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Notes on the Art of Puppetry in an Atmosphere of Dread

by Judd Palmer and Stephen Pearce

Although most of us have forgotten it, the fall of 1999 was notably strange. Y2K was upon us, and a quivering anxiety hovered over the world. Apocalypse loomed, and people grew frantic as the chill winds began to blow and the snow flurried from the north. The slow freezing of the earth beneath us, with its familiar sense of dread, this time mimicked a worldwide mortality in a grander and more serious sense than usual.

This dual threat—of winter and cataclysm—drove us all to some variety of strangeness. We were overwhelmed by the vast darkness that two millennia could encompass, dwarfed by the enormity of history—the empires, massacres, revolutions, holocausts, dishwashing. We filled our cupboards with tomato soup, we bought gas masks and weapons, we worried about our stock portfolios, and we looked with horror upon the pointless heart of darkness inside the machinery around us. Some of us tried to reform humanity on the eve of its destruction, some attempted escape, some were thrust into a new perspective on the precariousness of our marvellous and banal and cruel civilization. Many of us worried we wouldn't find a good enough party. But the essence of it all, beneath the derangement, was a collective effort to identify first principles, fundamental truths, and to ensure that they weren't being ignored in the hubbub and brouhaha of daily life.

Of course, as we look back on it, it's all a little embarrassing: the apocalypse didn't occur. Our disappointment with the inconsequence of Y2K, the technological holocaust we believed to be our millenarian due, left us with a great itch for cataclysm. We dreamt new myths of catastrophe, and with 9/11, they were realized, as though we didn't want to waste all that dread, as though we wanted to finally be able to say the world was ending after all. Because we need it, in a way—that sense that our lives are unfolding on some mythological level.

And so, in that atmosphere of metaphysical import, a small group of old chums gathered together and called themselves the Old Trout Puppet Workshop. It seemed like the right thing, given the circumstances, to huddle for mutual defence. We all had some experience in the anachronistic art of puppetry, and circumstances had come together such that we had a bit of money to work with. The idea to form a puppet company seemed beautiful in its precariousness, which made it appropriate to the times. But more than that, the idea, when we had it, took on the form of revelation. It seemed, in some way that was unclear (but which we are here trying to discover, imagine or poeticize), that it was the perfect response to all the angst.

FIRST AND FOREMOST, the Old Trout Puppet Workshop was a reclamation of the camaraderie of youth. We'd all grown up together, thriving on the feeling that we were miraculous companions on a ship bound for glittering shores. We'd breathed beautiful air through open car windows on grand road trips, felt holy in the clash of drinks, fought bitter wars over forgotten things and flung broad jokes to the heavens.

One of us has a family ranch, which had long served as an anchor when we felt storm-tossed or when our notions were growing thin, a mythic and mystical place that embodied our connection, a place named as if it were the only one in the world. It's an absurdly beautiful place, the Ranch, nestled among the foothills of southern Alberta, butting up against the mountains.

We'd head down there to crash around and feel as large and as small as that sky intends. We'd pretend to be cowboys. Unaware of our own ridiculousness, we'd puff out our chests, squint at the horizon and act like we knew things about dogs and knots. We'd feel tired when the sun went down, get our pant legs muddy and feel like that was evidence we were at one with the world—a world we felt was somehow more true, a world of wind, of blood, of bullets, of giants. Oh, we'd feel hearty indeed.

There's religion in a puppet. There's sorrows and joys, there's the wind that blows between us and the world.

But then the weekend would be over, and we'd head back to Calgary, where our real lives carried on. As we got older and realized just how gigantic the world is, we began to feel the confines of a prairie city. More exotic possibilities were imagined: lives at sea, with its elaborate tattoos and salt wind; lives in television in Toronto, surrounded by people with the latest shoes; gypsy lives, spent in the forests of the Tatras; lives directing obscure but profound theatre in New York. Anything that wasn't an inexorable vortex of suburbs and traffic problems, ignorant oil money and chuckwagon races. That's how we pictured Calgary, in our ravenous youth.

And so, over the years, we had one by one launched forth to seek out our destinies. Each of us departed with farewell toasts, like Victorian gentlemen, donning pith helmets and putting out to sea. Those who were left felt a little more lost, more dissatisfied, more in need of our own expeditions, until each of us found himself in his own Africas and Antarcticas, surrounded by strangers whose customs confused us. We were all far-flung and lost, our faith flagging, alone against the merciless cosmos.

So as the end of the world loomed, we were impelled to return to our happy youths, and it made sense to do so on the Ranch. It fit our notion of our best selves, our truest selves—the selves we'd found somewhere up a windy ridge or bug-bitten in the midst of a cathedral of trees or wandering the windy prairie steppes. The hardiness of the place made it romantic, but it was, at the same time, home. It was an Alberta we could embrace.

THE RANCH WAS, in a way that appealed to us, medieval, monastic, mystical. We set up a workshop in a feed storage shed, a place smelling of animals, with cracks that let in the wind and windows that rattled, a place that felt for all the world like some pioneer's hovel in the vast darkness. It was, in other words, an appropriately austere location for our millenarian gnosticism.

Our project was as medieval and as mystical as you could hope for: to create a puppet show. Of all the absurdities in the world, making a puppet show seemed the most beautiful to us. Puppetry is a humble vocation but one that is nonetheless ancient and profound. Its profundity rests in its humility: submission to the wood, to the form of things, the shape of a face, the smell of turpentine, the sawdust, the strange little souls that somehow glimmer in a nose or an eyebrow under your chisel. The whole enterprise hovers on that quivering threshold between life and death. It is a revelation of the miraculous absurdity that a consciousness could exist at all. That it would want to. That a little wooden creature would willingly confront the unanswerableness of its prayers, its mortality, its first love, its first heartbreak, the delicate line between hope and despair. All these things lurk in a log you've just dragged in, wiped clean of snow, contemplated with hand on chin and with hatchet hovering, prepared for the begetting blow.

There's religion in a puppet. There's first principles, in a way. There's sorrows and joys, there's the wind that blows between us and the world. It's all there to see, if you want.

WE FELT A STRENGTH RETURNING to us as we toiled. In the dark mornings, the mountains cold and enormous over us, we delivered hay to horses with frost in their whiskers and clouds of steam puffing into the air from their huge warm lungs. We fed the pigs, collected eggs, damaged tractors. And then back to the workshop, where we would work into the night, growing shaggy as the days passed.

There's something strange about the mountains down there. They seem perpetually shrouded in a menacing darkness. Roiling thunderheads threaten to sweep down from the crags and engulf the tiny buildings of the Ranch. It feels like the whole place is on the verge of a pagan invasion. But in reality, the clouds, for some cloud reason we don't understand, never leave the mountains. As a result, the Ranch hovers precariously, like some Austrian city awaiting the Huns, and one's spirit grows both heroic and timorous against the sky.

We lived on stew. Noble stew! There is much courage in the burbling pot. Onions, for example, are the very earth itself, strong and beautiful like an old Polish woman. And gravy, the glorious distillation of corpulence, the very soul of fireside contemplation. To say nothing of pork, the sublime in the soil, the miracle that springs from filth. If ever you find yourself growing thin about the lips, take refuge in stew if you can. It is a respite from the cosmic cudgel.

Across the river lived Hutterites. Every now and then the preacher would come over, in a broad hat and an equally broad, but entirely mysterious, smile, to observe our activities. He would watch, without speaking. We laboured at various projects with men from the colony and compared our medievalism to theirs: the retreat from a world that seemed wrong, the camaraderie of beards, the mysticism of good muscles, engine grease and expertise in tractor-bucket manipulation.

The cowboys by and large ignored us. We worried that they found us irritating. Maybe they did. We certainly caused our fair share of the disasters that constitute daily life on a ranch: we wrecked tractor doors so people had to crawl in through the window, we lost tools, we made messes. To be sure, we occupied a space that had formerly been theirs with our music, our noise, our late nights and our bizarre project. We talked with them occasionally about the weather or stared off into the distance side by side, but the chasm was not bridged.

Sometimes a little hand would scrape the frost from our window and the eye of one of the cowboys' kids would peek into our workshop, both afraid of and enticed by the strangeness that had come to the Ranch. At least we hoped enticed. We were caught up in the romance of what we were doing, and we hoped that he would be similarly affected. In the world of imagination, however, it's pretty hard to compete with a kid who's growing up on a ranch. He's got the whole sky and an infinite silence to fill up. Maybe we weren't much of a discovery.

The Ranch had a dog that bears mention. It was some kind of Hungarian herding breed, mysterious in origin, born in the presence of large moustaches and a language foreign to us and romantic to contemplate. It was huge and white, and it would appear in your headlights at night, like a ghost. It was harrowing to imagine him out there without headlights to summon him into existence. The remarkable thing about the dog was the way his breed is raised. As puppies, they are taken from their long-suffering mothers and given to sheep, a weird reversal of our own mythology of the wolf-child. And a remarkable thing happens: the dog begins to think it's a sheep. This makes it an excellent sheepdog. But questions arise: What does it dream? What confusion haunts it as it awakes to join again its brothers and sisters, which seem foreign to it? What does it think of dogs that know they're dogs? And what would have to happen to that dog—what psychoanalysis, what disaster, what adventure—for it to realize it is really a dog? And if a dog could think it was a sheep, who are we, thinking we're human?

Every now and then we would go back to Calgary, for one reason or another. We'd always stop at the Claresholm 7-Eleven for coffee or strange chicken things that would give us the strength for the remainder of the drive. It always seemed like the gates of damnation. As we walked in, we were confronted by the magazine rack, a truly terrifying array of leering perfect people, whose white teeth and really cool hairdos contrasted horribly with our own body odour and dirty pants. But it was purifying. We felt stronger upon returning to our sanctuary. We had begun to think of ourselves as desert fathers, wild-eyed, ecstatic, full of a hermit's joys on cold mornings.

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THE SHOW ITSELF BEGAN TO TAKE SHAPE as more and more of us arrived. It seemed to have a purity of spirit, an exuberance and peculiarity that we couldn't quite grasp but could certainly feel. We were beyond the point of worrying what people would think. How else could you do it? Very little that is worthwhile is aimed at the world, with anxieties about whether it's good or people will like it. Far better to make things beautiful for your own secret god, who, like all gods, lives in your very midst, and can be interpreted in the raising of wineglasses or the roughness of wood under your hands or the beautiful and infinite histories of those who have gathered around you.

The show made its debut in the bunkhouse to an audience of cowboys, relatives and Hutterites. It might have been the first puppet show the Hutterites had ever seen. They seemed to enjoy it, talking throughout about what was going on, gasping collectively when a spectre arose and laughing when a man was chasing a pig.

It was quite a scene, that first puppet show in the bunkhouse. Outside, the darkness was menacing, the prairie gigantic, the wind cold, the horses shadowy. Strange animal consciousnesses lurked in the night, their eyes glittering, their fur rimy. The bunkhouse stood tiny against the gloom, casting a gentle yellow light on the blue snow. It was a scene as old as the cosmos: hearth versus world, inside versus outside, warmth versus the wastes. And inside, another dichotomy: puppet versus human, staring at each other from across the boundaries of the stage and the world. One side a smaller, more manageable version of the other—the wooden souls' struggles graspable because the stage has its limits, its borders, its rituals and mythologies.

In the end, we moved back to the city. The isolation drove us to confusion, desperation and shagginess of disposition. It's often difficult to remember exactly what we were on about down there, perhaps because it was a mindset that can only operate in broad spaces or perhaps because that is the way of the hunt for first principles. Moments of ecstatic frenzies and apocalyptic dread fade; they become palimpsests, layered by memory and translated into stories. And once the stories begin to replace the actual events, the events grow tiresome, because their only existence is in the telling. You can't blame humans for all the failed revolutions of the past, for the immense sentiments and catastrophic numbers that are strewn across the calendars of the ages, only to be repeated again and again. That kind of intensity can only be sustained for a moment. And it may be that we need a decent apocalypse now and then to keep us on our toes.

But a puppet company had come into being. To tell the story is to summarize what is actually our lives—the whole broad expanse of muddy roads, creaking doors, inconvenient trains, rattling windows, chewing noises, disappointingly empty bottles, strange noises at night, lonely moments shared with small animals—to pluck from the cosmic muck a thesis, a beginning, an end. To summarize entails self-mythologization, but what can you do? After all, each life is as banal as it is remarkable, and as full or as empty of signs and wonders as we're willing to see it.

OF COURSE, NEW YEAR'S EVE HAPPENED. We spent it making grand declarations and staggering around in the bush, singing songs of unblemished youth and spilling our drinks. At one point, we were rattling down a back road in a trailer full of hay, pulled by an ancient and clattering Volvo, staring up at the sky. Portentously, the most spectacular northern lights we'd ever seen glimmered on the horizon. We thought it might be Calgary evaporating in a technological cataclysm, transformed into pure light, streaking across the sky.

Judd Palmer and **Stephen Pearce** are members of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop.

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