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Our Special TOY THEATRE issue!

Toy Theatre Unbound: Little Blue Moon Theatre

by Kathy Foley



The Anglophone toy theatre has roots in stirring representations of early 19th century theatre's romantic epics, stirring melodramas, and spectacular pantomimes shrunk to fit the hands of juvenile presenters with playbooks replicating the texts of adult performances (George Speaight, *History of the English Toy Theatre*, Boston: Plays, Inc. 1969, pp. 11-27, 92-95). As the Victorian period developed a stricter conception of childhood, content and materials became more staid—edited versions of pantomimes and melodramas, diverged from theatre's Victorian drawing room comedies and realist dramas as the child audience vanished (Speaight: 144-145). Toy theatre from 1850 into the 20th century was a world where the only adult viewer, conceptually, was a doting parent applauding a child presenter.

This short article will explore reflections of the Victorian history and show how now these small figures have been taken up by adults, with a discussion of California performers Michael and Valerie Nelson (Little Blue Moon Theatre <http://www.magicalmoonshine.org/bluewelcomes.htm>, hereafter LBMT) who make what was once child's play, tasteful but suggestive foreplay with an "R" rating.

Victorian Toy Theatre and Childhood Innocence

Literary reflections on toy theatre are wrapped in nostalgia for childhood. Charles Dickens writes: "My thoughts are drawn back, by a fascination . . . the toy-theatre—there it is, with its familiar proscenium, and ladies in feathers, in the boxes . . . a teeming world of fancies. . . . Let the benignant figure of my childhood stand unchanged!"¹

Robert Louis Stevenson remembered the juvenile playbooks as a respite from his strict Presbyterian household and a boyhood escape to a world of fantastical adventure:

In the Leith Walk window, all the year round, there stood displayed a theatre in working order, with a "forest set," a "combat," and a few "robbers carousing" in the slides; and below and about, dearer tenfold to me! the plays themselves, . . . to undo those bundles and breathlessly devour those pages of gesticulating villains, epileptic combats . . . , it was a giddy joy.²

Stevenson as an adult found childhood visions provided by printer Skelt more artful than adult theatre or life itself:

If I go to the theatre to see a good old melodrama, 'tis but Skelt a little faded. If I visit a bold scene in nature, Skelt would have been bolder; there had been certainly a castle on that mountain, and the hollow tree—that set piece—I seem to miss it in the foreground. (ibid)

Victorian viewpoints on toy theatre, a passion of youth lost in adulthood, contrast with 21st century toy theatre where grown-ups collect or perform.³ Our children click computer mice to explore panoptic vistas that earlier youth found in toy theatre's proscenium arch. Today, adults play with the diminutive figures and juxtapose childlike associations [smallness, toys] and adult genres [social criticism, sexuality] to create ironic dissonances. Paul Zaloom and Great Small Works create thought-provoking political commentary and laughter. Hotel Modern's *Kamp* depicts Auschwitz as populated by 3,000 three-inch figures, creating Brechtian *Verfremdung*. Little Blue Moon Theatre of Vallejo uses cutouts and Barbies to explore the exotic erotic, using the bondage of figures' minimal movement, to show how sexy toying around can be.

Little Blue Moon Theatre

Michael Nelson is the initiator of these shows. He and wife, Valerie, have been working with music, large flexible figures, and minimal scenery for child/family audiences for thirty years. This repertory, except for music, is the obverse—puppetry with small, stationary figures (7"-10") and abundant scenery (often in a 19th century-style proscenium) for adults. Nelson says it is "just for me," and a response to mid-life: others buy sports cars—he builds toy theatre shows.⁴ Shows are not commercially viable, as the audience "doesn't know what the form is": the company's one children's show, *The Grasshopper and the Ant*, has not sold widely. Still, the productions have won national/international-touring invitations, including four visits to Germany and one to France.

If children's shows are the couples' day job, toy theatre is their nighttime romp that may compensate for limits inherent in American performance for children. The pieces with numerous scene changes, set pieces, and characters in multiple states of undress have an exuberance of creation that reminds the viewer of 18th and 19th century scenography with its panoramas and scrolled vistas. Nelson notes it is "is way too much work" and accommodates too small an audience for commercial viability. Nelson took up the art wondering, "How I could adopt an odd static form and see how it might work." A workshop

with Robert Poulter at a Puppeteers of America festival a decade ago was followed by a second with Dutch master Harry Ouderkerk, who did not feel sexual material was feasible. Nelson took up this challenge. Inspired by the understated style of Edward Gorey's book, *The Curious Sofa: A Pornographic Work*, where sex is implied not depicted, Nelson developed a version of Gorey's *The Hapless Child*, but encountered copyright restrictions. Then he did a relative's life story for her 70th birthday.

Nelson's breakthrough piece was *Natalie*⁵: a puppeteer in Paris (who performs *au naturel* in her booth) encounters a wind gust. She looses her garments, but finds true lust and fame. The fifteen-minute show "contains puppet nudity (tasteful, of course) and implied adult situations" (LBMT). The performer who has no clothes must have struck a chord in UNIMA-USA 2008 award reviewers in its willingness to reveal eroticism rarely let out of the booth, and won an UNIMA citation for excellence, along with a ballad piece, *The Widow*, in which Valerie sings/manipulates the story of a sex-starved widow who wears out the devil in her search for satisfaction. Nelson credits his spouse for keeping narratives tasteful and cites Isabel Allende's idea, "Erotica is when you use a feather. Pornography is when you use the whole chicken," to explain their approach (email, 14 Dec. 2010).

Scriptwriter Nelson finds humor in "our method of reproduction that our society is so convoluted about." The sexual content fit the venue where works debuted: Napa's Wild Swan Aphrodisiac Factory. Ticket sales for performances and factory's tour never justified the hundreds of building hours that "take my [Nelson's] attention from real paying work," still, shows allowed exploration of adult themes.

Paper, Shadows, Toys

Little Blue Moon Theatre work can be divided by the objects used 1) classical proscenium toy theatre, 2) shadow shows, and 3) pieces with dolls/toys. The narratives draw on two major sources: 1) traditional myths or 2) Euro-American popular literature/cinema. Very often these two story strains intertwine—culturally Americans use the exotic other (European, Oriental, vampire, mummy, ghost, jungle dweller, or dancing god) to let sexuality free.

The mythic material explores multicultural sexology: Roman, Japanese, Egyptian, Turkish, and Indian. Film themes and orientalist images impact, too. Wordless *Roman Reverie* (2010) uses 110 figures and scenic images for the metamorphosis of an American couple separated on Roman holiday: Harold sports with nymphs and becomes a gladiator; Eve becomes a centaur's "pet" and drinks with Bacchus. Transformed more than a Jamesian couple by their Italian interlude, they are, literally, reunited. *Japanese Ghost Story* draws on Japanese prints and *kaidanshu* (ghost tales). Puppeteer Tamaki Nobuko consulted on a story of a spirit wife. She



Dracula del Lobo

warms her husband's bed until his body is found, locked in her skeletal embrace. Necrology, Buddhistic "attachment," and Japanese bondage combine. A tale of Osiris has horror film tropes and Egyptian lore in *Shaft of the Mummy*. Isis, to revive the world, must find the lost penis of her divine husband. It turns up "in the hands of the young archeological assistant, Chastity Innocenti. All seems well, but the priestesses of Isis have vowed to search for the missing phallus even after death. In this campy play . . . it is dangerous to mess with 'mummy dearest.' Contains nudity, mummies with their wrappings coming off, . . . and mummy sex (in the wings)" (LBMT). Design element combine hieroglyphics, mummy cases, and Edwardian drawing rooms.

Nelson has three sexy shadow plays: *Celebrity Kama Sutra* based on Sir Richard Burton's translations of the Indian text to explain how they do it, as "an educational, public service for the community. . . . Running time varies depending on the number of positions covered (or uncovered)" (LBMT). *Krishna and the Gopis* (cow girls) uses North Indian miniatures as visual inspiration for a tale of *gopis* wild for the god. In *Picnic*, the bawdy Turk, Karagoz, hooks up with beauties and outwits the Pasha's guards.

Mutiny on the Bounty, visually inspired by Hawaiian postcards, depicts the South Seas where Tahitian dancers abound and "clothing is only for decoration." Moral implications of actual mutiny are tossed overboard "in favor of the archetypal island fantasy. Contains no sex, but lots of dancing, ukuleles, surfing, bathing, and a few tropical drinks in the hammock. Oh. And some long rowing for Captain Bligh. And some tattoos" (LBMT). *Dracula del Lobo* in 1920s Argentina jumbles conquistadors and sexual conquests. Two young women encounter the vampire next door. Sizzling tango music of Astor Piazzola accompanies stake driving, beheading, and lust of "the world's favorite monster" (see film, www.magicalmoonshine.org/toy2.htm). The 10" figures require two manipulators, rather than the musician-narrator and a single manipulator of previous shows. *Tango for Tarzan* is Nelson's *Night in the Museum*: Jane visits a natural history museum and enters the diorama. Captured and bound, she escapes the trappings of civilization, a literally bareback rider cavorting atop rhinos. Finding Tarzan, Jane abandons culture for nature.

Nelson uses dolls in *Barbie Diaries* (2004, revised 2009) and *The Lady or the Tiger*. The first finds Barbie living in a Salvation Army shelter and split from Ken after 43 years of union. She recognizes her need to be controlled; imagery includes leather and whips. *The Lady or the Tiger* uses Barbie and G.I. Joe to make the fateful choice.

Conclusion

What do we make of this playing around? Tropes come from American ways of framing sex—other people do it. We can go on vacation from traditional American restraints and, when in Rome, do as the Romans. Escapes to the South Pacific, "Oriental" of the "Mid-" or "Far" East, or global south let characters throw off constraint and clothes. Debates of orientalism, colonialism, culture vs. nature are echoed in these playful replays of civilization and its discontents. Of course stories are not about faraway places but about "us." In *Tango for Tarzan*, Jane's inner animal is released. Barbie can face her bondage to the materialism and become a dominatrix. Nelson finds puppeteer Kevin Menegus' comment, that he has a lot of people in knots, perceptive: "In toy theatre, the

figures can't move anyway, so bondage and toy theatre go well together." The stories are about cutting cultural knots. Foucault, who highlighted Western culture's tendencies toward discipline and punishment, would probably applaud these miniature pieces that combine beautiful visuals, music, and psyches unbound. The play is erotically enhanced due to the unexpected form: diminutive figures.

The Little Blue Moon Theatre reacts to American approaches to sexuality: while seemingly free it has puritanical constraints. The company illuminates the contradictions in a "harmless" and "comic" mode. Blue Moon slides under the radar with figures of childhood innocence to point out the deep fascination that sex exudes and the ways we displace desire. The sizzling romance of the Regency Theatre lured the hearts and minds of boys who became the masters of the British Empire. Their tales of travel and colonialism still haunt our popular films and media. The toy theatres of Victorian nurseries are gone but Little Blue Moon picks up characters for adult viewers. They're only playing, but these little figures are hot to the touch.

Foley Kathy is a professor of theater arts at UC Santa Cruz, the editor of *Asian Theater Journal* and has performed as a dalang of wayang golek rod puppets and wayang orang dance drama for more than twenty years.

Notes

1. Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Tree" (1850) <http://library.educationworld.net/clas10/sc11pg1.html>, accessed 6 December 2010.
2. Stevenson, "A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured," *Magazine of Art* [1884] and *Memories and Portraits* [1887] <http://www.toytheatre.net/JKG-Frame.htm>, accessed 6 December 2010.
3. Only Hans Christian Anderson, his memories clouded perhaps by his own childhood penury and experience of parental neglect, allows his writing a more strident note that invites Marxist analysis. In "The Money Box," the fat piggy bank stuffed with coins lords it over the toys as they "have a game at being men and women, that is something worth playing at [. . .]. The little toy theatre was set up in such a way so that the money pig could look directly into it." The play "was not worth much, but it was very well played, and all the characters turned their painted sides to the audience, for they were only made to be seen on one side. The acting was wonderful, excepting that sometimes they came out beyond the lamps, because the wires were a little too long." Through it all, "each one thought most of himself, or what the money-pig could be thinking." www.fairytalescollection.com/hans_christian_anderson/The_Money_Box.htm, accessed 6 December 2010.
4. All quotes unless otherwise noted are from a personal interview 5 December 2010.
5. Nelson discussed this piece in "Natalie Undressed" in *Puppetry International* #14 (Fall and Winter 2003).