



Marionnette & Thérapie

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A method for introducing puppets in therapy

Paper presented by Marie-Christine Debien and Gilbert Meyer on 3 February 2018 at the symposium organized in Friedrichsdorf (Germany) by the associations Deutsche Gesellschaft für Therapeutisches Puppenspiel and Fachverband Figurenspieltherapie, on the theme Puppe und Menschsein. Spiel über Grenzen hinaus [Puppet and human being. Playing across inner and outer borders]. Translation: Marion Tartarin. Photos: Gilles Eliot.

I will present some of the clinical and theoretical foundations of this method, which is taught in the training courses organized by *Marionnette et Thérapie* (with some variations, depending on the trainers' professional experience and the difficulties of the public they accompany).

The introduction of puppets into the therapeutic setting goes back in France as early as the 1980s. It was particularly implemented in several adult psychiatry services, in a number of different ways, which were presented at conferences, symposia and in articles published in various journals.

Colette Duflot was one of the pioneers of puppetry in therapy. She worked as an adult psychologist in the Mayenne Hospital's psychiatric ward, where she introduced puppet making and puppet play into the therapeutic setting. She explained her method in a book, published in 1992: *Des marionnettes pour le dire: Entre jeu et thérapie* (Puppets to say it: Between Play and Therapy - no English translation).

> *This method is characterized by a group format (5 to 7 patients), animated by two or three therapists and a sequence in several times:*

The first step is the fabrication of a puppet "at one's own idea" by each participant (over several sessions) then comes a time of presentation and statement of the "identity card" of each puppet (by its author), presentation addressed to the group.

This is followed by a third and fourth stage: with the creation of a collective scenario in which puppet characters will meet each other, and playing time with the puppets (marottes à main prenante, in the groups animated by C. Duflot) in their theatrical space (the castelet). The sequences of puppet plays behind the castelet alternate with speaking times outside the castelet. The staging of the scenario and the playing with the manufactured puppets can give rise (or not) to a final representation: either reserved for the group, or open to a chosen (and benevolent) audience, or filmed for a viewing reserved for the group.

Once the session is over, the puppets are usually left in the space dedicated to the puppet group. In some cases (and on the advice of the therapists in charge of the group), they can be taken to a place outside the puppet activity, by one patient or another, according to his request and the evaluation (by the therapists) of the psychic elaboration of which the puppet was the support.

> *These different moments activate strongly the psychic processes of projection and identification. They support the shaping of an image of oneself or make it possible to distance oneself from it. They support the transposition into words of one's suffering, of one's quest, to organize the narrative of a story, to make a place for oneself, to imagine several versions, with possibilities of encounters, of discoveries...*

As indicated in the presentation of our intervention, the intention is "to open up singular psychic spaces in a possible sharing with others".

Marionnette et Thérapie

It was after the international symposium of September 1976, held in Charleville-Mézières as part of the World Puppet Theatre Festival, that the UNIMA-France Therapy Commission became an autonomous association.

Marionnette et Thérapie aims to train and inform:

- *it regularly offers basic or in-depth training courses for health, education and puppeteer professionals who wish to set up a puppetry activity with therapeutic, educational or socialising objectives for people disturbed mentally, socially, or living with a handicap.*
- *it contributes to research and information dissemination through conferences, national and international meetings, a periodical newsletter and specialized documents in line with the objectives of Marionnette et Thérapie.*

The psychic processes activated in the different moments of the therapeutic device with puppet mediation

1/ The making of a puppet "at one's own idea" (without any model or character suggestion) allows the emergence of unconscious images that participate in the sense of identity and construction of the ego as well as in the formation of the imagos (the representations of parents, relatives, etc.) to which our emotions and our mode of relationship with others are attached. Therapists know it, the shaping of a self-image, of an intimate question, is the aim of any therapeutic process. For some psychotic patients, without desires for themselves or words about their suffering, this is a prerequisite for entering psychotherapy.

2/ The time of the puppet's "identity card" is that of the naming of the freely created puppet character. The author's enunciation of this identity has the function of allowing a first gap, between the author and his creature, between the author's person and what the character (this creature born of his imagination) represents, symbolizes, expresses. It is this just distance between oneself and the puppet character where "one has put of oneself" that will allow freedom of speech: "It is not I who speaks, it is the puppet". This character has a connection with me, but it's not me.

3/ The elaboration of a collective scenario and the sequences of play are then carried out alternately, during the following sessions. When all the puppets have been able to take a place in the scenario, and everyone has been able to play (somewhat) and "say what they have to say", the group can end.

When, in a hospital service, in a medical-psychological centre, the puppet workshop has found its place among other therapeutic mediation devices... it is common for participants to ask to re-register for another session, with another group. It will take place according to the same setting, starting with the manufacture of a new puppet "at one's idea" which could be the support of a new question or a progress in the psychic elaboration initiated with the first puppet.

Individual psychotherapy, through speech and without the use of puppets, is sometimes engaged at the end of a puppet group. This is the case, when a patient has been able to put in shape, to put words on an intimate question (until then indescribable and not represented) and open a psychic space in himself... From then on, he perceives the meaning (and interest) of having a personal space of speech to continue his subjectivation journey.

Puppets to start saying: Annie Z and her two puppets

It is a psychotherapeutic journey with the support of puppets, that of Annie Z. that I will present to you now. This patient, now deceased, was about 25 years old when she took part in two successive sessions of a "puppet group with therapeutic aim" that I animated (with an educator then with a psychomotrician). The two puppet characters she made "at her idea" (see

projected photos) were the medium for a commentary on the questions that lived in her: questions of identity and linking, which she staged in real life in a noisy and sometimes disturbing way; questions that she was able to begin to develop psychically with the support of puppets, which played, literally, a role of therapeutic mediation.

Following several meetings with the educational team, I plan to offer this woman to participate in this "puppet group". I hear of Annie: of her loud voice and of the power relations she puts in place, with regard to the people in charge, especially those in authority and men. From the director, she says loud and clear: "He doesn't do a fucking thing, he's not the one who's going to command me". These words, and the clashes they provoke, mobilize the managers who feel drawn into an escalation of acts of authority, without end and without effect.

At the time, Annie's father had just passed away. She was said to be in constant conflict with him. She lived alone with her mother, an older sister had left the family since being married. Since her father's death, Annie had been wearing his clothes: wide trousers held by straps and even (she points out) her father's men shoes. She is tall and strong ("taller than my mother" she will say later); her clothes, her voice, her way of speaking are ostentatiously masculine.

These disturbing or unusual behaviours seem to be related to the death of her father and her relationship with him during his lifetime. However, she does not seem to experience grief as a painful loss. The fact that she wears her father's clothes and thus displays a masculine identity raises the question of identifications; the aggressive-defensive mode of her relationship with the other has a paranoid tone that worries, her lack of apparent affect questions. The institution does not ask the psychologist that I am to see Annie in therapy; neither does she... But the project "comes to my mind" to propose to her a therapeutic work with puppet mediation.

While she is generally in a position of refusing any words or proposals addressed to her, she agrees to come and speak with me about this "puppet group". The preliminary interview with Annie takes place where the group is held; puppets made by others (previous participants or professional puppeteers) are placed on a display stand.

When I ask her if she recognizes some of the characters, for each one, she answers me in a joking way: "He's a guignol, a real guignol!". She expresses no other affects than those of fun and derision, nor any other word than "guignol". I perceive a massive refusal to distinguish between characters that are nevertheless differentiable, a defensive refusal to express herself in a mode other than ironic. However, Annie says she's interested in participating in this puppet group and already has an idea of the puppet she's going to make, without saying which one.

The time comes for every one to manufacture one's puppet. The proposal is to model a face and then to make either a marotte with a large fabric body, or a rod puppet with a body made of upholstered fabric and then dressed in garments made during the workshop. She models a man's face, his eyes surrounded by black to look like glasses, and chooses to make a puppet with a padded fabric body.

She doesn't hesitate with facial features and clothing, and seems to have a very precise idea in mind. One day, speaking of the castelet installed in the room, she said to me: "Your castelet, it is made of wood; my father knew how to make carpentry as G... the instructor of the workshop carpentry. I like to tinker, but I don't like sewing at all! I take after my father... but my mother, I have nothing from her at all! But really nothing!" However, there is still some sewing to do for the puppet she chose to make, and she will participate without hesitation.

Gradually, as this male character takes shape, without her saying anything about it, and neither do I, we notice that she is wearing less and less often men's clothes. Then one day, she arrives with a pink-mauve sweater and calls me as a witness: "Have you seen? it's a garment from my cousin!" She starts talking about her cousin, the daughter of an aunt, her mother's sister. She lists some common features and differences between her and this cousin she seems to identify with. It seems

that the identifications were able to shift, to move around during the making of this masculine character: she could talk about her father and recognize a bond with him, say how she took from her father (in french, « tenait de » son père), cared for her father (« tenait à » son père).

The end of the fabrication was coming, the moment was approaching to establish the identity of



The inspector

the puppets during a presentation of the character created, by each participant, behind the castelet.

Annie evoked the identity of her puppet, a man, but without naming her character. She did it by allusions that she insisted on addressing me: "You recognize him well, with his glasses, his checkered jacket, his harsh air... It's him!" And she waved her hand in the direction of the director's office and whispered to me, in my ear, the director's first name.

To which I replied: "You may have thought of him when you made your puppet, but this puppet is obviously not a real person... Keep thinking about how you might call it. »

Some time later, she said to me, "I figured it out, I'm going to call him «the inspector of finished works!» and went off with a big laugh before she added, "It suits him!"

At another time, she found a pen and told me in a discreet voice, quite different from her usual voice: "I think he [the director] has forgotten it here, maybe he needs it". I don't know who had the idea, me or her, of her dropping the pen off at the secretariat so that the secretary could give it to the director.

The hate-love ambivalence towards this director began to express itself, probably repeating feelings, repressed or unrecognized, towards the father in a displacement on to the director. In social life, this onset of psychological elaboration produces effects: noisy conflicts diminish in number and intensity. In her relationships with others, she is less aggressive.

In the puppet group, she shows little desire to direct this first puppet for which she will imagine a scenario limited to the "inspector of finished works" presentation who does nothing but watch the others work, with an harsh air. Then, she announces that she would like to re-register with the puppet group for a second session and make a new puppet: "the inspector of finished works' daughter". She will call this puppet Angelique, dress her in a wedding dress, evoking the marriage of the director's daughter announced in reality.

She underlines that Angelique, by marrying, will leave her father and that she would like, with this puppet, to play that moment.

It is during this second session that the director announces that he will leave the school to take the direction of another one, in which will be admitted about ten disabled adults that Annie is in contact with. She



Angélique

overwhelms the director with tender letters expressing her request to be part of those who leave, like him. Very embarrassed by this request, he managed to tell her that she would not be admitted and why. This departure, in reality, of a father figure at the moment when she was just starting to consider a place of "daughter of", about to leave her father to get married, certainly affected her.

Annie got physically ill from breast cancer. She was absent for several months for necessary care but did not return to the facility. To my knowledge, she recovered physically, living with her mother for many years without going to a specialized institution, apparently more serene than before.