drawn to puppetry; artists in the plastic arts, unlike directors for theatre, are accustomed to having total control of their work. Puppetry allows for this same level of control and aesthetic freedom (Blumenthal, *World History* 111).

The products of many of these sculptors-turned-puppeteers confound the boundaries between puppets and masks, amulets, dolls, statues, automatons and illustrations. Many of Skipitares' productions utilize pieces more commonly associated with dolls, statues or sculpture. Theodora Skipitares' earlier works were primarily produced as series of tableaux. The technique of tableaux is part of a tradition of Christian sculpture installations, *Nativity crèches*, begun in 1223 by St. Francis, which were made from wood, clay, plaster, glass or dough and were often animated. In Skipitares' tableaux with objects, the figures are often separate from the manipulators, like puppets, but require direct, hands-on manipulation like dolls to represent changes in the scene. As Blumenthal explains, "Smaller scale or larger-than-life statues – especially situated in tableaux – play at the edge of puppetry" (*World History* 231). Through a variety of manipulation methods and scales (often simulating filmic techniques), Skipitares creates entire environments. Often puppets serve as both characters and set pieces, such as the giant Medusa that served as a gateway in *Under the Knife*, the puppet in *A Harlot's Progress* whose head and hair becomes a smaller puppet stage, and the Trojan Horse, in *Helen, Queen of Sparta*, that doubles as a stage for GI Joe Soldier puppets.

Throughout her career, Skipitares' puppet style has tended to move from the more complicated to a streamlined, often minimalist combination of puppets and operators. In *Age of Invention* she used five-foot puppets of historical figures with several people manipulating each one (Jenner 110). By using several manipulators with each puppet no one operator or individual becomes linked with the character creating a distance between the audience and the live bodies on stage. Skipitares' later puppets gradually incorporated more traditional puppet methods of rod manipulation and shadow puppetry. Overall, even in large scale puppets, Skipitares' later puppets were more stylized and less concerned with hyper-realistic movements.

Breaking Boundaries Exhibit: Center for Puppetry Arts Museum Collection

In 1992 the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, Georgia opened an exhibit entitled "Breaking Boundaries: Puppetry in the 1980's." This exhibit demonstrated the direction adult puppet theatre was taking—straddling the fence between puppetry and theatre—that led to what is now often called "object theatre." The event also presents an opportunity for immediate comparisons between the works of Skipitares and other contemporary artists featured in the exhibit, especially concerning their differing presentations of gender.[5]

In a combined effort by Vincent Anthony, executive director of the Center, exhibition curator Nancy Staub, museum director Clarice De Prospero, and their staff, the "Breaking Boundaries" Exhibit ran at the Center for Puppetry Arts from January 31 to May 9, 1992. The information included here comes from the catalog produced in conjunction with the exhibit. It is also important to know that the exhibit, featuring works from Ralph Lee, Jon Ludwig, Roman Paska, Peter Schumann, Eric Bass, Julie Taymor, Paul Zaloom, as well as Theodora Skipitares, came before Taymor's production of the *Lion King* in 1997, which, in essence, brought experimental puppetry to the mainstream audience. The collection featured work by each artist, from 1980 to 1990, highlighting one production per artist. According to Nancy Staub, "In the 1980's a new genre of American artists created a large body of exciting work incorporating puppetry.… The creative visions of these artists have broken boundaries in American Puppetry of adult audiences in the 1980's" ("Breaking Boundaries" 1). Their works show a variety of design, staging and techniques incorporating both ancient traditions and modern technology. The puppeteers create their own images whether with found objects, human actors or combinations of both of these. Most or all of the artists included manipulators and/or mechanisms that were not concealed. Many also featured live actors, often with masks, and many utilized narration and direct audience

address. These methods enabled the audience to witness the creation of the puppets within the performances, making them almost a part of that creation (Staub, "Breaking Boundaries" 2).

The artists' contributions to the 1992 exhibit were as varied as the traditions from which they came. The Henson Company's contribution featured an excerpt from the 1986 film, *Labyrinth*, exhibiting "sophisticated electronic controls and film techniques pioneered by Henson Associates [which] make fantasy seem reality" (Staub "Breaking Boundaries" 15). Many of these artists, such as Eric Bass, Ralph Lee, and Peter Schumann, developed works which were centered on mythology or legend. Schumann, in his work with the Bread and Puppet Theater repeatedly "stages his own myths and legend for our own times" (Staub, "Breaking Boundaries" 3). Ralph Lee, of the Metawee River Theatre Company, consistently draws from world literature, specifically in his piece *Time out of Time*, and has also developed plays from mythology and legends such as his 1999 production, *Psyche*.

Theodora Skipitares, at the time of the exhibit, had primarily demonstrated an interest in the myths and legends surrounding American history and Scientific progress. This can be seen in her contribution to the exhibit from *Age of Invention.* Staub hailed *Age of Invention* as a "poignant political satire" with life-sized figures manipulated in bunraku-style, concluding that "the success of her irreverent parodies of historical heroes prove the puppet's political potential on serious performance art" ("Breaking Boundaries" 5). The caption for *Age of Invention*, included in the catalog, gives an excellent description of the piece:

> *The Age of Invention* begins with the 4 foot Buffalo Gal, whose face resembles her creator, singing a song in a style reminiscent of the Supremes. The words rap the white man who took the land out from under the Indians. A narrator speaks the actual words of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Edison, and a contemporary salesman of surgical supplies. These characters are life-sized, realistic figures with manipulators in full view of the audience. Panoramic scenes with smaller moveable sculpture figures are rolled on and off to illustrate their comments of "male importance." A number of talented performers help Theodora Skipitares

present a different look at American history and heroes, and a delightfully
irreverent view of American ingenuity. (Staub, "Breaking Boundaries" 25)

Age of Invention, originally produced in 1984 at Theatre for the New City, was Skipitares'

first highly successful production. In contrast to *Micropolis* which cost less than $1000 dollars

and which Skipitares presented without pay, *Age of Invention* was a larger production with more

funds available; $75,000 in production costs, all raised through grants. It combined 300 puppets

in 39 scenes and 5 performers, including Skipitares, as well as an original musical score. Though

in its 1985 review, Gussow notes the piece still had "rough edges" the combination of narration,

live music and puppetry produced overall, "a performance piece that is itself an exemplar of

American theatrical ingenuity" (C14).

Janie Geiser's *Blue Night*, the smallest in scale included in the exhibit, was originally

produced in 1984. It was an ambulatory performance, compiled of five playing areas, with

performers repeating their scenes over and over, accompanied by an eerie musical collage on

synthesizer, as the audience moved from one station to another. Staub describes the performance

as:

> The story of two lovers in the aftermath of a future war. Mysterious figures
> appear and disappear, and the lovers are followed by a bird-like man. A woman
> descends from above and opens her face to reveal another face from within. The
> characters are colorful, flat puppets manipulated from above with rods. …Janie
> Geiser's work always evokes a sense of mystery and has a visually unique style.
> ("Breaking Boundaries" 13)

Janie Geiser gives us significant insight into these artists' purpose and ways of thinking in her

artistic statement:

> For a visual artist with narrative ideas, puppetry is an ideal medium, for it allows
> one to deal with a variety of complex issues through the use of image, metaphor,
> scale, text, movement, and character in a way that is quite different from either
> painting or actor-theater. The neutrality of the puppet creates limitless

possibilities for dealing with subject matter such as power and its abuses, fear, responsibility, history, and the family by reducing the themes of the piece to its essence, especially through the use of imagery and movement. (qtd. in Staub, "Breaking Boundaries" 12)

In many ways, this statement is similar to those made by Skipitares—especially concerning the possibilities of communicating a multitude of ideas through puppetry. The idea of the puppet as a neutral object, however, is one which the succeeding chapters of this dissertation challenges through discussions of the conflation of neutral and male in western discourse, a neutral which is in immediate to contrast to Woman as Other (Phalen 5; de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 177; Mulvey 44, 47). Though several of the artists featured in the "Breaking Boundaries" exhibit presented works centered on the creation of identity through the analysis of myth, only Geiser's and Skipitares' focused on gender issues. Geiser presented gender comments made from the perspective of dream imagery (concepts more in line with Radical/Cultural feminist arguments) whereas Skipitares, in *Age of Invention*, raised gender issues from a historical and economic perspective, presenting women's contributions to American history in immediate contrast to the works of Ben Franklin and Thomas Edison (concepts more in line with Materialist feminist arguments). The "Breaking Boundaries" exhibit clearly demonstrates that "American puppetry in the 1980's has begun to evolve as a serious art form not merely entertainment" (Staub, "Breaking Boundaries" 9).

Part 3: Skipitares and Object Theatre

Works like those of the of the artists included in the "Breaking Boundaries" Exhibit led to the creation of the term "performing object," as well as a new classification or genre of theatre: object theatre. The idea of the performing object also allows for, though does not require, a puppet actor: an onstage performer who manipulates the puppet and often has a degree of actor training. This practice has also been utilized in object theatre, such as in the works of Julie

Taymor, more than in traditional puppetry. Overall, the term object theatre is the result of the commingling of the graphic and theatrical arts, and has been embraced by puppetry scholarship to encompass a greater number of creations and performances into what has been traditionally viewed as a folk art form.

In terms of Skipitares' work, the previously mentioned use of set pieces as performing objects fits in with this new field of object theatre. Another example of Skipitares' object theatre can be found in the production of *Helen, Queen of Sparta*. In one particular scene, Skipitares presented a meeting where the generals were counting the amassed navy before their departure to Troy. For this scene, two tall figures were rolled out to the front center stage. The figures were dressed in white lab coats and their heads were in beakers full of blue bubbling water. The recorded music started and upstage from these figures large ships (made of bamboo frames and sails of plastic bags filled with blue liquid) cross back and forth. The ships' movements somewhat correspond to the talking heads (with bubbles extruding from their mouths, synchronized to the vocal recording) who relay to the audience the vast numbers in the flotilla. By the end of the scene, the audience realizes we have been watching this gathering from beneath the Aegean Sea, though no other reason for the look and presentation of the scene is given.

One of the most renowned object theatre artists in America, with which Skipitares' has often been grouped, is Julie Taymor. In 1997 Julie Taymor's *Lion King* brought puppetry into mainstream America and made Julie Taymor one of the stars of puppetry. Her style, like other contemporary object theatre makers, promotes what Woods calls the "double event," that is, seeing both the puppet and the puppeteer simultaneously, making audiences conscious of both (236). According to Woods, "The visible manipulation of the elements, revealing the effort

needed to create the illusion of movement, is the hallmark of Taymor's later work with puppets" (236). Taymor's career parallels that of Skipitares, coming from a sculptural background, but starts from set design instead of costume design. Though she has not been directly compared to Taymor, Skipitares is often grouped with her in collections, interviews, and exhibits.

Like Skipitares, the "Taymor style" adapts the style or mediums used in a production to the needs of the piece, combining elements and images from a dazzling range of sources. Taymor's style is characterized by formal elegance, filmic manipulation of scale and viewing angle, and the braiding together of global stage forms (Blumenthal/Taymor 14). There is a definite slick, professional look to all of her creations. Responding to comparisons between Skipitares' work and Taymor's, Skipitares states:

> As an artist, I was born an avantgardist. I craved experimentation and what I knew of the historical avantgarde. I just loved the mind-set of the avantgarde. So I am always going to make work that is trying to experiment, and maybe this roughness you recognize in the sensibility of my work is part of that [...] I think that Julie Taymor was never as interested in experimental work. She has a very humanist sensibility[…] And her aesthetic is prettier than mine.' (2000 interview, qtd in Stanley 68)[6]

Despite being the first woman to be honored as best director (1998), and the first puppeteer to win a directorial Tony, Julie Taymor has repeatedly rejected the label of puppeteer, going even so far as to say in one interview: "'I can't bear it when people see me only as being about puppets when I feel that my work is so much more than that'" (Woods 225). In many ways, Taymor's puppetry successes like the *Lion King* can and have hindered her more recent work, for example the mixed reception of her 2002 piece *The Green Bird* (Woods 226). Perhaps this is one reason why Taymor has spent much of her career avoiding the label of puppeteer, preferring to be called a theatre maker or mixed media artist, and insisting that she uses puppets as one medium within many (Woods 226). Despite her refutation of the label, her association with the

puppet medium continues to shatter notions of traditional puppetry while bringing a new interest to the field (See Anthony, Dircks, and Kaplin). The work of artists like Taymor, with which Skipitares should be included, continues to expand the meaning and label of "puppeteer." That Taymor herself prefers the label of object theatre or multi-media theatre director, and that Skipitares is more often described as a theatre conceptualist or experimental theatre-maker than a puppeteer points to the liminal stance of this object-laden mode of performance.

Lee Breuer of Mabou Mines is another in a growing number of contemporary artists incorporating performing objects in their productions, with or without the addition of live actors. He is also one of Skipitares' named influences in puppetry. Taymor was also involved in productions of *Peter and Wendy* and *MahabarANTA* created by Breuer. Clearly, the work of these contemporary artists like Taymor, Breuer, Ariane Mnouchkine, Basil Twist, and Ping Chong are far different from that of traditional puppeteers, as well as the more innovative puppeteers of the latter twentieth century like Bil Baird and Jim Henson. Within the more recent puppet history texts, Breuer's *Peter and Wendy* is repeatedly cited for its innovative use of an all-marionette cast, assisted by a single female Narrator who spoke for all the characters, similar to the *joruri* narrators of Japanese doll theatre (Blumenthal, *World History* 85; Dircks 3). These artists, like Skipitares, have combined actors, dancers, musicians as well as modern media technologies to produce unique characters, such as the video projections representing Zeus disguised as a swan that Skipitares used in *Helen, Queen of Sparta* (2006), or the a ghost created from a blue beam of light for Ping Chong's 1999 production of *Kwaidan*. These experimental artists have often worked within the tradition of Tony Sarg, finding new techniques for manipulation such as Lee Breuer and Basil Twist's 2002 production, *Red Beads*, which used wind from electric fans to move performers, or Basil Twist's 1998 production, *Symphonie*

Fantastique, which was performed inside tanks filled with water (Blumenthal, *World History* 57). Through these productions, artists are not only creating a new space for puppetry, but a new way of viewing performances in general.

It is true that puppetry has often been overlooked artistically as well as in academic circles. Adult puppetry, specifically, has held an even more tenuous place in the arts, and often seems "doomed to remain a subordinate branch of puppetry, which is itself a subordinate brand of theatre" (Shershow 223). According to Swortzell, however, "What with ever-widening audiences, young and old, to be found at live performances, at critically praised films, and watching television programming, historians may conclude that puppetry is now recognized as an art form firmly, if still not yet fully, established in American cultural life" (36). In addition, "Recent productions such as *Avenue Q* and the works of Eugene Ioneseco and Paula Vogel that feature puppets interacting with live performers offer a promise of future possibilities for puppetry on the American stage" (Dircks, Introduction 3).[7] The recent program listing for the 2007 conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education organization also features a seminar on contemporary American puppetry for adult audiences. As this chapter has shown, Skipitares is situated within a newly forming tradition in American puppetry, that of the performing object theater. Her works are innovative within the American puppet tradition because of their combination of manipulation methods with other cultural and media forms. The works of Skipitares and her contemporaries have created in puppet theatre, as well as traditional theatre, a space for continued experimentation with new subjects and concepts, forms and styles.

CHAPTER 3

THEODORA SKIPITARES, PERFORMANCE ART, AND EXPERIMENTAL

THEATRE

Part 1: Performance Art Tradition

In *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Marvin Carlson lists a series of frequent characteristics of modern performance art, these include a multimedia texture utilizing "found" or "made" materials; a tendency towards open-endedness or undecidability; an emphasis on play, parody, joke, or whimsy; an interest in the principles of collage, assemblages, and simultaneity; and a "'heavy reliance upon unusual juxtapositions or incongruous, seemingly unrelated images'" (80). These characteristics are predicated on the works of certain artists coming out of the avant-garde art traditions of painting and sculpture, primarily from New York and California, but are also based on the evolution of traditions found historically in avant-garde art movements in Europe. Born in San Francisco, Theodora Skipitares attended UC Berkeley in the 1960's with the intention of pursuing a medical degree. The atmosphere of the times and especially that of the Berkeley campus, as well as a crisis in her family, influenced her decision to turn towards painting and sculpture. Skipitares' performance art employed some of the basic characteristics described by Carlson, specifically in her use of collage, her multi-media texture and her non-linear structure. Many of the concepts that were characteristic of the performance art movement in America and that became a part of later experimental theatre projects are remnant even in Skipitares' most recent works. Her beginnings in performance art also yielded a more

experimental approach toward puppetry. This chapter will situate Skipitares' career and artistic

production within the tradition of avant-garde theatre (specifically performance art) and

experimental theatre (specifically in relation to the Off-Off Broadway movement and La Mama

Etc).

Generally, the history of performance art has been presented as a product of European avant-

garde theater and art traditions. The changing environment of Europe and evolving concepts of

the individual during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created a desire for a new

type of theatre. During this period performing objects were also adopted as a tool of

Experimental theatre artists, such as Alfred Jarry, Maurice Maeterlinck, and Edward Gordan

Craig, primarily as a way of producing theatre without traditionally-trained actors. John Bell

attributes the 1896 performance of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* as the beginning modern avant-garde

theater, stating that—if not the beginning—the performance certainly changed the course of

modern theatre by bringing "the world of puppets, masks, and other performing objects onto the

centerstage of western theatre" ("Puppets and Performing Objects" 29). Prior to the nineteenth

century, live theatre and puppet theatre ran in parallel paths and traded influences, as seen in the

puppet versions of commedia and puppet Operas (See McKormick). At the end of the nineteenth

century a turn towards realism proved problematic for puppetry; puppets began to be compared

to "real life." Indeed, still today, the puppeteers' success is often measured by the degree to

which he or she can make the object appear alive.

In the 1920's Futurism, Cubism and Expressionism emerged as alternative ways of seeing

which rejected realism as a goal (Bell, "Puppets and Performing Objects" 33). The rejection of

psychologically-based, realistic theatre was central to this vision, specifically a rejection of the

"theatrical trappings" of linear narrative, discursive language, character, and mimesis. This new

avant-garde and experimental theatre was influenced by a variety of artistic and philosophical movements—Futurists, Surrealists, Dadaists—as well as by a tradition of popular entertainments/performance activities such as: mock naval battles, medieval passion plays, royal entries, court spectacles, mimes, mummers, jugglers, bards, minstrels, mountebanks, animal acts, circus acts, and parades (See Carlson 85-86). Manifestos, by leaders in each movement sought to "sought to shock the middle class out of its complacency" (Sayre 66). Emilio Marinetti, leader of the Futurist Movement, published such a manifesto in February 1915 in which he called for a Futurist Theatre that was synthetic, atechnical, dynamic, simultaneous, autonomous, alogical, and unreal (142-46). He along with Emilio Settimelli, and Bruno Corra, sought a theatre which would "orchestrate the feelings of the spectators by exploring and awakening their laziest tendencies through all possible means (Marinetti 146).

Experiments with puppets in these new forms of theatre partly stemmed from a "distrust of the animate body," as well as a distrust of the actor, which many artists of the modernist tradition shared (Shershow 186). It was believed, especially given the acting methods of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, that the performing object allowed the artist to "transcend the particulars of individual personality" unencumbered by the actor's personal ego or agenda (Shershow 189). The actor's human body was seen as an obstacle to both the artist's truth/true expression and to true artistic control.

Skipitares' comments on the actor and the puppet echo some of these modernist sentiments. Especially in regards to history, Skipitares has repeatedly stated that she used puppets to "speak the truth;" in her case, the words as she found them in historical primary documents. She believed, at least during her earlier works, that the puppet was "innocent and pure, that you could give it the truth and that it could say the truth where as an actor would bypass truth through their

own agenda" (Personal Interview, Mar 2006). Skipitares also spoke on the same topic in an

earlier interview with N. J. Stanley in 2000:

> Its as simple as saying that the puppet is an empty shell, and the puppeteer's job is to breathe life into the empty vessel. And if the intension of the puppeteer is pure, then the soul of the puppet is pure. And so you can ask the puppet to be a person, and it will be that person with a lightness and innocence and authenticity. Whereas if you ask an actor to be that person, the actor's ego is going to make kind of a clever manipulation of energy to allow the creation of this figure within himself, but it's really in a sense, I believe, not as pure as a puppet…there's a complexity that needn't be there for a puppet. (35)

Like Theodora Skipitares' the avant-garde artists shared an idealistic image of the puppet as a

vehicle for performance unmediated by corporeality or personality (Shershow 191). The

inclusion of performing objects allowed a greater control over the entire production. Overall,

their style of theatre was characterized by a desire for total theatre, in which all elements

reflected the artistic vision of the author-creator. This total theatre aesthetic is most prominent in

Skipitares' performance art pieces and early puppetry works, but it is somewhat reflected in even

her latest works.

Genres of Performance Art

There are several genres of performance in which Skipitares' work would fit, however, as

most performance art scholars note, it is hard to define the boundaries of performance art. Roth

attempts to define performance art as "a hybrid form which combines visual arts, theatre, dance,

music, poetry, and ritual" (8). In contrast, Sayre views performance art as a continuum, existing

somewhere between ritual and narrative, dependent upon the object it produces (17). As words

like "hybrid" and "continuum" reflect in these scholars' statements, performance art defies easy

definition. However, by combining the analyses of Roth, Carlson, Auslander, Sayre, and

Goldberg one can attempt to group performance art into a number of genres. These genres can

generally be separated into either one-person or collective/interactive performances, "theatrical"

(meaning spectacular and often using abstracted notions of character, narrative, and costume) or raw minimalist (usually concentrated on the body), forward-looking (activist) or culturally/historically focused (ritualistic). Of course, as is typical of performance, all of these forms can and have been mixed to varying degrees. More specifically, the genres of performance art can be further grouped into:

1. Interactive Instructions and Questions (like happenings)
2. Body Art, including Living Sculpture and New Dance/Bodies in space
3. Ritual Based
   a. a merger of ritual with autobiographical information
   b. performances "intended to move the performer away from the personal and toward the realm of myth" (Roth 23)
   c. concentrate on ritual and ceremony through collective memory
4. Personal/Autobiographical (also includes persona/character based performances, monologists, stand-up comedians, often incorporating mixed media)
5. Group Performance: personal, theatrical, ritual based
6. Spectacle Entertainments: punk aesthetic
7. Women's Public Ritual Theater Performance, often included more theatrical techniques and meant to be performed more than once for public audiences (Roth 23)
8. Activist/Resistant, topics included violence on women, representation of gender, class, race in media, specific political events.

Of these genres, Autobiography and Ritual/Myth, and the mixture of these genres, are most relevant to Skipitares' artwork. However Skipitares' earlier performance work also displayed elements of Body art and Activist/Resistant genres, especially in relation to feminist performance art.

The first forms of Body Art and performance art were concerned with operations of the body. These performances reflected an "interest in developing the expressive qualities of the body, especially in opposition to logical and discursive thought, and speech and in seeking the celebration of form and process over content and product" (Carlson 100). In these performances,

the artist's body served as both subject and object of the work, often combined with real time activities, stressing reality over illusion. These performances, for example the works of Chris Burden—*Shoot* (1971) and *Through the Night Softly* (1973)—often pushed the body to extremes of pain or risk. Even though she never worked with pain tolerance, many of Skipitares' performance art pieces exhibited traits of Body Art. According to Roth, Theodora Skipitares began her involvement with performance art as a teenager in San Francisco where she "painted her body, donned bizarre costumes made of feathers, tree branches, bones and jewels, among other things, and then wandered around through the amazed crowds of Golden Gate Park" (Roth 136). The early women's performances in the genre of Body Art reflected the "essentialist feminist's desire to reclaim the female body as a non-colonized a-historical space" (Sayre 185). They represented, initially, an extension of the radical/cultural feminist belief that the personal is the political; that individual experience can be shared by many through performance (Roth 14). Works such as Carolee Schneemann's 1975 performance of *Interior Scroll*, reflected the sexism of the New York gallery system—exemplified by the tone/attitude of a structuralist filmmaker whose words were included in the text—where according to Sayre, "only 2% of museum exhibitions by living artists were given to women"(87).

Skipitares' first performance and gallery installation, entitled *Mask Performances*, was in 1977. This primarily sculptural piece presented 72 life-cast masks of Skipitares' face in different expressions which she would pick up and physicalize with vocal/movement improvisations. These pieces were an extension of body art/living sculpture however they also explored the performance of identity and femininity characteristic of early feminist performance art. As Skipitares' career developed from sculpture to performance art to experimental, object theatre, she incorporated greater methods of resistance against traditional, western representation models.

Like many women performers in the 1970's and 80's, she also uses performance to explore and address stereotypes of women. To this end, Skipitares' work, like the work of many female artists is "particularly concerned with what can and cannot be represented" and investigates how images are culturally encoded with gender values (Sayre 96).

Skipitares later pieces were primarily autobiographical, yet they combined personal, historical, and mythic images in a fantastic and poignant way. As Roth (1983) explains, "Unlike much autobiographical work today, Skipitares transcends the personal to create her own intriguing myths populated by characters of her own design and fantastic objects of compelling visual intensity" (136). In 1979, Skipitares presented *The Venus Café*, a multimedia series of autobiographical stories in Greek and English. This performance piece focused on the struggle between Greek and American cultures in her identity, and in finding a balance between freedom and repression; virginity and promiscuity; responsibility and self-expression. The name of the piece was taken from the restaurant her father opened when he first arrived in the U.S. In general, in her performance art, Skipitares presented history and culture as influential in the formation and oppression of individual identity.

Many performers in the autobiographical genre began to use theatrical approaches either in one-person performances or in larger, multi-media spectacles (Carlson 104). Included in this group of performances are the monologues of Spalding Gray and Rachel Rosenthal, the stand-up comedy of Whoopi Goldberg and Rosanne Barr, the multimedia spectacles of Laurie Anderson, and the initial performances of Theodora Skipitares. As Roth explains, however, the nature of the material presented in the autobiographical mode of performance complicated its criticism:

> What are the criteria for good and bad autobiographical art – how can one, indeed how dare one, judge the life (as opposed to the art) of the performer? How does one weigh admirable politics against dull art? What is the audience's stake in

personal performances which seems created exclusively to satisfy the therapeutic needs of the artist? (21)

In the 1970's personal histories/autobiographies were also a major source for women's performance art. Roth actually credits the development of this genre to female performers stating that "the introduction of autobiography, characters and personae by women into the field of performance totally transformed the substance and direction of this medium" (20). Often the autobiographical material was interwoven with fictional, mythical, or historical material. This intermingling of fictional, mythical and historical elements can be found specifically in Skipitares' performance art pieces.

According to Moira Roth (1983), "The main thrust of Skipitares' art deals with the conflict between her flamboyant personality and the strict, traditional Greek home in which she was raised, the tension between the Greek and American cultures, and the opposition between the heroic myths which were a part of her heritage and everyday realities" (136). Skipitares also incorporated oral histories in these first solo pieces, the result of interviews with Greek immigrant women who lived in her New York City, 3rd Street neighborhood (Personal Interview March 2006). In 1980, Skipitares presented *The Mother and the Maid* at the Performance Garage in New York City. Combining personal statements with history and myth, this piece incorporated images projected on her body, plates, and walls to represent how Greek myths influenced her daily life. This is similar to Spalding Gray's 1977 performance piece, *Rumstick Road*, in which he projected the image of his late mother onto an actress.

Mother and the Maid also emphasized the transformation and sacrifices made by women trapped by their cultural and economic circumstances. To represent this struggle, she used the traditions of Greek culture, such as weaving, to serve as visual metaphors connecting her personal experience to a collective past. Each of Skipitares' performance art piece held reflected

issues of identity building, the construction "woman" and woman's role in society. This particular piece blurs the genre line, combining autobiographical content with socially activist sentiment.

Another genre in which Skipitares' performance art pieces might be included is activist, resistant performance. Viewed by many scholars as part of materialist feminism, resistant performances by women artists stressed "looking beyond individual case studies to the particular social apparatus or cultural practice that has produced them and others" by questioning, exposing, and dismantling cultural codes, social construction and assumptions "that governed traditional gender roles, stagings of the body and gender performance both on the stage and in everyday life" (Carlson 167). Resistant female performances emphasize the social construction of the body and of the subject in performance. As Peggy Phalen explains, "The task, in other words, is to make counterfeit the currency of our representational economy – not by refusing to participate in it at all, but rather by making work in which the costs of women's perpetual aversion are clearly measured" (164). These codes which guide audience reception are the by-product of the western system of representation, which positions the male as subject in a subject-object binary or dialectic where the female is therefore positioned as "other," the object desired by the subject. Women's performance art challenges the Western tradition of representation by reconfiguring this subject-object binary, placing a woman on stage as the central speaking subject. The resistant female performer therefore uses both body and voice towards the purpose of "decentering of the subject" rather than creating a new subject position (Carlson 170).

Unfortunately, the use of stereotypical images of women in attempts to force audiences to question these representations often merely reinforce the sexist tendencies and underlying ideologies of gender—in fact denying the opportunity for resistance offered by the performance

artist. This phenomenon has led many scholars, like Carlson, to question how representation or performance, which have so often been the tools for implanting and reinforcing phallocentric cultural assumptions, also be used for the feminist postmodern project of decentering the subject (170)? Can using the materials of oppression even in a parodic way be deconstructive?

In her first performance art pieces, Skipitares constructed herself as the subject of representation by being physically present on stage. Even after her move from autobiographical to historical subjects and incorporation of puppets in performance, she maintained her physical presence on stage as her figure and face served as the model/mold for all the puppets. According to Skipitares, female artists who author their own work often work outside of traditional forms (Personal Interview 2006). In Skipitares' work, this connection to feminist art is most evident in her narrative structure—typically a series of tableaux with blackouts between them—which tends to discourage a linear narrative arc. In using the distancing techniques of ambulatory performance, non-linear narrative, and puppetry, Skipitares disrupts the traditional performance/reception process and challenges the voyeurism of performance.

Performance Art Influence in Later Work

As a practicing costume designer in New York City, Skipitares worked for Villanova University (1972/73), the Section Ten theater company (1973/74), and Richard Schechner's Performance Group (1974-1978). As a designer, she often chose more unusual materials such as glass, nails, or wood for her costumes, which though somewhat impractical for performances, were characteristic of the mixed media techniques of avant-garde performance. They could also be seen as a carryover of styles used in her early walkabout performance pieces and solo performance art productions. The incorporation of puppetry into her works, since 1982, reveals an evolution from a performance art style, centered on personal identity, towards a "desire to

communicate something larger" (Montano 439). These days, Skipitares is well known for combining many artistic media such as dance, music, sculpture, and film, along with puppets.

Skipitares' career has been influenced by the evolving performance scenes in both California and New York as well as by the avant-garde art tradition. Skipitares has specifically mentioned the works of Spalding Gray, Elizabeth LaCompte, and Meredith Monk as particularly influential through their constructions of narratives, sound and movement. Her performance art combined various genres of body art, autobiography, and ritual/myth. In her later pieces her fascination with history, myth, and ritual remains present. Her work maintains characteristics of the avant-garde art tradition that so influenced performance art, as seen in its multimedia texture, combining television monitors, projected images, non-western dance and puppetry as well as music. Her narrative structure and characters reflect an interest in play and parody as well as a tendency towards juxtaposition and ambiguity. The overall tone of her pieces is a mix of humor, fantasy, and social criticism. Finally, performance art allowed female artists, like Skipitares, personal control of all areas of production, the freedom to create their own aesthetic, and the opportunity to express their individual identity and voice.

Part 2: Experimental Theatre Traditions—Skipitares and La Mama

Theodora Skipitares is one of a long line of experimental theatre artists who have incorporated puppetry as one of many tools of theatrical expression. Her works represent a convergence between the tradition of avant-garde or experimental theatre, which incorporated puppetry, and the residual atmosphere created by the Off-Off Broadway (OOB) movement of the 1960's in the Greenwich Village and East Village sections of New York City. However, the terms "experimental theater" and "avant-garde theater" have, at this day and time, lost precise meaning because they have been applied to so many different and divergent works.

Responding to this question of what constitutes experimental theater, artist Theodora Skipitares commented in a personal interview that basically "experimental theater" is an indefinable term to her, that there are "too many compartments inside of that now" (March 2006). Instead, she cites Richard Foreman's work at the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre as an example of where that term might be applied today. Foreman's work has previously been labeled "theatre of images" by Bonnie Marranca and credited for its experiments in stage picture, scene design and dramatic structure (Foreman 119-132). Later, in response to a question of what constitutes avant-garde theater, Skipitares also cited, as example, a production of *Emperor Jones* by The Wooster Group that was in performance during the time of our interview (March 2006). In this particular production, the lead character of Brutus Jones was played in drag and blackface by Kate Valk, who succeeded at creating "with superb precision, a simulacrum of a stereotype" (Isherwood E1). The variety of artists who have been included in the label "experimental theatre artist," such as Julie Taymor, Lee Breuer, and Ping Chong, have also complicated efforts at definition. This label has also been applied to Theodora Skipitares, whose style Lynch describes as "the conjunction of experimentation and tradition" (139).

In Stephen Bottoms' recent study on the Off-Off Broadway movement, he also attempts to characterize or at least navigate these over-used terms "experimental" and "avant-garde" as they are applied to theatre. He addresses the fact that the avant-garde label, "then as now," is casually thrown around "as a term of dismissive abuse for anything that seemed stylistically unusual or difficult to understand by conventional standards" (Bottoms 9). The academic view of the avant-garde (especially in the US in the 1960s and 70's) was far narrower, focusing on those works seen as descendent from a quasi-Artaudian (anti-textual, anarchic, visceral) theatre model, worthy of the time-honored role "as champions of political and aesthetic progressivism"

(Bottoms 9). As such, much of the work on Off-Off Broadway remained off the academic and critical radar.

Instead of using the term "experimental," Bottoms prefers the term "underground" setting it up in a binary relationship to his definition of the 1960's/70's American avant-garde. He accredits the work of the OOB playwright as characteristic of "underground;" anti-establishmentary works without agendas (aesthetic or political). According to Bottoms, the avant-garde, though it leads the way artistically or politically, remains at least economically attached to the elite – in a sense telling high culture what to like. The OOB movement of the 1960's and 70's, and the environment left by OOB artists, fundamentally challenged this link between economics and creativity.

The following section will discuss Skipitares' puppetry from the perspective of the experimental theatre tradition as well as the influence of the atmosphere created by the Off-Off Broadway movement—specifically focusing on the activities surrounding Ellen Stewart's La Mama ETC. La Mama has been a primary venue for Skipitares' works since 1992 with the performance of *Underground* (although she has also performed at Theatre for the New City, the Performance Garage, and other non-theatrical spaces in NYC).

Off-Off Broadway

The new plays produced during the Off-Off Broadway movement were only one strain of the experiments in theatre produced in New York in the 1960's. There were also experiments by director or auteur-led companies, as well as collaborative, performer-centered ensembles. Skipitares' arrived in New York City in the late 1960's. She graduated from the Tisch School of the Arts with a degree in set and costume design in 1972. Responding to the state of the theatre world during her graduate school years, Skipitares states in a 1987 interview with Joan Driscoll

Lynch, "'Experimental theatre at the time was seeking radical notions of all aspects of theatre including design, so my desire to use and work with unusual materials was welcome'" (140). These companies incorporated found objects, and collagist methods of assembly and collaborative products—methods which Skipitares has continued to incorporate into her productions.

As Michael Smith explained in one of the first major studies of the Off-Off Broadway Movement, "Off-Off Broadway is theater without theater," a theater that featured primarily new plays, new playwrights, and adventurous, experimental production styles (159). There were four principal stages at the core of the movement – two coffeehouses and two churches: Caffe Cino, Café La Mama (eventually La Mama ETC), the Judson Poet's Theater, and Theater Genesis. The Open Theater, headed by Joseph Chaikin, was also associated with the Off-Off Broadway movement, and worked in partnership with La Mama for a period of time in the 1960's. The term "Off-Off Broadway" was coined by Jerry Tallmer, a critic for the *Village Voice* (then a small community paper) in 1960. Previously, productions in these non-theatre spaces were known as café theatre or underground theater. The Off-Off Broadway movement began as entertainment in coffeehouses, mixing amateur and professional actors, directors, and playwrights. Smith marks the "birth" of the movement with another monumental performance of Jarry's *King Ubu* in September 1960 at Take 3 on Bleeker Street in which "imagination was substituted for money" resulting in a presentation style "that would be impossible in the commercial theatre" (Smith 159).

The characteristics of an OOB production cannot easily be listed, for they were as varied as their participants, and constantly changing. They did, however, share a similar point of view and the forces behind the movement's emergence were quite clear. The Off-Off Broadway

movement came about in response to the procedures and limitations of the commercial

"professional" theatre on Broadway, and the increasing commercialization of Off-Broadway

theatres. The majority of playwrights could not find ways to get their plays performed, and if

they did, they had less freedom in effecting the production, either to set their own standards or

define their artistic goals. The movement resulted from a dire need for an outlet for new

playwrights and an outlet for new methods of staging. Most of all, the movement sought to

promote and produce the works of these young new playwrights (such as Lanford Wilson, Sam

Shepard, and Tom Eyen) who felt they were "producing a new abstract theatre," allowing them

complete freedom in producing their plays (Smith 166).

Because of the types of plays written and the style in which they were typically presented,

the majority of OOB productions were not appealing to a mass audience. As such, many of the

productions of the OOB movement (the majority of which were one-acts) did not easily transfer

outside of the specific community for which they were written. The one-act structure was most

popular because they could be repeatedly performed throughout the night. These plays were

created and produced with little-to-no money, and they did not make much money either, but the

primary purpose was accomplished: the new works were getting performed. The movement

proved an ideal medium, allowing artists from different backgrounds to cross disciplinary

borders and experiment together, collaboratively (Bottoms 2-3). Works often moved back and

forth between venues, and during periods of renovation or relocation, the venue directors often

opened spaces to each other.

According to Stephen Bottoms there was "never a single leader or manifesto for the

'movement' or even a coherent set of objectives" (3). There was, however, a definite sense of

community and a shared resistance to the standards of mainstream commercial theater. No one

charged money for tickets, and it was only after licensing harassment that La Mama began to charge membership dues. Most programs were subsidized by post-show donations. It is probably this reason why the movement could not last; eventually people needed to make a living. Some scholars have seen this movement as an extension of Expressionism, or as a continuation of the art created by Provincetown Players and others in the "Little Theatre Movement" of the 1920's (Valgemae 227, 233). Clearly the playwrights of the OOB movement were able to create works that immediately responded to the time and place in which their works were made and displayed, though their iconography and subject matter may not transfer to contemporary audiences. Perhaps the Off-Off Broadway movement's greatest contribution was in the way it challenged the concept of "professionalism" in theater.

Although Bottoms marks the "end" of the Off-Off Broadway movement by the voluntary dissolution of the Open Theatre in 1973, the impetus for the movement had been dissipating since the death of its "Papa" Joe Cino, founder of Caffe Cino in 1967. It was this atmosphere, and this culture (or counter-culture) that in a sense became the inheritance of La Mama and the artists that remained in the East Village, including Skipitares.

The characteristics of Skipitares' artwork that most specifically reflect the influence of the Off-Off-Broadway movement are the desire and commitment to authoring her own works, the use of non-theatre spaces and the anti-commercial attitude that served to challenge theatrical standards of professionalism. This challenge is best described as a "work in progress" mentality, one which creates artwork which is focused on process, reflecting a "producedness" or "seams-showing" quality of a work (Marranca xii).

This challenge to standards of professionalism can primarily be seen in Skipitares' characters and puppet designs. According to Stanley, "To describe Skipitares's puppet-making style as

rough-hewn is to put the matter delicately. Sometimes her puppets verge on the ugly; they certainly do ugly and disturbing things," such as vomiting, raping women, killing animals or each other (67). The variety of ugly actions that Skipitares' puppets perform reflects a change within the works of contemporary puppeteers, one that is free from the "narrow, fairy-tale notions of how puppets function" (Stanley 36). This "rough" aesthetic is described by Stanley as part of the artist's individual style: "Skipitares's sensibility simply excludes the commonly accepted notion of beauty as appealing and pleasing" (67). There are a few anomalies in this regard, such as the large illustration-style puppets in *A Harlot's Progress*, the stunning 2/3 life-sized bunraku-style puppets used in *Iphigenia*, and the vividly colored shadow puppets used in *Odyssey: The Homecoming*.

In general, Skipitares' productions display what I would term a *work-in-progress aesthetic*—that is a product which maybe "finished" for a certain moment or production, yet always has the potential to be changed. The very term *work-in-progress aesthetic* is a bit of an oxymoron as "aesthetics" is a concept centered on analyzing the beauty inherent in an object, from a detached or disinterested stance, based on regimented standards of taste such as balance, harmony, line, or wit. The most important part of this *work-in-progress* perspective of art is that it leaves gaps and "loose edges" which the audience is required to fill in with their active participation (either figuratively or literally, as in the environment, ambulatory productions of *Under the Knife*). This process-oriented style denies the fixed nature of commodified art, as seen in Skipitares' commitment to constantly revise and rework her later performances (*Under the Knife* has three versions, *Bodies in Crime* had two).

La Mama

The make-up of an artist's work, where the artist might be pigeon-holed, or how they are labeled is often influenced by "the company they keep"—that is the specific venues in which they play as well as the actors or directors with whom they choose to work. By this logic, the artists presented by a certain venue are a reflection of that space's mission statement and, as such, an examination of La Mama reveals more about Theodora. In fact, with its focus on strong visual style, new play development and cross-cultural artistic sharing, La Mama's artistic mission reflects the influence most evident in Skipitares' artistic products.

Café La Mama opened in 1962 on East 12th Street. Ellen Stewart went through a series of relocations in the first few years of operation, the result of the "coffeehouse war" between café owners in the Village and city officials (fire departments, police, license bureaus, etc). Each time she was forced to relocate, Stewart found a larger and more flexible space. Eventually Stewart limited the café functions and instead, filed paperwork to incorporate La Mama as a private club, La Mama ETC. By 1967 there were an estimated 3000 card-carrying members of La Mama ETC (Bottoms 95). By 1971, they had moved to a show-by-show ticketing system, and had replaced the club membership with general admission tickets.

Ellen Stewart's theatre was originally characterized, like many OOB venues, as both a space to work in and a spiritual home for the artist (Banes 50). According to Michael Smith, the plays produced were the plays Ellen *wanted* produced (166). In 1965, Stewart's artistic opinion was rewarded as La Mama was awarded its first Obie from the *Village Voice*, marking the "discovery" of the OOB Movement by critics. By the 1970's "Stewart had developed a strong preference for work that was highly visual and musical, as this had greater potential to cross national and cultural borders" (Bottoms 323). Stewart also began a touring repertory company that took these new playwrights and productions to Europe (again in hopes of gaining

recognition for the young playwrights by promoting them overseas). To introduce each show, Stewart stood at the front of the audience and rang a large cow bell, saying "'Welcome to La Mama, dedicated to the playwright and to all aspects of the theater,'" in essence declaring her mission statement as a mantra for the movement itself (qtd in Stone, *Caffe* 15).

La Mama ETC is the only surviving theatre of the four main venues of the Off-Off Broadway movement. This is primarily due to Stewart's acceptance of foundational funding and her ability to balance the "institutional" procedures associated with grant funding with the not-for-profit style of the original OOB Movement. She found in OOB more than an anti-commerce statement, but also a new way of producing truly moving theatre. Unlike the other venues, Stewart's also had a more intercultural or multi-cultural vision and initiated an international cultural exchange between her artists and artists from all over the world. The current theatre complex (74A East 4th Street, the Annex theatre, and a building on Great Jones Street) includes three theatre spaces, a rehearsal building, dorms for visiting artists, administrative offices, Stewart's apartments, and archive storage. The largest of these theatre spaces is the 299-seat flexible theatre space called the Annex Theatre where many of Skipitares' productions have been performed.

Today La Mama's work can be divided into several strains including works from abroad, "serious minded experimentalism," overtly theatrical "show-biz" productions, and revue or cabaret-style productions many of which are written, produced, and directed by a single artist (Bottoms 98). The most recent works are often re-examinations of classical texts—like much of Skipitares' work—which are highly visual, with abstract, non-referential language. As of 2006, its 45th anniversary year, La Mama has also incorporated dance shows as well as a play reading and a poetry reading series.

The connections between Theodora Skipitares' works and the La Mama/OOB tradition are obvious. Her production style, her themes, and her narrative style combine strong imagery with abstract language—often in the form of song lyrics—and are often produced as a sequence of tableaux separated by blackouts. The often "rough hewn" style of some of her earlier works is reminiscent of the artistic perspectives promoted by early experimental works, fusing the avant-garde art tradition with "underground" style (Stanley 67). Through this fusion, yesterday's trash sets are today's "found objects." Skipitares' desire to use these objects as the sole focus of her productions, whether to tell the historical truth or re-examine Greek mythology, represent not only a singular vision, but a much older aesthetic goal of theatrical expression not reliant on the human actor.

CHAPTER 4

ASIAN PERFORMANCE TRADITIONS IN THE PUPPETRY OF THEODORA SKIPITARES

In Skipitares' most recent works, she has incorporated more techniques and artistic stylings from Asian art forms, most specifically those of Japan and India. Theodora Skipitares has routinely traveled to Europe to present productions, but in the late nineties and early twenty-first century, she began to travel to parts of Asia as well. Overall, each of these artistic influences and/or movements affected the way Skipitares chose to create her puppets and the way she in turn uses those puppets in performance. In the following pages, I will present background information on the Asian artistic traditions that Skipitares routinely incorporates as influences in her productions.

In Skipitares' trips with Ellen Stewart to produce shows in Vietnam (1997) and Cambodia (2001/2002), the pair came to the projects with the central ideas and production methods they would apply already prepared. When in Vietnam, Skipitares experimented with water puppets, combining them with other forms of puppetry and media. According to her published journal on the trip, the goal of the Vietnam project was to "integrate [water] puppetry techniques and the stock characters into a multi-media production with singers and dancers, based on the myth of Dionysus." (Vietnam Journal 65). Skipitares goes on to state, "We are told that because we are foreigners, we are welcome to try this in a way in which Vietnamese artists are not" (Vietnam Journal 65).

In Cambodia, Skipitares and Ellen Stewart worked with professional dancers and university students at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh on a production based upon a Cambodian Hindu myth called "The Churning Of the Sea of Milk" (Stanley 61). Skipitares also worked with a puppeteer on shadow puppets, one of which became part of *Timur the Lame*. Although Stewart and Skipitares collaborated with local artists in these projects, it general none of the forms were truly integrated into Skipitares' style. This was not true of her 1999/2000 trip to India where she was greatly inspired by Yakshagana dance-drama, shadow puppetry, scroll painting and the traditional epic narratives, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

In contrast to the more recent incorporation of Indian influences in Skipitares' productions, the Japanese influence on her work has been almost continuous. Japanese influences which are most easily seen in Theodora Skipitares' works are traditional Bunraku, and the one-person, female form of Bunraku known as Otome Bunraku. Each of these traditions of Asian performance has a long history in Japan and India coming from both "classic" and "folk" traditions, from courts as well as villages. In her typical style, Skipitares collages these Asian/South-East Asian artistic methods together in such a way that reflects both a respect for her sources and a unique creative vision.

Part 1: Japanese Influences

Like many contemporary American puppeteers, Skipitares' primary Japanese influence comes from Bunraku. In fact, Skipitares' style has been labeled a "cross between Bunraku and Brecht" (Gussow, "Master Builder"C15).[1] In her 2004 article on Bunraku, Skipitares echoes this connection between Bunraku and her own work as well as Bunraku's link to Brechtian distance:

> Even before I began using puppets in my performances in 1982, I had always felt connected to the Japanese Bunraku theatre. In my early solo performances with articles of clothing and other objects, I referred to myself as a Japanese stagehand

or puppeteer […] Bunraku presented a total, though divided, spectacle in which each element retained a distance from the other and recalled Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. ("Tension" 13)

Skipitares has routinely used a modified version of Bunraku performance style since her production of *Age of Invention* in 1985. In *Age of Invention*, Skipitares combined Bunraku-style manipulation of life-like figures (Ben Franklin, Thomas Edison, and Mike Connor, the salesman-turned-surgeon) with the documented words of these historical figures to explore their façades and comment on their complex lives (Skipitares, "Tension" 13-14). In these earlier puppets, Skipitares concentrated on hyper-realistic figures and movements, more like theme-park animatrons than traditional puppets. Reflecting on her use of Bunraku in these earlier puppets, Skipitares states, "What I didn't understand then about Bunraku theatre was that its greatness lay in the constant tension, and the attempt to strike a balance between realism and non-realism" (Skipitares, "Tension" 14). In her most recent productions, especially *Iphigenia* and *The Exiles*, Skipitares use of Otome Bunraku or one-person Bunraku-style puppets creates puppets who truly reflect the theatrical tension between the real and un-real. Several of the puppets—especially their faces and costumes—are realistic looking, but they have no facial articulation and are performed by a single, masked puppeteer.

The goal of Bunraku is the complete synergy of actions, words, and music (Adachi 56). Unlike, "total theater" however, these elements are presented completely independently of one another. The puppeteers only manipulate the puppets. The puppets' dialogue, as well as general narration, is spoken by a narrator (*tayu*) from a separate side-stage (the *yuka*), on stage left, which he shares with the shamisen player. The narrator, wearing formal dress from the Edo period, "takes individual roles of all characters as well as narration of the story" (Adachi 60). He sets the scene, describes the characters' emotions, recites the narrative, and delivers the dialogue,

giving each character a distinct voice. Although the *tayu* always has the text before him, he also performs each play from memory. Live music, performed on a shamisen again separate from both puppet and narrator, provide additional mood and sound effects. The "energy" of any production is both shared and passed among each of these separate artists.

Bunraku, or *ningyo joruri* (doll drama), began as a form of narrative storytelling. By 1600 each of the elements of puppets, narrative storytelling, and shamisen music were joined together to create Bunraku. The height of Bunraku coincided with the Edo period in Japanese history (1615-1868) though it had a revival during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Meiji Period). According to Barbara Adachi, Bunraku is now considered an "important national cultural asset" in Japan and around the world (7). Interestingly, the elements seen as so characteristic of Bunraku – the visibility of the puppeteers, and the three-person manipulation style – have not always been a part of the art form. The puppeteers did not appear before the audience until 1705 (they performed behind a curtain prior to that), and it was not until 1734 that the signature three-man manipulation system was created by puppeteer Yoshida Buzaburo. During the eighteenth century, the puppeteers engineered more articulate faces (eyes, and mouths) and hands (including moveable fingers), but by the end of the eighteenth century, the art form went into decline.

The puppets used in Bunraku are one-half to two-thirds life-size (2.5' to 5' tall) and are manipulated internally and externally by the use of rods and armatures. They are articulated to produce "commonplace movements" known as *furi*, which include sitting, crying, heavy breathing, sewing, smoking, and dancing (Adachi 51). These are combined with *kata* movements, that is, certain poses struck to display the doll's grace, highlight a stylized action, or portray a climactic action in the play. As Veltrusky comments, in Bunraku, "The operators are

seen moving at the same time as the puppet yet it is not their movements but the movement they impose on the puppet that represents the character and its actions and behavior" (91). Each Bunraku puppeteer builds his own puppets, assembling the parts to create a specific character. The puppet's body structure is made of carved wood. The head, attached to the headgrip, is inserted into a shoulder board. The shoulder board is covered by a length of material to which a bamboo hoop is attached to form the puppets' hips. Arms and legs are tied to the shoulder board with rope. Unlike traditional male Bunraku characters, however, Skipitares' male puppets did not have legs or walk until *Trilogy*, therefore she only needed two operators, one for head and right hand and other for left hand (e.g. Franklin, Edison, Connor).

Each element in the design and production of the Bunraku puppet is chosen to relate certain character traits. Puppet heads are chosen that will best fit the character of each role and puppet costumes, made of embroidered silk or cotton, are hand-sewn onto the puppet's frame by the puppeteer. Even the stitching and resulting line of the costume relates character traits. The puppet's shoulders, arms, and hands all have the ability to express emotion through movement, but it is the way the puppeteer manipulates the head grip that most influences the way the puppet succeeds in conveying character and emotions (Adachi 90). Skipitares designs and builds all of the puppets used in her productions, though she has often worked with other technical artists to create the inner mechanisms of the puppet bodies. Each of Skipitares' puppets are created for its specific purpose in a specific production. Since Skipitares has begun telling stories based on Greek mythology and epic literature, seen in her last four productions,[2] she has begun to reuse both character designs and specific puppets for characters such as Helen and Menelaus who appear often in the literature. Even so, Skipitares often has many constructed versions of the same character, often in varying scales.

The presentations of gendered characters in traditional Bunraku conform to historical and stereotypical constructions of feminine and masculine as represented in the eighteenth century texts. According to puppeteer Tamao, in Bunraku "'there are more roles for male puppets that are difficult than for female puppets,'" females have two character types, whereas male roles have six types *just* for old men (Adachi 55). Female characters in Bunraku are divided into two types of roles (represented by different head types): young women and mature women. Within these two categories there are wives, courtesans, prostitutes, and supernatural beings. The look of the female puppet adheres to conventions of beauty for Japan during the Edo period (for example, married women shaved their eyebrows so the puppets just have pale blue curved lines painted on at the brow line). The female Bunraku puppet has no legs so it is the third puppeteers job to maneuver the bottom of her kimono to simulate walking. As Master Puppeteer Tamao describes in an interview with Barbara Adachi, "'For female roles, strength and grandeur are harder to achieve than youthful grace; sadness and loneliness are more difficult than joy and passion'" (57). For both male and female roles, however, conventions of gesture and pose are combined with the factors of personality, age, and social position to create the overall look and movement of each puppet (Adachi 57).

Within the tradition of Japanese Bunraku, Skipitares was most influenced by the Bunraku puppeteers: their focus, their physical presence on stage, and how those combine to create a realistically moving puppet. According to Skipitares, "Unlike puppet performances from other countries, this Japanese form does not require the illusion that the puppets are moving and talking on their own" ("Tension" 13). In Japanese puppet theater the manipulation of the puppet is never concealed, and as such, becomes secondary to the story and characters presented. The majority of Skipitares' puppet operators are visible to the audience: sometimes in blacks, other

times in costumes which match the puppets or story presented.[3] Although the three puppeteers are visible to the audience, they move as one, focusing all their attention on the puppets: the chief puppeteer controls the puppet's head and right arm, the second puppeteer controls the left arm, and the junior puppeteer controls the legs. Each Bunraku puppeteer trains for years at each position (many beginning as stagehands) to learn the economy of motion, conventional movements, and the traditional characters and plays in the repertoire. Amazingly, although the puppeteers work as a team, they may not rehearse together at length for any particular role (Adachi 51). This practice is due to the fact that the puppeteers have memorized each role in the repertoire and have often performed them several times. Unlike traditional Bunraku, the majority of Skipitares' puppet operators are not trained in puppetry when they first begin working with her. They must learn the best method for manipulating their performing objects in each production—since Skipitares often combines Bunraku-style puppets with other traditional puppet types. The years of training in conventional movements and postures are replaced by a few short months—often less—of physically working with each puppet, attempting to find movements that best fit the story and character.[4]

The majority of plays in the Bunraku repertoire are domestic dramas or historical dramas with supernatural elements, dating from the eighteenth century and often set in Osaka. Most of these plays are written by the playwright Chikamatsu and emphasize realism and emotional intensity. Each of these plays feature specific character types which fall within strict gender conventions (in both the characters presented in the text and the visual presentation of these characters). Generally women's roles fit within idealized and historical stereotypes, such as the demure courtesan, Ohatsu, in Chikamatsu's *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, and the dramatic action is centered on the male characters (who are also historical stereotypes). Contemporary

companies aim to produce these plays in their traditional fashion, recreating the past production

requirements, if records still exist for those performances. In the case of new plays, or plays that

have not been performed for a century or more, research and new design choices are made.

Skipitares' approach to Bunraku is primarily as a method and media form, she uses the

methods of Bunraku to relay a variety of texts. Though many are based on history or historical

accounts, Skipitares typically reads against the grain of these texts, presenting alternatives to the

"facts" presented. Of Skipitares' 1989 production of *Empires and Appetites*, Mel Gussow writes

that, though the production seems like a work in progress, it is "clearly the work of a social

commentator," and part of Skipitares larger tendency to take "a reflective—and often a

sardonic—view of scientific invention and political history" ("Gastronomics" C18; "Puppets"

1.13). As Skipitares' production history shows (see Appendix A) there is also no set repertoire of

plays that Skipitares performs, rather each performance is her original design and creation.

For her most recent shows, *Iphigenia* and *The Exiles*, Skipitares incorporated manipulation

methods from a relatively new form of Bunraku called Otome Bunraku. According to Skipitares,

Otome Bunraku was "founded in the early 1900s by Kiritake Monzo V, a member of the

Bunraku theatre, who was trying to find a way to perform Bunraku with solo puppeteers,

primarily as a financial consideration. Kiritake was also trying to revitalize the dwindling

audiences by bringing women's uncovered faces onto the stage" ("Tension"14). Otome Bunraku

troupes are formed of only female performers who independently manipulate their puppets. The

puppeteers are bound to their puppets by strings/rods attached at the head, waist, and knees.

According to Skipitares, "It takes several assistants to bind the puppet mechanisms to the female

puppeteer's body" ("Tension" 14). The Otome troupes perform traditional Bunraku repertoire

from the eighteenth century, both the domestic dramas (*sewamono*) and the plays based on

history or legend (*jidaimono*). Skipitares chose to use the one-person of form because it had a more minimalist look than traditional Bunraku. According to Skipitares, Bunraku is "magnificent for a certain deep, psychological realism, but honestly sometimes I can't stand seeing the bulk, the mass of three forms" (Personal Interview Mar 2006). For a show like *Iphigenia*, having so many operators with each character, would overshadow Skipitares' larger concept of using the puppets as political and social masks (Skipitares, Personal Interview Mar 2006).

Skipitares worked with puppeteer Cecilia Schiller to create the Otome-style puppets used in *Iphigenia* and her 2007 show *The Exiles*, based on Euripides *Orestes*. Unlike the tradition of Otome Bunraku, Skipitares has used this method with both female and male operators. Generally, in her use of Otome Bunraku, she matches the sex of the performer to the character's gender, but in her most recent productions—*Iphigenia* and *The Exiles*—Skipitares cross-gender cast two major roles, Achilles and Menelaus. The significance of these changes and the affect they have upon the presentation of gender in each character will be further examined in Chapter 5. Overall the one-person method of Otome Bunraku seems to better compliment the minimalist style of the majority of Skipitares' productions. Because the puppets act as extensions of the operators' bodies, it is also an easier method in which to train performers who have never used puppets. Although this method provides a one-to-one relationship between puppet and manipulator, making it easier to communicate characters to the audience, it also maintains the distance that is characteristic of Skipitares' style.

The primary elements of Japanese puppet theatre which Skipitares has incorporated in to her productions are the visible presence of the puppeteers and the division of a production into its independent elements (puppets/puppeteers, music, and narration). The use of visible puppet manipulators is not uncommon in contemporary American puppetry, but few puppet artists—

most notable Lee Breuer—have chosen to present the production elements separately. Throughout Skipitares' career she has repeatedly used live narrators separate from the puppets, many times with live music. In Skipitares' work, this separation is strongly highlighted—each element works to distance the audience while the interaction between elements creates a unique synergy in performance. As previously stated, Skipitares also deviates or modifies the tradition of Bunraku through the types of texts she uses as well as the type and number of performers she uses.

Part 2: Indian Influences

Theodora Skipitares traveled with Ellen Stewart to India in the winter of 1999 to 2000 on a Fulbright Fellowship. She toured mostly through the states of Kerala and Karnataka, in major cities and small villages, and attended many traditional dance-drama and puppetry performances. According to Stanley, Skipitares was most impressed by the Yakshagana puppets of Karnataka, specifically the Sri Ganesh Yakshagana Gombeyata Mandali troupe, and by the colorful shadow puppets of Andra Pradesh.

While in India, Skipitares worked with Stewart on two pre-arranged productions: *Sita* in November 1999, and *The Pied Piper* in February of 2000. *Sita* was performed in Bangalore (Karnataka) India, in a large amphitheatre with a company of 46 puppeteers, dancers, actors, and musicians. Working with local artists, Skipitares and Stewart combined many types of Indian puppets with Yakshagana dancers to present an episode of the Ramayana between Sita and her husband, Rama. According to Stanley, the production held two outdoor performances "for standing-room-only crowds" (59). In contrast, *The Pied Piper* was a much smaller puppet theatre show performed in Ahmedabad. In collaboration with the Darpana Theatre Company, Skipitares' production presented a mix of shadow puppets, masked dancers, and a Bunraku-style Pied Piper.

Skipitares' trip to India was, in the end, responsible for "reinvigorating her thinking and inspiring her to move in new directions" (Stanley 58-59). She was impressed by the relationship between spirituality and the creative arts in India, specifically the tradition of dedicating each performance of dance theatre or puppetry to Lord Ganesha, the remover of obstacles. Yet though Stanley speaks of Skipitares' "reverence for her sources," there is no evidence she ever began these Asian influenced productions with ceremonies, offerings, or blessings (63). Skipitares' trip to India was primarily influential in changing the way she viewed stories:

> Before I went to India, I could care two figs about a story, who cares about a story. Then I go to India, where there's 4000 year old culture that reveres its stories and still presents its stories […] And oddly enough those months in India made me want to tell stories about Greece. It's so weird. But I became interested in stories and in storytelling. (Personal Interview, March 2006)

Skipitares' trip to India did end up changing the way she told stories—especially her use of puppets—and what stories she chose to tell. It also inspired a new tendency in Skipitares' work toward focusing on a particular story rather than a theme (Stanley 65). Evidence of these changes can be found in Skipitares' renewed interest in Greek myth and legend. Though Skipitares dealt somewhat with Greek mythology in her performance art pieces, since her return from India, Skipitares has created several productions dealing with Greek legends on Helen of Troy, the Trojan War, and the House of Atreus.

Although the performance immediately following Skipitares' trip to India, *Optic Fever*, did not show any Indian influence, subsequent performances, beginning with *Timur the Lame* have repeatedly incorporated Indian dance-drama and puppetry styles. Skipitares' more recent plays *Helen, Queen of Sparta* and *Odyssey: The Homecoming*, reproduced in 2006 at La Mama ETC, introduced the narrative painting styles of West Bengal (*patua*) and Rajasthan (*bhopa*) in addition to the use of Indian shadow puppet techniques.

The Rise and Fall of Timur the Lame presented a collision between Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and the historical figure of Timur Lang, a fourteenth century Asian warrior-conqueror also known as Timur the Lame. For this production, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* was distilled into 45 minutes and combined with shadow puppetry and Yakshagana dance. The piece opened with a prologue on the Hindu myth of the origin of theatre, recreated as a conversation between two Hindu gods, performed on the ceiling of the Annex Theatre with two inflatable puppets. The shadow puppets were extensions of the Indian tradition, modified versions of the traditional form in both color, material and size. The shadow puppet play in *Timur the Lame* included 35 characters, manipulated by 8 puppeteers, appearing on a 5 sided, 60-foot-long screen that wrapped around the audience (Stanley 62-63).

Helen, Queen of Sparta and *Odyssey: The Homecoming*, began in separate trips to India, following Skipitares Fulbright trip. *Helen* began with funding from Arts International in response to an invitation to a festival in Calcutta in the fall of 2002. *Odyssey* began at the Delhi International Puppet Festival in 2004. Each of these pieces was introduced by scroll paintings, narrated in traditional style, which told the entire story to be presented directly to the audience in a "frieze-like" style. The following sections will examine the Indian performance traditions which Skipitares has incorporated into her productions, focusing on her alterations to these traditions.

Yakshagana

Yakshagana is a tradition of dance-drama with dialogue that comes from Karnataka in southern India. A meshing of Sanskrit theatre tradition, Kannada literature tradition, and regional, ritual dance drama, it is both a popular and devotional art form. Yakshagana existed first as a sung narrative, then as a style of music in the seventeenth century, and later a theatrical

form which took the name from that musical style (Vatsyansan 37). It has survived through local

patronage (as opposed to court patronage) as well as its association with the temple of

Bhagavatas.

Unlike other dance-drama forms of South India, like Kathakali and Kutiyattam, Yakshagana

does not use gesture language. It is performed from November to May in the open air, either near

the patron's house or in front of a village temple. The performances last from sunset to sunrise

and the local patron chooses the story to be performed. The audience sits on three sides around

the musicians and dancers who are lit by an oil lamps and gas lanterns. There is no scenery, and

the primary spectacle of Yakshagana is the elaborately colorful costumes with resplendent

headgear. The typical Yakshagana troupe consists of about fifteen actor/dancers (all male)

accompanied by five musicians and a director/narrator called the Bhagavata. The Bhagavata

directs the play from the rear of stage, plays cymbals to establish the *tala* (rhythm), and chants

the verse. The performance is divided into dance portions and dialogue portions; the Bhagavata

sings a stanza while actors dance, and in between songs, the actors interpret the stanza in

improvised dialogue or monologue (Upadhyaya 76).

The music, movements, and costumes share a warlike quality. Of the fifty plays in the

repertoire, most stories deal with battles, scenes of violence and carnage, usually in the life of

Krishna. The stories are all based on the Indian epics and the Bhagavata Purana and are familiar

to the audiences. According to Ashton, "The plays have no prescribed structure," but "most

climax with a battle or a battle followed by a marriage" (5). The *Ardhamandali*, or basic dance

stance, is a squatting posture with out-turned thighs and knees. From this beginning stance,

Yakshagana dancers perform fast-moving, vigorous, intricate steps; high jumps, and pirouettes

on knees, typically in patterns of figure-eights and half circles. The footwork and movements,

including weapon wielding moves and battle-type movements, are designed to express the characters' emotions (Upadhyaya 76).

Skipitares has only used Yakshagana in one production, *The Rise and Fall of Timur the Lame*. Skipitares' production featured Yakshagana dancer Sajeeva Suvarna of South India who performed Krishna in a scene from the *Mahabharata* between Krishna and Arjuna. Unlike the traditional presentation of Yakshagana, Skipitares only used the dance-drama form for the second act where the performer was accompanied by a narrator and live musicians. During these scenes, the performer interacted with a puppet who portrayed the role of Arjuna. These scenes also served as a striking contrast to the first act, performed with shadow puppets. Skipitares chose the Indian dance-drama form for the way it commented on the warrior-ruler Timur and the ruthlessness of his campaigns, seen in the tyrannical actions of Tamburlaine but relatively underscored in Marlowe's play (Weber E6). In Skipitares opinion, "'Pure Yakshagana is tribal, it has heavy drums, it has heavy footwork, it's very aggressive, and it's very warlike. The real folk-theatre Yakshagana is very raw, very rough, and very vigorous'" (Stanley 61). The use of Yakshagana in this production also reflected the idealized constructions of manhood and masculinity modeled by Indian legend and used as the basis of this stylistic dance form.

Overall the audience and critics did not see the connection between the dance form and the story of Tamburlaine, and found the traditional dance form confusing and repetitive. As Weber comments, Skipitares "doesn't explain in the program why she thought those theatrical elements should be fused, which is fair enough; unfortunately, it isn't clear from the show itself why they belong together, and that's a problem" (E6). To a multi-media artist like Skipitares, however, the links seemed obvious, but the gap between cultures proved too wide. It appears that although Skipitares saw a thematic link between the story of Timur the Lame, the conferences on war

depicted in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the war-like dance drama form of Yakshagana, the lack of

context for the Indian texts and performance styles hampered her audiences' reception. Using

mediums imported from other cultures without insight into their specific performance codes

proved too alienating for her New York theatre audience. Unfortunately, it seems that dance

forms like Yakshagana can often only be appreciated as individual "folk performance traditions

of India," praised for their exotic surface appearance, and not for what they may provide to

contemporary theatre.

Scroll Painting

Although the forms of scroll painting used in Skipitares' productions came from West

Bengal and Rajasthan, they are actually part of a larger tradition of picture-aided narrative

storytelling that occurs across India. The majority of paintings or scrolls are known as "*pats*," but

the names for the picture showmen vary from region to region. They are called *Patua* in Bengal,

Bhopa in Rajasthan, *Garoda* in Gujarat, *Citrakathi* in Maharastra, and *Telengana* in Andhra

Pradesh. This traditional storytelling style is most well known in Bengal. As Topsfield describes:

> In Bengal, as elsewhere in India, the only fundamental continuity of artistic
> tradition has been at the scarcely changing level of village life, notably in the art
> of the *patuas* whose interpretations of religious myths and popular legend have
> reflected the age-old hopes and fears of rural people even up to the present day.
> (34)

The term *patua* actually has several meanings: it refers to the inherited occupation of a certain

community which handle *pats* (paintings), it is also associated with those who paint the scrolls,

the actual practice of displaying the scroll, the surname of the *jati*/community/family lines that

work with the scroll painting, and a practicing picture showmen. Traditionally the *patuas* were

known as storytellers and they often were not involved in the painting process. Today most

patuas sell scrolls door to door. Only recently did the tradition become one focused on painting

more than performance. In general, scroll painting is considered a folk art to contemporary

scholars because they are produced by people from the villages who have no formal, academic

art training.

Blumenthal dates scroll painting and performance, or illustrated narration, to fourth century

BCE India, but comments that it could also have been in existence "possibly hundreds of years

earlier" (*World History* 235). The lack of written documents mean it is hard to track or

determine a date of origin for scroll painting. Many stories are narrated in a specific style and

language similar to fifteenth and sixteenth century *mangal* literature, therefore it is assumed it is

a continuation of a tradition from this time (Hauser 110). Other scholars see similarity between

the painting style and those of fifteenth to eighteenth century temple cloths (Rossi 92).

The process of assembling and displaying the scroll painting is relatively simple. The *patua*

first composes the story-poem, then sets it to music, and, finally, he illustrates it with a series of

painted panels arranged one below the other in a scroll (Sen 168). The performances and scrolls

are based on well-known myths and legends of regional Hindu gods, the lives of local hero-gods

and episodes from the Indian epics. Traditionally the *patua* collected stories from the places he

visited, which he used to compose new songs and paint new scrolls "functioning as a sort of rural

newspaper" (Sen 168). Stories may also include local legends as well as social and political

events that have proved important to the region. Secular scrolls depict historical events, such as

the changes after the British withdrawal in 1947. They have also been used to depict social

problems. From around the 1970's on social organizations began to pay *patuas* to paint scrolls

which conveyed their messages—family planning, literacy, dowry issues, the environment—

through traditional media (Hauser 114) With this new take on scroll painting, it is possible for

any subject to be made into a scroll, which explains why Skipitares was able to have paintings based on Greek mythology made for her performances.

The style of any particular scroll painting varies according to district and time of origin, though many have a strong moral message (Rossi 97). They may have a single panel, or many frieze-like panels. Bengali scrolls, in particular, have a vertical format and arrange scenes divided into horizontal panels. Many have rich color and strong detail in profile images, while others show less detail and more subtle coloring, opting instead for a more realistic portrayal of the human figure (Rossi 98). Deities are often depicted in an iconographic or conventional style. Typically each panel, register, or line of images feature bright, intense colors with figures heavily outlined in black, and set against a dominant background color (usually deep red). A decorative band of color separates the edges of each line of images. In some traditions, like the Paithan paintings of Maharastra, "parts of the body are drawn from multiple points of view and are combined in a single image" (Rossi 130). Generally, human figures are painted in profile, and architecture is only represented from the front plane.

The picture showmen travel to villages to perform, showing three to four scrolls at one performance. The scrolls may be taken door to door or performed at a village crossroads or central area. In the case of larger performances, the audience determines the story, which is performed in the local language. The scroll is usually displayed by men, though they are often accompanied and/or assisted by their wives. Typically, the storyteller sings the narrative, which combines prose and poetry, in a monotone chant, unrolling the scroll to coincide with the narration. Some performances use several narrators or may be accompanied by instrumental music and/or dancing, while others are performed without accompaniment. Today's recitations often only last about ten minutes, but in some areas the performance lasts all night.

Theodora Skipitares has used scroll paintings in two productions: *Helen. Queen of Sparta* and *Odyssey: The Homecoming*. Because the scrolls were painted by a traditional Indian artist, they were traditional in design, iconography, and coloring. *Helen, Queen of Sparta* began in Calcutta where Skipitares brought two other actors with her to an arts festival in the fall of 2002. The scroll for *Helen* was painted by a tenth generation scroll painter who lived in a small town about 40 km outside of Calcutta (Personal Interview March 2006). As Skipitares described, the painter "Dukhashyam, and his sons arrived with scroll paper and paints under their arms, they slept on their blankets in the green room of the theatre. I told them the story of Helen of Troy, and he made the scroll" which was in the "skinny almost filmstrip style" of Bengali *pats* (Personal Interview, March 2006). The second scroll used in *Odyssey* is from the Rajasthani tradition of scroll paintings and was a larger, horizontal painting which looked more like a comic strip than the Bengali style.

Both of the scrolls were performed in the traditional style, but with a female narrator who chanted/sung the story of Helen of Troy and Odysseus as a prologue to each production. The repetition of a chorus prologue "The story of her life should be told once more; how a terrible beauty came to cause a war" focuses on the idealized beauty of Helen of Troy and the myth of Helen causing the Trojan War (Skipitares, *Helen* 179). The prologue ends with the lines "And the Greeks ask themselves: Did we go to war? Did we lose so many? All because of a Cloud?" which at the time if its first production, was meant to comment on the war in Iraq (Skipitares, *Helen* 179). In her performances, Skipitares' adaptation of the narrator/storyteller role allowed for greater comment (through phrasing and intonation) on the subject matter than is found in traditional presentations.

Shadow Puppetry

Puppetry has existed in India for roughly 2500 years, originating with leather cutouts. They

are referenced in both the *Mahabharata* and the *Natyasastra* (wherein the director of live theatre

is called the "string holder") both of which date between 200 BCE and 200 CE. According to

Blumenthal, by the thirteenth century there is definite evidence that shadow puppets were used to

enact stories (*World History* 24). Today, in India and throughout south Asia, there is a huge

range of shadow puppets, many based on the Hindu epics (Blumenthal, *World History* 24). The

repertory of plays has remained mostly the same, consisting of both the sacred, heroic, and

elegant as well as satiric, raunchy and slapstick scenes and characters. Southeast Asian puppetry

has also influenced western avant-garde "already searching for ways to escape realism, to

express the realm of the subconscious, the world of the imagination and even the nature of art

itself" (Blumenthal, *World History* 29). Skipitares' use of shadow puppets—seen in *Timur the

Lame*, *Iphigenia* and *Odysseus: The Homecoming*—has primarily been reserved for large battle

scenes and supernatural scenes, such as at Iphigenia's sacrifice when her body is replaced by that

of a deer. The shadow puppets serve as a contrast to the Otome Bunraku-style puppets and

humanettes[5] used for the majority of the show.

Within India, there is a relatively large range of shadow puppets, many centered in Kerala in

south India; the majority are made in the same fashion, varying only in size, color, and type of

story presented (though many of these are similarly based on the Indian epics). One example of

this shadow puppetry tradition is the *Tolpava Koothu* or leather puppet play, which comes from

Kerala (see Venu). *Tolpava Koothu* originated in the Bhagavati temples of Palghat where they

were performed in twenty-one episodes over twenty-one nights for the goddess Bhadrakali.

When *Tolpava Koothu* is presented to a public audience, it is as a mix of both ritual and

instruction, such as diet, the treatment of pregnant women, or the role and duties of a chaste wife (Venu, *Puppetry* 26-27). Each *Tolpava Koothu* play presents the story of Rama from birth to coronation from a version of the story written by the tenth century poet Kamba. The particular version and method of storytelling is designed so that the epic story could be presented to ordinary people.

Each puppet troupe includes a head puppeteer, called a *pulavar*—who is also a Ramayana scholar—as well as junior puppeteers and musicians. The puppeteers and singers (including the *pulavar*) are primarily accompanied by drum and cymbals, though some productions may also use a conch, additional drums, a *chengila* (gong) and pipe/flute. In any performance, the singers are positioned behind the puppeteers, and the older members sing and deliver dialog, while the junior members manipulate puppets. Since many productions are based on the *Ramayana*, there are a variety of female characters in Indian shadow puppetry. Most female characters portray a type—an example of duty, love, virtue, etc.—common in Indian dramatic and epic literature. For example Sita, Rama's wife, is typically depicted as a beautiful, curvaceous figure with doe-like eyes and long, flowing hair. She is the epitome of the dutiful wife. In contrast, characters like Supanaka, the amorous demoness, reflect the farthest extremes of a woman's rage and vengeance. Rarely are the female characters in positions of power. Both female and male characters are manipulated and voiced by male puppeteers who do not attempt to match their voice to the character's gender. Instead, the character who is speaking is identified by the puppeteer moving its arm or entire body. In contrast, when using shadow puppets in her productions, Skipitares either assigns a specific voice to each puppet character (one which matches its gender) or performs without any voice at all.

Each production is performed behind a screen made of a thin white cloth (*ayapudava*), 11.5 meters wide, with a black band at bottom. A narrow bamboo platform holds the 21 coconut shell lamps, which illuminate the puppets behind the screen. The puppets are made of deerskin with holes punched to show ornaments and the lines of the costume. They are all painted different colors, which appear muted on the deerskin, and are held close to the screen so that audiences may see them clearly. Often three puppets may be made for one character each in different positions and/or scales. Visually, the female puppets are similar to the idealized, beautiful women represented in Hindu temple sculptures with wide hips, large, round breasts, and long hair. The female puppets, be they for characters of dancer, demoness, or wife, are posed in a way which stresses the essential nature of each type: the sexuality of the dancer, the refinement of the wife, or the rage of the demoness. Most are painted in profile with expressions that, like many other Indian art forms, are specific to their character and/or mood. The puppets are affixed to a central rod, and typically have only one articulated arm, which is moved to signify what character is speaking (since the *pulavar* may not differentiate all characters vocally). Puppeteers use certain prescribed or conventional movements, such as shaking a puppet to signify that character's anger. These movements are combined with special effects, like pyrotechnic blasts made by throwing explosive powder on the lamps. In performance, the combination of shadows, music and mixture of voices lends most productions an otherworldly atmosphere.

Since her trip to India, Skipitares has repeatedly used shadow puppetry in her productions, specifically *Timur the Lame*, *Helen: Queen of Sparta, Odyssey: The Homecoming*, and *Iphigenia*. According to Stanley, her incorporation of this mode of production stemmed from the numerous large, colored shadow puppets she saw in museums, as well as live productions (61). As usual, Skipitares made an individual statement even with this age-old tradition. Unlike the

other forms of Indian performance which Skipitares has used, she did not have traditional Indian artists build her shadow puppets. Instead, Skipitares created her own puppets, using plastic rather that the traditional deerskin. This plastic material, when painted, resulted in brighter, more vibrant colors. The material was also easier to work with, drilling holes instead of having to punch leather, which allowed Skipitares to make larger puppets, some forty-three inches high.

In *Trilogy* (*Helen*, *Odyssey*, and *Iphigenia*) Skipitares combines various puppetry styles and media styles, but each includes shadow puppetry. In *Helen, Queen of Sparta*, and *Odyssey*, large segments of shadow puppetry are used to depict days and battles in The Trojan War. In *Helen*, warriors, who looked like they had "just leaped off Greek vases," battle behind a 50 foot wide screen (Bruckner E4). Bruckner goes on to describe, throughout the battle scene, "Piles of the dead rise, while gossamer gods strike down the enemies of their favorite humans, skewing the odds. And all this is watched from above by louche deities idling in Olympian gardens" (E4). In *Odyssey*, Skipitares uses shadow puppetry to represent Odysseus' encounters with the Cyclops, as well as other episodes from his epic journey home. In one scene, different versions of the character Odysseus, each in gradually smaller scale, are used to show his approach to the giant, bright blue Cyclops. According to one review, however, the shadow puppets in *Odyssey* were not entirely well-received: "the conceptual ideas are more of a focus than actual high performance values; plenty of clunking and clanging goes on when the epic battle of Troy is being told with shadow puppets" (Portwood 19.5). In all the plays, these shadow puppetry sections are combined with other scenes in which Skipitares uses video, rod puppetry, and recorded music, what *New York Times* review Neil Genzlinger calls a "merging of the ancient and the modern" (B10).

In *The Rise and Fall of Timur the Lame*, Skipitares used shadow puppets for the first act. As reviewer Bruce Weber describes:

> A U-shaped screen separates the audience and the puppeteers, and in the southern Indian technique borrowed by Ms. Skipitares, the brightly colored, two-dimensional puppet figures are illuminated from behind so that their images, colors and all, show up on the screen. The effect is striking, especially with Ms. Skipitares' puppet designs, which, like some Picasso paintings, are representations of three-dimensional figures mapped onto a plane surface; the eyes of each puppet, for example, are on the same side of the nose. (E6)

The narrators in this play were positioned behind the screen and provided reading and sound effects in a "cartoonish" style, which was intended to comment upon the text (Weber E6). In this and all of her productions, Skipitares' "reverence for her sources is clear, yet she makes bold choices that mark this Tamburlain/Timur as her own invention" (Stanley 63). This mix of invention and tradition is a fundamental element in Skipitares' productions. In traditional productions of Bunraku, Shadow puppetry or Yakshagana, the art forms are never combined with other forms of performance. Although she maintains the traditional applications of the Japanese or Indian art form, Skipitares routinely mixes these Asian traditions with contemporary media such as slide projections or video.

Although many of Skipitares' Asian influences have only been incorporated into her productions once or only recently, overall they mark a distinct shift in the artist's style. In Skipitares' hands Japanese and Indian methods are combined to express ancient Greek myths, creating a collage of artistic styles and cultures. Amazingly, these elements are combined in ways that complement the story Skipitares wishes to tell, not in ways which exoticise the cultures from which they originate. Moreover, Skipitares' modifications to each method reflect a possibility for these traditions to survive globalization while maintaining their cultural and historical contexts.

CHAPTER 5

CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION IN THE PUPPETRY OF THEODORA SKIPITARES

As stated in Chapter 1, gender is one of many components which are combined to create a puppet. Of course there is not only one way in which any puppeteer creates gender. The gender of the puppet can often be dictated by the visual or textual source that each puppeteer draws on in the design of the puppets, whether direct images that govern the look of the puppets or gendered voices in sound recordings. Gender may also be dictated by the story or texts the puppeteer chooses, by the gendered characters in a narrative, or the gendered voice of the historical author. Each of these factors in turn influences the puppeteers' choices when designing a puppet character.

This chapter will examine how Theodora Skipitares constructs characters in her productions through the phases of research, design, and performance. Specifically, I will explore how Skipitares creates characters within her texts, expands them into physical designs, and works with actors to mold the characters in performance. Within these discussions, I will focus on one particular element of character – specifically the creation and performance of gender within the puppet character. The impetus for this, as stated in Chapter 1, is Skipitares' unique practice of building puppets from a physical female form—her own face and figure. Indeed, one of the key issues in Skipitares' work, from a materialist feminist perspective, is her representation of gender on stage through the performing object. Other key gender issues regarding Skipitares' work, as

stated in Chapter 1, are her methods of creating texts and characters which deny a fixed identity or point-of-view, thereby acknowledging that identity (and gender) is socially constructed.

The analysis of gender within puppetry problematizes the notion of a hidden gender core or true gender identity. As Butler states, "There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*GT* 33). The regulating effects of gender norms thereby reshape the body, whether it is human or puppet, and these norms are then perpetuated by their embodiment. In the case of Skipitares' work, I will address Skipitares' unique dramatic structure, approach to textual sources, and physical design of characters. I will also discuss her practice of casting across gender and her puppet operators' abilities to work with stereotypes and cultural associations of feminine and masculine in their performances. I will further discuss how her creative processes offer innovative approaches to creations of character with performing objects. This chapter will look specifically at seven of Skipitares' productions: *Age of Invention* (1984*), Under the Knife: A History of Medicine* (1994-1996), *A Harlot's Progress* (1998), *Iphigenia* and *Helen Queen of Sparta* from *Trilogy*, a production that featured the culmination of shows produced from 2003 to 2006 and *The Exiles*, Skipitares 2007 production.[1] These productions show the range of characters and gender representations offered by Skipitares, as well as the variety of performing objects she has created.

Part 1: Gender Text and Gendered Characters

The majority of contemporary puppeteers work from adapted texts, many, traditional folk tales or fairy tales. Some texts that serve as source materials for puppet productions have mutable gendered characters. The text of *Aesop's Fables*, for example, provides a basic plot structure but

very little characterization. Lisa Sturz explained her process of creating gendered

anthropomorphic characters for her production of *Aesop's Fables*:

> Many of the stories in *Aesop's Fables* are just 5 or 6 lines, so I had to make up the
> stories really and give them the characters, because in most of the stories you
> don't get a lot of personality, you get 'the turtle and the hare had a race' but you
> don't know anything about his family life. And often there's no gender in those
> stories. So I had to make a choice, and it was tricky. When I was writing them I
> did go back and forth a lot. I did sometimes write them as if the Fox is female,
> and then I would try it again the other way. (Personal Interview Jun 2006)

Sturz explained that each change she made in the text resulted in numerous new questions abut

the character (such as whether that character was a mother) because of our cultural associations

with certain character types.

The terms masculinity and femininity are polar opposites which define each other and cannot

be understood apart from each other (Blondell 50). Each text creates a set of gender ideals which

are a reflection of the current society. In addition, the presentation of these ideals of gender

through performance, often reinforces the hold they have on society. One's success or failure at

gender is determined by how well one conforms to these ideals and performs the characteristic

traits or duties of that gender (Blondell 51). For example, in Greek tragedy "heroic women often

win such praise by sacrificing themselves for men" like Iphigenia in Euripides' *Iphigenia at

Aolus,* a source text for Skipitares 2005 and 2006 productions of *Iphigenia* (Blondell 51).

Puppeteers can treat gender in a text in three primary ways: they can maintain the gender ideals

created in the source text, reinterpret the presentation of gender in those sources, or—especially

in those rare sources without gendered characters—they can create gendered characters within

the text.

In general, puppeteers tend to accept the representations of gender found in these traditional

texts. In response to the question of whether textual sources influence the presentation of gender,

Allison remarked, "When we are working with an established story that we have adapted obviously the gender is sometimes built in, like the story of *Cinderella* where a lot of the genders have already been determined for us" (Telephone Interview Dec 2006). In Allison's adaptation, entitled *Salsa Cinderella*, he explained that he felt afraid to go against audience expectations of the traditional story, especially concerning the representations of gender. Although through his production Allison questions gender stereotypes by applying them to abstract, non-human-looking puppet bodies (vegetables), the gender ideals set up within the narrative are taken as truth.

Most often puppeteers change the gender of the puppet character to balance out a show's distribution of male and female roles. However, the process of creating gendered characters allows puppeteers the chance to question cultural stereotypes and present alternative views of gender ideals. In choosing texts with little determinable gendered representation, puppeteers can attempt to alter stereotypical representations of gender in narratives. Skipitares' productions have also shown how texts with specific gender ideals can be presented in such a way as to question traditional perspectives on gender and appropriate gender behaviors.

Skipitares' Dramatic Structure

The structure of Skipitares' pieces is typically episodic, a "montage of vignettes," bound together by a common theme (Stanley 37). Skipitares has repeatedly admitted that she rarely writes original text, stating rather, "'I collage text together; I arrange text'" (Stanley 43). The majority of these collages are assemblages of primary historical texts on epic themes seen in *Age of Invention* (a presentation of "Yankee Ingenuity"), *Defenders of the Code* (focused on genetics, race and DNA), *Under the Knife* (a history of medicine), and *Bodies in Crime* (a history of women's detention facilities) as well as secondary topical sources, pop culture images, and

interviews. As Vincent Anthony states, "History has long fascinated and frustrated many puppeteers who have chronicled the past; they have even shed new light on significant historical moments" (13). In Anthony's opinion, Skipitares is "undoubtedly the master of recounting the past and holding accountable those responsible for some of its greatest blunders" (13). This penchant for history is also evident in her treatment of literary texts and ancient myths such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey,* and Euripides' *Helen of Sparta*. Overall, Skipitares has only performed from dramatic texts three times in her career. When she does perform dramatic texts, she chooses plays which are rarely done, like *Iphigenia*, or presents them in a new (fractured) fashion.

Primarily Skipitares' early character types can be grouped as either general/type female, general/type male, historically identifiable female (Mdm. Curie, Sylvia Frumpkin), or historically identifiable male (Franklin, Edison, Robert Moses). There are rarely any central characters in her performance texts, as they are primarily centered on a topic or theme. As Skipitares has engaged in dramatic texts or narratives, the character types also included specific male characters (Agamemnon, Odysseus, Achilles) and specific female characters (Moll Hackabout, Helen, Clytemnestra, Iphigenia). In the 2000s, however, Skipitares began to narrow her scope, using three characters' stories (seen in *Trilogy*), to reflect on a larger theme of war and duty. One character is often represented by multiple puppets (or video projections) in various scales; 30-inch puppets are juxtaposed with 5 foot puppets, often set next to a live narrator (as in Bunraku) who reads the puppet's dialogue.

According to both Skipitares and Stanley, telling a linear cause-and-effect story, such as in *A Harlot's Progress* or *Iphigenia*, is a rarity in Skipitares' productions, one that defies expectations of Skipitares' work as a "sweeping, postmodern montage of imagery" (Stanley 52). Skipitares is,

rather, a master of synthesis. For example, for a production of *Timur the Lame*, Skipitares and her dramaturg, Andrea Balis combined Marlowe's *Tamberlain*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and several other whole texts, cutting and pairing them down into an hour-long performance script. For her more recent productions of *Helen Queen of Sparta*, *Iphigenia*, *Odyssey: The Homecoming*, and *The Exiles*, Skipitares has worked primarily from translations of Euripides' texts, paring each of them down to between 45 and 60 minutes in performance. For *Iphigenia*, Skipitares and Balis worked from Philip Vellacott's translation, eventually cutting the text by half, resulting in a distillation of character, themes, and emotional effect.

Each production begins with thorough research on a theme, often producing alternative or competing versions of history. In *Age of Invention*, for example, each of the three sections were focused on major male inventors of the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, but they were introduced by prologues presenting the underrepresented contribution of women during each age: "the Buffalo Gals represented the 18th century, the Pioneer Women the 19th, and Rosy the Riveter the 20th" (Lynch 150). Often the images come first and in essence "'wait for a text'" (Stanley 43). Each script is compiled from primary texts and illustrations, along with conversations with experts in the field, original music, and vernacular adaptations of Skipitares' research. Regarding using puppets to treat historical people and subjects, Skipitares states in a 1985 interview with William Harris "'Puppets are such a sensational lie of their own—but a very innocent lie—that I don't think you can ask them to support anything but the truth'" (Harris 17).[2]

According to Skipitares, after textual research, "I go to the studio, where I explore the subject in a more tactile way, building puppet figures, objects, and environments"(Skipitares, Under the Knife 93). Research and experimentation evolves into an outline or storyboard script of scenes, "a notebook full of her own drawings and photocopies of original visual sources, acquired from

books and manuscripts" (Stanley 43). This storyboard script also incorporates narrative summaries of each scene including specific excerpts from primary texts she intends to use in the performance script.

Although the text itself often indicates a small drama or scene, the "lining up of the words or the rhythm of the writing comes last" (Harris 17). Often, dialogue includes direct quotes (in context) from her primary research documents. This dialogue is spoken by a narrator off-stage or recorded. She usually works with a dramaturg (often Andrea Balis), a composer (Virgil Moorefield), and a narrator, in addition to the puppeteers and musicians used in performance. Through collaboration with all of the artists, "the structure of these plays resembles a chain of molecules that are connected by chronology" (Skipitares, Under the Knife 93). This structure of scenes, in a variety of locales, creates a unique rhythm and new notion of performance space. Exceptions to this structure occur when Skipitares has dealt with dramatic and/or linear narratives such as Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress*, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, or Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Helen.*

For *A Harlot's Progress*, Skipitares allowed her source documents to partially dictate the dramatic structure as well as the look of the puppets. In *A Harlot's Progress*, Skipitares used the series of six engravings to set up the six scenes of the play. The tragedy of the narrative text is compounded by the life-sized, two-dimensional presentation of the characters' physical bodies. Between these formal scenes (those presenting Hogarth's series) Skipitares developed entr'actes which commented on the tragic saga of Moll Hackabout. These scenes were created in collage style, assembled from documents by Jonathan Swift, Daniel DeFoe, and Claude Quetel's *History of Syphilis*. Even when the textual source dictates the presentation of gender, Skipitares finds a way to comment upon those representations. Describing her source for *A Harlot's Progress*,

Skipitares comments, Hogarth "practically invented the fiction of a country girl who goes to the city and becomes a whore. In a sense, he wrote the story with those pictures" (Stanley 50). In this text in particular, the gendered images and creation of character was dictated by the look of Hogarth's engravings, but the combination of Hogarth's story with the textual sources for the entr'actes provided a way to comment upon her collected visual sources.

Skipitares typically approaches her texts from a critical standpoint, questioning and reinterpreting the representations of gender found in those primary documents. In the case of the historical characters found in many of Skipitares' productions, the sources of documentation often determine their gender representation. Each collection of characters is presented in a fashion, however, that historicizes and distances the images from the audiences' identification, allowing the audience to question the representations presented to them. Skipitares' philosophy towards her texts can be seen in her approach to the character Ben Franklin in *Age of Invention*: "[Benjamin] Franklin was an expert at façade, as a diplomat. That made him a great candidate for a puppet" (Harris 16). In creating a text which presents the three inventors as facades (puppets), Skipitares also "offers a statement about 'male importance' or 'male grandeur'" (Harris 17). Although Skipitares typically presents characters in traditional male-centered families or male dominated pairings (such as those in *Iphigenia*, *Helen, Queen of Sparta*, or *The Exiles*) the representations of gender depicted through these relationships highlight expected masculine and feminine behavior, in essence, mocking historical western ideals of masculine dominance and feminine submission (Abel 185).

When assembling documents for the performance script, Skipitares often tries to balance the number of male and female views, making efforts to include materials that express historical views of or by women. This is particularly evident in the structure of the performance text for

Age of Invention. Though the majority of this text is taken up with long monologues by three central male characters, Skipitares balances these sections with historical accounts of women, such as the monologue by the women receiving electric shock therapy from Ben Franklin. One particular prologue between the first and second act presents a song about being pregnant on the wagon train:

> My belly keeps on a-growing
> My feet keep on a swelling
> And we keep on a-riding
> Cross this vast endless plain. (9)

Skipitares explains some of her reasoning for including these elements in her texts, "Traditionally history has been this big blustery affair basically acted out by important men. But these ordinary women provide a through line, a mainstay of history" (Harris 17). Her background in activist, auto-biographical performance art combined with her interest in the minutia of history and culture results in a penchant for women-oriented stories or texts. Working from these texts, the gender images created through her puppets stand out even more.

Skipitares also generally has more female characters than most puppeteers, and features more strong female characters than are found in traditional western puppetry. Part of the strength of Skipitares' female characters and texts is their ability to talk openly about gender. In our interview in March 2006, Skipitares had very strong feelings regarding the label of "feminist theatre" and what such a label might mean when applied to her work. When asked whether she felt her work was representative of feminist theatre she stated that feminist theatre is a "loaded term," and that "I think it always was" (Personal Interview). However, she agreed that certain characters, like Clytemnestra in *Iphigenia*, create a certain presence or feminist voice within the

performance text. When asked whether she thought there was a certain aesthetic that goes with theatre produced by women Skipitares responded:

> Well not just theatre produced by women, what ends up happening is there's a connection between feminist theatre and not working easily or comfortably inside traditional forms… [and] when you author your own stuff and you work in an idiosyncratic way you sort of quietly, or not so quietly, smash traditional forms, you just do. (Personal Interview, Mar 2006)

Especially when an artist authors her own work, there is a freedom to interpret things in a different way—though Skipitares remarks the downside to these new interpretations for her have meant a lack of a "traditional, dramatic arc." One example of Skipitares' interpretation of character can be found in the performance text of *Iphigenia*. In one particular scene Agamemnon, facing the decision to sacrifice his daughter, states to his wife Clytemnestra: "you must be ruled by me," to which Clytemnestra replies, "Relax, I've always been ruled by you" (Skipitares, Personal Interview Mar 2006). However upon consulting a recent translation of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, one finds these radical statements are more a colloquial interpretation of the dialogue between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. In Kovacs 2002 translation, the lines read:

> AGAMEMNON: What you must do is this: obey my words.
> CLYTAEMNESTRA: In what? My custom is to be obedient.[3]

One sees further evidence of the strong female character already evident in Euripides' text when, in lines 739-741, after Agamemnon tries three times to send Clytemsestra away (screaming "Be Ruled by me!" in line 739) she promptly replies:

> No, by the goddess who rules Argos![4] You go and manage things outside the house, but I shall manage matters within.

Clearly the tone of voice in performance combined with this text is key to the character's effective historicized presentation of gendered behaviors. In performance, when during these lines Agamemnon moves to strike Clytemnestra, she (portrayed by Carolyn Gelzer) does not falter in strength or tempo.

Strong female-oriented adaptations of text are also found in the case of *Under the Knife: The History of Medicine* which had for its sources, among others, Galen's *Treatise of the Parts of Medicine*, materials from 19th century Medicine Shows, a 1949 US government bulletin on polio, and Fanny Burney's letter to her sister giving account of her mastectomy performed without anesthesia. The text for the scene entitled "Gyno Gals" came primarily from Galen's theory of sexual anatomy, which stated that women were just men with inverted sexual organs (on the inside). Together with her dramaturg and composer, Skipitares developed Galen's theory into a cabaret song performed by three dancing Venuses described in Chapter 2. Song lyrics like "Having a penis would change my whole life, My husband would act like a dutiful wife," expressed how a change in anatomic understanding could invert sexual power relationships (Skipitares, *Under the Knife* 100).

In my interviews with her, Skipitares repeatedly referred to her puppets as masks for the characters—especially in the production of *Iphigenia* wherein twice during the performance puppet operators (each strapped at the head, shoulder, and waist to the puppet) removed veils covering their faces to deliver the character's more intimate thoughts from the text. As stated about her approach to the character Ben Franklin in *Age of Invention*, Skipitares' method of using the puppet character as a façade or mask, presents gender as façade as well. As the next section will demonstrate, Skipitares' use of varying scales and a visibly present puppet operator only reinforces this idea. In the majority of Skipitares' productions, although the presentation of

gender in the body and voice of the puppet may conform to gender stereotypes and historical accounts, Skipitares' texts question the authority of both. There is typically one element in Skipitares' performing objects which doesn't quite fit; one aspect of the puppet's body, voice, or text which forces a reevaluation of the character and interrupts our attempts at passive spectatorship.

Part 2: Character/Puppet Design and Gendered Puppet Body

Gender analysis in theater is typically applied to the representation of the corporeal body. Typically gender is strategically linked to sex and sexuality. In *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Teresa De Lauretis notes that sex is perceived as both gender and sexuality and that the terms sex and gender "are usually defined in terms of each other in a viscous circle" (166). This tenuous link between gender and sex is further complicated when applied to puppets, for the puppet's "sex" can only be read through the use of gendered signifiers—specifically hair, eyes, costume and voice—and the use of these in relationship to other puppets. This relationship implies that, similar to arguments raised by Butler, sex is always already gender. Although male puppets are often less marked (requiring less definition through the conflation of "universal" with "masculine"), both "girl" and "boy" puppets must be physically marked to be read as either male or female.

Including genitalia in a puppet's design is probably the most straight forward way to represent the "sex" of the puppet, which in turn influences audience expectations of gender. Although in Asian puppetry traditions many comic puppets or demon puppets have visible and even exaggerated genitals, in American puppetry the practice of showing genitals is much rarer. Instead, in contemporary American puppetry, most puppets are either clothed or are presented devoid of genitalia. Skipitares has made both male and female puppets with visible genitals for

Under the Knife, *A Harlot's Progress*, and for *Trilogy*, where she created humanettes of young and old men with exposed genitals. Lisa Sturz has also created puppets with visible genitalia such as the 10-foot-tall upper body puppets with rod arms and exposed breasts, called the African Yemaya dancers, used in the opening proceedings of the 2004 Southeast Regional Puppeteers of America Conference. Although both male and female performing objects are marked by their exposed genitals, it is typically character design more than gender determination that serves as the impetus for most artists' inclusion of genitals on a puppet. Nevertheless, the use of anatomically correct puppets clearly puts Skipitares' work in the realm of adult puppetry while also making a comment on the acceptability of nudity in various cultures.

In investigating how and when gender enters into the construction process, I asked each puppeteer about his/her process of designing and building puppets. Each puppeteer revealed different methods of construction, yet opinions were generally in line regarding what specific elements in a puppet determine gender. All the puppeteers I interviewed thought it was possible and sometimes necessary to make a puppet with unrecognizable gender. All stated that they establish gender differences by "the physical look of the puppet, their voice characterization and the way they are manipulated" (Allison, Telephone Interview Dec 2006).

Unlike most contemporary puppeteers, Skipitares originally creates her puppets from a model of her own face and figure. For puppets of her earlier male characters, such as those used in *Age of Invention*, Skipitares adjusted the model, adding male genitals, and cast a new mold "generating new, maleish Theodoras" (Jenner 109). As Skipitares' has stated in numerous interviews, her involvement with puppets began in the early 80's when she began making puppets of herself, 30-inch sculptures she called Theodora dolls:

> The first one is the figure of which became Sylvia in *Micropolis*. I did a sculpture, about one-third life-size, which was a very careful self-portrait of my whole body.

It just sat around my studio for the longest time. For *Micropolis*, I made a mold and I turned out these female forms. I used my face on the dinosaur in the last scene, too. Even the male puppets were adjusted Theodora's. (Jenner 109)

In actuality, Skipitares created the sculptural self-portrait even earlier. As she told me in a follow up interview in August 2006:

I had made the Theodora sculpture in the late 70's, before I began to perform. I had made many multiples of them....maybe 30 or so. They sat in a line along one wall of my studio. […] I first took one and cut it up and re-stitched it for its debut in *Venus Cafe*. From then on, I used them repeatedly and simply kept on casting them over and over. I used them intensively until 1996.

The impetus to use her own figure as the basis for her puppets can perhaps be linked to a desire to maintain a central role in her productions, a trait more in line with the aesthetic of performance art than with traditional puppetry or even experimental theatre. Skipitares describes her puppet making process in her earlier days as a practice of improvising things, instead of utilizing conventional puppet construction methods, "because I think at that point I was working more as a sculptor and not as a person who was steeped in the traditions of puppet making" (Telephone Interview Nov 2006). These elements in combination better explain the practical reason why Skipitares chose to start from a female form. Commenting on the change to using a more neutral model for her puppets, Skipitares said:

When I began to deal with the Greek plays and Greek mythology, and certainly when I began to bring actors in, I began to see that the puppet functions best when it's blankest. So I worked to kind of streamline the features – streamline is not the right word – rather *smooth out* the features so that they were more neutral. (Telephone Interview Nov 2006)

The idea of a "blank" face can be related to what Bogatyrev terms the "schematized face," that is a minimalist representation wherein the face is barely indicated—this is in contrast with what he calls the caricatured or stylized face (56-58). Many puppets represent caricatured versions of

man or woman by "stylizing its face and figure" (Bogatyrev 56). Furthermore, Bogatyrev explains, the majority of modern puppets are humorous satirical caricatures; not caricatures of individual faces but of types (58). Bogatyrev notes that with the schematized face, a puppet can participate in a larger variety of dramatic situations and will seem appropriate to each. Since the 1990's, part of Skipitares' desire to streamline the puppet' features has included a lack of articulation in the puppets' mouths. According to Stanley, without the distraction of moving lips "the essence of what is being communicated, the message, the thought, comes through so much clearer" (67). However, because there is typically little or no variation in the facial expressions of puppets, it is harder to communicate gender through the face. Instead Skipitares' puppeteers must rely totally on voice, movement, and gesture to communicate.

Skipitares' puppets still maintain a semblance of their creator's face, looking, in general, more like the archaic Greek faces used as source images for *Trilogy*. Skipitares says these days she is "working toward more transparency" in her puppets, attempting to find "a simpler surface through which the essence can come through" (Telephone Interview Nov 2006). As previously mentioned, this idea of "essence" as well as gender neutrality in character creation is one that the materialist feminist scholarship into gender and theatre would dispute, but that many puppeteers take as simply part of a logical process of puppet construction. In Skipitares' work it means that the performance elements of voice, text, or movements are used to convey gender more than the puppet body.

Structure

In the design process, the first obstacle and often the first thing constructed is the puppets' structure or system of movement mechanisms, addressing character-based questions such as what movement is required of the puppet from the script, what physical interactions are intended

between it and other puppets, and what interactions are intended between it and the puppeteer. Since her first puppet constructions of the Theodora dolls Skipitares has taken steps to learn a variety of puppet-making traditions, most recently traveling to Prague to work with a marionette-maker there. However, Skipitares still often relies on a sculptural basis for puppet construction, especially when trying to solve mechanical problems. For example, in trying to figure out how to build a large egg that can roll on stage and open up to reveal a smaller puppet (as seen in *Helen*) Skipitares sat in her studio and "hacked away" at a giant piece of foam until the giant egg emerged (Telephone Interview, Nov 2006). Overall, for Skipitares, the puppet making process often changes with each production, seemingly inventing a "new species of actors for each show" (Blumenthal, caption 57). Likewise, gender representations in her characters are as varied as the methods of puppet manipulation, or the types of media included in each production.

The level to which the puppet character's gender can be represented on the body begins with the type of manipulation or structural mechanism. For example, in the case of hand puppets, there is little room for detail apart from the head and hands. These structural items are often generic creations of wood, string, metal, foam or wire and not necessarily related to the gendering process. Even in the structure, however, we can find the beginning formations of gendered traits.

In master puppeteer Philip Huber's opinion, gender is built into the structure and stringing of a marionette. In an interview conducted in December 2006, Huber stated, "The common misconception about marionettes is you can build neutral figures that can do anything, they can just mass produce the figures and stick them in any act you want, and that's totally untrue of you are really going to do a good job with it" (Personal Interview). Instead, Huber takes an

anatomical approach to puppet design, an approach which also reflects an essentialist view of gender representation:

> I build [a puppet's gender] in through the physical structure of the female body, through the qualities which are most notably female: more sloping shoulders, the wider hips, and the way the buttocks is formed in the back is totally different from the male. And those actually effect the movement; when you make the hip joints for a female it is definitely a female moving hip joint as opposed to the male. (Personal Interview Dec 2006)

According to Phillip Huber, within the structure of a marionette the fluidity or restriction of certain joints on the marionette can often produce gender associated movements or postures.

For the majority of puppeteers, however, gender is considered to be inherent in the object (abstract, stylized, or realistic) with which they are working. When asked what elements of an abstract object influenced how he created a puppet character, puppeteer Drew Allison of Grey Seal Puppets commented, "Naturally, we play off the intrinsic qualities of the object itself [...] These natural properties can transcend into the personification of the object. Color, textures, shapes all play a role" (Telephone Interview Dec 2006). Many puppeteers begin with what they consider to be a gender neutral model to which gender is added as a sort of layer onto the performing object. Yet, as previously discussed, when presented with a "neutral" puppet, an audience member—if not the puppeteer—will often be drawn to assign a gender, usually a male gender.

Sources

Simultaneously with the structure of the puppet, another starting point in puppet design is the puppeteer's source material or sources of imagery. Often these materials are the most influential in determining the gender of the puppet and, more importantly, the presentation of gender with or against convention. In a series of interviews conducted for this study, I asked puppeteers about

their sources and what role those sources played in determining gender. Their responses revealed the breadth of influences contemporary puppetmakers use and their relative awareness of the importance of their sources in reinforcing cultural norms.

Skipitares, as a multi-media artist, takes imagery from a myriad of visual sources within a variety of cultures. Many of Skipitares' images come from fine art and video culture. They also come from the texts themselves and the images described therein. One specific influence from fine art can be seen in *Helen, Queen of Sparta* wherein the characters of Zeus and Hera—in a scene when they fight about sex—have bodies represented by sheets, their heads by pillows upon which have been appliquéd images from fine art books on painting. According to Skipitares, the source images for these sheet puppets came from "Christian Coptic portraits from the Roman period of the Fayum portraits, which are North African and Middle-Eastern images" (Personal Interview, March 2006). The character of Phantom Helen was another sheet and pillow puppet with appliquéd images of a bare, female torso. These images came from photo-scanned copies of Leonardo da Vinci's painting of Leda, with her face and body repositioned to fit the sheet and pillow. In this example, we see images which dictate gender, however, one must not deny the agency of the puppeteer to choose one image (an idealistic depiction of Greek beauty) over another. In the presentation of Helen, though, the use of a formless sheet combined with images of a naked female body limited the possibilities for the spectator's objectification of that body. Thus, here we see how the basic structure of a puppet may change the presentation of gender. The use of the sheet served two other less subtle functions, one as a reference to Helen's sexuality and the various competing suitors her sexuality created, and secondly the sheet was literally designed by Skipitares to symbolize the Phantom of Helen (or Phantom Helen as she is called on the program) created in Euripides' text.

Skipitares' documentary sources for her scripts often carry over into puppet production. Skipitares' first puppets (those used in *Micropolis* and *Age of Invention*) were more technically complex, more mechanical and realistic (though still rough looking) than some of her later puppets. In *Defenders of the Code* (1987), the puppets of Curie and Darwin were 6 feet tall, with greater capabilities than previous puppets including "realistic hands whose fingers could lift objects and put them down" (Lynch 155). Each of these figures were designed to be replicas of the historical figures featured in Skipitares' script—lending an air of "authenticity" to her words. Through these works, Skipitares participates in the traditions of using puppets to teach a variety of subjects: history, language, health care, business skills, law enforcement, for therapy and general education, and to transmit and conserve cultures. However, Skipitares' work reveals the agendas and alternatives overlooked in the majority of presentations of history, especially concerning gender, class and race.

Modes of Production—Specific Production Analysis

As previously stated, in *A Harlot's Progress*, the textual source of Hogarth's engravings determined the dramatic structure for the piece. The degree to which the visual source determined the look of the puppet, however, is greater in *Harlot's Progress* than any other of Skipitares' productions. She purposely mirrored the two-dimensional, pen-and-ink style of Hogarth's illustrations, a design choice which gave the puppets the effect of "photocopied, blown-up black and white cutouts of the originals" (Stanley 51). These puppets had limited articulation (only in joints) and were used for the formal scenes presenting Hogarth's narrative. For the entr'acte scenes, however, Skipitares used three-dimensional, colorful puppets like the inflatable bust of Moll that loomed above the proscenium arch (Stanley 51). The main character, Moll Hackabout, was represented by multiple puppets: in life-sized two-dimensional scale,

gigantic bust relief, and a "dream-like jewel box miniature" (Horowitz 205). Even as faithful and consistent reproductions of Hogarth's engravings, the life-sized two-dimensional puppets presented a variety of body types and representations of eighteenth century Western gender norms. In performance, these images were immediately juxtaposed with the bodies of the puppet operators, also clothed in eighteenth century costumes and make-up, providing a greater range of gender representations. Through the two-dimensionality of many of the puppets, the use of multiple bodies for one character, as well as her choice in subject matter, Skipitares questions the concept of a fixed feminine identity.

Iphigenia is a more traditional production in both story structure and performance technique. It employs primarily Otome Bunraku puppet manipulation wherein two-thirds, life sized puppets are strapped to the head, waist, and legs of the actors so that their movements are mirrored in smaller scale in the puppets. The Bunraku puppets were used for the major characters: Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Achilles, Menalaus, and a humanette was used for the servant. The role of Iphigenia, however, was played by a live actor, carrying a small puppet/doll which was later used in the final scene's shadow play. Beyond being a link between the various media forms used in the play, the doll served as a symbol of Iphigenia's "social mask," representing her growing sense of duty as she prepared herself and her mother for her sacrifice.

In addition, Skipitares created a chorus of life-sized caricatures of Greek women. Hailed by Hoban as "The East Village version of a Greek Chorus" these chorus members were in reality "five connected columnar blue-hued puppets with hinged mouths, whose large breasts sport red nipples" (E1). The chorus was accompanied by operators, with costumes and blue wigs to match the mass-puppet. These operators stood on either side and sang while they synched the puppets' mouths. Another circular construction of the same female puppets, supported by one

manipulator, was used for a dance sequence. Like the Venuses in *Under the Knife*, the puppets'
bodies evoke a generic feminine identity, while their movements and sung text question the
systems of power and duty underlying gender relations.

Specific Character Body Design Elements

In my interviews I asked Skipitares and other artists how they thought the audience
recognized gender in their puppets. Skipitares commented that rather than one specific feature, it
is the combination of specific physical features, such as, in *Iphigenia*, Clytemnestra's long curly
hair, with her costume and movement that create gender (Personal Interview Mar 2006). All the
puppeteers agreed that costuming was perhaps the strongest communicator of gender since it can
be read as well from a distance as from the stage itself.[5]

Although costume may be the initial signifier of gender, several other specific design features
contribute to gendering the puppet in construction.[6] To Allison, the element which most helped
determine gender was the puppet's eyes. According to Allison, "something as subtle as the color
of the eyelid can really change the look of the puppet" (Telephone Interview Dec 2006). Lisa
Sturz confirms that the eyes as well as the eyebrows and the lips all work together to create a
gendered face: "Stereotypically the female lips are generally redder and generally more defined
and the male lips are broader and usually paler toned […] Eyebrows too, the female eyebrows
are more refined and thinner, and the male are thicker, more uni-brow" (Personal Interview Jun
2006).

However many of the puppeteers I interviewed expressed that gender may not be as easy to
recognize in a puppet as other character traits such as age, class, or race—especially when
several puppets are created from the same mold. Sturz in particular mentioned that, regarding
gender, "You can tell the difference between an old lady and a young lady more than you can tell

the difference between the young prince and the ingénue" (Personal Interview Jun 2006). Sturz typically uses the same head for both male and female characters, therefore the eyes, hair and painted features become more important. She will often intentionally use the same mold for the lovers in a play, using the visual link of similar features to signify a relationship between characters.

The over-accentuation of a certain feature or attribute on the puppet's face or body can also greatly change the portrayal of gender on a puppet. Take for example an exaggerated neck; in female puppets the use of a long neck can reflect a graceful beauty (tied to cultural icons like Audrey Hepburn). However, in Lisa Sturz' latest production of *Aesop's Fables*, a tall, skinny puppet with long neck and legs demonstrates a model of beauty carried to comic extension, resulting in the character of a vain, but very sexy Stork. Phillip Huber has also used an exceptionally long neck in a male marionette, a German accordion player and yodeler. In this case, however, he included a moveable Adam's apple not only to signify gender but also as a comic bit (the Adam's apple slides up and down as the character yodels).

Overall, the most prominent features that determine gender in a performing object are dress, movement, voice, gender specific role or relationship, and the object's dictated behavior/actions within the text. The fact that, as in animation, performing objects most often represent exaggerated types, does not deny that the basis for those types comes from and thereby reinforces cultural norms of gender and sexuality. Skipitares' puppets are unique in their design from a gender studies perspective for several reasons. To begin her design, the structure of many of Skipitares' puppets are based on a mold taken from her face and figure. With these puppets, Skipitares creates a specific representation of *a* woman—a version of femininity—rather than a standard for female or male form. In contrast, Skipitares often bases the total visual design of her

puppets off of historical models of beauty from the fine arts (represented in classical and Early Modern paintings, engravings, and sculptures). However many of these images (often idealized representations of the female form) are applied to formless puppet designs, such as the pillow-sheet puppet for Phantom Helen or the video-projected banner puppets for the characters of Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. In each of these practices, along with her representation of anatomically correct puppet bodies, Skipitares inadvertently challenges these traditional beauty standards and gender norms.

Part 3: Defining Puppet Performance and the Puppet/Performer Relationship

Before delving into the specifics of Skipitares' directing process and her actor's processes working with the performing object, we must first consider the nature of the puppet-performer relationship. According to Jiri Veltrusky, the primary phenomenon in puppet performance is the vivification of the puppet or how it is imbued with life (88). In discussing the "performance" of an inanimate object like a puppet one must first determine what the factors that create that performance are, and what the relationship between the object and the manipulator of that object is. As Lynch explains, in performance, "One of the major aesthetic choices to be made involves the relationship of the puppet to the manipulator. Should the puppeteer react to what the puppet is doing, be expressionless, or be hidden?" (Lynch 151). Skipitares has a specific take on the relationship between puppet and manipulator in performance:

> The puppeteers wear black. However, their faces are visible. I have made a conscious choice to leave the puppeteers unmasked as a constant reminder to the audience of the artificiality and illusionism of the theatrical experience. I also like seeing the emotional connections that develop between the live performers and the puppets (qtd. in Lynch 153).

Though puppetry scholars such as Proschan, Tillis, McCormick, Veltrusky and Bogatyrev do not go so far as to propose that the puppet is the sole actor in the puppet-operator relationship,

phrases like "puppet acting" are thrown around in a majority of scholarship—especially as it is opposed to "live acting." Both puppet acting and live acting require that the actions and behaviors represented be distinct from those of real life; however the puppet's actions have to be even more distinct in order to separate themselves from other inanimate production elements (for example, puppets move either head or arm to mark sentence rhythm and indicate which figure is speaking). So what is puppet acting, or performing with puppets, and where does it fit within the wide range of activities which are called "performance"? Also, how do differences in the puppet-character's gender and that of the performers affect this relationship?

Stephen Kaplin, in his 2001 article "A Puppet Tree: A Model for the Field of Puppet Theatre," created a new classification system based on the *physical* relationship between puppet and performer. Kaplin's model is delineated by distance and ratio, wherein distance is the level of separation or contact between performer and object manipulated, and ratio is the number of performers to puppets or vice versa – 1:1 or 1:many or many:1 (Kaplin 22). Michael Kirby unintentionally addressed the question of the *performing* relationship between puppet and operator when he designed his matrix of performance. Kirby defines acting as a verb meaning to feign, to simulate, to represent, or to impersonate (Kirby 40). He elaborates upon this definition claiming "Acting can be said to exist in the smallest and simplest action that involves pretense" (Kirby 43). Acting therefore "appears" at the moment the emotions are pushed for the sake of the spectators (the projection of emotion), but does not depend on the speaker's belief in what they are saying. Given these definitions it becomes clear that not all performing is acting.

Kirby, in turn, devised a continuum of performance which ranges from Non-acting/non-matrixed performing to symbolized matrix to received acting to simple acting to (finally) complex acting/Acting. Though the amount of simulation, representation, and impersonation

increases as one moves from Not-acting to Acting, the points on the continuum are not evaluative, instead they are descriptive and objective, regardless of style. Kirby's continuum does not answer for puppet performance, nor is it meant to, but it can give some insight into what "role" the puppet operator is performing on stage. Kirby labels those persons which are on stage but not within the diegetic world of the play as *Non-matrixed* performers (41). Though Kirby gives the example of the Kabuki or Noh theatre stagehand for this label, most puppeteers exist in this fashion on stage. That is to say that most puppet operators whom are visible to the audience perpetuate the illusion of being non-matrixed (of simply being on stage with the "puppet actor").

Farther along the continuum, the on-stage performer begins to acquire signs of an actual character such as a symbolic costume or prop. This style of performance, which Kirby calls *symbolized matrix*, can be found in some types of cabaret-style puppetry, such as that of Phillip Huber, and in particular Skipitares' production of *A Harlot's Progress* wherein puppet operators were dressed in period style costumes. As more information is given through production elements (props, costume, gesture) then the combination resembles acting or what Kirby labels "received acting" (42). *Received acting* describes a person on stage that is perceived as a character due to the persistent reinforcement of that character through production elements. From received to simple acting to complex acting, Kirby states, "Acting becomes complex as more and more elements are incorporated into the pretense" (Kirby 45). It is in this latter part of the continuum that many puppet operators' performances actually exist, as they actively employ simulated emotion, circumstance-based gesture, and often speech, in combination with a performing object designed to relay certain physical characteristics.

In puppet theater there is a "marked contradiction between the inanimate figure and the action imported to it by the manipulation and voice performance" (Veltrusky 70). There is also a

contradiction between the manipulated action and voice performance within the stage action performed by the puppet, mainly due to the relationship of the size of the object being manipulated to the size of the voice produced (i.e. a small puppet with a human-sized voice). Many of the previously referenced puppet scholars describe puppeteers as actors, however according to the Prague semiotician, Jiri Veltrusky, although the puppeteer's own motion may have distinct elements of acting (for example in the case of puppets attached to the body), "The manipulation of puppets is a human action that by its general nature is not a form of acting properly so called" (74). Although vocal delivery does belong to the realm of acting, often this is treated separately from manipulation. The puppeteer's manipulation of the object is instead the movement of an object which when properly executed, represents a human/animal behavior or action.

Frank Proschan, who defines the performing objects as any "physical artifacts used in narrative and dramatic performances," argues that puppetry is a theatrical art wherein the actor is replaced by the puppet operator, bound to the puppet ("Puppet Voices" 542). Statements made by Proschan such as, "in puppet drama […] the actor is made from leather, cloth, or wood its appearance frozen or its motions stiff" point to the fact that the complete "actor" in the puppet performance is divided into a pair of puppet and puppeteer, a combination which is not necessarily the same as character and actor (Proschan, "Puppet Voices" 528).

Steve Tillis focuses more on the semiotic capabilities of the puppet/performer relationship and conceives of the actor in puppet performance as the producer of signs that communicate a dramatic character (Actor Occluded 109). He therefore agrees with Proschan's division of the actor stating that in puppet performance "two aspects of acting—production *and* siting—are split between operator and puppet" (Tillis, Actor Occluded 110). Despite the focus given by both

puppeteer and audience, the puppet is not the actor. One must remember there is always someone behind the puppet needed to produce the signs. Although the puppet does replace the actor as the site of signification and has a physical presence in front of the audience, the puppet is not an actor; moreover, its presence is material rather than corporeal (Tillis, Actor Occluded 111). The puppet is moved and is spoken for. The actor in puppet performance is therefore the operator, even though signs are not sited on her body. The puppet merely gives the illusion of life through the application of design, movement, and voice.

Human bodies, though they may have a greater level of expression, are restricted by their physical capabilities and given form. Moreover, the body of the operator and the body of the puppet are not interchangeable sites because they are not equal in the level of expression (Tillis, Actor Occluded 112). Nevertheless in puppet performance the operator is always concealed by the puppet, either literally, as in the case of performances where operator work behind a curtain, or figuratively through operator focus and aural occlusion. Skipitares' productions, in particular, use figurative occlusion directing the audience's attention away from the visible operator and toward the puppet. However, Skipitares' choices in puppet/performer relationships have also created striking images, especially from a gender perspective. In particular in *Odysseus: the Homecoming*, there was more mixing between the genders of the performer and those of the puppets, with female actors performing male characters. In two scenes, Skipitares inadvertently created a puppet character (a humanette) with a female head and an anatomically correct male body. This combination put the two sexes, usually positioned in feminist theory in binary opposition, in immediate contrast and forced the audience to deny their associations between sex and gender in order within the puppet character.

Part 4: Puppet Character Development and Performance

The scholarly interest in the puppet in performance can be explained by its ability to explore the outer limits of "socially acceptable" behavior. As puppeteer Bruce Schwartz explains in his 1983 interview with Lee Jenner, "The puppet can express large emotions, display feeling publicly, that would be impermissible in daily life and embarrassing in a human actor" (106). In that same vein, through the puppet the human operator has the ability to play characters far removed from him/her in terms of age, gender, class or even species. The human actor in a traditional live stage drama is limited in the kinds of characters she can perform, and is often cast "to type" meaning those characters physically similar to her. However, as Eileen Blumenthal explains, "Freed from the stylistic and biological limitations from human actors, creators of puppet worlds can design characters and their surroundings in tandem, with compatible proportions, textures, fluorescences and so forth" (*World History* 107).

Puppets are unique in that they are "the only simulacrum animated directly by the hands of a human and the only one able to perform as substitute of an actor in the presentation of stage characters" (Jurkowski 492). Often, as Jurkowski goes on to state, puppets are considered as a good alternative to the actor (492). It was as an alternative to actors that Theodora Skipitares first began using puppets in her productions. But as the size of her shows increased and the type of stories she wanted to tell changed, she began to see the necessity of employing actors, and dancers, and technicians, as manipulators for her growing number of performing objects. This section will investigate the relationship between these performers and their puppets, how they work with the director to develop a character, and how gender is incorporated into that performance. Within Skipitares' puppet performances, the primary elements of discussion from a gender studies perspective are the ideas of gendered movement (and by that gendered

appropriate movement and cross-gendered performances) as well as the use of gendered

stereotypes and associations as applied to the performing object.

It is Skipitares' contention that "puppets have the capacity to be more engaging than live,

actors in many circumstances" (Stanley 48). Her puppeteers typically perform multiple functions

as puppet manipulators, video or multimedia manipulators, dancers, singers, and voice actors.

Chris Maresca comes from a dance/movement tradition and is a trained Butoh dancer. According

to Maresca, this dance training has helped her in "understanding movement and how to

manipulate a puppet or object to make it appear grounded in reality" (Email Interview Mar

2007). Alissa Mello, who has also worked with Skipitares since 1998, has served as

choreographer as well as performer/operator for many of Skipitares' productions. She has a

background in both dance and theatre and commented on her training, "I think having trained

and performed as a dancer is very helpful and extensible to working with objects and puppets but

I am not tied to any one technique" (Email Interview Jun 2007). As choreographer, Mello

auditions performers and teaches them how to operate and perform with the various puppets

while working within their skill set. As she describes her role as choreographer, "I am generally

working to develop a visually dynamic and interesting composition while conveying whatever

content is relevant in the scene" (Email Interview Jun 2007).

Skipitares' most common mode of staging features a stationary audience watching a series of

scenes separated by blackouts, but she has also produced ambulatory performances such as

Under the Knife: The History of Medicine in 1994. In both types of performances, "Narrators

supply voices for the puppets and often comment of the action" and her tone is typically "a

combination of a social criticism (that can sometimes be scathing) and a delightful sense of

humor and fantasy" (Stanley 37). According to Swortzell, "The 1980s and '90s witnessed

increases in the interaction between puppets and actors" (35). This interaction can be seen in all

of Skipitares' productions. Skipitares routinely uses actors or dancers as puppeteers, training

them in the manipulation while they are simultaneously creating the character. Commenting on

this practice, Skipitares states:

> This is something I think I am often criticized for, among puppet-theatre critics: the fact that there's a slacker quality in my work—that it's a peculiar hybrid of many puppetry styles and then stuff left over, which is singing and acting and other kinds of performing by puppeteers. Certainly there are a lot of artists who work that way. Julie Taymor works that way, as the maestro of maestros of maestros. She's always combined a very powerful dance sensibility—so her actors are really important—with spectacular puppetry. But my puppetry has always been a hybrid […] and I am really now much more interested in hiring puppeteers who have many other skills. Or I'm actually asking puppeteers who work with me to stretch and do more things now. I like mixing that up. (1999 interview, qtd. in Stanley 53)

Skipitares' performers come from dance, music, and traditional theatre. Skipitares instructs her

performers, who are usually in blacks, unmasked, and in full view of audience, to focus all their

energy and attention on the puppet. In each production, no matter their background or what is

required of them, their commitment to Skipitares' unique experimental style and avant-garde

message is clear.

Directing and Puppet Performance

Skipitares' decision to use dancers or actors as puppeteers stems mainly from her belief that

puppetry is primarily about movement, and who better to perform puppets than those artists

trained in movement (Stanley 66). Puppetry relies particularly on the expressive nature of

movement, on the ability to communicate through movement alone, as is found in the tradition of

pantomime. According to puppet artists and directors Carol Fijan, Frank Ballard and Christian

Staroben, "Pantomime is the basis of all puppetry. It is the visual development of the story

without words," and therefore the events in any puppet story should be understandable without

any dialogue "because the movements the puppets make, the positions they assume, and their

relationship to the stage are all clear and concise" (Fijan 32). As many of Skipitares'

productions include no more than 15 or 20 minutes of dialogue (and this without using puppets

with articulated mouths) it would seem that she has completely accepted that circumstance-based

movement or pantomime is the most important element in puppet performance. Skipitares

confirms these statements on her compressed performance style, as well as in a 2004 interview:

> Puppetry becomes about rhythm; puppetry is more like doing choreography. You look at a piece again and again and again, and from it you extrapolate a kind of rhythm, and you choreograph a series of moves, So it is very technical. […]There is something very satisfying about the puppetry parts because it is like choreography, and once you lock in the steps, you have, within limits, a consistency that will play out every night. (Stanley 67)

In rehearsals, Skipitares works with the manipulators to first see what the physical capacities

and limitations are for the specific puppets. According to Skipitares, the average rehearsal for a

puppet performance is very technical, like a dance rehearsal, as she works with the manipulators

to choreograph a piece, "scoring movement to the text," often word by word or phrase by phrase

(Telephone Interview Nov 2006). Moves by the puppets and between the puppets on stage are

explored through rehearsal combining Skipitares' ideas with the actors' skill set and are then set.

After puppeteers movements are choreographed, they are paired with the cadence and rhythm of

the live narrator and or musicians (see Lynch 151). Usually the puppet that is speaking is

emphasized through either placing it in what is traditionally considered in a stronger acting area:

face front, elevated, and/or center stage. These chosen spatial relations are combined with

societal and cultural power relations, such as those associated with gender, communicating a

greater range of meanings than the specific narrative circumstances.

Sometime, "usually late in the rehearsal process," the three elements of movement, voice and

script "begin to play off each other" (Mello, Email Interview Jun 2007). It is through this

combination of movement, voice and script that the "character proper" is built. Rehearsal periods for Skipitares' productions average around three to four weeks after which the performers move into the theater space where the independent puppet performances are combined with other scenic effects, lights, and other technical elements. Skipitares' combination of scenic effects with an array of puppets is characteristic of other object theatre artists. These scenic effects—be they video, projections, or another kind of media—are often not available for rehearsal as they first only exist as a model or concept in Skipitares' mind.[7]

Within many contemporary puppet performances, like those created by Skipitares, the puppet characterizations are produced, for the most part by the actor's own body and voice (Proschan, "Puppet Voices" 527). However, those performers with a background in live theatre acting (including the actors Skipitares hired for *Iphigenia* and *The Exiles*) are not left floundering in the face of puppet performance. There are several core concepts such as relaxation, aligning, grounding, centering, and focusing, which can be related to any actors work and can especially be incorporated into the work of a puppet manipulator (Ellison 121).[8] The performer also uses gesture conventions, or gesture language used to clarify the puppet's statements, mood, or characterization. As all the artists I interviewed confirmed, the "actor/puppeteer" can only develop his or her movement technique through physically working with the actual puppet. Therefore the operator/performer's basic process for creating a puppet character begins by working with puppets through playful experimentation—usually in front of a mirror—to test their physical limits, to find out what the puppet can do, "what looks interesting, what does not look natural," and "how it moves in space" (Maresca/Mello, Personal Interview Mar 2006; Mello, Email Interview, June 2007). There are limitations in the puppets' movements just as there are in human actors, however, "'Sometimes the limitations of the puppet body movements

will bring out something else very vividly'" and the character can come from these restrictions (Skipitares, Jones 47). Although many of the skills necessary for a movement-based performance (in acting or dance) are easily incorporated into puppet performance, according to Lisa Sturz, "more of their personality has to come from their voice and their movement," because with puppets "you don't have the physical vocabulary of the facial movement that you can do with a live actor (Personal Interview Jun 2006). Therefore, the "puppet's performance," or the puppet in performance, becomes a mesh of the puppet's capabilities, the puppeteer's movements and the director's specific choreography.

According to the performers I interviewed, they determined the personality traits of the puppet character in the same fashion as the traditional live theatre actor approaches character: using the script and what other characters say about the character, researching characters where information is available, and "filling in" with information from the director and the actor's own impulses (see Email interviews with Maresca and Mello). As Lynch explains, "When the actor is a puppet, the puppeteer must literally find the so-called spine of the character" (151). Actors in a puppet performance still ask questions of their characters: Who are they, what is their background? How would they react in a specific situation? All of which lead to questions such as "How would they move?" and, "How would their voices sound?" (Fijan 33). Puppeteers must consider that movement, rhythm, posture, and gesture all communicate personality or character, but obviously, each operator/performer's process will be slightly different (Davies 54). Chris Maresca stressed in each of our interviews the importance of grounding the puppet's movements and voice in reality, whereas Mello felt that the process of building a character happens slowly and in layers, often stressing the importance of historical/cultural context in her choice of movement or voice style.

The puppet character the performer creates will continue to evolve in some fashion throughout the production. As Maresca explains, "It takes several shows to learn from the audience what timing works in terms of the rhythm of the performance as a whole as well as my own performance" (Email Interview Mar 2007). For the character of Achilles in *Iphigenia*, Maresca had to come up with what she calls "a whole new movement vocabulary," one that "works for the puppet, not necessarily for the actor" (Personal Interview Mar 2006). According to Skipitares, Maresca scored the entire performance of Achilles much like a movement piece (Telephone Interview Nov 2006). Within this technical score, for Maresca there is still a basis in reality and a desire for realistic movement, as she explained:

> I think a lot about the young men in my neighborhood. I live out in Flat Bush, Brooklyn and its kind of a very macho culture out there. So I have been observing these guys, young men, hanging out on corners and their movements and I just try to think of that. I am approaching it as an actor, and then also its puppetry as well […] and I just kept trying, thinking how these guys hang out and their movement, and they're very loose-limbed, tall and skinny, and I wanted to get a lot of that since the puppet is kinda loose-limbed but some things just end up making him look spazzed out and not like this tough macho young guy. (Personal Interview Mar 2006)

To compensate for this Maresca had to make her movements less natural, for example, moving her arms higher so that the puppet's arms could rest on his hips in particular way, or pushing her arms out more so that the puppet's arms swung in sync with his torso when he walked to display the "macho" attitude. My interview with Skipitares' actors revealed they were also attempting to develop the character's subtext in combination with the puppet's movement considerations, as Maresca explained: "At one point [as Achilles] I'm thinking about how I would be if I were a young man, like approaching Clytemnestra thinking 'oh here's this good-looking older woman—uhoh, no she's the kings wife, I better get away from her'" (Maresca/Mello, Personal Interview Mar 2006).

Maresca's creation of the character Achilles is particularly interesting within a gender studies perspective as it reveals the actual creation of "masculine" movement performed in drag. In fact, Skipitares chose Maresca for the role of Achilles primarily for her movement skills. In Skipitares' opinion, "the puppet is like a mask—more precisely like a Greek mask—so the gender of the person playing doesn't matter" (Telephone Interview Nov 2006). However, similar to the issue Sue Ellen Case argues in her 1985 article "Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts," the operator's opinion on gender and how it is displayed are reflected despite the supposed neutrality of the mask, through character development, gender representation, and performance.

The concept known as "drag" is most often described as the performance of one's opposing gender on a human body. Rarely is drag discussed in terms of the puppet body or puppet operators. However, though the performance of gender is sited on the puppet body, according to Tillis' theories of acting with puppets, the signs themselves originate from the human body and the performer's perspective of gender. Although superficial drag performances are produced anytime the puppet artist mixes the gender of the operator and that of the puppet, drag is also performed in strategic ways in Skipitares' productions, in effect embracing and reading against the traditions of drag performance in theatre history. As Mello explained the use of the Chorus puppet in *Iphigenia* presented a comment on drag and classical theatre conventions:

> It is an interesting play on traditional Greek theatre because in traditional Greek theatre the chorus was teenage boys in drag. So she intentionally exaggerated to almost a drag-gy point by doing the blue wig and the really big hard breasts with the really bright nipples—to almost make it borderline drag, but she's still using women to do it because she wanted the vocal of women, not men—I believe […] It was teenage boys playing women who were dressed in heavy drag and now it's kind of heavy drag only now its women playing it. (Personal Interview Mar 2006)

In the Chorus puppet, the gender is clearly marked on body by large exposed breasts with bright

red nipples, so the puppet does not require gendered movement. As Mello explained, "There's

very little extra movement that happens with [the chorus], very, very little. And they are almost;

they are just acting as witnesses" (Personal Interview Mar 2006). When cross-gendered

movements are incorporated into performance, the result is often a false posturing, a blatant

presentation of the stereotypes involved in the socio-cultural construct "Man" or "Woman."

In Skipitares' 2006 production of *Iphigenia*, she made several production changes which

sought to highlight particularly masculine stereotypes through the character of Achilles. When

first produced by Ten Thousand Things Productions in Minneapolis, the role of Achilles was

played by a male actor. For the La Mama production, that role was played by a female, Chris

Maresca. According to Andrea Balis, Skipitares' long-time dramaturg, both she and Skipitares

felt strongly that it would be interesting for a woman to play Achilles in the La Mama production

because it "serves as a comment about masculinity, a stand in for masculinity in all its

variations…the warrior role, the hot young boy role, etc" (Phone Interview May 2006). Through

this change, Achilles became a drag role derived as a "feminist theatrical device meant to point

to real life gender costuming" (Dolan, Gender Impersonation 7). As performer Chris Maresca

explained in our interview, for a variety of reasons, these layers of meaning are not always

understood in performance:

> Theodora's interpretation [of Achilles] was always—there's something kind of
> feminine about him, his always trying to be tough, but wouldn't it be interesting
> to play on those images of masculinity by having a woman play him. So the first
> time I did it I was really trying to get my voice really low and the interviewer
> from the *Times* came in and actually thought I was a man because I used the
> shortened version of my name—my name is Christina, and I have always used
> Chris. So he referred to me as "he" so well there goes the whole concept of
> having a woman playing a man's role. So this time around I am not trying to
> make my voice quite so low, I am using more, kind of just going as, you know, as

a young man and trying to think how a young man would think. (Personal Interview Mar 2006)

Although my reaction to Maresca's performance was initially to view it as a performance *of a performance* of a cross-gendered character (like Mary Martin in *Peter Pan*), the significance of her interpretation of "macho" grew after our interview. Maresca's experience performing the character Achilles also reflects how the puppet performance and the puppet—performer relationship can evolve throughout the cycle of performance, reception and evaluation.

Gender in Character Development

The puppet in performance is both a material object and a signifier of life, however, since signs of life must be produced *by* life the puppet "exposes even as it occludes" (Tillis, Actor Occluded 114, 117). By exposing the creation of its self the puppet also exposes the process of creating a cohesive "identity." It outwardly, overtly displays the constructed-ness of that identity, the picking and choosing of characteristics from a rather small bag of descriptors. In essence, in creating the puppet character, each choice made puts the puppeteer on a narrowing path of associated characteristics which, in combination, are easily recognizable to the audience as "natural" or "appropriate." Mello's response to the question of when gender enters into character creation revealed the degree of analysis ad gender awareness she generally applies to character development in Skipitares' productions. According to Mello, "gender always enters into the process as the characters are generally 'gendered' and so am I" (Email Interview Jun 2007). Her comments on gender also reflect some of the key elements of my argument regarding the positional status of gender and its socio-cultural basis:

> I usually "see" gender on a continuum from very masculine [to] very feminine
> which includes feminine males and masculine females…gender is also culturally
> constructed into behavior types—what is considered fem in one culture may not
> be in another. The "culture" comes into play relative to the narrative context
> which includes temporal issues (meaning the time period the piece is set in as
> well)...and then I may not deal with any of this, culture or time, within the context

> of a specific show. For example in *The Exiles* I really was playing to a very
> masculine, tough guy type.

Mello's comment reflects how artists themselves may fluctuate between personally analyzing

their creative processes and "playing to type." More interestingly for this study is that the types

with which a puppet performer may play reflect the most latent and pervasive socio-cultural

associations. The concept of a gender continuum, however, has been proposed by other

scholar/artists dealing with gender and performance and provides a good starting point for

gender analysis in puppet performance.

In her book, *Presence & Desire*, Jill Dolan describes an exercise she performed with her cast

in which they as a group created a gender continuum (109-113). She gives an example of a

production she cast across gender (with male and female actors) in which she uses the experience

to get actors to acknowledge gendered stereotypes, work against their assigned (or chosen)

everyday performance of gender, and to work against initial, "natural" instincts of performing

the opposite gender. After creating the continuum, the actors analyzed the roles in which they

were cast and determined where that specific character fit along the continuum. Dolan's specific

group of actors created a continuum that had at the most extremes the labels "hyper-masculine"

(exemplified in the personas of Sly Stallone and John Wayne) and "hyper-feminine"

(exemplified in the personas of Marilyn Monroe and Jessica Rabbit).

It occurs to me, however, that any group, class, cast, etc. would create a very different style

of continuum with differing end points. It is in actuality the end points of that continuum (as well

as demarcations along the continuum) that are most telling of any group's understanding of

gender. Gender norms are somewhat individual in that they are the product of and originate in

the social system of the family wherein certain versions of gender acts are rewarded or punished.

But for the most part, the sets of norms concerning gendered acts remain consistent across

families at a specific socio-historical situation. Each of the "extremes" on the gender continuum, as well as the other positions in between, therefore become a point of discussion into the ideological, social and historical elements that constitute and accompany a certain label such as tomboy, sissy, or princess.

Besides stereotypes of intelligence and sexuality, the extremes of the gender continuum presented in the example also call up images of body shape, movement, voice and gesture that could be then be physicalized by the members of the group. The physicalization of gender types also reinforces the idea that one is constantly reading and interpreting gender codes. These gender-reflecting gestures or movements may perhaps be even more evident in more stylized traditions of performance, such as puppetry. Regarding her uses of the gender continuum, Mello noted, "An object can be constructed as female but be a vast range of masculine to feminine and vice versa. Despite a character's construction, where it sits on this continuum plays a role in the qualities and types of movement it performs" (Email Interview Jun 2007). Because puppetry is an abstract art and because Skipitares' puppetry is even more "compressed" in its style, this use of a gender continuum can provide performance options that are textually specific but which also reflect archetypes that are actively chosen instead of implied by association.

Interlinked with this idea of the gender continuum and the physicalization of the points along the continuum is the idea of stereotype or archetype. Maresca commented that she felt that "the fact that I am hidden behind the puppet forces me to exaggerate movements more so than if I were playing it without a puppet or mask. It makes you strip down to male and female archetypes that don't necessarily make sense in today's world—or at least not in a lot of western countries and many eastern ones as well" (Email Interview, Mar 2007). In puppetry the majority of movements are based upon conventions and the transference of human behaviors on inanimate

objects (Tillis, *Aesthetic* 129). These conventional movements often include indication or telegraphing a puppet character's intention before completing the movement, such as patting a pillow before lying down, or jumping up to sit down. In general most movement conventions are exaggerations of real life while others are necessary for audience focus, such as the convention of having only the puppet speaking move. These exaggerations extend into characterization as well. But what is the relationship between convention and stereotype? Both convention and stereotype represent a pre-established set of rules or descriptors, a language which when understood create a "short cut" in the meaning-making process. Puppeteers often combine convention with archetypes and stereotypical gendered movement to swiftly communicate character traits to the audience. Along gender lines, these archetypes include associations which characterize female characters as either sweet and helpless or the old hag or shrew and those characterizing male characters as strong and active (the hero type), each of which reflect "male-originated signs of appropriate gender behavior" (Case, Classic Drag 321).

One example of how these stereotypes enter into the movement of performing object can be seen in the character of Tiresias, performed by Maresca in *Helen: Queen of Sparta*. In Greek mythology, Tiresias is a character who experienced life as both a man and a woman. In a scene where Zeus and Hera discuss who (male or female) gets more pleasure from sex, they consult Tiresias because of this experience. For the production, Maresca had to create the character from a virtually gender neutral set of objects: a Chinese lantern, "some curtains from India sewn onto him" and a little red flashlight. But as Maresca explains "somehow I have to move it in ways to make it look like a man and a woman. [So] in movement I think of curves for women and men as more angular (Maresca/Mello Personal Interview Mar 2006). For other androgynous characters, like the Phrygian slave in *The Exiles*, Maresca states, "I emphasize both male and female

archetypical movements" (Maresca, Email Interview, March 2007). Underlying Maresca's comments is the notion that the gender neutral character actually carries elements of both genders to equal degree instead of being devoid of any gendered movements.

Another way to analyze the embodiment of stereotypes by the performer is through the concept of "bodily clichés," as described by Jean Newlove. According to Newlove, "We can only act out emotions if we formalize them into bodily clichés" (119). These bodily clichés are certain gestures or movement patterns that have become associated with specific emotions and have thereby become acting clichés. This concept of bodily clichés can also be applied to understanding how gender is performed in puppetry as they are often gender specific, for example masculine characters portray grief or fear—according to stereotype—differently from feminine characters. One could describe bodily clichés as culturally inherited bodily movements and postures—a real-life example of how culture (or society or gender) is written on the body. For example, in Bunraku there are stylized gestures specific for female roles—mostly for middle-aged women and some young woman characters. For a female character to express sorrow, the puppeteer uses a stylized gesture of sleeve biting and towel twisting. To achieve this, a pin is inserted in the puppet's mouth that can catch or hook onto the puppet's kimono sleeve (Adachi116). In the 2006 production, *Trilogy* Chris Maresca mentioned a gender-specific bodily cliché which she used for the Helen of Troy puppet, "When I manipulated the Helen of Troy puppet, I emphasized her youthful sensuality by often placing the puppets hand right above her breast" (Email Interview Mar 2007).

The meaning produced through these signifying bodily clichés, though they are intended to resemble/represent human actions and behaviors are not quite the same as real life; they are differentiated by their distinctness. Bodily clichés are produced by "breaking down" human

looks and behavior and "building them up" (Veltrusky 94). This process of consistently breaking down and building up human looks and actions yields the shape of the puppet, the movement imposed on them by operators, and delivery of voice (Veltrusky 99). The puppeteer breaks down and builds up the looks and deportment of people at large, those looks established by existing conventions of puppet performance, and those looks/moves belonging to actors' conventions (for example Huber modeling marionettes on celebrities). In contrast, the actor in live theatre "fashions the signans by breaking down and building up his own looks and behavior as well as others he observes and knows" (Veltrusky 99).

The combination of associations (or connotations) in puppet-character development are not unique to a particular puppet artist, rather they are the norm within the history of puppetry. Puppet characters are combinations of identity-defining clichés of gender, class or ethnicity. For example in Sturz' description of movements for a princess character she combined several of these clichés and associations, stating that in general a princess would move more delicately (gender cliché) and more refined (class cliché). This artistic tendency is because, as Frank Proschan explains, "The traditional performer whether the puppeteer or actor must combine a legacy of conventionalized conceptions of how people behave, how they move and speak, with his own perceptions of life around him, fashioning characterizations which are inevitably unique yet which must necessarily be recognizable to the audience" ("Puppet Voices" 527). As Proschan points out, the conventions used in puppetry must be familiar to the audience in order to have meaning. Within puppet performance, "The puppet never bears all the marks of the person, animal or spirit it represents" (Proschan, "Puppet Voices" 538). Although each object and gesture has an associative value, there are connections made by the audience to fill in the gaps. The gaps are often filled in by connotation—a sign of signs or second order sign relationship—

producing a greater depth of character. According to Kier Elam the "theatrical sign inevitably acquires secondary meanings for audience, relating it to the social, moral and ideological values operative in the community of which performers and spectators are part" (8). As previously mentioned, the majority of movement in puppet performance is based upon convention. The audience's understanding of these conventions is proof that "meaning is learned, historically derived, and socially situated rather than arising mysteriously from unconscious habits located neither in time nor space" (Proschan, "Cocreation of Comic" 38).

As stated in Chapter 1 Jill Dolan, in *Feminist Spectator as Critic*, praises Skipitares' use of puppets to replace live bodies in representation. As this chapter has shown, Skipitares—especially in her more recent work—does more than merely replace live bodies with puppets. She repeatedly creates visual and aural collisions between the creation of the character in the text, the bodies of the performing objects, and the movement of the manipulators. This disassociation of gender and body, as well as body and voice reflect one of the themes of gender performativity which are repeated in Skipitares' work over several productions. Her practice of mixing female bodies with male characters (more so than male operators with female characters) yields greater insight into the relationship between the gendered puppet and the gendered performer, and how that relationship relates to other writing on puppet acting theory.

As Sue Ellen Case states in her book *Feminism and Theatre*, "The norms of culture assign meaning to the sign," which include dominant notions of gender (117). Gender is up to interpretation in performance (and in life) but only within given, culturally predetermined parameters, like, perhaps, the various ways a school uniform may be worn, or the variety of ways a character can be created from a script. The key is for the artist to recognize what elements (voice, movement, and gesture) spectators use to understand gender associations and to attempt

to control how those elements are perceived—even if the audiences only begin to question why the artist chose one interpretation or presentation of character over the stereotypes. By using several female (and male) performers to operate one or more female puppets, Skipitares' symbolically examines "woman as sign" and deconstructs that cultural construct "woman" which is central to both feminist semiotics and gender studies (Austin 76). Skipitares' productions reflect the range of possibilities and representations of the constructed signs "Woman" and "human." Through puppet performance, we can dissect the process of attaching gender to any object or subject (material or corporeal) in order to identify how we know woman or man when we see it and what relationships, livelihoods, personalities, and identities are excluded by that particular construction of knowledge.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

For most of the history of puppet performance, a performance was considered successful if the viewer was convinced for a moment that they were watching live actors (McCormick 75). These "signs of life," as Steve Tillis describes them, were the model against which puppet performance was judged. In order to be real, the puppet's portrayal of concepts such as class, gender, or ethnicity must also match the audiences' expectations of those societal roles. Puppetry in the twentieth century became divided between a desire to make puppets look like actors, as seen in intricate marionette performances, and those puppeteers who stressed the elements unique to puppetry, or their inanimate-ness. Some artists combat or challenge the mimetic desire by making their puppets overly unrealistic (such as abstract shadow puppets, or puppets made of raw materials—household objects, trash, etc), creating puppets in front of the audience, or using self-reflective verbal and visual puns through which the puppets acknowledge their "puppetness." By stressing that the creation of life came not from the object, but by the manipulator, puppeteers and puppet creators were unleashed into a new world of "performing objects" in which characters could be made from imaginary monsters, talking vegetables, or cartoon-like animals. Scholars such as Eileen Blumenthal, John Bell, as well as N. J. Stanley and Joan Driscoll Lynch rightly link Skipitares with this latter tradition.

Skipitares' career, like those of many other contemporary artists, has gone through several stages, branching out, if you will, from autobiographical solo performances to smaller projects

involving additional puppet performers, gradually taking on larger collections of texts and incorporating more puppets and performers. Still, puppetry is but one of many media which Skipitares' uses to communicate her themes and messages. As the preceding chapters have shown, Theodora Skipitares' form of puppetry is a unique fusion of many artistic traditions: performance art, experimental theatre, political theatre, puppetry, and dance. Therefore, it is my opinion that a greater understanding of each tradition will lead to a great understanding of Skipitares' work.

Reviews of Skipitares' productions, found primarily in *The New York Times* by writers such as Mel Gussow, Anita Gates, James Bruckner and more recently, Honor Moore, chronicle the ups and downs of Skipitares' career as she has incorporated various artistic traditions into her performances. Overall, what the existing scholarship on Theodora Skipitares points to is that her unique style and experimental methods often require the spectator to work harder to find meaning in a production. As previously stated in Chapter 3, the key to Skipitares' style, what I term the *work-in-progress aesthetic*, is that it leaves gaps and "loose edges" which the audience is required to fill in with their active participation. As Stanley states, "Skipitares' productions do not simply require but demand a rigorous intellectual engagement on the part of her audience" (65). These gaps include making links within an episodic dramatic structure (building the "dramatic arc" through the progression of a theme rather than conflict) and finding identifiable characters in inanimate objects—whether those be puppets, sculpture, or video projections.

Part 1: Intersecting Traditions in Skipitares' Productions

Each perspective on Skipitares' work, each tradition which she has encountered, has contributed specific elements to her total production style. Most important to the focus of this dissertation is the positioning of Skipitares' work within the tradition of American puppetry. As

discussed in Chapter 2, In her first works incorporating puppetry, her animation was often described as "minimal or crude" and her puppet's articulation simple with "no attempt to disguise the mechanism of wire, stick, or string" (Jones 48). Upon closer examination one finds Skipitares' work is polished and visually stunning, yet it retains that quality of the "rough edge" that, along with textual and presentational practices, denies the traditional processes of identification. One essential element in Skipitares' puppet style is compression; overall her puppets create a compressed universe. According to Stanley, this compression is "achieved through Skipitares' style of animating puppets, which has generally meant very sparse, selected movement that can sometimes incorporate a haunting quality" (66). This sparse aesthetic environment in which Skipitares' functions often relies on stereotypes or archetypes as a starting point for characterization, yet Skipitares also works to push these stereotypes in order to comment on a specific text, role, or historical circumstance. Since the puppet in performance distances the audience, it already generates an active spectator and space to make social or political comment. It is this space that Skipitares routinely "plays with" through meta-theatrical techniques, her selection of texts, and the presentation of those texts in a historicized fashion.

Moreover, puppetry is traditionally a handmade theatre, and in scholarship often grouped with other folk arts and popular entertainments (See Sherzer and Jurkowski). As puppeteer Bruce Schwartz states in his 1983 interview with Lee Jenner, "Puppetry is about as handmade as theatre can get. I make everything to do with my shows myself: story, characters, dialogue, puppets, scenery—everything"(104).[1] It this particular nature of puppetry, its obvious constructed-ness, which in combination with Skipitares' aesthetic tendencies produces such vivid statements on gender, class, science, culture and myth.

Skipitares' background in the performance art movement and especially the experimental theatre works of La Mama Etc have contributed to Skipitares visual style—specifically her multi-media techniques and the rougher style of her performing objects. Philosophies regarding the presence of the artist in avant-garde art and the performance art are also found in Skipitares' style. Even after her transition from performance art to puppetry, her first performing objects were self-portraits of the artist—giving Skipitares a physical presence on stage even after she turned to solely directing. Even in her latest works, the concepts and themes Skipitares' chooses to work with are still centered on her life as a Greek-American, her experiences with Greek, American, and Indian culture, and how each of these play into [her] identity.

As Sayre rightly states, "The art of the avant-garde is always in process, always engaged" (7). However as performance artist and critic Linda Montano describes, "The avant-garde doesn't demand or expect acceptance, only a tolerant understanding and respect for its ability to aesthetically transform secrets, fears, addictions, impulses, and the shadow" (xiii). Skipitares' productions might best be described as avant-garde simply for how clearly they fit into Montano's description. Skipitares' productions reflect a playful conflict between content and form (e.g. ancient stories told as a game show, medicine show, or cabaret). Her creation of texts feature historical appropriation, direct quotations, and an ironic tone (Harrison 40). In general, "The juxtaposition of scenes with actors and scenes with puppets reinforces the constructedness of the theatrical experience" (Harrison 111). She begins with the raw materials of theatre (narrative and mimesis) and uses them against themselves to reveal and deconstruct codes of representation. Overall, Skipitares' productions, when approached from the traditions of avant-garde and experimental theatre, reveal the seams of such monolithic constructions as society,

culture, history, scientific progress, and identity/self-hood, and they do so without apology or equivocation.

Approaching Skipitares' works from Japanese and Indian performance traditions, helped to better understand Skipitares' dramatic structure and her practice of separating the performance into independent production elements. As Skipitares' stated about her work, "the well-constructed tragic arc, that isn't me" (Personal Interview March 2006). Skipitares' more recent work seems to be incorporating more texts which have that traditional dramatic arc (*Iphigenia*, *Helen of Sparta*, *Orestes*), yet even these are presented in a fragmented, episodic fashion. Her presentation of myths and legends in this discontinuous style is characteristic of Indian performance traditions as well as Japanese traditions of storytelling. Finally, the separation of production elements into independent entities is immediately influenced by Japanese Bunraku. In each production, Skipitares has traditionally kept the manipulation of the puppets separate from the narration and dialogue. These elements were also kept separate from the live music. This separation is physical (the narrators, musicians and puppeteers perform in separate parts of the stage) and therefore the spectators' focus often flows from part to part before taking in the larger whole. The objective in this separation is not only to keep the spectator active, but to keep all the performers invested in the synergy of the performance. The example of Skipitares' production *Timur the Lame*, presented in Chapter 4, also demonstrates her mental processes of collage-ing texts, traditions, and mediums by theme. This production also points to the problems of cross-cultural or multi-cultural performances and how such applications of artistic traditions out of cultural context may not be fully understood (Weber E6).

Finally, examining Skipitares' puppetry though a materialist feminist perspective, with specific focus on gender, reveals greater insight into her unique style of representation.

Skipitares' representation of gender is unique within puppetry, specifically, because of her use of her own figure as the basis for the puppets' structure, her approach to women's roles in her text and her practice of casting characters against gender.

As has previously been discussed, in basing her puppets off of her own face and figure, Skipitares created a new ground for puppet design. However, as she has changed her puppetry style, she now creates puppets with what she call a more "transparent" or "streamlined" design. This progression from female ground toward neutral has in my opinion created a new version of neutral, a new perspective on "gender neutral" in puppetry. Instead of working from a neutral that is presumed male, Skipitares creates a neutral design that assembles and aligns traits typically placed in binary opposition as masculine or feminine, male or female.

In general, many of Skipitares' texts stress power relationships in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Her background in activist, auto-biographical performance art combined with her interest in the minutia of history and culture results in a penchant for women-oriented stories or texts. Her approach to text is unique within puppetry in her practice of repeatedly reinterpreting women roles, duty, and position in society, as seen in characters Helen, Iphigenia, and Clytemnestra. In our interview, she offered her most recent production of *Helen Queen of Sparta* as represented a feminist piece, especially as it presents Euripides' play, *Helen*, and the premise of Helen never having gone to Troy, but instead being replaced by a cloud or phantom (by Hera's doing). As Skipitares explains, the myth of the phantom Helen, "is not just Euripides', its an older story," yet she saw it as a "fascinating explanation for why [Helen] got blamed for the war" (Personal Interview). For, according to Skipitares, most Greeks realize that the Trojan War was really just a colonial war to acquire resources. Moreover, Skipitares feels that "This idea that [the Trojan War] was caused by the face that launched a thousand ships is

just absurd" (Personal Interview). It was this myth of the Phantom Helen that made Skipitares feel that the story was well suited to puppetry, primarily because a phantom character translates well into an easily manipulated performing object. In addition, it was Helen's place as a beauty icon and her being blamed for the injustices of men that gave Skipitares' production its "feminist premise" (Skipitares, Personal interview). In her construction of female characters, Skipitares leaves room for the feminist spectator to see both herself and the socially constructed "Woman" on stage.

Skipitares' practice of casting across gender is not in itself unique within the tradition of American puppetry. Especially in one-person puppet productions, puppeteers often create and perform cross-gendered characters. However, Skipitares' work with movement-based performers allows her to explore the embodiment and presentation of gender-associated movement as they are simultaneously produced on the human body and the performing object. Skipitares' performing objects and their manipulation both deconstruct and at times conform to conventional or stereotypical representations of gender in American society, such as the presentation of "tough guy" characters by female performers: one as an overtly drag performance (Achilles in *Iphigenia*) and one as a historical stereotype (Menelaus in *The Exiles*). As interviews with Skipitares' performers revealed in Chapter 5, Skipitares' performer's construction of androgynous characters (such as Tyrisias or the Phrygian Slave) combine movement conventionally associated with both "masculine" and "feminine" to an equal degree instead of being devoid of any gendered movements. Maresca's presentation of these characters, correspond to the concept of Skipitares' "new neutral," as it is applied to the physical performance of the puppet.

Part 2: Final Conclusions—Gender and Puppetry

We have previously discussed in Chapter 5 what conventions of the puppet mark gender: the combination of facial features, hair, costume and telegraphed gendered movement. However, puppets can be any size and look like anything, and can therefore deny, circumvent, or reconfigure gender. For example, in a puppet performance gender could be signified by a pattern (plaid or striped) or a shape (an eye or a lightning bolt). Of course true "gender" would not be fully signified on stage unless it was combined with performed power relations.

Within the perspective of gender studies, this dissertation was meant to prove, through a case study in puppetry, that, as Teresa de Lauretis states, "gender is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings but 'the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors and social relations'" (*Technologies of Gender* 3). Rather gender is a system of human relations, historically and culturally specific. The design, construction, and performance of gender in puppetry reveal how bodies can be idealized through representation, reconstructed to be exactly what we want them to be (Auslander 94). Skipitares' work is subversive from a gender studies perspective because of its particular use of the physical body. As Auslander states, "In performance, physical presence, the body itself, is the locus at which the workings of ideological codes are perhaps the most insidious and also the most difficult to analyze" (Auslander 90). Skipitares creates characters which are clearly separate from the human body, clearly presentations of person-hood. This is in opposition to the tradition of psychological realism that wants the body to merge with the character, to virtually disappear (Auslander 91). In productions like *A Harlot's Progress*, *Under the Knife*, and *Helen Queen of Sparta*, the puppet serves as a "demonstrator" for gender, class and ethnicity; specifically questioning "what types of movements are appropriate for women and for men," and highlighting the relationship

between gender and gesture (Harrison 24, 21).Through her character design and presentational style, gender becomes just one of many "illusionistic trappings" in Skipitares' productions (Harrison 21). The construction of gender in her puppets and the development of her designs throughout her career, reveal how artists may challenge the phallocentric tradition of representation through visual images as well as narrative structures, use of language, and character development.

Gender is internally discontinuous having merely the appearance of substance and it is this ability to categorize certain patterns of movement which exemplifies Butler's statement, "There is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 271, 273). Traditionally, identity is signified by consistency and continuity, however Skipitares' character designs reveal the positionality and fluidity of these constructions. They acknowledge that the body is encoded by social discourses and that there is no essential body which lies beneath. The characters as they are co-developed by director and performer, show off their "gender role playing," and thereby through noting that they are roles, they are subversive. However because this subversion is presented through objects abstracted from reality, such as puppets, performing objects or animation, it is more accessible to public morality (Abel 184). On a lager scale, Skipitares' puppetry and productions style is unique in that they reflect the opportunities for dissecting and discussing the construction of gender in society.

Perception and the Puppet in Performance

Perception is not an individual process, but an interactive, social one: "a process in which meaning is not given but created and not imposed by the speaker but negotiated together by speaker and hearer" (Proschan, "Cocreation of Comic" 38). In performance, puppets are clearly

manipulated by others (denying agency), but yet display agency or attitudes of its creator and the society within which it is created. The performer with the audience is always aware of that audience, but more importantly, "both the performer and observer will usually share a cultural tradition which the performer is able to draw on" (Newlove 119). Because of this interactive relationship between artist-object-spectator, "Puppets are both a reflection and a meta-communicative commentary on the society and culture in which they are performed" (Sherzer, intro 2).The iconography and symbolism used in any production—whether used in design, movement or voice—combine both social structures and individual creativity. This connection is demonstrated by Fijan's statement that, "The rhythmic pattern of a character is determined by age, sex, ethnic background, position in life, and education of the puppet" (Fijan 27-28). However this statement presupposes that we all have the same assumptions of what rhythms go with what sex, class, race, or age, which ultimately perpetuates stereotypes in each of these identity qualifiers. According to Shershow, "the performing object continues to focus a range of cultural anxieties—about class, about gender, about performance itself" (225). What the audience sees on the puppet stage is a reflection of these anxieties, and from a larger perspective, is the result of silent societal codes and rules shared by both puppeteer and audience—codes which have been transmitted orally and in writing for generations.

Overall, Skipitares' use of puppets, as one of many types of media in performance, brings nuances to puppetry and performance in general. Although her audience is mostly New York based, her methods of puppet construction and puppet performance have the possibility to influence a new generation of experimental theatre artists seeking new methods for presenting non-traditional narratives. Skipitares' work reveals what artists coming from more experimental theatre backgrounds can contribute to the tradition of theatre and puppetry. Through mixing

sculpture and puppetry within one performing object, such as the Trojan Horse/stage in *Helen, Queen of Sparta*, the Medusa Gateway in *Under the Knife*, and the bust/mini-stage in *A Harlot's Progress* she has successfully contributed to the reformulated definitions of puppet (as performing object) and puppet theatre (now often termed object theatre). She repeatedly produces multi-media puppet shows based on remote subjects such as the history of medicine, famine, or women in prison which are far from the commercial mainstream of Taymor's *Lion King*. Her adult subject matter has also translated into presentations of the adult-oriented puppet body, often anatomically correct human sculptures based on her own face and figure. Her desire to incorporate multiple media—though not entirely highly technical media—as well as multiple scales and types of puppets reconfigure the definition of puppeteer to a theater conceptualist. She has also revisited lesser known puppet traditions such as Otome Bunraku and humanette puppets, using them in ways that advance notions of gender in performance (through cross-gender casting and providing multiple, simultaneous constructions of "Woman"). Skipitares' use of Japanese and Indian puppetry traditions and her recent interest in marionette making (Telephone Interview Nov 2006) also reflect an evolving approach to puppetry. Her sculpture-based, multi-media production style is clearly representative of the genre of contemporary puppetry in America. However, Skipitares is not interested in doing away with traditional puppetry. Rather, as this dissertation has shown, Skipitares uses these traditional methods in combination with new media to deliver her unique perspective on myth, culture and identity.

Finally, regarding an analysis of Skipitares' career, there are several other areas which need further study, such as audience response to her work and how her specific aesthetic choices reposition her audiences (Personal Interview). I hope that the interviews conducted for this dissertation will inspire other artists to publish writing on their own experiences. In the future I

would like to use the connections made in this study to compile such a collection of essays by female puppeteers on their specific styles and experiences in the field. I am especially interested in how Laban Movement Analysis might work to inform research into puppet manipulation, gendered puppet movements, and puppet performance criticism. This dissertation also points to the need for further study into the relationship between gender and puppetry.

APPENDIX A

THEODORA SKIPITARES' PRODUCTION HISTORY

1977 *Mask Performances*

This primarily sculptural piece presented 72 life-cast masks of Skipitares' face in different expressions which she would pick up and physicalize with vocal/movement improvisations.

1979 *The Venus Café*

A multimedia series of autobiographical stories in Greek and English, this performance piece focused on the struggle between Greek and American cultures in Skipitares' identity, and in finding a balance between freedom and repression; virginity and promiscuity; responsibility and self-expression. The name of the piece was taken from the restaurant her father opened when he first arrived in the U.S.

1980 *The Mother and the Maid*

Produced at the Performance Garage in New York City, this piece combined personal statements with history and myth, incorporating images projected on her body, plates, and walls to represent how Greek myths influenced her daily life. This piece also emphasized the transformation and sacrifices made by women trapped by their cultural and economic circumstances. To represent this struggle, she used the traditions of Greek culture, such as weaving, to serve as visual metaphors connecting her personal experience to a collective past.

1981 *Skysaver*

Touring performance in galleries across Europe, centered in Frankfurt Germany. Subject collage of life and art of insane, product of art therapy in psychiatric treatment facilities. Skysaver is also the name of Skipitares' production company.

1982 ***Micropolis: 7 Portraits and a Landscape***

Micropolis was the first of Skipitares' shows produced completely with puppets, however most were set in tableau (eight in total) with limited movement. Most of the environments/tableaux were around 30" tall. Her assistant on the show, Eli Langner, built hyper-realistic puppets with complex electrics, circuitry motors, built-in sound and lighting, and special effects (See Jones). The texts were taken from news stories of the day, adapted and assembled together by Skipitares and others. The production also included taped sound scores and music by Virgil Mansfield. In total the show, which took 10 months to build and cost $900 to make, had over 100 performances at various venues in US, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and England.

1984 ***Age of Invention***

Age of Invention, produced in 1984, was a three-act piece based on the theme of "American Ingenuity" from the 18th through the 20th century (one century per act). Completed with a NEA grant of $1500, the show featured life-sized, lifelike puppets of historical persons (Franklin, Edison, and Mike Connor, a 20th century medical equipment Salesman) all operated in Bunraku-style. It was produced at Theatre for the New City and featured 300 puppets in 39 scenes and 5 performers (including Skipitares). It included film clips and a musical score, and excerpts from first-person accounts of Franklin, Edison, Conner, and others. In addition, the production included rod mechanicals and

marionettes in various scales and dimension (Nimen 85). Between each formal act highlighting the "accomplishments" of each of the inventors/businessmen, Skipitares presents prologues based on the plight of Native Americans and the native American buffalo ("Buffalo Gals" lyrics by Martha Wilson), Pioneer Women (song lyrics by Andrea Balis), and Rosy the Riveters ("Doin' it for Defense") which serve as a historical counterpoint. Master puppeteer, Preston Foerder; Puppeteers: Debbie Lee Cohen (vocalist), Renee Miller, Martha Glenn, and Amy Casale. Narrators: Ben Franklin – Mike Engels; Thomas A Edison – Edwin Becker; Mike Conner – Bill Weinstein. In **October 1992** the piece was performed at the Center For Puppetry Arts in conjunction with exhibit Breaking Boundaries: American Puppetry in the 1980's (held Jan 31-May 9, 1992).[1]

1987 *Defenders of the Code: Musical History of Genetics*

Produced at Apple Corps Theatre in New York City, this piece was partially funded by large scale grants from NEA, NYSCA, and Henson Foundation. It was centered on a series of tableaux regarding the subjects of heredity and evolutionary theory, especially the use of science to support social prejudices and the ability to genetically create life. In this piece, Skipitares utilized 50 puppets, many in larger, life-size scale. The large scale puppets, like Madame Curie, were usually reserved for the most important characters, and were more technically complex with working hands

1989 *Empires and Appetites: History of Food and Famine*

Performed at Theatre for the New City (NYC), this musical puppetry piece featured six performers who manipulated 100 puppets, a mix of shadow puppets, rod puppets and life-sized figures. One tableau in particular, "St. Catherine of Sienna," was donated to Center for Puppetry Arts Museum.

1991 *The Radiant City*

Produced at American Place Theatre in NYC, this piece was based on the subject of
Robert Moses, the "master builder" of New York City. It incorporated 150 puppets and a
5-piece band.

1992 *Underground*

Skipitares' first production at La Mama ETC, *Underground* presented a series of tableaux
on people who live, work and hide underground. Tableaux included a nuclear family in a
fallout shelter, coal miners, Count Dracula, and baby Jessica trapped in a Texas well.

1994 *Under the Knife: The History of Medicine*

Under the Knife was performed in three separate "incarnations" between 1993 and 1996.
Part one was created through a visiting artist project at the University of Iowa and
entitled "The History of Medicine." A second version entitled *Under the Knife* was
performed at La Mama ETC in New York in March 1994. The final version, billed as
Under the Knife: A History of Medicine opened at La Mama ETC in 1996. Epic in scope,
the production presented a post-modern take on the entire History of Medicine; from
Medusa and Mesopotamia to a distant sci-fi future. Information was presented in roughly
chronological fashion, but with varying methods or mediums for presentation:
reinterpreting history as a game show or cabaret song, using live actors, dancers, puppets,
film clips, and projections. One Story featured Fanny Burney's Nineteenth century, first-
person account of her mastectomy performed without anesthesia. Each show was
presented in environmental, ambulatory style wherein audiences traveled throughout the
spaces to various stations for each scene. As they moved between each scene the
spectators (only 50 admitted at one time) were presented with series of tableaux on

alternative medicine, history of disease, etc; such as an animated wall piece on the Black
Death.[2]

1996 *Bodies of Crime Part I*

Performed at La Mama ETC, this piece treated the history of women in prison in a series
of tableaux (such as the Salem witch trials, inmates sewing in Nineteenth century prison,
Typhoid Mary). It featured 5 performers and 50 puppets. Part 2 was produced in 1999.

1995 and 1998 *Installations*

Motorized figures and multimedia presentations in abandoned/found spaces (banks,
office buildings, etc)

1997 *Dionysus*

In collaboration with Ellen Stewart (LaMama), the National Theatre of Vietnam and the
Vietnamese National Puppetry Theatre, Skipitares produced an adaptation of the Myth of
Dionysus with water puppets and land puppets (December 26, 1996 to January 20, 1997).
Water puppet techniques and traditional characters were combined with multimedia
production methods. In this production they first had to decide on a space (an outdoor
water puppet amphitheatre), pick a cast, write the outline of scenes and musical score and
create many of the puppets. Sponsored by the Asian Cultural Council.[3]

1998 *A Harlot's Progress*

A Harlot's Progress, a chamber opera for puppets, featured sixty puppets, the majority of
which were life-sized, 2D, black-and-white, photocopied reproductions of the illustrator
Hogarth's original engravings. It was first presented at the 1997 International Puppet
Conference at O'Neill Center and lasted twenty-two minutes. This was followed by a
May 1998 performance at Performing Garage (an extended one-hour version), a tour in

France in 1999, as well as seven revival performances (including one in the 1998 Henson

International Festival of Puppet Theater). Hogarth's story was presented as a series of

scenes, separated by blackouts, with a stationary audience. Each scene offered one

episode in the story of an innocent girl who comes to 18th century London and ends up

becoming a prostitute, eventually dying from venereal disease. Described as "a

production virtually too pretty for the sordid tale of sexual manipulation being

illustrated," *A Harlot's Progress* incorporated operatic song, live chamber music,

narration, and slide and video projection along with the puppetry (Horowitz 206).[4]

1999 *Bodies in Crime Part II*

An extension of the 1996 production, this piece included 65 puppets and 9

actor/singer/manipulators. It expanded the original version to include 12 scenes and a

deus-ex-machina style ending with female superheroes saving the women of Riker's

Island. The productions also featured scenes entitled The Crossing (female prisoners

shipped from England to American colonies), Black Dress, Typhoid Mary, Albion Jail

(performed without puppets), and included letters from inmates.

1999/2000 **Fulbright Fellowship performances**: *Sita* and *The Pied Piper*

Nov 1999 *Sita*: In collaboration with Ellen Stewart, *Sita* was performed in Bangalore

(Karnataka) India, in a large amphitheatre with a company of 46 puppeteers, dancers,

actors, and musicians. Working with local artists, Skipitares and Stewart combined many

types of Indian puppets with Yakshagana dancers to present an episode of Ramayana

between Sita and her husband, Rama. The production held two outdoor performances and

was a great success.

Feb 2000 *The Pied Piper*: This was a much smaller puppet theatre show performed in Ahmedabad. In collaboration with the Darpana Theatre Company, Skipitares' production presented a mix of shadow puppets, masked dancers, and a Bunraku-style Pied Piper. collaboration with Darpana Company of Ahmedabad, India.

2001 *Optic Fever*

This production featured a series of tableaux and performing objects investigating the way we see. It incorporated some ambulatory techniques, moving audiences to three locations. Inspired by Giorgio Vasari's 15th-century book, *Lives of the Artists* it also incorporated texts by Pliney the Elder, Leonardo da Vinci and Sigmund Freud (Stanley 59).

2002 *The Rise and Fall of Timur the Lame*

Produced at La Mama ETC, this was Skipitares'second performance following her trip to India, this production was a combination of Marlowe's Tamberlain, shadow puppetry and the Bhagavad Gita performed by an Indian Yakshagana dancer, Sanjeev Suwarna, and a puppet. *The Rise and Fall of Timur the Lame* presented a collision between Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and the historical figure of Timur Lang, a 14th century Asian warrior-conqueror also known as Timur the Lame. The shadow puppet play, which made up the first act, included 35 characters, manipulated by 8 puppeteers. The puppets appeared on a 5 sided, 60-foot-long screen that wrapped around the audience (Stanley 62-63).

2003 *Helen, Queen of Sparta*

Twelve-minute version of a play staged in Calcutta, this piece includes a shadow puppet version of the Trojan War and scroll painted Prologue

2004 *Odyssey: The Homecoming*

This 90 minute piece charts Odysseus' journey home, using lots of shadow puppets to depict the Trojan War.

2005 *Iphigenia*

Performed at VOA Correctional Center through Ten Thousand Things Productions out of Minneapolis, MN in January and Feb. Also performed at La Mama in March 2005.

2006 *Trilogy*

Trilogy was performed at La Mama ETC from March to April of 2006 as a reprise of three of Skipitares' productions, all centered on the Trojan War. *Helen, Queen of Sparta*, produced at La Mama in 2003, featured a series of scenes on Helen's role in the Trojan War and the larger cultural icon of Helen of Troy. In all, the dialogue added up to less than twenty minutes, all recorded. This piece was first staged in Calcutta and is primarily a mix of puppetry and video projection, including a shadow puppet version of a day in the Trojan War. *Odyssey: The Homecoming* was first produced in 2004 and focused on Odysseus' return from the Trojan War. A majority of the production was performed using shadow puppetry, but rod puppetry, humanettes, video projection and Rajastani scroll paintings were also incorporated. This production was also largely told without words. *Iphigenia* was first produced in Minneapolis in 2005 and was only the third full dramatic text Skipitares' had ever produced. The production featured 5-foot tall Bunraku puppets strapped to the puppeteer's bodies in the style of Otome Bunraku, as well as rod and shadow puppets. The role of Iphigenia was played by a live actor, carrying a small puppet/doll which is later used in the shadow play.[5]

2007 *The Exiles*

The Exiles, produced in March 2007, combined Euripides' *Orestes* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Files* to examine the plight of exiles from the Trojan War (Helen included) many of the events told from slaves' perspectives. The puppets used were Otome Bunraku style with similar features to those in *Iphigenia*. The production also included video (1st in front, 2nd over top of audience) and humanette. Many of the puppets had a far more life-like quality in their facial structure and coloring.[6]

APPENDIX B

TRANSCRIPTS OF INTERVIEWS WITH THEODORA SKIPITARES

Part 1: Personal Interview

Interview with Theodora Skipitares: March 19, 2006, at the Annex theatre, La Mama ETC,

NYC. Preparing for a matinee performance of Trilogy. We spoke as two of the stage technicians

were hanging a puppet of Zeus and of Athena used for Odyssey.

Describing the Set:

I: Is it plastic bags between 2 sheets of plastic?

TS: It's a sheet of heavy plastic and then I hot glued Ziploc bags onto it, and then added about an

inch and a half of water. They look great with the light.

I: (adamant)Yes!

The Set pieces look like metal chain or plates and created a gorgeous effect of metallic columns under the lighting

I: What I want to know first off is how did this show (*Trilogy* or *Iphigenia*) how did this series of

shows changes from last year?

TS: *Iphigenia* didn't really change much except in the staging, in it being in a bigger space. But

it's the newest of the *Trilogy* and the one that's sort of closest to us. We didn't really change it,

its quite the same. There are, if you go back to the earlier play, for example, *Helen*, which is

2003, there is a scene right after the Prologue Scroll, which is Zeus disguising himself as a swan,

coming to Earth and raping Leda, the beautiful woman, and Helen coming out of an egg that's

the result of that union. Originally, a human dancer came from a tower up above in a white swan outfit and circled around the bed of sleeping Leda and represented to rape her. And this time, the dancer I wanted wasn't available and I sat scratching my head and someone gave me some dancers' pictures to audition and I thought "you know what, I'd like to find a non-human way to do that." So then the three screens came about, the big screens, [made from three large hoola-hoops] and I gathered different kinds of footage and decided he would come down and the rape would be somehow done in video and done in shadow. And actually the shadow was Alissa Mello's idea, she's the choreographer. When we were rehearsing she says, "Shouldn't you do this in shadow?" So it was an alternate way to do it that was not a human dancer.

I: Besides the logistics of not having the same person, were there other reasons that you thought you would like to have a non-human or non-live actor?

TS: I think it was a good idea, I just think that an obstacle stimulated me to look for another visual way to do it. I always liked the dancer well enough, and I always liked using the human element, but in a way this is more unusual and odd to me. [asking me] Do you get it? Is it easy to get?

I: yes, very much so. I think that some of the footage is more blatant than others—

TS: Well at the end when those storks are actually copulating

I: If you don't get it by that time, you get it then.

TS: good

I: And I like the repeated use of those…

TS: little baby projectors

I: Yeah

TS: Yeah I love those, they are not, ideally, powerful enough, but they are this big [like a hand-held camera]. Sony doesn't make them anymore. I struggle to find them on E-bay now but they are less than 5 pounds each and I like to consider them a puppetry tool.

I: Okay, that makes sense

TS: They are used in animation like those curtains.

I: That leads into one question I had; where do you find the images that you use for the sheet – for Helen, Hera, and Zeus – where do those come from?

TS: Christian Coptic portraits from the Roman period of the Fayum portraits. They are North African and Middle-Eastern images.

I: Are they textbooks that you are using or…

TS: No they were art books that I just scanned from and then reproduced, the way you do T-shirts. You print it out on sticky paper and then iron it on – like iron-on T-shirts.

Another thing about the *Helen* production that's really important: First let me say generally, it's a reality that in New York its very, very difficult to create and produce – the whole cycle of creation – a show and have it ready in New York; even, as I do, when you raise grant money and stuff like that. And what really you long for and you look for all the time are other presenters who will give you a jumpstart in the first phase of the production. And what happened with *Helen* was, I couldn't bring the whole company, but I brought three people – myself, Alissa, and Michael – to Calcutta for the fall of 2002 and it was—it was done on a shoestring—it was so good. We got there by some small amount of Arts International money, which is no longer in existence, it's a fund that takes US artist's abroad and its criminal that its gone. And so with a teeny amount of money we went to this threadbare festival in Calcutta, which is such an exciting artistic community, and built the show with Calcutta actors and puppeteers. That's why those

beautiful women (*used for the voices and faces of Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, projected on cloth strip-screens)* are Indian TV stars. They're BEAUTIFUL, and I love what they give to it. The scroll was painted by a tenth generation scroll painter and the tradition is Muslim, they live in a small town about 40 km from Calcutta and it's a dying form. In Calcutta, this toothless old man, Dukhashyam, and his sons arrived with scroll paper and paints under their arms, they slept on their blankets in the green room of the theatre. I told them the story of Helen of Troy, and he made the scroll. So that was so exciting.

I: Wow, that's amazing

TS: It was really exciting. So I brought so much of India back into this production.

I: I noticed some of the pictures on the scroll almost looked like Rajastani kings?

TS: Exactly. Well that whole style of scroll painting is almost, even though Bengal is way, way East, it really had something to do with the fact that they were nomads, and they were probably going along a route that went through—well the 2nd scroll in Odyssey, that you haven't seen yet is a Rajastani tradition and you'll see that. It's a different shape and everything. But this skinny almost filmstrip style is Bengali.

I: I'll have to look into that because that's one of the things that with my experience in India, being able to trace some of the influences […][1] One of the primary things, besides the imagery and the source material – so for most of your work (the sources of the images) do they come from art books as well?

TS: From art, probably they do…lets see...well the pillow puppet of Helen, she has Leonardo's face [from "Leda"?]. And actually her body too, kind of repositioned. Well I think they always have come from fine art.

I: It's hard for me to ask questions about gender and puppetry, I just usually throw that out there and see what people say. But what were some of your first thoughts when I told you about the topic?

TS: Well I guess I had the most direct experience was last year when I was trying to cast Achilles and I wanted to use some of the people form my own company. Because I had originally done it in Minneapolis and again I thought, "How can I use people in my company they are not really actors?" But the dramaturg, Andrea Balis, who's coming later [*working out meeting time with Andrea*] –It was a struggle whether I should try and bring three of the people from Minneapolis and I simply couldn't raise the funds, but Carolyn I know I wanted to bring from Minneapolis. And then I think it was Andrea who said, "I bet Chris M would do a great job with Achilles, why not audition her for it." And because she's trained as a dancer and in Butoh, she really makes that puppet look beautiful.

I: It's a very different style from what everyone else does.

TS: And she does a lot of the other movements. She does Tiresias – the little lamp-head with the Indian curtains – she does the little Helen puppet at the end (she never found her light last night). In *Odyssey* you'll see she does a lot of things, she just moves beautifully. So anyway, Chris became Achilles and there was a conversation where we were saying could Alyssa do it – and you should talk to Andrea about this, ask her to talk about the kind if gender suggestion of Alyssa versus Chris in terms of what Andrea thought because Andrea was dead-on right about this…Chris turned out to be a wonderful construction of Achilles. His ridiculous self's really in the writing, it's really in the writing, but Chris really goes somewhere with it.

I: The writing was –

TS: Euripides, Euripides, I didn't touch it except I cut it by half. It's a Philip Vellacott translation and I think it's really good.

I: Did Chris approach it, do you think as [an actor] – because voice acting in that is a lot stronger than in *Helen*…

TS: Completely. [*break to discuss set pieces with TD*] Well, see this is the thing; I have only done two plays in my life. And this play came about because this theatre in Minneapolis commissioned me to do a classic text. And I was very interested at the time in *Iphigenia*, which is rarely done. So I found a translation I loved and I went and worked with Equity actors there, so it was different. It was completely different; it was about rehearsing with actors who have never done puppetry. Carolyn [GELZER] has never done puppetry but she is so good. But it totally was voice based.

I: Do you think that the method [of manipulation] since it's partially attached and can just use their own physical instinct, that helps?

TS: I consider it like a mask. But I had also been really fascinated when in 2000 The Henson Festival brought the Otome Bunraku Company and the intimacy of that [*referring to the female one-person style of Bunraku from 19th century Japan*]. I went and interviewed them. And they were wonderful women. I liked the one-person style. I mean the three-person Bunraku is magnificent. And it's magnificent for a certain deep, psychological realism, but honestly sometimes I can't stand seeing the bulk, the mass of three forms.

I: It's a lot of bodies on stage

TS: I could have never done *Iphigenia* that way, but it would be ridiculous. So this kind of ended up being what it was, and I have to say it worked out great. That one-person style was in Minneapolis, there was a person there who has worked a long time at Heart of the Beast theatre--

-What happened (to David the TD) Did you hurt yourself--- Her name was Cecilia Schiller, her name is in the program, and she was the perfect person to make these. Now you understand, mostly I make everything, but these required a technical durability. I made the faces and I made some of the hands, but she constructed the system, which you might want to take photographs of, but fully credited to her of course. So I made drawings of where I wanted the connection points and we realized that you needed an extra point here (*gestures toward head or neck*) so she made this kind of halter strap that you hook on to the back of the neck of the puppet. Originally it was connected head, shoulder, waist – that you slot into a construction belt – and feet. We amputated—you asked about changes last year. The feet of the men began to look a little odd to me and I don't think they were functioning as well as they should – except for Achilles where its this silly little marching.

I: And they can become comical. Because when the messenger came out I heard the audience kind of giggling a little. You definitely wouldn't want that when Agamemnon is on stage

TS: Last year we did though. We amputated him last year and its much better. And Menelaus actually has his little legs attached but we've covered them up. So he still walks and his legs show under the cloth.

I: And that's something if you had the third person that's what they would be doing but you don't need to for this.

TS: So yeah, that's a change. So Cecilia really built these durable, durable things that give us very little grief.

I: So the actors that don't usually use puppets can learn.

TS: Well they all learned, I mean the first rehearsals in Minneapolis were hilarious because the puppets weren't ready and here's the thing you realize immediately, you can just go into a

rehearsal room with actors, you can start rehearsing – if you don't have your bloody puppets, what are you going to do?! So I remember the first couple of days, we had 1 working puppet we used to trade if off all the time. But you know what that opened a window onto? When you do a Greek Tragedy like this, you don't figure out exactly how they did it casting wise, because we are always told they only had three actors to play like this. And if you notice the way the play is structured you can see it, because, for example, Menelaus might be shared with the old man like we did but Menelaus doesn't show up ever again. And probably the person who was playing, it could be that the person who was playing Menelaus ends up playing Iphigenia, you know what I mean, the way its all switched around? So you get a window into how they cast it, which is so much fun. And then you think about all the masks because you think that, well we know that a guy was playing Iphigenia and a guy was playing Clytemnestra. So there's some similarity in that interchangeableness of the roles.

I: And the construction or the application of that gender on top of that.

TS: So in a funny way it turned out being like a Greek mask and I think that I was aware of that. So this play more than so many other good plays is really about [*unclear*] desire. It's that notion of that little [*unclear*] to the army, [*unclear*] to his brother and his conflict inside. Iphigenia, I knew from the start I didn't want her to be a puppet. Because she was so pure and so young that perhaps she didn't have time to grow that shell yet, and that this defining moment in her life propelled her into adulthood, but death. So I know that, that was an instinct that I would only use an actress and not encumber her, but she gets this teeny little puppet. And I don't even know if it worked. Well, now I think it works well, people buy it, but I was never sure it would work.

I: And there's some times where, because she's surrounded by the other puppets, I don't think there's an issue where it's the live actor versus the puppets, but sometimes, the smaller puppet –

it's my instinct to say oh that's her character, but then its not, and I like this idea of it being a shell

TS: Well it's some little part of her, the childish self that she actually throws away.

I: And you have that link so that when you have the shadow puppet you can know who that is. So you have to have at least the visual repetition. Well I have read in so many things that you model the faces and figures off of your own, is that still true?

TS: I don't know that I do that now except they kind of do look like archaic Greek faces, I mean I go for something neutral. And actually 4 of the faces are from the same mold you know Clytemnestra, Achilles, Menelaus and the Messenger. And then Agamemnon I made out of a different mold. Just between you and me I am not that happy about his face you know who he reminds me of sometime? The Count in Sesame Street –

I: (laughing) Oh no, no, no –

TS: (laughing) his ears are a little pointy or something went wrong there

I: If he had pink skin [both laughing…] so there were two different molds. So when you try, when you make them, because I have never had a chance to do that, how do you make them so that they appear neutral? Gender neutral you mean right?

TS: Yeah except I think Menelaus should be more rugged, I mean in an ideal world I would go back and make like a hefty Menelaus. But I didn't, I mean this was just an experiment. I just think simplified. I think they have some kind of a look of an archaic Greek something. I always like to, when dealing with Greek stuff, which I am not going to say I am not going to deal with it. You know I probably won't deal with it again and again and again, this is probably it, but I like that notion of the Mediterranean as a really diverse place of many, many different cultures. That's why the Calcutta thing was so interesting. [*Follow up with her on this link*]

I: How do you think, was it received well there is in Calcutta?

TS: Oh, definitely. It's a great, great community there it's the most brilliant, lively, contemporary art place of all the other cities. I mean Mumbai's the movie capital, but Calcutta's really a brilliant place. (To TD) Oh that's starting to look wonderful.

(Commenting on the hanging puppets)

I: So the eye is for Athena and the lighting bolt is for Zeus? That's great… (*Few more moments watching and choosing not to bother the stagehands*)

TS: So well we were talking about the neutral mask and

I: modeling off of your face – which you don't do as much any more?

TS: No.

I: How do you think the audience recognizes gender? Like if you have a neutral mask, is it by putting the curly hair on Clytemnestra that they know, is it a costume, or is it something that's in the movement?

TS: All of those things. And I hope that you can talk to Chris, you must email her. But we'll meet and maybe she can start telling you but you have to talk to her and Alissa too

I: Just to know their process and how they went about changing, the movements that Chris does, I mean of course they are bigger because she has the puppet but they are almost that Peter Pan style.

TS: Well he is a little Peter Pan-ish, it's funny. But that's okay because he's lie 18 years old at the time, he's the golden boy.

I: But even like Mary Martin, Peter Pan, you know like how you play a guy?

TS: You'll have to talk to her about that, that's just a great idea.

I: And I didn't know if that was something that she was thinking or if it just came out of her characterization

TS: You have got to talk to her.

I: I will. Because really that's the bulk of what I'm doing is trying to figure out where that process comes from.

TS: Now see I think you might want to talk to other puppeteers who do like 300 marionette shows a year where they play every character. I think for us it was just a series of discoveries in the dark to tell you the truth. And I think that if you go to other puppeteers, maybe even puppeteers that do very traditional marionette work or other kind of hidden work you can get some fun answers about how they construct a woman or how they construct an old man or something like that.

I mean another thing that's interesting about *Iphigenia* is Nicky [Paraiso] as a humanette. Because hardly anybody uses humanettes. And that's when you use your own face and a little body. And that turned out to be I think a really good choice for the slave. That he would always be dirtying himself on the floor as the other puppets are kind of airborne almost.

I: And very much they have to look down to him all the time. I don't think I have ever seen that [a humanette] before

TS: Well the only time I ever saw it in a picture was I was looking through old pictures of Charles Ludlum's productions. The Ridiculous Theatre – do you know it – the best of the best! And I saw that in one of his early shows like in the 70's his partner, Everett Quinton was a humanette. And it was a silly little dress or something tied up on the head. So I love those humanettes.

I: Have you used them in other shows?

TS: *Helen* and in *Odyssey*, that's it

I: So only in this *Trilogy*.

TS: Yeah

I: The choices then of having, say like in Helen, the puppeteer/operator is female but there is the male body, those are just choices by necessity? Or is that something that…

TS: Why didn't I have Michael Kelly do that? I don't know, more movement based, it doesn't matter in that kind of puppet, that's different from the psychological implications of *Iphigenia*.

I: Well they don't speak so there's just the image. I really did enjoy the voice acting in *Iphigenia*, its just beautiful, and they move really well with those puppets…and we can just talk because I have pages of stuff to talk about…

 What type of audience, the audience that you had last night is that -- is there a certain type of audience that comes to your show?

TS: I have a following, a core of people, let's not say it's huge but I have a following. And then what happens is that people write about you like today the *Times* is coming for the Matinee and the evening. So that review weighs a lot. If that review is really good then you get fresh new people coming to be part of your following and the house will just pack out. And because its Equity workshop in New York you can't have more than 99 people, so that will generate a new fresh audience. And then there's the La Mama audience, its not overwhelming. Last year when we did *Iphigenia* alone we got a really great *Times* review so we sold out every single night of course.

I: So do you think it's probably the same audience that supports experimental theatre in general?

TS: That's a really big term, so there are too many compartments inside of that now. There's a puppetry audience that will come to see whatever is puppetry. But that's not a huge audience but it's a growing one.

I: From the Henson Festival?

TS: I did 2 of those International Festivals. They got to the point where there were some many events from like 40 countries in 13 theatres. And it was SOLD OUT fully; people just bought whatever they could. And so that was your puppet audience focused toward a really hot event. So there's a puppetry audience. My old-end audience is the visual art world, but that's pretty much dwindled. And then, what is experimental theatre, there is no such thing for me anymore of that term, so what is it? Is it people who follow some sort of [pause] alternative theatre, I don't know. For example – this is not me – but down the block, Richard Foreman does like a three month run in his tiny little theatre packs, them out every night, filled with young people, younger than you, I mean people that are 20 I don't know how old are you?

I: 27

TS: Okay, people like undergrads and young grads from Columbia and NYU. They just see it and they die for it. And he's in his 70's. He connected in some way – his weirdness connects with this younger audience. I don't have *that* so I think it's more a generalist audience that *(laughing)* reads the *New York Times*! Something like that.

I: Well you said that there really isn't experimental theatre – it's too big. The word avant-garde theater has been applied as the same kind of label for everything

TS: That's more specific but its still a hard word for example – too bad you don't have more time here because you would want to go to Brooklyn and see *Emperor Jones* by the Wooster

Group. Did you read that review? It was reviewed in Wednesday's *Times* I think, with Kate

Valk. He calls her Sarah Bernhardt, its amazing.

I: But do you think that is kind of a similar draw, that the same people who go to see that would

come see this?

TS: Some, some they have a much hotter following. (To the TD) David is it interesting at all now

for me to tell you it's not even…

(We pause so that she could give them some direction. I tell her that while we were talking I

overheard the TD and the other stage crew talking about the gender of the puppets they were

hanging – something like "Athena has the big eye so that's a girl and Zeus has the lighting bolt

so that's a boy) Chatting more with the TD…Only her side is audible on the tape

I: Well eventually, I'll let you know cause of the grants, I am going to try and come back

because I want to see the 2 tapes that are in the Billy Rose Collection in Lincoln Center.

TS: Which ones?

I: It's *Harlot's Progress*

TS: I have a good *Harlot's Progress*, But the Robert Moses, Radiant City; I am not allowed to

have because the set design union won't permit it. That you have to go to Lincoln Center.

I: And then *Eh Joe*

TS: That's not mine

I: That's got your name on it

TS: That's a really sad mistake. Eh Joe.

I: I know its Beckett, but did you do something in it, did you do costumes or anything?

TS: Oh I might have done like a costume, like one man's robe…somebody has to tell them.

I: Well I will if I get up there.

TS: That's done by Erica BILDER

(More chatting about video access)

(Break to talk to TD)

I: So do you have an ideal audience?

TS: No, Oh well see I love working internationally, because that's so exciting to see audiences like we did an early version of *Odyssey* in Delhi 2 years ago at a puppet festival. And that's a whole other thing. I mean there's a home base here, but I really like doing the work for many different kinds of communities and many different cultures.

I: And just seeing their responses that are different from anything you can expect. Did *Helen* come out of something during your Fulbright trip?

TS: Well *Helen* came about…

I: What shows did you do there, was it *Pied Piper* and…

TS: How did you know that?

I: Oh reading, it's in the Stanley or the Lynch article...one of the articles

TS: Oh no, no, no this *Pied Piper* thing that I did – this is spooky that you know this – was with a company in Ahmedabad. And I did a production there with Ellen Stewart, called *Sita*. I did that in Bangalore, now how did you know about that?

I: That's all in the Stanley Article

TS: oh yeah,

I: That's the only one I could find that had anything (about the India trip)

TS: She's great, have you met her?

I: Know I will have to do that. Yeah, so *Pied Piper* and *Sita* those were the two that you did

there. Was *Sita* something that you came up with while you were there?

TS: Yeah

I; And you just worked with the actors there?

TS: yeah, yeah

I: How do you think those were received there?

TS: Oh, well *Pied Piper* was a small show, that's a small puppet theatre. *Sita* was huge, it was in this outdoor amphitheater, in the town of Bangalore *(chat a little about Bangalore, me teaching, wanting to go back, etc)* I: So Sita was in a large place in Bangalore?

TS: A large amphitheater and it was wonderful. It was a huge cast, a cast of about 40.

I: Was it puppets and live actors?

TS: Yeah

I: What type of puppets?

TS: Well a lot of the puppeteers that we brought in for the show used their puppet style, so there were many, many puppet styles. And there were Yakshagana dancers which were one of my favorites. It's much more energetic than Kathakali.

I: Well was the *Pied Piper* just a regular folk tale or was it a certain version that you had found?

TS: Yeah, I just worked with this theatre company (talking with TD for a minute) that was a small production. And that company, the Darpana theatre, (*look them up*).

I: Now your work is primarily funded through grants?

TS: Oh yeah, or like I said, I have found really shoestring little ways to jump-start a project because the effort of starting a project is overwhelming. For example this tiny little grant from Arts International responding to an invitation to the festival in Calcutta, launched *Helen*. And a tiny little amount of money launched *Odyssey,* in the Delhi International Puppet Festival. And

Ten Thousand Things Theatre in Minneapolis underwrote really the first production of *Iphigenia* that went to all these prisons. And that was really exciting to see.

 The great thing about Ten Thousand Things is they do productions that you just take into a prison, set up in 20 minutes and leave, and I never thought I could work like that because look at all this [*pointing to all the production work around in Annex*]. But having those puppets in their bins, from Target, you just took your bin into the prison; you did the show with no lights, just work lights. One little set piece of the chorus, she was there, and you brought her in on wheels. They had a van for all the actors and now talk about audiences, that was exciting.

 We went to men's prisons and women's prisons. So the first show we take it to a women's facility. [pause] And can you imagine the fathers in their lives, practically selling them for a sacrifice. I will never forget what one woman said, she came and she said I am so glad to see this. This morning (an officer?) was telling me to come to this and I said "I don't wanna go see no Greek Pathology." It's so brilliant, she meant to say mythology but it is Greek pathology! (Laughing) [pause] See it's interesting to me that the emotional response is in the script, like *Iphigenia* the way it's NOT in My scripts. And like I remember one of my fellow puppeteers in the community coming to *Iphigenia* last year and she said "Wow, a puppet show that makes you cry" And there aren't too many of those.

I: How did you think it was different, in the women's penitentiary--

TS: It was a women's facility not a penitentiary, but anyway, how was it different?

I: Yeah

TS: Well I have done a lot of work in women's prisons. A couple years back I did a piece about the history of women's prisons. My cousin was doing a ten year sentence in a federal prison in

California and I used to visit her a lot, so I could see some of the differences between a women's facility and a men's facility. So generally a women's facility is warmer, the women are kind of nurturing to each other, and it's not as threatening as Men's facilities. Men's facilities are tense. They responded to it, they weren't about to be crying but they responded to it. It was also interesting to see what people in those two public facilities responded to in terms of the characters. And that was that everyone loved the slave. They totally identified with this little man who was big of heart, and earnest, and sort of a moral core, one of the moral cores. So they giggled frantically the combination of that - they went right to him, they went right to him. The director of Ten Thousand Things theatre had flown me out a couple of weeks before to see one of their other productions in a facility - *Cyrano de Bergerac*. And the people you could see them respond to Cyrano's big heart, his humiliation - they really loved the comic side characters who are the underdogs, I mean it was really interesting. They totally attached empathetically to the old man and let's see who else...well they cried for the daughter, the women, but I guess the old man was the one they were drawn to.

I: So because it's a very different type of text from what you write?

TS: Yeah, Oh yes, I would never write that, the well constructed tragic arc, that isn't me - but I loved it. I loved going in there.

I: Was *Harlot's Progress*, now that was based off of--

TS: Hogarth's 6 plates

I: Right, There's a narrative that's in that

TS: Totally, it is a narrative

I: It's more like a scenario right?

TS: Yeah and the co-creator of that, Barry Greenhunt, who wrote the music and the text. Yeah

that was definitely well created that way - it had an arc, totally.

I: And so you just use that as a scenario and then put in dialogue here and there?

TS: And music, and puppetry

I: It was more of an opera right?

TS Yeah it was sung fully sung.

I: This is such a weird touchy subject, well not really -- do think that you have a personal style? A style that you repeat?

TS: Yeah, well I have certain aesthetic tendencies. And I am not probably even the best person to say what they are. But I think oh gosh, it is hard. Well I think I used to really, because I came from first being a solo performance artist, I think that I used those strong visual stills put together. And then from the early puppet work, that episodic nature has been part of it and I think as it developed I think that became – I was blind to it I think because sometimes you can't see things until a few years past or something like that. I think certain people--(to TD: What's that...I'll fix it) certain people became - critics and what not, who write about it - became really frustrated by the non-narrative structure of things. I would structure things chronologically you know like *The History of Medicine*; a walk through that was chronological. I guess I thought that somehow as you are walking through that you use time differently from sitting in a seat. I mean this is only recently for me that you sit in a seat and watch everything. But this is where I am now, definitely.

I suppose I am more in line with the frame of the proscenium - I mean this isn't really a proscenium but you understand, closer in. And pressing these three plays into one space was a good thing because, once we got the logistics out of the way they really kind of coexisted although they are three very, very different plays. I mean you saw that with *Helen*, how different

Helen is from *Iphigenia*. Again, chronology dictated the trilogy, *Iphigenia* being about those moments before the war which *Helen* has created just before. So that statement that the scroll singer says which it comes rights out of, the line comes right out of Euripides' *Helen*, which I used as a source for *Helen*, but where its the story of Helen being put in Egypt while a fake Helen goes to Troy. This messenger says two thirds of the way through, "Wait let me get this straight, are you saying we went to war all because of a cloud?" So at the time that *Helen* was premiering we were just on the verge of going in [Iraq], so it had a different resonance then, but nonetheless I consider *Iphigenia* the pre-war, *Helen* about the war itself, and *Odyssey*, was total sadness of trying to come home after the war.

I: So years later there's still resonance, the *Odyssey* even more.

TS: Yeah, Lanny HARRISON who does the scroll, is very different from --I should give you a video of *Helen*, I don't have one handy - a couple of people are out studying that for the show but I mean I can send you that

I: That would be great!

(Give her my card)

TS: But in the first version of *Helen,* the scroll singer it was, MARIANA (SADOVSKA) she's a Ukrainian singer she lives in Germany and she happened to be in the country and I was able to work with her but she is not available now. So she did An innocent passionate interpretation and Lanny does a more cynical, dry and I thought "this suits our time right now" because we got stuck in this war and we're stuck, we are spinning our wheels, and we can't innocently say did we go to war for a cloud anymore, its cynical, its so much more cynical now, everything about it. So, she's appropriate for this moment.

I: Do you think that, because sometimes it's easier to define things by what its not, is there any

place that your work, (still talking about aesthetics) doesn't fit? Are there places that it fits better?

TS: Well there are, I mean most plays that exist out there, I would never do, I mean I would never want to do, and I would also be terrible at doing them.

I: So what kind of thing does a text need to have?

TS: I think mythological things I have always been fascinated with, and history was always fascinating to me. If you have read about different periods of my work you'll know that I always found history and puppetry to be a perfect match. Well, now I'm thinking more a mythologized version of history. But I find that myth suits puppets very well.

I: Definitely. Why do think history suits puppetry?

TS: Well I had a whole set of feelings about it at the time which was that I always thought that the puppet is innocent and pure, and that you could give it the truth and that it could say the truth where as an actor would bypass truth through their own agenda.

I: Creating subtext, which happens even if you are not trying that kind of method of acting.

TS: It gives you charisma illegally or something.

I: I know that a lot of your work - I am thinking specifically of *Age of Invention* that has the preludes in between that focus on women's issue during that time - but overall do you think that your work is feminist theatre?

TS: Well see that's another loaded term. I think it always was. I think you could make a case for the shows here, though it's not an issue in *Odyssey* really, you'll see, but it's an issue in *Helen*, I think. And some of *Iphigenia*, particularly Clytemnestra, of course, not by text, but just by presence. And so I think Clytemnestra is her feminist voice.

I: Especially the response to the blocking where Agamemnon is about to hit her and she doesn't stop, she doesn't drop a beat. She just keeps going.

TS: Yeah, oh this is not a feminist issue but I just wanted to say another thing about the Euripides' *Iphigenia* is I completely added the prologue, [which was] many years before, at the original insult, which is the killing of the sacred deer. The thing about Greek mythology is there is always an original insult it just keeps going back and back and back. But I wanted that as a sort of setting and that wouldn't exist in a regular production of Euripides, we invented that.

I: Do you think your works have gone in stages?

TS: Yeah

I: To start with there was performance art--

TS: There was the solo stuff, and then there was the beginning puppetry, which happened '81. The first show, *Micropolis* was these vignettes based on this group of articles, documentary stuff and then the big pieces came, all historical. The Three part *Age of Invention*, the 2 part DEFENDERS OF THE CODE the History of Eugenics, EMPIRES AND APPETITES the History of Food and Famine, after that was Robert Moses the Radiant City, UNDER THE KNIFE, the History of Medicine, BODIES IN CRIME the History of women in Prison, and *Optic Fever* (the history of seeing the renaissance) and then this *Tamburlaine*, a take off of Marlowe's play. *(a few unintelligible comments on that)*

I: So what was the impetuous for that idea?

TS: *Tamburlaine*, well the producer came to me with it.

I: So was that the text you wanted?

TS: Well *Tamburlaine* had beautiful shadow puppets in it, huge

I: Well that was one thing about *Helen*, and I might just have to go up there and look, is there fluorescent light, how is that put together?

TS: You mean for the shadow scene? It's just lighting from above.

I: So what did you start with, because a lot of your pieces have a research basis?

TS: Yeah well I always do a lot of research, I mean I did a lot if research for *Odyssey*. What I got

stuck on, which is not as evident this time there's a psychiatrist named Jonathan Shay and he has

worked with Vietnam vets for 30 years.[2] And he began to see parallels between the vets he was

treating for post-traumatic stress disorder and chapters in the *Odyssey*. And he came to believe

that the *Odyssey* was a kind of archetypal text which showed really kind of inside the brain of a

damaged war veteran. And he went through each of the 24 chapters of the *Odyssey* and made his

case, and it is so interesting.   Well he was dealing with these guys every day.

I: So when you are doing research into veterans that's what you found

TS: He wrote two books, one's called *Odysseus in America*, and *Achilles in Vietnam*. And they

were wonderful; I contacted him briefly and told him what I was doing. I tried to make the case

for Odysseus that way and I tried to use a lot of (to TD: It's no longer level...oh sure then you got

it) so I tried to bring contemporary stuff in. I'm not sure if it worked to tell you the truth. I have

actually eased up on a lot of it. I have manipulated the text a little bit so, you'll see.

I: In the beginning, was there research to your solo stuff - well they were auto-biographical - so

did it start with the puppet stuff then?

TS: Well I also did research in my solo pieces too because they started to become to include

more than just my life. Like at the time, I was teaching painting to mental patients, so I started

doing research about insanity and how it was received at different times, historically. And the

connection between insanity and art, stuff like that.

I: Have you ever used oral history?

TS: Yeah, yeah definitely. In my early pieces for example, which were about the conflict

between Greek culture and American culture. I have lived on 3rd street, I lived around the corner

for about 30 years, and when I was doing the solo pieces there were a bunch of Greek families who lived about a block away and they were hot-dog vendors, because that used to be a Greek kind-of business. Greeks who had just come over from Greece would run these little hotdog carts on the street. I would say now they are pretty much Pakistani, it's the next level of immigration. So there were these Greek families that lived half a block from me and a couple of the women who were hot dog sellers, one if them had been an award-winning embroiderer in her village and another woman had been a weaver. They were from Asia Minor originally. And so I interviewed them, I researched them and that became a part of it.

But you know another thing - and this is going to be useful to you - in Virginia there's a press, Alexander Street press, they contacted me last year. Let's see I have written 16 texts, they wanted all of them in a collection. So it exists now in several collections of libraries but it's not performance rights, and sometimes it's not the whole play, I think you have to go somewhere else to get the play. But indexing is what they are really brilliant at so if you are in Florida and you want to reference plays about Genetics, you'd find me right there. You'd find, I don't know if you would find the whole text, maybe you will. And for that I get a little but of royalty every year. But anyway, all 16 of them are catalogued there now. So that would be a great way to look at everything I have ever written, because I had to spend a whole month to get it all together. Alexander Street Press, they might be in Richmond, Virginia.

I: I will check it out. (*break to talk to TD*) So do think your artistic process has changed at all?

TS: I do feel the need now to do my work in stages, and I really need support outside of New York, to develop a piece. Whether it's another country, another part of the US, I'd like to develop my work in stages so that I can have more control over how it is when it's "ready."

I: So how would you characterize the stages?

TS; I always have stages of a long research period, and then a long building period in my own studio, but now that's becoming a little less practical because as it becomes more ambitious, I need help. I need money, but not just money, I need facilities, and I need to start it somewhere else. Out of my little loft now I can no longer manage doing everything from start to finish which I did for years.

I: produced everything in your apartment?

TS: Loft, and studio. But I can't do it anymore, it's not feasible.

I: Do you have a separate place where you store?

TS: (*Laughing*) Oh do I ever, and that's an agony too. Now it's in upstate New York, it used to be in Dumbo in Brooklyn. But it's all about real estate.

I: So after you do the research and then building, then you start to storyboard a piece?

Ts: Well while I am building I am always story-boarding but the hardest part is the rehearsal process. Its always the most cheated, it's the most expensive. That was what was great about *Iphigenia* in Minneapolis, we had not a very long period, but a 4 week, Equity Actors rehearsing, done right. And then I come here and frantically from 6:30 - 10:30 at night after peoples' jobs, we rehearse

I: Where you are just glad that people show up!

TS: And they do and you are amazed!

I: And they put work into it and everything.

 [*sound of Genie going up or down in the background as technicians finish hanging the puppets*]

I: So do you think if there's not - feminist theatre is a loaded word - is there a certain aesthetic that goes with feminist theater or even just theatre produced by women?

TS: Well not just theatre produced by women, well what ends up happening is there's a

connection between feminist theatre and not working easily or comfortably inside traditional

forms. So when you author your own work, you are so free to interpret things. I mean, I will be

really honest if you said well what's the downside of authoring your own work, well in my case

some people feel that the traditional, dramatic arc doesn't exist fully for them in my work. And I

never cared about that until last year when I saw *Iphigenia* have its emotional effect on people

and you tell me that, last night, several people were crying. And I thought to myself, that's so

interesting. That is something I want more of. And is the only way to get that by working the

straight -- oh and here's even something more - before I went to India, I could care two figs about

a story, who cares about a story? Then I go to India, where there's 4000 year old culture that

reveres its stories and still presents its stories and what is a great story. And oddly enough those

months in India made me want to tell stories about Greece. It's so weird. But I became interested

in stories and in storytelling... [*inserting affirmation from me*]...So when you author your own

text you have a freedom that I just take for granted cause I have always done it. But the downside

I think was that some people felt that there wasn't enough of a narrative motor to keep a

production going.

So anyway I observe that and I find that interesting, So back to feminism, so I think when

you author your own stuff and you work in an idiosyncratic way you sort of quietly or not so

quietly smash traditional forms, you just do. So I think I was always doing that. And I think

Helen is a really feminist piece, Euripides' play *Helen*, the premise of the cloud and her not

having gone, which is not just Euripides, its an older story. There are a couple of poets before

him that mention it. It was kind of fascinating explanation for why she got blamed for the war.

Most Greeks, I mean I ask Greeks this, I ask "do most of you think the Trojan War was really

just a colonial war to just get hold of resources" and they go "of course." This idea that it was

caused by the face that launched a thousand ships is just absurd. So that became a really

interesting story, Helen, and a story that I thought suited puppetry very well. But that's definitely

a feminist premise.

I: I think you play a lot, especially with Clytemnestra [*accidentally switch plays, should follow

up on Helen*]

TS: Oh in *Iphigenia*

I: Yeah, you play a lot with roles, women's roles - duty, etc

TS: Oh yeah the way he says "you must be ruled by me" and she says "Relax, I've always been

ruled by you" And the way Helen becomes this object of hate. Like even in *Iphigenia* the chorus

goes, "all this for Your sake Helen"

I: And it's almost that by the end of *Helen* I felt like she was cursing herself. (*winding up

interview with plans to meet others later...*)

TS: Someone's in the lobby?--

THE END

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Part 2: Phone Interview

Phone Interview with Theodora Skipitares 9 Nov, 2006 (9 am)

Beginning of interview: Reviewed transcript of personal interview, worked out for her to send

me videos of *Under the Knife* and *Harlot's Progress*, then went into interview:

I: Are there any puppeteers who influenced your work and if so, what about their work influence

you?

TS: I doubt any puppeteers, American puppeteers influenced, well I take that back. In 1980,

before I first began to use puppets I saw two shows that really influenced me. One was Mabou

Mines *A Prelude to a Death in Venice* where there was this great actor Bill Raymond played the

character John [his alter ego]. Here was cutting edge, contemporary American theatre with

Bunraku. The second was by an artist no longer with us, Winston Tong, from San Francisco,

who did a show at La Mama called *Bound Feet* about the Chinese practice of binding women's

feet. He had these exquisite muslin dolls that he manipulated beautifully and he had dressed

himself up as an Empire era Chinese woman who was binding the feet of the dolls. It was utterly

original, utterly contemporary, and deeply emotional . I would say it was these two that really

launched my interest in puppetry. Oh there was a third artist – you see most of my viewing time

was spent in galleries during that time – a sculptor named Dennis Oppenheimer who worked

with motorized string puppets. There are still artists today whose work still interests me: Julie

Taymor's work interests me, Lee Breuer's work interests me, Basil Twist, who's a young

puppeteer, his work is very interesting. And I always love to see Bunraku. I managed to see

[sounds like "Tader's Cantor"] and those were amazing experiments with dolls.

I: Can you describe the Puppet Construction process?

TS: Well of course it's different every time. In the earlier days I always had someone in the studio with me, someone who did the technical solutions. And we were improvising things and really not relying much on the traditions of how puppets are made. So because I think at that point I was working more as a sculptor and not as a person who was steeped in the traditions of puppet making. And now I am more knowledgeable about that and I certainly move between solutions, how you solve something. So the construction of the puppets often largely falls in my hands now and I don't have somebody technical who works with me in the studio for months at the time anymore. For *Iphigenia*, as I told you, I did connect with a great technical designer from Minneapolis and that's Cecilia Schiller, and I actually going to meet with her next weekend, I am going to Minneapolis and I am bringing her a bunch of puppet heads and we're going to make more modified one-person Bunraku puppets. So I made the heads for those but really Cecilia engineered them and they are solid, they are reliable, they are reliable performers.

Then a lot of times I will just make things on my own in the studio and solve problems like, how do you make an egg that opens up like that (in *Helen*) and I just sat and hacked away and hacked away until I that giant egg, that giant egg that Helen comes out of. Another person that I do work with often who I've worked with for 20 years now is Cathy Shaw, who is a puppeteer and theatre director in her own right, she lives in New York. But what I long for is a big production with a technical team that would help me realize solutions. The project in Minneapolis was really Cecilia and me, but we did it and it was still small. But what I really want is a team of people who help me solve problems and I would guide them to make it, but that's sort of just not happening right now, I am still a small production company unto myself.

Oh there's also a person I have worked with for many years who I always go to for video solutions and that's Kay Hines.

I: Did you use to work with Stephen Kaplin?

TS: He was in one of my shows years and years ago…he's really great

I: Why did you choose to change from using your own figure as the basis of the puppets to a neutral model?

TS: I began, I think in my own way when I was making puppets that were in my image, I think in my own way – they had a kind of universality – but I think I was still, on some semi-conscious level, projecting myself out there and I think that, especially when I began to deal with the Greek plays and Greek mythology, and certainly when I began to bring actors in, I began to see that the puppet functions best when its blankest. So I worked to kind of streamline the features – streamline is not the right word – rather smooth out the features so that they were more neutral. I know some puppeteers who have had the same feeling like for example Dan Hurlin, and his puppet faces are almost rid or devoid of features, the nose is a small bump and the mouth has a subtle indication, and I guess like him I am working toward more transparency. And again, it's a mask idea.

I: And by transparency what do you mean?

TS: A simpler surface through which the essence can come through.

I: Can you talk to me for a minute about the rehearsal process and what it's like directing for puppets?

TS: Well I think that one comment that came up in the other interview (Mar 19 2006) is so true that notion of if you don't have your puppets ready you can't rehearse. You can't call your performers in with scripts and have a rehearsal. The other thing about [rehearsals] is it's quite technical. I suppose you could liken it sometimes to a dance rehearsal, where every second counts because you are choreographing, you're scoring something. Now I know in the case of *Iphigenia* it's complicated by the fact you are kind of doing an actor-like thing with voice producing the text of a play. But all the same you are still choreographing moves. That's why it's interesting to look at someone like Chris Maresca who is trained as a dancer and in the way she scored Achilles – and she really did that. It was like a movement piece. So that's a lot of what it is. For me a lot of it is also scenic effects. And of course that doesn't happen in rehearsal so much, you realize, but the idea is something I sort of draw up or make a model of . So that's another part of a different type of puppet theatre which are a particular kind of projection or a use of some medium. But in a sense a puppet rehearsal can be made up of several parts – if you look at the timeline of an evening of one of my puppet rehearsals sometimes you break things up into small segments and work on them and then move on to something else. I believe it's much the same way you work on a movement piece.

I: When you are directing them and you know that there is going to be a piece of video projection or something or other, do you talk to them and let them know what its going to look like during rehearsal or do you have to wait until its there?

TS: Yes, and you know that stuff comes in pretty late sometimes and sometimes that's okay. Sometimes if it's more a part of the performance then you are working with it all the time.

I: So if it's something that they will need to work with you will bring it in sooner?

TS: Yeah Sure

I: So you compared the rehearsal process to dance which is really very helpful to me in trying to find a way of notating dance or choreography and gesture.

TS: You know everybody I think who works in puppet theatre has their own method of notation. I remember really early on you used to take a – especially when I was working with bits of text like in *Age of Invention* – you would have this paragraph and it would be completely saturated with the gesture score of like the puppets hand when they were saying this. I don't tend to do that kind of lip-sync stuff anymore but puppeteers script is a really interesting, it's notated in a certain way.

I: How tight is your direction to the actors, by that I mean do you give them exact moves or is it, by now, that you give them freedom to find the gestures that work for the characters?

TS: In rehearsal we look for it and then it does get set pretty specifically . I decide where and it stays that way.

I: Well there are so many other technical aspects that go with the production, that they do need to be set

TS: Yes. And I am going to have to stop you in about 5 minutes

I: Well I am actually done.

TS: Great! What's your time-line on this?

I: Well I am trying to be finished next spring, possibly summer at the latest, but I am trying to come back up to New York sometime January, February, or March.

TS: Well you know in March I am doing a show

I: Oh In March. Well I did want to know, what you are working on now?

TS: I have taken a lot of messenger speeches from certain Greek plays and I am really going to gel it in a week or two. But I have been playing with 5 different plays and I am kind of

manipulating the text. One of them is *Medea*, one's *Orestes*, they are all Euripides. So stay tuned for that.

[Reminds me to talk to Andrea Balis – probably best on the phone – "She just has good insights." I discuss my apprehension because I missed our first appointment and she tells me not to worry. I will call her when I can figure out what to ask her (dramaturgical questions maybe) Thanks and good byes]

[Entire interview lasted around 40 minutes]

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1 See articles by N.J Stanley, Joan Driscoll Lynch and reviews by Anita Gates (Saucy Puppets), Bruce Weber (A Warlord as Puppet), and Mel Gussow (Review; A History of Food, and Defenders of the Code)

2 This festival, based in NYC, ran from 1992 to 2000 and features puppet theater for adult audiences as well as children's audiences.

3 Unlike puppetry traditions in Europe or Asia, which are popular among adult audiences, American audiences assume puppets are for children. As such, American audiences have certain expectations for puppetry which follow a particular concept of what is appropriate for the medium. This criterion is reinforced by the amount of children's television programming that use puppetry.

4 The best website for documentation of Skipitares' work is the online archive of LaMama ETC at http://lamama.org . Video excerpts of *Under the Knife III* performed January of 1996 are found under Archives—Video Clips link (same url). Synopsis and some production images can be found under the Archives—Play List link (same url) for several of Skipitares' productions at LaMama ETC: the 2001 production of *Optic Fever*, the 2002 production *The Rise and Fall of Timur the Lame*, the 2003 production *Helen, Queen of Sparta*, the 2004 production of *Odyssey: The Homecoming*, the 2005 production *Iphigenia*, and the 2006 production *Trilogy*. These can be accessed by searching for the production, or Skipitares, under the "Browse the Archive" Year listings.

      A search through the Google Images search engine produces 170+ pictures from Skipitares' productions. With a university library access to databases such as JSTOR or Project Muse, one can access these images in context as they are found in the following articles:

      Bell, John. "Puppets and Performing Objects in the Twentieth Century." *Performing Arts Journal*. 19.2 (1997), 29-46.

      Sexton, Lauren Hobbs. "Performance Review; *Trilogy*." *Theatre Journal* 58.4 (Dec 2006): 679-681.

      Skipitares, Theodora. "Articulations: The History of All Things." *TDR* 43.3 (Fall 1999) 135-153.

      Skipitares, Theodora. "Under the Knife: A History of Medicine [with introduction]." *Performing Arts Journal* 18 (May 1996): 93-117.

      Skipitares Theodora. "Vietnam Journal." *Performing Arts Journal* 19 (May 1997): 64-80.

Also, images have been included in recent *New York Times* reviews of Skipitares' productions *Trilogy* (2006) and *The Exiles* (2007) by Honor Moore. These images and reviews can be accessed through the *New York Times* Online Archive at http://theater2.nytimes.com/2006/03/22/theater/reviews/22tril.html (For *Trilogy*, posted March 22, 2006) and http://theater2.nytimes.com/2007/03/28/theater/reviews/28exil.html?fta=y&pagewanted=all (For *The Exiles*, posted March 28, 2007.

5 At the time of publication, this database was not available at The University of Georgia System Libraries.

6 See Appendix A

7 See Webster, Fiona. "The Politics of Sex and Gender: Benhabib and Butler Debate Subjectivity." *Hypatia* 15.1 (Winter 2000): 1-22 for a synopsis of this debate.

8 Similar arguments can be found in Mulvey 47, and in Luce Irigaray's essay, "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the 'Masculine'" (119).

9 *Helen, Queen of Sparta* and *Odyssey: The Homecoming*, began in separate trips to India, following Skipitares Fulbright trip. *Helen* began with funding from Arts International in response to an invitation to a festival in Calcutta in the fall of 2002. *Odyssey* began at the Delhi International Puppet Festival in 2004.

10 This chapter will focus on Skipitares' 2006 production of Trilogy (Helen, Queen of Sparta, Iphigenia, and Odysseus: The Homecoming) and her 2007 production of The Exiles as I was able to see performances of each of these.

CHAPTER 2
1 This term was coined by Jeffrey Jones in his article "Elusive Idiosyncrasies: The World of Puppeteer Theodora Skipitares." Theatre Crafts 18.3 (1984): 20-23, 47-48, 50-51. It describes a design quality that seeks to simulate life down to the most minute movements. In this case, electronic mechanisms were employed to produce the vocal aspects of Sylvia's vomiting episode and tubing was used to produce the visual signs. Typically when this term is applied to Skipitares' later works, it is due to their similarity to animatronics, and her practice of choreographing precise movements in life-sized puppets, mimicking real life.

2 This tendency towards minimal animation was also noted by reviewer Mel Gussow in the 1992 production of Underground ("Theatre in Review" C16).

3 For video clips of the production see the online archive of LaMama ETC at http://lamama.org . Video excerpts of *Under the Knife III* performed January of 1996 are found under Archives—Video Clips link (same url). For production images see the article available through the Project Muse online database: Skipitares, Theodora. "Under the Knife: A History of Medicine [with introduction]." *Performing Arts Journal* 18 (May 1996): 93-117.

4 See discussions in Jill Dolan's chapter, "The Discourse of Feminisms: The Spectator and Representation" from The Feminist Spectator as Critic and Gayle Austin's chapter "Feminist Theories: Paying Attention to Women" from Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism.

5 The Center for Puppetry Arts opened to the public in 1978 and is the largest organization in the US with a sole focus on puppetry. In addition to a puppet workshop and performance facilities, the Center also includes a museum, a small research library, and is a repository for several collections (including pieces by Baird, Henson, and Taymor). The Center Museum is also home to Skipitares' Kathakali hand puppets, which she brought back from her Fulbright trip to India, as well as a museum exhibit of "St Catherine of Sienna" from her production, Empires and Appetites.

6 In the same interview, Skipitares praises Taymor's courage and talent to take on the Disney production and still maintain her own sense of style, stating, "It was a manifestation of sheer creative energy" (2000 interview, qtd in Stanley 68).

7 Though Dirks does not cite the specific productions of Ionesco to which she refers, both Rhinoceros and Tales for Children have been recently produced – Tales for Children at the Untitled Theatre Co #61 in Sept 2001 and June 2004. The Paula Vogel production she cites is "The Long Christmas Ride Home." Vogel's production was held at the Vineyard Theatre in New York City November 4th, 2003 and featured puppets created by Basil Twist. For more information on this production, see New York Times review by Ben Brantley (Nov 5 2003, late ed.:E5).

CHAPTER 4
1 This reference generally refers to the "high points" of Brecht's epic theater productions (after his work with Piscator) characterized by a historicized, political presentation of texts and a regular use of distancing devices such as signs and titles which deny passive spectatorship.

2 See Appendix A

3 In *Harlot's Progress*, Skipitares chose to have her puppet operators in period costumes of eighteenth century England to math the look of the puppets modeled from Hogarth's engravings.

4 I will discuss this process of character creation further in Chapter 5.

5 A humanette is a type of hybrid puppet Skipitares adapted from pictures of those used by Charles Ludlum in The Ridiculous Theatrical Company. They are comprised of a half-sized body strapped to the operator who walks on his/her knees. The operator's head is used as the puppet's head and the puppets arms are controlled via rods.

CHAPTER 5
1See Appendix A

2 This remark of Skipitares has been reprinted in both the Lynch and Stanley articles, and it has been reiterated in most of the interviews she has given.

3 Page 273, published by Harvard University Press.

4 Hera, the patron of marriage (note 19, page 247)

5 Specifically in Huber's cabaret-style variety marionette act, several of his characters are dressed in beautiful beaded costumes with glamorous accessories, "So it becomes obvious pretty fast" (Telephone Interview Dec 2006).

6 Both Huber and Allison mentioned the importance of a puppet's movements in determining gender. Their ideas on gender appropriate movements as reflected in both interviews typically fell along stereotypical lines of masculinity and femininity: aggressive movements for male characters and delicate or graceful movements for the female characters. The creation of a specific movement style or gait for a character and the use of those movements to determine gender is a topic which straddles the line between construction and performance, one that I will analyze further in the chapter on gender in performance.

7 The technical aspects of the rehearsal reveal a very practical fact, that being that Skipitares' artists can't really rehearse unless the puppets are ready – especially when working with people not trained in puppetry.

8 It should be noted that, ironically, puppet or puppet-like performance is typically used as a negative evaluative term by directors and acting coaches. What many call "puppet-like behavior" is described as "losing touch with an awareness of one's individual movement," whereby "Parts of the body appear to move as though pulled by strings and are not integrated into the whole body behavior" (Davies 58).

CHAPTER 6
1 My interviews with puppeteers such as Sturz, Huber, Allison and the Powells of the Toronto-based troupe Puppetmongers, as well as conversations with puppeteers at regional conferences, and my experience as a puppet spectator in America and India have generally served to prove Schwartz's sentiment.

APPENDIX A
1 Complete performance text can be found in Theodora Skipitares'. "The Age of Invention." *Theater* 17.1 (Winter 1985): 5-15.

2 Video excerpts of *Under the Knife III* performed January of 1996can be found at the online archive of LaMama ETC at http://lamama.org under Archives—Video Clips link (same url). A complete performance script with several figures can be found in Theodora Skipitares' publication, "Under the Knife: A History of Medicine [with introduction]." *Performing Arts Journal* 18 (May 1996): 93-117.

3 A detailed journal of the production in Vietnam, complete with photographic documentation is available through the Project Muse online database under Skipitares' article, "Vietnam Journal." *Performing Arts Journal* 19 (May 1997): 64-80.

4 Images from this production are available on the Project Muse online database under Skipitares' publication, "Articulations: The History of All Things." *TDR* 43.3 (Fall 1999) 135-153.

5 Images from the productions can be found through the Honor Moore's review on the *New York Times* Online Archives at http://theater2.nytimes.com/2006/03/22/theater/reviews/22tril.html (posted March 22, 2006). Also images are posted on LaMama's Online Archive Play List, along with a synopsis of the pieces at http://lamama.org . These can be accessed by searching for the production, or Skipitares, under the "Browse the Archive" Year listings.

6 Images from this production can be found through the Honor Moore's review on the *New York Times* Online Archives at http://theater2.nytimes.com/2007/03/28/theater/reviews/28exil.html?fta=y&pagewanted=all (posted March 28, 2007).

APPENDIX B
1 The following conversation dealt with my experiences in India was not relevant to the total interview.

2 Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: combat trauma and the undoing of character* (1994); *Odysseus in America: combat trauma and the trials of homecoming*. New York: Scribner, 2002.

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