

# Hand in glove: understanding the hand puppet's life and liveness as a precursor to its application in education and therapy

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**HAND IN GLOVE:  
UNDERSTANDING THE HAND'S LIFE AND LIVENESS  
AS A PRECURSOR TO ITS APPLICATION IN EDUCATION AND THERAPY**

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Introduction

Walking through the streets of Verona, Italy, with puppet artist and hand puppet ambassador Maurizio Gioco, my nascent Italian is helped along by his many gestures as he explains why the hand puppet is a distinctly powerful form. Gioco has spent decades as a puppet artist and at least twenty years using hand puppets, and other forms, as interventions to help children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), particularly with a focus on children who are non-verbal. Recently, he has begun collaborating with researchers at the University of Verona.<sup>1</sup> Tall with long limbs; he powerfully animates and embodies what he wants to impart to this curious American. His gestures, more than his words, convey his passion for the little beings that he easily slips on and brings to life, helping to explain why he has embraced (both literally and metaphorically) the *burattino*.<sup>2</sup> The loops that Gioco draws in the air describe the relationship of connectivity between a puppeteer's body, an audience, and that of the hand or *glove* puppet, as it is often called in Europe (2019). Before thinking, "Well, of course he uses gestures—he's

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<sup>1</sup> See Cini's thesis for an example of Gioco's consultations at the University of Verona. Language surrounding disability is in flux. In reviewing the literature, one finds language that shows an evolution in the divergent models of disability. Many of the studies—even those from recent years employ the language of deficit, with terms such as "impoverished" or "lack." I endeavor to be cognizant of language and how it shapes our perceptions of value, diversity, and potential. While not wanting to reinforce that framing, the goal of this article is to reveal aspects of puppetry that can contribute to communication skills and hence relationships that are important to the quality of life, which does not take away from affirming the value of a neurodiverse world.

<sup>2</sup> Italian has different words for different puppet forms. *Burattino* refers to a glove puppet with a long history in various regions of Italy, including Veneto, where Verona is located. The many stock characters that Gioco creatively reinvents form a part of Italian folkloric identity.

Italian,” one must also remember that his life’s work is gesture. The hand puppet is a gestural form—one Gioco has contemplated extensively, particularly in how the physicality of the medium establishes relationships and communicates. Extending from the body outward into the world through the reach of the arm and the hand, the gesture of the hand puppet with its many positions, makes known feelings and thoughts.<sup>3</sup> The gesture is not divorced from the word, rather it is integrated into thinking and the sharing of thought. It dramatizes our invisible intentions.

Researchers are beginning to examine benefits that puppetry might have for children with autism spectrum disorder and other exceptionalities.<sup>4</sup> These studies confirm the experiences of many practitioners, who have used puppetry to provide integrated developmental opportunities along the specific continuum of a child’s unique path. Gioco and other puppeteers who also worked in applied puppetry have had particular success with children who need support in developing communication and socio-emotional skills. It is their knowledge and skills that allow them to use this medium. Should educators and practitioners want to harness puppetry’s qualities, it is essential that they consider the form more closely. Puppets are not mere objects, props, or manipulatives; they are best understood as phenomena since their power derives from their complex existence when animated.<sup>5</sup> Far from being an easy or straightforward process, their aliveness has captivated many scholars in the past two centuries who have tried to explain this uncanny phenomenon. In her book, *The Case for Make-Believe*, ventriloquist, psychologist, author, and performer Susan Linn says that “Acquiring a systematic understanding of why and

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<sup>3</sup> A puppet thinks through its gaze. Hand puppets often look at something, then at the audience, and again at the thing to invite the audience to also think about that thing and make clear that the puppet is thinking about the door, a cookie, another puppet, and so on.

<sup>4</sup> Language is continuing to evolve; at the time of writing this article, these are the recommended terms. They acknowledge some patterns in development relating to disability and discuss interventions that meet individuals’ needs.

<sup>5</sup> While some people use “manipulate” to describe puppetry, most puppeteers use the word “animate” (a word that comes from the Greek word for breath and soul) since it is essentially the breath that creates the experience of life.

how puppets work as therapeutic tools is essential to using them effectively as agents for growth and change, for making sense of the themes and content they evoke, and for making decisions about how to use them therapeutically across a range of situations” (62). Lindsey “Z” Briggs, a Sesame Street puppeteer with expertise in autism and puppetry, is also a puppet coach, builder, and educator. She draws on this broad experience in workshops she has designed and led for the Jim Henson Foundation, entitled: “Making Connections Through Puppetry.” In the workshop, Briggs stresses the importance for educators to develop a sensibility for the medium of puppetry as well as skills and a level of comfort.<sup>6</sup> In the report, “Puppets Facilitate Attention to Social Cues in Children with ASD,” which discusses a study that Briggs assisted in, the authors note that, “The style of the puppet in terms of its design and complexity is far less important than the performance of the puppeteer.... More essential than its appearance, the puppet should be operated in accordance with several key principles (Macari 1983). In this article, I draw upon the knowledge of these and other practitioners who work in applied puppetry, specifically with students with enhanced needs, to distill some of their insights and to provide recommendations for best practices. I endeavor to offer practical suggestions and to reveal innate qualities of the hand puppet that allow for its application with children. A deeper understanding of puppetry allows more sensitivity and flexibility, which can help to meet different children’s needs and provide them opportunities to engage at their individual level and with a range of access/entry points.

Children can engage with the art of puppetry in a variety of ways: as audience members, creators, animators, directors, and dramaturges, making it responsive to individual comfort and

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<sup>6</sup> She encourages having a home for the puppet in the classroom and never wearing a hand puppet while, for example, moving furniture. Ultimately, the puppet either is or isn’t a special being, capable of life. The practitioner should be careful to not build and then undermine that effort through careless gestures.

developmental tasks (both those that are self-initiated as well as those identified by practitioners as objectives). For many children (and adults), puppetry is inherently motivational. It activates affective states, such as wonder, humor, and suspense. In describing a project that they led integrating puppets into drama experiences for children with ASD, Melissa Trimmingham and Nicola Shaughnessy state that “The approach in *Imagining Autism* links cognition to affect (in keeping with the enactive mind hypothesis) and in so doing, emphasises the importance of embodied engagement to learning in autism” (303-4). Affect and embodiment are a part of puppetry and its inherent quality of imaginative play, a quintessential activity for children’s development. Susan Linn argues that not only is it through play that children learn how to learn, but play is also closely linked to creativity and mental health (11). In her article on puppetry and ASD, Rita Jordan makes a case specifically for supporting social play through facilitating experiences of “spontaneous, affect-driven, and collaborative patterns of behaviour [builds] self-awareness, motivation, memory, socialization, and self-control” (356). She argues for conceptualizing children’s play as an interwoven and persisting collection of developing repertoires that integrate the social and cognitive (rather than stages within a hierarchy of development);<sup>7</sup> puppetry stitches together much of what she describes:

Cognitive development is reflected in the move through sensory exploration of objects, simple repetitive play, relational and constructive play with objects, and purposeful problem solving with an awareness of the functional as well as the physical properties of objects. A full functional appreciation of objects includes the recognition of the active and dispositional properties of toys (such as dolls or toy cars). At the pinnacle of cognitive play is the recognition that pretend play can be divorced from these functional toy props and become truly symbolic through the use of ‘pretend’ objects, attributes, and functions (249).

### The Hand Puppet

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<sup>7</sup> Jordan argues: “At the same time as play is developing cognitively, it is also developing socially, and the separation of these two strands of play is only an abstraction for academic purposes; in reality, they are intertwined. Socially, play is often seen to move through steps that are social counterparts to the cognitive ones...joint play routines become more complex and involve both cooperative and competitive social play until the child is able to plan and execute negotiated and fully collaborative social dramas with peers” (249–50).

Puppetry is a broad category, which includes many forms—each with its specific qualities. In this article, I focus specifically on hand puppets and some of their often taken-for-granted qualities, which affect the way they function, especially at subtle levels.<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that this form might be what first leaps to mind when children and puppets are mentioned, a practitioner's explicit awareness of its subtleties and specificities makes them more responsive, sensitive, intentional, and strategic.<sup>9</sup> Hand puppets have long been staples of home toy boxes, children's theatrical programming, therapeutic environments, classrooms, and other settings where imaginative play is seen as fundamental to all children's development.<sup>10</sup> This has been especially true in the twentieth century, often called the "Century of the Child" in the United States and western Europe. It was a time when a radical reimagining of children and childhood led to a boom in toy design and accompanying theorizations around toys and child development—the latter a new concept.

Hand puppets offer many advantages, in great part because of the inherent social quality of the medium; they invite interaction and performance for the self and others. The very morphology of the hand puppet makes it imminently available; their hand-size openings and glove-like fit invite spontaneous use. Caroline Astell-Burt describes them as a vehicle for an individual to combine the potential of creativity and communication to develop a "personal coherence" through "creative expression" (xi–xii). Hand puppets are easy to access and, because a hand puppet is directly manipulated, Engler and Fijan note that "The puppeteer can express

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<sup>8</sup> In American culture, the hand puppet is associated with children and, even with the current popularity of puppetry for adults, the form is not as widely used as others. The United States lacks a marketplace/plaza tradition such as the Punch and Pulcinella form that entertained families. In Russia, Obraztsov, for example, elevated the form, gaining respect.

<sup>9</sup> For example, just as with music, the practitioner should endeavor to become knowledgeable and skilled in the form themselves so as to offer high-quality experiences with the art form.

<sup>10</sup> The enduring value of puppet-centered play for children reveals the artificial and culturally-bound divisions between the pedagogical, social-emotional, entertaining, and therapeutic in children's complex development.

himself... without having to overcome the complex problems of control by rods or strings,” making them “the most natural and... easiest type to construct” (19). Some would argue that, since their movements are direct extensions of our own, hand puppets are more seemingly alive than other forms (Astell-Burt, 8).

Gioco has many puppets in his repertoire, but most prominent in his practice as a puppet artist and a therapist are the classic hand puppets of the Veneto region of northern Italy. Indeed, the hand puppet is “one of the simplest and most widespread types of puppet, and can be found across the world in a variety of cultures. Because it is extremely portable and need cost very little to make, it has long been the favourite type of puppet for street performance” (Glove Puppet). It is not surprising, then, that Gioco’s puppets still venture out into the street. Right at the door of his atelier, there is a large wooden desk where he paints and attaches eyes and hair. Across the front, hung upside down by loops, as is the custom during performances, Gioco has a collection of what he refers to as his *burattini sociali*, or social puppets. These are the puppets he takes to the restaurant or the plaza to interact with people, drawing them into spontaneous play. The hand puppet tradition of the region is not a one-way performance; it is an interactive form (like many other related traditions across eastern and western Europe and Morocco which emerged as forms of entertainment in the marketplace and town square). Their larger than life action drew attention to the small figures in the midst of these busy settings, but they also drew people with their banter—banter between the audience and the puppet and, often, the puppet and an interlocutor. The latter stands outside the small theater or, in Gioco’s case, can be the animator himself unhidden, witnessing, reacting, and even commenting on the puppet’s actions. They often translate for the audience because the traditional puppets of this form may speak only in quasi-

human voices.<sup>11</sup> Astell-Burt discusses the potential of the hand puppet for comedy that arises due to the closeness of the animator and the puppet through interaction and reaction (8). Puppeteers need not be invisible or hidden—especially in contemporary puppetry. Hand puppets function well as ventriloquist dummies. (For an example, see Susan Linn’s work with Audrey Duck.)

### The Puppet as Gesture

While Gioco’s own puppets can be quite expressionistic and experimental (he frequently reinvents stock characters in surprising ways), the form is ancient. The wooden head of the traditional *burattino* sits on the index finger—the importance of which is not lost on Gioco (2020). For Gioco, the body itself offers a powerful tool for children to externalize and the index finger, or pointer, is perhaps the most powerful of indicators and pointing, the essence of a gesture as the externalization of thought.<sup>12</sup> As Barbara Tversky points out in her book entitled, *Mind in Motion: How Action Shapes Thought*, all gesture is an externalization. “Gestures come first, before words, both in evolution and development,” she says (110). Tversky discusses how even babies’ small gestures are full of meaning. She too specifically describes the act of pointing, which can range from a demand for something to an effort to express what they know.<sup>13</sup> Words, she says, are (for the most part) arbitrary sounds, whereas a gesture “bears immediate relation to their meanings” (113). Through gesture the puppet can build worlds, describing relationships to actual space while also co-constructing an imaginary theatrical world between the mind of the gesturer and an audience—a space where a puppet’s life can unfold.

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<sup>11</sup> The hand puppet form often involves the use a swazzle, a small device inserted in the mouth which produces a kazoo-like effect, making the voice not quite human and setting the puppet apart as its own creature, subject to its own rules and heightening its trickster essence.

<sup>12</sup> The name that in Latin means to say or make known *towards*.

<sup>13</sup> Tversky describes her granddaughter’s gestural syntax when she points to the sky to express that she knows that airplanes fly.

Since applied puppetry is a form of drama-based pedagogy, puppetry can draw upon the body of research that supports its benefit in the development of reading, social skills, expressive/receptive language, and creative thinking...[providing] students with and without disabilities with additional opportunities to develop oral language and vocabulary skills.”<sup>14</sup> In “Material Voices: Intermediality and Autism,” Melissa Trimmingham and Nicola Shaughnessy describe ways that children with autism create meaning (differently) and the body’s greater role in their cognition through interacting with the physical and social environment (303). Through their ongoing theater project, they came to understand that imagination in children with ASD might be different; children might recreate the world around them in what they call their “enactive minds”:

Shaun Gallagher’s view of the centrality of the body in the action of cognition [challenges] the ‘body snatchers’ that see the essential action occurring in the brain (Gallagher 2015)...We came to understand the importance of our imaginative engagement with the autistic experience and perception of physical and social environments, the need to facilitate social (and creative) imagination, and empathy on the part of the participants through intermedial elements. These material voices and rich affordances provided us with tools for learning as our cognition was also facilitated through action-and-object orientated perspectives (303-4).

“The puppet is fundamentally oral and its orality differentiates it from sculptural objects or dolls,” suggests by Tova Ackerman in “The Puppet is a Metaphor.” However, that orality is not necessarily speech. Even non-verbal puppetry addresses literacy concepts such as cause and effect and beginning, middle, and end. Puppetry allows children specific experiences with communication continuums that involve gestures as a form of speech.<sup>15</sup> Ackerman argues that even when it has no language of its own, the puppet acts in concert with the presentation of a story (in which, at times, the audience vocalizes the words). The puppet has been intimately

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<sup>14</sup> Puppetry aligns with the principles of Universal Design for Learning and the Kennedy Center’s resources on UDL, as well as those on Arts integration.

<sup>15</sup> It also offers children a chance to tell stories and claims space and time for their stories with the expectation that others will listen. Gradually, as shyer children become more confident in their delivery, they strengthen the skills that allow them to command attention and to feel entitled to do so.

associated with orality in societies that did not have written language, where it was accompanied by songs that were passed down through repetition. It is specifically through gesture, she says, that it is able to reach deeply into the psyche, offering another dimension to speech. “It gives the speaker a way to state a thought in a strong way before a word is uttered” (9).

With a twist of the wrist, Gioco deftly illustrates the puppet’s ability to create an intimate conversation with the animator and then to turn and triangulate that communication, externalizing it to an audience (2020). The puppet, as a performing art, is also communication. Herein lies one of its strengths as a tool to help promote the externalization of a child’s communication, moving children towards language production and verbal engagement. Gioco stresses the importance of helping children to face their puppet outward. In some instances, he gives them simple sets that frame and focus the action outward. In others, he often sits close, one-on-one and face to face with students, using the puppet to hold their focus and helping to coax the puppet to face outward, thus becoming an intermediary. While there is also a value in an internalized dialogue between the child and the puppet they are animating, Gioco’s goal with his clients is to draw them into social interaction (2021).<sup>16</sup>

### Externalizing Emotion

In her study of puppetry as a tool for exploring self-awareness and empathy, Bani Malhorta finds that a puppet allows one of her clients to specifically externalize her emotions, in particular those upon which she perseverates (perhaps indicating her internal drive to resolve them). In the process of externalization, it would seem, names are given to emotions and a dramaturgy to emotional conflict and confusing experiences: “The puppets functioned as a safe

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<sup>16</sup> It is Gioco’s contention that the puppet has a fundamental ability to both nurture an inward, internal dialogue as well as to send it outward, supporting children’s development in interpersonal interaction and verbal communication. The physical process of a child turning a puppet to face outward is mirrored in the internal processes of connection.

and somewhat controllable physical object for exploration of complex feelings. The use of puppets served as a medium to externalize Lisa's feelings of loneliness and anxiety." Malhotra draws on a hypothesis posited by Trimmingham (2010) that the puppets' usefulness lies in part in its ability to embody an externalization of inner emotions and therefore shift focus away from their closed inner world, "as if another presence suddenly shares their lonely perception of the world" (Trimingham in Malhotra, 188).

After centuries of performances, it is perhaps not surprising that puppets generally have the potential to capture children's attention. However, this is not consistently or universally true; the specifics are important to analyze if one wishes to apply puppetry within therapeutic or educational settings. An aforementioned study, recently completed by a team at Yale University, addressed a common concern that "children with autism are less likely to attend to and engage emotionally with their social partners, which limits their exposure to a host of important learning opportunities and experiences" (Cummings). The study sought to introduce a puppet and analyze closely the effect it might have on children, controlling for variables. "We found that while children with autism paid less attention than typically developing peers when an interactive partner was human, their attention was largely typical when the interactive partner was Violet, the puppet" (Cummings). The researchers conclude that "Unlike humans, puppets appear to elicit typical patterns of attention in young children with ASD. Given that puppets can deliver simplified, salient, and highly contingent verbal and nonverbal social and communicative cues, they may play an important role as facilitators in the therapeutic process" (Macari 1983).<sup>17</sup>

In a study Gioco assisted with, the researcher observed an improvement across various metrics including communication, when a variety of hand puppets were used (those that resembled

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<sup>17</sup> They caution, "Whether attention to the puppet's social-communicative cues translates into better social engagement and more effective communication skills in ASD remains to be determined" (Macari 1983).

people, both realistically and more symbolically, as well as animals). “[P.J. and S.P.] were also the two participants who, from the first exposure to the puppet, presented and then maintained their interest in the proposal over the course of the ten sessions” (Cini 131).<sup>18</sup> In the article entitled, “Material Voices: Intermediality and Autism,” Melissa Trimingham and Nicola Shaughnessy use puppets as intermediaries. “In Imagining Autism, as these examples indicate, the intermediality of the project’s title created insights into how children with autism create meaning (differently), and the role of the body interacting with the physical and social environment in developing cognition. Our approaches helped us to understand more about imagination in autism and how those affected recreate in their minds the world around them” (303).

### Introducing Hand Puppets

Puppets should be introduced slowly with some children. As with many successful activities and interactions, a choice should be offered. Be sensitive to extreme hesitance, disinterest, or rejection. Both Briggs and Gioco mention the importance of allowing a child to reject puppets. Gioco reminds us that, “Not everyone likes dogs. Not everyone likes puppets” (2021). Astell-Burt points out that hand puppets are accessible to watch for most students but animating an object in close proximity to the body may not be for every child. Laying them out and seeing how a child engages is a good first step (13). Are they interested in them and, if so, which? A child may engage strongly with a puppet in an unexpected way. All engagement is engagement, regardless of how *seemingly* minimal it might be. Briggs describes some children

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<sup>18</sup> While not tested in these studies, one might also explore whether a child could channel and their attention through a puppet in order to enhance their focus. In theater and puppetry training, an animator may take a puppet or even an object and channel and shift their intentions into that object. For children, letting a puppet lead them around the room as they discover and respond to their environment might be an interesting activity.

who took multiple weeks to allow a puppet to go from being in their peripheral vision all the way to direct touch.

Animating itself, should a child choose to try it, offers opportunities for both fine and gross motor practice, coordination, and proprioception. Hand warm-ups could be built into the routine of using puppets, helping a child explore their dexterity. Engler and Fijan detail the six worldwide ways that one can fit a hand puppet on the hand (20–22). Different from *Gioco*'s index finger, they prefer what they refer to as the modern method, which most American hand puppeteers use. This style, where the index and second finger are inserted in the head, has benefits. Through this, the hand is more relaxed, and the puppet's arms can stretch more widely. For children—especially those with exceptionalities that affect their dexterity, hand strength, or fine or gross motor control—the single finger or even the two fingers in the head accompanied by the need to move the others independently may present challenges and frustrations. Those children can hold a rod that extends into a puppet's head, or a wooden spoon could become the puppet.<sup>19</sup> Some children will want to feel the hand within the puppet or otherwise explore the object permanence of the hand that has disappeared inside. If a child is disturbed by the hand hidden in the glove, a Styrofoam ball or something similar on the finger (as was used by the great Sergei Obratsov) might allow them to focus.

### The Hand Puppet and the Senses

The puppet offers multiple opportunities for sensory and proprioceptive input, which should not be underestimated. Briggs had us all squeeze our own hand through the felt body of the puppet, pointing out that this was unlike any other feeling (pressure and the firm but yielding

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<sup>19</sup> In terms of the connection to gesture and language, one might hypothesize that pointing with a stick is also integral to a child's communication impulses.

warmth of flesh). In her talk, “Looking Out and Seeing In: A Journey into the Body,” Jennifer Tantia describes different types of touch and their neurological effects. She asks adult participants to place their hands on the back of their head and switch between feeling their head with their hands while being felt by their hands, and then also to try to feel their hands with their head—a more challenging task, but one that alters their senses. “When you're feeling your head with your hands, that is an example of body image...looking at [and] feeling yourself from the outside in. When you shift inside your body or, in this case, inside your skull (inside your head), and you're sensing yourself from inside. That's body schema. And that's mostly what we do when we're cultivating embodiment.”

When making puppets for or with children, one should consider the tactile qualities of the fabric and construction. The face is important. Briggs has had experiences with kids who want to grab and squeeze the felt puppet’s face which is not necessarily aggressive but necessitating good construction. Gioco notes the triangle formed by the eyes and the mouth as the key to a child’s interest in that face. As the key to reading the puppet’s thoughts and intentions, Macari et al., cites a conversation between Briggs and Cheryl Henson, president of The Jim Henson Foundation: “The eyes should be clearly visible and appear to focus on something in front of them, in most cases, their viewer or social partner (1983). Although some studies have been carried out using puppets with detachable faces that clearly express a fixed emotion, many practitioners prefer puppets with more fixed but neutral, open expressions that allow for a child to project a range of emotions conveyed by the body language, voice, rhythm, etc. Briggs talks about the importance of a mouth that suggests a smile but does not exaggerate it.<sup>20</sup> While this

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<sup>20</sup> While often undervalued in comparison to qualitative data, the importance of anecdotes from years of experience is revealed when speaking to practitioners. The specificity of Briggs’ puppet design which has been longitudinally

may seem to lack range, in mask improvisation work, for example, a fixed mask—even one designed to be the epitome of neutral, can successfully be played as many emotions.

### Bringing a Puppet to Life

Puppetry is thought in action. “Every thought is embodied.... This lends the thoughts and actions more power and impact,” says Mervyn Millar in *Puppetry: How to Do It* (45). He emphasizes three components of successful animation in puppetry: *clarity*, *focus*, and *timing* (43). “Clarity is the most important thing in puppetry. Every time the puppet moves, the audience guesses what it is thinking (e.g., ‘He’s nervous...’). They then watch to see if that next movement bears out their guess.... When a puppet’s intention, mood, rhythm or movements are clear, the audience is more likely to guess correctly” (44). This, he argues, is necessary for audience investment. Many novice puppeteers move their puppets too quickly, or their moves are too tentative, vague, or complex to be accurately read and followed. That is not to say that some dramatic confusion, suspense, and surprise are not necessary to good puppetry. However, they will be most effective when they are framed with clear and specific actions that allow the audience to invest their interest.<sup>21</sup> Briggs and Henson, cited in Macari, add: “Details that give a sense of character such as distinctive voice, movements, and playfulness can provide additional appeal” (1983).

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“tested” in her work, is supported by a memorable anecdote she tells in the workshop: A teacher tried to soothe an upset child with a grinning hand puppet, only to make him more despondent. A few weeks later, when she pulled the same puppet out, the child exclaimed something to the effect of “There is that puppet that laughed at me when I was upset!”

<sup>21</sup> Someone new to the art form should practice breaking down a chain of thought and motivations into clear actions. For example: 1.) The puppet sees the butterfly. 2.) The puppet looks at the audience to see if they see it. 3.) The puppet looks again. 4.) The puppet takes a tiny step towards the butterfly. 5.) The puppet’s hands come to their cheeks; they are thrilled. (Note that checking in with the audience is also typical, though not universal, in hand puppet performance.)

Clarity of thought and feeling, along with their physical embodiment and location within a character, might offer some unexpected benefits as children learn to identify and manage emotional responses to complex social interactions. For children who need that support, the clarity of puppets' actions and statements may help children to powerfully and symbolically separate their own emotions and role in a situation through a character. Based on her research, Malhotra speculates that “Even though people with autism might share others' emotions, they might be unsure about its source or how to manage it, making it a struggle for ASD people to step back from the overwhelming empathic connections resulting in an empathic imbalance” (109).

Clarity may also support the puppet's usefulness in fostering the development of the symbolic play. Most children will begin to develop symbolic play at age two, and the process will continue. “Subsequently, the child begins to perform what is called combinatorial symbolic play. This consists in recognizing the various components of a sequence of actions. The child engaged in play, experiencing a certain role, learns to master it, and plays it without necessarily carrying out all the actions associated with it, shortening or completely eliminating some actions. In this phase, which occurs after the age of three, the meaning for the child is more important than the action itself. The child, getting into a certain role, must perform the foreseen actions and the emotions felt by the person he is representing (Cini, 47–48). For some children, this will be less developed. Gioco has noted that some children will remain in the process of repeating and rehearsing a short sequence that he demonstrates. He may even make a video for the child to access at home (2021). Gesture and the gestural form that is puppetry require what Tversky calls a “slimming of information” (115).

While there are some rules that most puppeteers identify as crucial to the aliveness and effectiveness of puppets, they lend themselves to all sorts of innovations. “The natural zaniness...allows for the free flow of ideas...the lack of a set of conventions is one of the conventions of the puppetry world” (Ackerman 9). This includes how the puppets and the sets (if there are any) are constructed. Contemporary puppetry has pushed the boundaries as well, opening material performance practices for vast experimentation, certainly granting permission for practitioners to defy conventions and create practices that work.

While for many, hand puppets are relatively easy to manipulate, since they are a direct extensions of limb function, this is not true for everyone (Astell-Burt 8). To be alive breath and ease must flow through the animator into the puppet, and this cannot happen if there is discomfort or struggle. Thus, they must fit the puppeteer’s body and abilities. One should consider a child’s strength, dexterity, muscle tone, and control so that they do not interfere with a child’s ability to be expressive. In a talk, “Why the Authentic Voice is Necessary When Making Puppet Theatre Around Disability,” given as part of the Nottingham Puppet Festival’s “Puppetry and Wellbeing” series, Dr. Emma Fisher, a researcher, puppeteer, animator, theatre designer, playwright, and educator, discusses the breakthrough that she had when she stopped making puppets to fit an image or idea and started making puppets that worked with her body. Fisher’s research explores unconventionally constructed puppets that reflect the disabled body. She described how, at times, the puppet’s required manipulation techniques even caused her pain and demonstrated a process she developed where she builds on her own body (for example, on her hand and arm). This construction technique is also a dialogue with the kinds of manipulation she wishes to achieve and that she discovers as she works (Fisher).

Not all children will be motivated or able to make, alter, or even decorate a puppet, but many will. Often considered a total art form because they allow children a chance to apply 2D and 3D art techniques, creating or altering puppets also offers a natural chance to engage in prototyping and other components of design-thinking in dialogue with kinesthetics.<sup>22</sup> *The World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts* extensively details the many variations in hand puppets that one finds across the world (Glove Puppet). These variations affect the appearance and animation qualities of the puppet and ultimately influence the personality and even the story they tell.<sup>23</sup> This not only highlights human ingenuity and the versatility of the human hand, but it also should offer practitioners who work with children the encouragement to modify any aspect of a puppet that interferes with a child's manipulation.<sup>24</sup> Because they are imaginative play, there can be great freedom and humor which emerges though animating a puppet, and this humor can open more relaxed space for children to perform. This humor also provides a certain creative freedom that practitioners can draw on when working with children to embrace the diverse experiences that they might have and lower levels of stress. "It is important that the person performing the puppet approaches it with focus and intent, has a sense of humor, and can express clear personalities" (Macari 1983). During a symposium, Gioco tells the audience that by nature,

"Puppets are disobedient. It is not easy to put the words we want in their mouth, we can try, but sometimes this does not happen.

In my opinion, [it is] for at least three reasons:

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<sup>22</sup> Empathy is built into good design and design thinking and is an added benefit for social-emotional growth. The problem-solving and the ownership that comes from a redesign is also beneficial.

<sup>23</sup> A puppet's characteristic movements, created through construction and animation, may give rise to a distinct personality and that may suggest a plot or storyline. Puppeteers embrace these happenstance results because they can give rise to great stories.

<sup>24</sup> As designed objects that must negotiate with specific human bodies, puppets are prototyped and refined. Many puppet artists design *and* animate their puppets. Encouraging kids to alter a puppet to work better is modeling the approach of professional puppet artists.

- 1) By their nature, they are rebellious.
- 2) They have their own language, which depends on their personality, which already has a vocabulary.
- 3) They do not like to follow the closed path of writing.” (Gioco 2013)

Even in language and sound, a puppet need not speak in any predetermined manner; they needn't even use words.

### Special Considerations

Gioco playfully describes puppets as disobedient. Adults should be aware that, as Linn notes, puppets *are* play and everything that comes out of their mouths is play.<sup>25</sup> It may be up to the adult to set that tone by activating their own humor and zaniness but also, in some instances, setting limits. What if a child wants to be violent with a puppet and to symbolically hurt the puppet for any number of reasons, including an effort to work through trauma? This is a challenging question and one that Susan Linn discusses with complexity in her book, *The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World*, drawing upon her training and a long career working with children undergoing painful medical procedures and other forms of trauma. While there isn't space to give this question adequate consideration here, I want to note the gravitas of this question and encourage any practitioner to consider in advance their response to a child wanting to harm a puppet in a symbolic way.<sup>26</sup> Two takeaways from Linn's work are that,

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<sup>25</sup> This is one of the many reasons why Linn reminds us not to have a puppet enforce rules. “Given that, ‘everything that comes out of Audrey’s mouth is play,’ she cannot create the necessary metastructure that reminds the child that something is pretending—a key aspect to working things out safely. Linn, however, can do this job” (Amato). Briggs concurs. They should not be the ones to correct behavior in a classroom; theirs is another role.

<sup>26</sup> The harm I am discussing here doesn't involve damaging the object, nor does it refer to hurting the animator, whose hand is inside that puppet. Injuring a person should not be tolerated. However, what about the puppet that exists in a nebulous space of imagination and hypotheticals? It is important to note the long history of puppets undergoing slapstick violence within comedy (possibly a healthy and cathartic part of a culture's negotiation with taboos), and even contemporary puppetry for adults often draws upon the puppet's unique existence to explore

because the puppet is play, the puppet cannot be the one to set boundaries—even about its own treatment. Also, while Linn ultimately decides to allow her puppets to undergo some painful acts (for example, be given, hundreds of painful shots by a child who is facing traumatic medical treatments), she requires that anything painful done to the puppet have a reason because, as she points out, what separates a medical procedure from torture is the intention to heal and not to hurt. The experience for a child undergoing this kind of treatment can be indistinguishable—this rule helps to make some sense of the difference.

### Conclusion

Puppets can have powerful benefits for all children and hand puppets, die to their very nature, offer many ways to engage children in imaginative and developmental play. Nancy Renfro describes them as “extraordinary creatures...ambassadors between a child’s inner and outer worlds” (2). They are human-like but they are also objects of fantasy, allowing for the rehearsal of life’s complex interactions and creating a space to test boundaries of what is acceptable—and possible. Hand puppetry practices have evolved across the world over the centuries but there is an innate wisdom that had developed from skilled puppeteers’ intimate experiences with the form and how it works. While puppetry is immensely adaptable, there is much to be gained by drawing upon this body of knowledge. Through the experiences of practitioners of applied puppetry, one can begin to understand aspects of the form itself that must be understood to be sensitively applied—and adapted. Each child will have a different experience with the puppet. It is important for the educator or practitioner of applied puppetry to consider the vast range of potential opportunities for growth offered by the hand puppet—many

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trauma and even death. To make this off-limits for children, it asks them to self-limit what adults do not. Establishing explicit expectations for a class puppet, for example, while introducing it can be helpful. Modeling care and elevating the puppet’s existence by, as Briggs suggests, designating a place for the puppet to live and sleep in a classroom could set up a different expectation than throwing them into a box or bag.

subtle and perhaps even unconsidered or taken-for-granted. “It is not necessary to be a professional puppeteer or even have formal training in order to effectively manipulate a puppet; however, training is, indeed, helpful to develop more advanced skills and insights” (Macari 1983). These skills and insights reveal and leverage multifaceted opportunities to incorporate hand puppets. It is important that any practitioner be responsive to the child with whom they are working, and this allows for that response to address both explicit and implicit aspects of puppetry. Susan Linn reminds us that each child’s play—like a fingerprint—is unique. It is a product of that specific child’s capacity for fantasy and their unique effort to make meaning out of their individual experience (12). It is also a response to a specific sensory encounter with the object and the phenomenological response to both the object and its aliveness, where one might find the deepest well to draw from when working with students with exceptionalities.

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