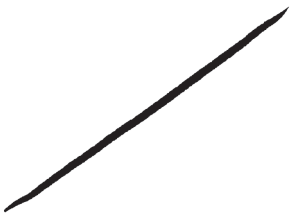


PUPPET TRANSGRESSION: AN ALTERNATIVE AND PERSONAL VIEW OF PUPPETRY IN THE UK

MATT SMITH



University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom
matt.smith@port.ac.uk

Abstract: In 1951 British puppeteer Rene Strange is captured in a Pathé clip transgressing the boundaries of acceptance by performing with an abusive male marionette. Later in the twentieth century Doo Cot provoked audiences with openly queer narratives and images challenging audiences with their object performances. This article charts the history of transgression and deviation in puppetry exploring interstitial practices around othered bodies. The iniquitousness of puppetry is presented as a rich genealogy of practices breaking conventions and rules.

This article will chart an alternative genealogy of puppetry moving from the margins to the mainstream in UK theatre cultures. The author will draw on their own ethnography and *dérive* through the changing landscape of UK puppetry. The argument presented is that puppetry draws an alternative path to the traditions of theatre and breaks apart the dramaturgy of things in performance. This article links to the themes of popular puppetry traditions, the dramaturgy for puppets, lesser-known histories, puppets as a phenomenon without borders, puppetry and community.

Keywords: transgressions, abjection, queer, dramaturgy, borders, genealogies, interstitial.

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Introduction

In 1951 British puppeteer Rene Strange is captured in a Pathé film clip transgressing the boundaries of acceptance by performing with an abusive male marionette. She performs in what would now be described as fetish clothing; super high heels, fish net stockings and small black knickers or pants. She uses string marionettes in her act, and the abusive male puppet is one of an entourage of her puppet characters. The "lover of forms" as the puppet is presented in the film narration, is in the form of the drunk male character who drinks heavily and then notices the legs of the performing puppeteer Rene which the puppet starts to caress until moved away from the performer. This act of ritual abuse is shocking from a twenty-first century perspective, but also a powerful moment in puppetry history where the lines between what is acceptable or normal are transgressed. Rene is fracturing the male gaze, or any gaze, towards her fetishized legs, by using the abusive puppet in this way. The puppet representing a predatory man as caricature is parodied and mocked for his desire to touch the eroticised flesh of the puppeteer. The wooden figure enacting bodily acts towards the human provokes an uncanny sense of wonder and disgust, in this odd performance. This is a dark image at odds with a time of British pride in its post-war cultural survival, as presented in the Festival of Britain in 1951. To present, through the artificial character of a puppet man, this image of the seediness of British entertainment is

surprising and certainly would not be as shocking as it is now received in hindsight. The puppeteer Rene Strange, very present and eroticised, also presents herself in a powerful, if complex image of animation and performance. She is in control of the image of abuse she transgressively presents in the innocuous room that could be a dressing room backstage at a theatre venue. The visual punctum (Barthes, 2010) or aesthetic shock of this act, which jumps off the screen, is of the abusive puppet seemingly out of time alluding to the abuse of women culturally, more apparent in reflection than at first considered. It is a much more complex image and performance than just mere titillation.

Transgression and marginalisation

The transgressive puppet has been found throughout history to transcend boundaries of taste in regards to human eroticism and sexual imagery (Jurkowski, 1988, pp. 96–111 and Blumenthal, 2005, pp. 125–142). Eileen Blumenthal in her encyclopedia of world puppetry suggests, in the section on puppets and sex, that puppets have a “license for licentiousness” (Blumenthal, 2005, pp. 129–30). They mock human desire and eroticism, parodying our bodily connections as well as troubling our notions of fixed boundaries in regard to gender. Henryk Jurkowski also suggests that the history of puppetry is intertwined with eroticism, including an ancient “planchette” style puppet in Africa which demonstrates human copulation, performed among simple figures animated between the feet (Jurkowski, 1988, p. 99). In these figures there is a traditional form of comic sexual education but also a tangible representation of sexual acts. Puppets are adept at transgressing in this way, as boundary explorers, taking us into alternative spaces of being, exploring difficult spaces of desire and eroticism.

As an animated figure, the puppet disturbs representations of fixed gender and normative ideas of relations between entities in these historical performances because of the puppet’s ambiguous status as a thing. Rene Strange is exploiting this disruptive alienating transgressive way that puppets represent in performance when animated. As a popular mainstream variety act, even at one point performing for royalty at the Royal Variety Performance in 1946, Rene Strange, the popular entertainer, is also commenting in a “meta” way on the abuse of men towards women’s objectified bodies in this powerful act with her predatory male marionette. There is a cruel ironic point about gender violence underlying this historical puppetry. Contemporary online viewpoints emphasise the nasty and disturbing nature of this act by Strange, but miss the subversive recalcitrant narratives this strange performance provokes. In 1995 Basil Twist, the US based master puppeteer, unknowingly echoed Rene Strange’s act of subversion in one

of the images of his show *Stickman* that Twist created as a result of being invited to perform at a fetish cabaret in New York. In the powerful image Twist's legs are eroticised with fishnet stockings and he is wearing high heels in conjunction with the marionette figure. In this image of the subversive marionette mixed with the puppeteer's corporeality, the intention appears clearly to be kinky. In both Twist's and Strange's performances, the puppet and the performing objects – hosiery and fetish shoes – augment the performer into a non-binary, beautifully unfixed image of eroticism. When puppeteers and puppets perform like this there is a troubling mix of fun, frivolity and freakishness on display. They are often pushing at the boundaries of the marginal, a point explored by the critic Kenneth Gross:

Marginalisation offers advantages. That “secret and demeaning stature” has made it possible for puppeteers, in some historical contexts, to take up a repertory of otherwise forbidden worlds – as when players in Tudor England performed with puppets whose medieval passion plays the protestants authorities banned for human actors, or when nineteenth or twentieth century puppet troupes [...] staged shows too politically raw for the commercial stage. (Gross, 2011, p. 7)

This article partially charts the history of transgression and deviation in UK puppetry exploring interstitial practices around othered bodies. This is an alternative partial history and account of UK puppetry pointing towards where this form crosses the boundaries of normalised taste and cultural discourses. This article charts this alternative genealogy of puppetry moving from the dirty margins to the accepted mainstream in UK theatre cultures. The argument presented is that puppetry draws an alternative path to the traditions of theatre and breaks apart the dramaturgy of things and materiality in performance, especially when mixed with a queer reading. Puppets and puppeteers are often portrayed as inhabiting the dark spaces of the irrational and ambiguous like the perverted persona of Mickey, the distasteful deviant puppeteer in Phillip Roth's novel *Sabbath's Theater* (1995). The iniquitousness of puppetry in its histories offers a rich genealogy of practices breaking conventions and rules. For example, the trickster figure with its long history, the wicked and immoral Punch in *Punch and Judy*, and the crazed dictator Ubu (1896), the disgusting tyrant puppet figure as imagined by the avant-garde rule breaker Alfred Jarry, are just a few of puppetry's iconic immoral transgressors. The mischief-making puppet survived puritanism and is openly mocked by Ben Johnson in *Bartholomew's Fair* (1614), when the puppeteer reveals the interior of the puppet to demonstrate its lack of fixed gender or genitals (Gross, 2007). Another very early example in transgressions is the now

well documented account of the protofeminist cross-dressing puppeteer Charlotte Charke, who used Punch to make outrageous shows in the late eighteenth century. Amber West's recent account of this historical figure explores how Charke mixed high and low performance with issues of gender in her inimitable style of bold and subversive puppetry (2015, 127). Puppets have often been relegated to being wicked and morally repugnant in popular culture in regard to images of the uncanny horror inducing puppet or the possessed ventriloquist dummy. This iniquitousness gives the puppet power culturally and ethically to negotiate awkward boundaries between ideas of fixed or unfixed self and others. The puppet has also a powerful indeterminacy that has meant that non-binary concepts like Edward Gordon Craig's *Übermarionette* (1908) have continued to fascinate theatre scholars and practitioners (Le Bœuf, 2010). The *Übermarionette* in this reading is beyond the confines of conventional theatre having no fixed gender, control or defining features beyond its graceful, transcendent and godlike status in the avant-garde theatre of the early twentieth century. As philosopher John Gray points out, puppets are wonderfully divergent beings; "when the puppet acts, it cannot help feeling that it is free. *Übermarionetten* have irreducibly many divergent views of how they should live" (Gray, 2016, p. 156).

In the 1990s the openly gay puppet theatre company Doo Cot provoked audiences with queer narratives and images. This company's aesthetic and powerful visual theatre was a great inspiration for my own practice in the early 1990s. The first performance I witnessed was a strange variety show of small acts by animal puppets in a rundown circus-like scenography called *Cages* (1993). One puppet figure of a skeletal dog in this show is etched in the memory as it was made from a real dog carcass left on a high rise building in Manchester and stripped by acid rain. The dog was a disturbing presence as an in-between being or thing, dead but animated. The grotesque and dark visual world of this company slips between the cracks, never binary, but always other, in this set of animal acts in *Cages* or through their other transgressive productions. The characters of the animal puppets troubled our relation to other species and to the idea of how we both treat and present animals in our culture. Basil Jones (Handspring Theatre) has discussed this idea that animal puppets tap into a cultural zone unique in performance (Kohler et al., 2009). Doo Cot explored the way that animal puppets can push boundaries and present stories of others. Another of their productions, *Odd if you Dare* (1995), was both a celebration of a queer perspective and an attack on male hetero violence towards women. The puppets in this show irreverently enabled images of otherness and transgression away from gender binaries and norms.

One moment of body shock in Doo Cot's version of *Frankenstein* (2000) included a moment when Nenagh Watson manipulates what looks like offal or

entrails within a soup of blood within a bowl. The visceral animation of the slimy objects is transfixing and troubling and cuts into the heart of the materiality of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) body horror. It is also a great demonstration of our fear of the abject as explored by feminist scholar Kristeva (2024). The abject is expelled from the symbolic order – the realm of language, culture, and societal norms – as it represents what is deemed impure, repulsive, or threatening to the self and social identity. This revulsion stems from what is transgressively polluting or boundary-crossing. The animation of flesh by puppeteer Watson in a blood soup feels like a step away from the acceptable, as these abject materials are often sanitized and hidden in modern culture. In this bloody moment the objects and bodies are doubly uncanny due to the mixing of puppet and abject meaty elements.

A marginal puppet journey

Next, I draw on my own ethnography and *dérive* through the changing landscape of UK puppetry. My practice emerged at a time when puppetry in the UK was “on the brink of belonging” (Allen and Shaw, 1992), a very marginal art form in the early 1990s. At the moment of writing this article, the situation is that puppetry is no longer just marginal in the UK but is a part of the mainstream, with very popular shows in the West End and lots of high profile puppet projects gaining media attention.

My journey involved experimenting with the form of puppetry, and in pursuit of this aim I devised a cabaret show with a paper bird. In 1995, as part of the Battersea Arts Centre puppet cabaret in London, I presented a short *étude* featuring a paper origami bird lit with candles. I first made the bird, then a simple puppet figure fashioned from a piece of muslin cloth knotted in one corner to form a head, and this simple figure burned the object bird in a ritual act of destruction/transformation. The burning carbonised the white paper and the bird form, which was relatively intact after combustion. Among the audience of puppet fans, this destruction of the object was seen as distasteful and was poorly received as an experiment in object animation. Burning the bird was a transgressive ritual act of violence towards the emblematic image of a dainty paper bird and the act of making it from a simple sheet of plain paper. Like the butterflies burnt at the end of the Peter Brook show *US* (1966), this act of symbolic violence towards the animal/object other was morally distasteful to audiences who had expected an entertaining cabaret puppet show. This destruction was like an “anti-puppet show”: instead of animating the object for the pleasure of the audience, I, the puppeteer, performed a ritual act of transformation/destruction. For puppet scholar Matthew Cohen, the puppet has its own destruction written upon its form in performance (Cohen, 2007).

Transgressive Testicle show

In 2006, I explored my experience of testicular cancer, focusing on the imagery and behaviour of the cancer cells themselves. In collaboration with musician Paul Rogers and actor Gillian Knox, we made a form of dark cabaret. This included a shadow puppet show that represented my internal organs and the scans of my body as part of the treatment. Within my represented shadow stomach, we projected a world of sea life. I then introduced the large testicle puppet – representing my testicle that had been removed – which I called Frank. This puppet of a testicle sang songs and spoke in an “American” accent (I had discovered the tumour while in New York). The puppet was a large ball of scrap foam (upcycled from an old sofa) with a mutated visage complete with eyes, teeth and an arm protruding at unusual angles. The piece was received by some guests in the audience try-out as “too weird” or too transgressive to apply to a wider audience, specifically teenagers. The show would struggle as an educational performance (the aim of the production) and so was shelved. This experiment (though not reaching a wide audience) did explore how I attuned to something as relatively unknowable as a tumour in a puppetry show. I explored cancer and its bodily and emotional trauma using performing objects which helped me navigate my embodied experience of mutated cancer cells in my earlier life. Recycled foam, sculpted into a tumorous testicle, helped me transgress cultural norms and explore the interstitial space of my mortality. Frankenstein-like, I brought my testicle back to life. Puppetry also enabled me to creatively unpack the way that medical contexts and discourses often alienate illnesses for the patient. I discovered through this bizarre performance a creative kinship with my removed testicle. It gave me a way to think beyond the disempowering medical metaphors that Susan Sontag eloquently critiques in *Illness and its Metaphors* (2009) as distancing the self from their body/illness. The testicle puppets agency spoke to my experience of illness and articulated my imagined life of my cancer cells in this dramaturgy.

Attuning to these cancer cells using transgressive puppetry explored the material conditions of my own body, and through this dramaturgy I was performing healing from this traumatic episode in my life. This experiment centred around my own genitals and was transgressive and ludic in its response to illness, metaphors and performance. The boundaries between my body as a site of death/life mixed with the entities of puppets and performing objects troubled notions of fixed boundaries and fixed reception of narratives. The abject was conjured in this performance through exploring my body transgressively navigating the trauma and horror of what I had birthed through my illness. I am in this example part of an alternative history of the puppet in which its existence

either blatantly represents or performs acts about our most intimate body parts. The puppet has this transgressive power of giving us the freedom to make these types of body morphing acts possible.



Jack and Poll with performer Twyla Brown
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Jack and Poll

In 2022, as part of the PortFest festival, I collaborated with Louis Netter and Twyla Brown on a devised performance that explored the history of Portsmouth during the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar. Our approach to Portsmouth's naval heritage in this puppet show was by turns playful, irreverent, and poetic in the final performance. The aim was to show Portsmouth from street level and from various dispossessed viewpoints, extending even to the perspectives of other species, all conceived as lost voices from history. Jack and Poll, two drunken puppets late for their own

wedding, were from the outset portrayed as unreliable narrators whose tall tales were often openly debunked by the master of ceremonies, a devilish cat. A 2023 remake extended the ensemble of puppet characters, incorporating a rat and a seagull to further diversify the city's represented viewpoints. Additionally, the voice of naval authority was included to acknowledge the historical discourses of British imperialism.

Our process avoided caricaturing people and animals, countering the stereotypes found in contemporary illustrations by bringing these transient figures to life in a different style. This was in counterpoint to the general demonising of the poorer classes in the early nineteenth century Britain. Overall, we explored how our transgressive, magic-realist approach to historical sources functioned as a response to performing heritage, inviting audiences to empathise with the transient characters who still haunt our coastline. The puppets, like the transient figures they represented, occupied the liminal space of the littoral coastline narratives, drifting like pieces of wood or waste along the land's edge.

As part of our research into *Jack and Poll*, we found recent scholarship on women serving aboard Royal Navy ships (Stark, 2017); this challenged misogynistic seafaring myths and provided an alternative history to the dominant narratives of men at sea. Women were an integral part of the experience of the navy at the time of Trafalgar. This included the women who prepared Admiral Lord Nelson's dead body before returning to England. There was a roaring trade in prostitution during this period and the 'bum boats' in Portsmouth were used to transport cargoes of women for sex and companionship. The source cartoon of Poll (nickname for sex worker) by Charles Williams from 1806 uses symbolism in her dress that indicates that she was a sex worker as well as Jack's (nickname for sailor) partner. In our show, the counternarrative of women as integral to the success of the British navy is articulated through the powerful and commanding presence of the puppet Poll and her puppeteer, Twyla Brown. There was a fascination with stories of Jane Tars (women masquerading as sailors) in Victorian popular culture, including in a set of toy puppets produced by the Pollock theatre brand. In our production our gender bending was inspired by the popular traditional song *Jackaroo*. Poll sings this song with vigour and as a way to reclaim her history from dominant male discourses. In our story, we give Poll a long life so that she can join in solidarity with the 300 sex workers who marched in Portsmouth in 1867.

Despite this superstitious prohibition, there were women living and working in naval ships from the late seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth, although their presence onboard was officially ignored or hidden. (Stark, 2017)

Historian Suzanne Stark makes a great case of turning the assumptions about women on board ships at the time of Trafalgar. Her history of the subject shows that women were an integral part of the British navy for hundreds of years. Her view is very bleak, giving the social context for how women were part of the navy. A cruel, abject and filthy life. Her account serves as an inspiration and reference for the character of Poll, who embodies the harsh realities faced by women both aboard ships and onshore, where many were left to pick up the pieces of desperate lives and families. One key source Stark often references is the numerous naval ballads and songs that recount women's experiences, frequently with incredibly misogynist, cruel, and bawdy humour. These sources were also central to our construction of a dramaturgy inspired by naval heritage. Brown sings songs with the puppet Poll, a choice that recalls music-hall performance styles as popular vehicles for social narratives. Brown also drew this from her experience as an actor at the historic dockyard in Portsmouth, where actors are employed to provide heritage information and experiences on the decks of historic British naval ships. When Brown/Poll sing a spirited version of Nelson's Blood (a popular naval song), the puppet dances and "sells" the performance like a music-hall performer. This use of songs with puppets forms the theatrical experience into a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of elements including visual theatre, song and dance. In this total theatre the puppet of Poll does not reduce her character or agency to just a female type in the narrative but brings to life the appalling context and oppression these destitute people faced. It was a continual observation during rehearsals and in performance that the puppets could enable empathy for transgressive characters lost to history. Puppetry did not seem to diminish the importance of the feminist retelling of Portsmouth naval history. The puppet of Poll was able to amplify this alternative to normative narratives of women excluded from history. Jack and Poll as a performance used the littoral in-between status of puppets as objects to represent an alternate history of the dispossessed. These puppets performed as representations of transgression making these marginal characters tangible whether human or animal.

Transgressive dramaturgy

Objects like puppets do things to dramaturgy that are transgressive, surprising and enlightening, if listened to. Puppet scholar Claudia Orenstein has charted this in her view of world puppetry and its dramaturgy.

In puppetry, we have the advantage and maybe even the obligation to express important moments of transition or progression through materiality. In any case, doing so, I believe, can lead to powerful choices. Indulgence in the animation of matter is the central pleasure

of puppetry but not the full sum of a puppet piece. Some useful terms I have used here that can help to think about how a puppet performance might be structured include dramaturgical moment and invitation. Finally, a good rule of thumb is that the dramaturgy – storytelling, emotional trajectory, meaning-making – in puppetry is in the object. Let objects lead in the progression of events and the telling of puppet tales. (Orenstein, 2023, p. 55)

Orenstein (2023) suggests above a “puppeturgical” moment in the understanding of the shape of puppetry, and this article uses this view to valorise the object in dramaturgy framing questions of how performing objects taint, distort and reframe scripts and scores in performance. This is in relation to dramaturg Posner’s view (2014) that in puppetry the audience is receiving either a “meta” or “ur-narrative” when exploring the threads of meaning in puppet dramaturgy. These spectacular narratives affect the dramaturgy and the minds of the audience. For Posner, “this meta-narrative is depicted in the persistent simultaneous presence of and equal emphasis on both puppeteer and puppet. It is implemented through fully exposing the puppets’ mechanics, so that the puppets move seemingly by magic even while the audience sees how the magic works” (2015, pp. 336–7). These narratives visually interpreted by the intervention of puppetry in this way, form new meanings. This layering of narratives in both the spoken and visual senses operate in my own practice as a performance artist and in the world of unbounded art. Performing objects bring to life alternative narratives emphasising the material nature of performance often outside of the disciplinary structures of mainstream theatre.

Puppets have a unique tendency to disrupt human cultural systems and subvert our normalised ideas of networks of things. They are unusual objects that act like interfaces for us and our object worlds. We project our fears and our ideas onto these objects and freely use them in an instrumental way to open up imaginative magic-realist worlds in unusual spaces. Puppets do this by shifting our notions of subject–object relations and the idea of the im/possible autonomy or agency in objects. The puppet in this way, oscillates between being an object that has subject status in theatre or as characters, or as powerful symbols. This shifting and oscillation is one of the reasons they bring to life and open up interesting alternative spaces in performance.

So, in my alternative view of UK puppetry the traditions and the contemporary practices break boundaries and represent what is often not represented. Puppetry does this by breaking apart dramaturgy in acts of material awakenings in audiences and by forming “meta-” or “ur-”narratives (Posner,

2014) demonstrating the strata of the imitative art that is performance. Even with efforts to push traditional puppetry into marginal spaces because of its odd but popular reception and consumption, it now seems to be enjoying a golden age. Even when puppetry becomes part of the mainstream theatre space like this in the UK, it still has the potential to inhabit the interstitial and speculative space between categories and binaries. Looking for our puppet genealogies in queer and transgressive acts like those of Doo Cot and Rene Strange are alterantive transgressions operating against and commenting on dominant discourses that aim to marginalise the other. This transgressive theatre has inspired my own experiments in articulating marginalised narratives with performing objects. Queer readings of puppetry provide an important alternative way to think of the human nonhuman issues that puppetry presents. As Antione Hirel posits, the mixing of queer aesthetics in puppetry performances is a productive and hopeful process; “the queer puppet absorbs our heteronormative projections and return them back through new signs of subversion and fiction, giving us the power through our perspectival vision to create the queer utopia” (Hirel, 2022, p. 89).

Exploring the potential of objects in theatre, Ben Gillespie offers us a fresh look at the materiality in performance by the process of “que(e)rying” the way we receive and use objects in performance cultures. He suggests that “by recasting the object as actor, the theatre (perhaps inadvertently) provides the space to enact queered reading practices that evaluate the ignored, underrated, incapacitated, and recalcitrant performances of humans and objects alike” (Gillespie, 2014, p. 151). This new reading of recalcitrant objects is one approach I am suggesting here as a way to capture the transgressive genealogies in puppet theatre. Gillespie sees this as a practice that can be applied to materiality in performance in more general terms, and “as such, we have an opportunity to consider theatrical life-forms beyond the human by thinking queerness as a critical tool for harnessing objects” (Gillespie, 2014, p. 153). Looking at objects as “otherwise” beyond normative values (Gillespie, 2014, p. 158) for the artist and researcher is a generative and alternative route to understanding the dynamics of things in performances. The transgressive approach is to see our enactments entangled with and combined with objects as opposed to being usually seen as “enacted upon” in theatre cultures (Gillespie, 2014, p. 160). In both practice and reading, the performance is re-enchanted with this alternative approach beyond binaries and fixed boundaries of human categorialism. This reading and viewpoint opens up new spaces when reconsidering popular puppetry traditions, dramaturgy for puppets, the marginal lesser-known histories, and the way that puppets transgress as a phenomenon without borders. In this way puppetry and its communities can be read using this queer lens and sensibility.

Conclusion

Puppeteers and puppets are edge walkers navigating the margins, the gaps and the liminal spaces of culture, divining what is often an offensive and transgressive terrain. They are now part of the mainstream too as part of what is the “puppet moment” when our non-human puppet kin are so attractive to contemporary audiences. Even when puppetry inhabits the mainstream, it is still journeying through aesthetics beyond the human and playing with narratives that are challenging and sometimes hybrid. Exploring alternative spaces and places using performing objects is both disturbing and exciting for artists, audiences and scholars alike. This can take us into the past like in *Jack and Poll* where underrepresented voices are animated in the present, or in challenging heteronormativity like in the history of Doo Cot, or the disturbing image of Rene strange with her predatory male marionette in the 1950s, or more recently in the way that drag culture has appropriated the transgressive puppet into its oeuvre. The puppet is the master of the interstitial zone and will never conform to human domination or control. I have presented here my personal and partial alternative history of puppetry by exploring this “interstitial dallying” and encouraging lovers of puppetry to mine the in-between spaces where the allusive and fascinating puppets play.

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Matt Smith, Reader in Applied theatre and Puppetry, has thirty years experience, working in landscapes, prisons, with environmental agencies, health, youth arts, disability arts groups and with the homeless. Smith's practice is interdisciplinary mixing drama, puppetry, masks, and junk music. Publications include (2015) *The Practice of Applied Puppetry: Antecedents and Tropes*, (2016) *Thinking Through the Puppet inside Immigration Detention*. and (2018) *Hand to Hand: The Dynamic Situation of Applied Puppetry* and his monograph (2024) *Applied Puppetry: The Theory and Practice of Object Ecologies*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.