

With disgust and contempt,  
Knowing the blood which the poet said  
Flowed with the earthly rhythm of desire  
Was really a river of disease . . .

And the moon could no longer  
Discover itself in the white flesh  
Because the body had gone  
Black in the crotch,  
And the mind itself a mere shadow of idea . . .  
He opened the book again and again,  
Contemptuous, wanting to tear out  
The pages, wanting to hold the print,  
His voice, to the ugly mirror,  
Until the lyric and the rot  
Became indistinguishable,  
And the singing and the dying  
Became the same breath, under which  
He wished the poet the same fate,  
The same miserable fate.

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CRITICISM / BARRY GOLDENSOHN

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## Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater

The Bread and Puppet Theater was deeply involved with the civil rights and anti-war protest movements and is marked by their political moralism in two important respects: its concern with domestic issues, the home front, and its primitivism of technique and morality. This primitivism is very clear in one of their earliest pieces, *The King Story*. You are seated before a large red cloth which is supported by poles on either side. A small, roughly modeled puppet head with a crown rises from behind and announces that he is the King of a country threatened by a Dragon. He does not know what to do. A White Knight in a horned helmet, and with an enormous fist and sword offers to kill the Dragon. The King asks his Advisers and People and they all counsel against using the Knight. The

King decides to, in spite of them, and in a slow dream-like sequence the Knight kills the Dragon, and then the King, Advisers, and People in order. As the Knight stands alone, seemingly triumphant, Death emerges from behind the screen in a mask that is half skull, half helmet, with a body of rags. He wrestles the Knight in a slow dance and finally kills him. In this drastically simple moral and political context, Uncle Sam is transformed into Uncle Fatso, an enormous puppet with a bloated face and a single fist that carries a cigar like a bomb, the emblem of greed and ruthless power.

Underlying these moral and political concerns is a religious vision that chooses as its main symbols resurrection and redemption. These are made impersonal and public, not emblems of personal salvation. *The Dead Man Rises* is an early example of this theme. In a darkened loft, a small, dim spot of light appears before a gray painted fabric screen. An attendant, barely visible in black robes, kneels at the side. A tall white puppet, the Woman, slowly circles the stage and enters the light. The attendant whispers through a megaphone, and rings a bell to distinguish the “speakers.”

WHERE ARE YOU GOING? (Bell)  
I AM GOING TO THE RIVER. (Bell)  
WHY ARE YOU GOING? (Bell)  
THE RIVER IS COLD. (Bell)  
WHERE IS THE RIVER? (Bell)  
THE RIVER IS FAR AWAY.

The attendant breathes heavily into the megaphone while the woman walks around the circle of light.

With these few beginning words and actions, stylized and abstracted in manner, we have been carried into a world of profound inwardness. The power and the suddenness of the artifice—disconnected speakers engaging in an interior dialogue, oversized puppets, the absence of color, and the physical helplessness of the puppet figures—place the action in a dream realm that has many features of the inner lives of children, another aspect of primitivism, and one that is a clue to the dramatic force of the Bread and Puppet. The primitive morality, the resurrection of the dead man as a reward for the devotion of the woman, is in keeping with the technique. Despite the inwardness, the Woman of this play is not individualized, and the emphasis throughout the work is still on the public nature of the religious issues, the implications for public morality.

The use of Bread is a part of the public ritual of communion and an integral part of the theater. You are sitting at an Easter Play, you have been a witness to the Passion and the puppets which grew enormous for the great event lie collapsed in a heap before the Cross. The puppeteers have

crawled out, shrunken after the event to their normal size. They pass through the audience handing out chunks of bread. It is not the usual mush but a dark, heavy bread, made of hand ground rye, not flour, and it requires strong teeth. You sit there in a communal ritual tearing at it murderously. Is there only one myth and ritual? The puppeteer who hands me the bread is a friend. I whisper: "Mayra, what is a nice Jewish girl like you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?"

From what am I defending myself with bad tasting jokes? This event is quite different from the audience role at Riverside Church, listening to the *B Minor Mass*, or hearing vespers at the Camaldoli Hermitage: we are sharing a chaw of the seasonal god. In this theater the bread is a direct assault on aesthetic distance.

In the setting of the *Easter Play*, bread is offered as an echo of the Eucharist and one is thrust into the role of the surprised communicant, but in other pieces its function is more modest. The bread is an offering, ostentatiously so, and it therefore has an unavoidable ceremonial flavor. Something is shared, and the audience is jarred out of passivity by the act of eating together. Schumann *intends* the bread to be a reminder that you come to the theater not just for entertainment, which is for the skin, but also for vital sustenance, which is for the stomach. That he should assign this meaning reveals the habits of mind of a confirmed allegorist, since it is, after all, gratuitous. Since he leaves out sustenance for the head and heart, it also suggests that he is a primitive and an anti-sentimentalist.

The puppets are all created by Schumann, like almost everything else in the theater. He makes them of celastic over clay molds, and they vary in size from six inches to over 20 feet. The torso and limbs are cloth, and the expressiveness of the puppets is in the molded heads and hands. Schumann says that "Puppet theater is an extension of sculpture," and his masks are the means. They use the past boldly, and suggest African, pre-Columbian and Asiatic masks, Easter Island Heads, Chinese Temple sculpture, Lehmbruck, Grosz; the dragons are mostly Oriental, but the most wonderful set of monsters, large yellow heads with small monsters in their mouths, seem right out of Bosch.

The puppets create the first and most striking impression of this theater, the miraculous sense of the static mask in motion, where the few words come through with the inwardness of possession by a great force—through the face of the sleeper into the inner movement of the dream. But Schumann's puppets are quite unlike the masks of Attic drama. The voice that rings through them is not individual: only the masks are. One responds to the puppet, not to a person revealed through words, since the words are seldom spoken by the puppets, but by a narrator off to the side.

The puppets move with a dream-like rightness that is adapted to their size. The large ones move slowly, occasionally breaking the pace with startling and often terrifying suddenness. We are not dealing with pompous solemnity, but with a sense of motion that the subconscious recognizes. Visually it is similar to film, which can condense time and action, alternate scenes, and shift focus with the subjective freedom of the dream.<sup>1</sup> (Think of how chase scenes let us experience simultaneously the desperate scramble of flight and implacable pursuit.) Likewise, the puppets move with a sense not of unreality but of those distortions proper to an inward sense of reality, for their size and motion have the air of dream. Thus this theater can deal utterly unselfconsciously with the fabulous:

THERE IS A DEAD MAN LYING IN THE RIVER. (Bell)  
WHAT WILL WE DO WITH THE DEAD MAN? (Bell)  
I WILL TIE THE MAN TO THE BACK OF THE RIVER  
AND TAKE HIM TO MY HOUSE. (Bell)

(From *The Dead Man Rises*)

In this context nothing seems more natural than the resurrection that follows. In *Ordet*, Carl Dreyer tries to force a resurrection out of the fabulous and into the casual world of plots and motives where we explain magic away as a violation of confidence, a sleight of hand, and whatever power it has in *Ordet* depends entirely on its outrageousness, whereas the power of *The Dead Man Rises* depends on our initial acceptance of the moony world where resurrection is normal. The normalcy of the miraculous indicates that we are dealing with a primitive system of conventions similar to those of folk tales, and the preconceptual thought processes of childhood, of our earliest attempts to understand the world.

The basic elements of the medium of allegorical puppet theater correspond closely to Piaget's description of the patterns of thought in childhood. For example, allegorical causation is like the *post hoc* nature of syncretic thought. Psychomachia depends for its persuasiveness on the early sense of imminent justice. Schumann's use of primitive expressive sounds (twittering, moaning, etc.) has the emotive weight of pre-verbal struggles for articulation and, similarly, the dissociation of speaker and figure seems in itself to be an emblem of the separation of the child from the verbal world of adults. The very enterprise of allegorizing with puppets is rooted in animism and concretizing, both of which are basic modes of thought of childhood.

This is not to say that it is a theater for children, but rather that the medium has its roots in the inner lives we carry with us from childhood:

the structure of primitive cognitive styles; explosive psychic material composed of fantasies of power and helplessness, of incomprehensible forces, of magical fulfillment of wishes; of human animals and animal humans; of giants and dolls; and above all the sense of disparity between the puppet and its human role. One is seized by one's childhood. This is apparent in the way Schumann alternates simple moral absolutism with perceptual ambiguity, uses satiric ingenues with a child's vision of moral issues, and characterizes stylized and exaggerated gestures, and in general by the freedom with which the mysterious and playful enter this world. The first time I saw the Bread and Puppet in New York in the mid-sixties, I felt that I was in the presence of remarkable artistic power, and it has taken me years to begin to understand this kind of fascination. I found myself resisting an understanding of the use of the materials of childhood for two reasons: first, it seems to minimize the seriousness of the theater, which is vulnerable to any association with childhood merely because the use of puppets suggests that it is entertainment for children; and second, the process of maturity seems to put one acutely out of touch with childhood.

The theatrical means that Schumann uses to deal with this material of childhood is pre-dramatic. It is a theater of pageants, tableaux, and processions where sculpture walks, parades, or dances. The art of drama begins with texts, whereas Schumann "pushes for a place where some language is achieved . . . we find from language what we really want."<sup>2</sup> He works with stylized expressive gestures from which language is very remote but which, unlike mime, never seek to substitute themselves for languages. As he works, words are "achieved" with great difficulty, and are usually of great simplicity. As pieces evolve, the company struggles through its bafflement to present the actions that Schumann lays out. After late-night sessions with friends, full of questions, criticism, exhortation, home brew, and strong coffee, a few hand-painted signs or words may appear in the next rehearsal as the work takes shape. Language seems to enter to organize and clarify work that is initially conceived visually.

There are a few unusual works that begin with texts. *The Birdcatcher in Hell* is adapted from a Kyogin in the Noh cycle, with additions by Nixon and Homer. What Schumann refers to as the "religious sarcasm" of the Kyogin (which deals with a pardon for the Birdcatcher by the King of Hell for his very un-Buddhist occupation) is here applied to Nixon's treatment of Calley. *Jephth* provides a setting for the biblical text and music of Carissimi's Oratorio, and *Gray Lady Cantata #5* does the same for Tallis' *Lamentations of Jeremiah* and Bach's *Jesu Meine Freude*. They present pageants that derive from the texts and are translated characteristically into Schumann's Christian Humanism,<sup>3</sup> with its pantheon of White Knights (who slay dragons deftly, sadly, on stilts, for love of us), Mother-Christ

(who suffer and sacrifice for us), or the comic-irreverent-sarcastic figure of the Gentleman Angel (out of the world of sentimental melodramas like *Camille*). In Schumann's words, these pieces attempt to provide "a context and a setting for musical works taken out of their historical setting." (Conversation, November 1974).

Sculpture and dance are the means of providing these settings, and words are only marginal. The phrases for describing movements in rehearsal (I was a Gray Lady in *Cantata #5* at Goddard College in the winter of 1974) are consistently "that makes a beautiful sculpture" or "that makes a beautiful dance."<sup>4</sup> I never once, in six years of friendly association with the group, heard the phrase "that is very dramatic," though as the word can mean engrossing or expressive, this theater is full of "dramatic" gestures and movements. (Some of the "what does it mean" puzzlement of naive viewers stems from the fact that we ask that question about the verbal arts in a very different way than about music or dance, and it seems that no matter how few words there are, people insist on "reading" theater.)

In the summer of 1974, when Schumann decided to leave Goddard and free himself of the burden of a communal company, he set up a weekend called the *Domestic Resurrection Fair and Circus* as both a retrospective and as the occasion for the creation of a massive work, the *Circus* itself. Many old pieces were shown in the afternoons: *The Dead Man Rises*, *Hallelujah*, *Mississippi*, *A Man Says Goodbye to His Mother*, *King Story*, *Theater of Uncle Fatso*, *Life and Death of Prisonman*. The *Circus* itself contained parts of earlier circuses, notably the central parricide of Uranus, here appropriately enough the keynote of domestic insurrection—a comic version of the archaic revolution. This insurrection is resurrection, a primal validation of life by Love, the conquest of death, the circus, the big show.

Where the structure of *The Dead Man Rises* (and other short pieces) is based on concentration and exclusion, the *Circus* is expansive and inclusive: as Schumann says (in conversation, November 1974), "The circus doesn't make sense. It is the opposite—show-offy, and it makes its own rules. It is more amateurish, a collection." This is not to say that the work is without structure, but rather that it is episodic, its frame is enormous, the range of movements and type of puppets is broad. The large puppets move among masked and robed puppeteers, small puppets, costumed clowns, and tumblers.

The title has been used for two previous pieces. The first was an evangelical circus in the summer of 1970 when the group first moved to Goddard. It involved the first and only use of audience participation by the theater. At the conclusion of the *Circus* an ark was formed around the audience, and they walked around the meadow chanting "The storm is here," between the ropes and banners. In retrospect this gesture seems dated, and

in fact seemed so at the time. I moved into the ark to guide a blind friend, but the words stuck in my throat painfully. I could not chant and merely felt awkward in another refuge of the self-elect and burned at the willingness of my friends to be so.

A street theater piece done in Washington on April 24, 1971, was called *The Domestic Resurrection of King Richard the Last*. A section of this piece was called "Domestic Insurrection," and the verbal echo suggests the basic religious role of protest in Schumann's work, where the Passion and resurrection are the culmination of a determined and loving insurrection. The resurrection is domestic because its moral urgency is *self*-transforming and aimed at internal political and social reform. To direct it at others would be aggression, political aggression. It is domestic also because the chief images of evil authority are drawn from the family: Uncle Fatso, and Uranus the Father. The images of peace and salvation are the sorrowing mother and the sacrifice of the son. The basic "political" process suggested throughout is transformation in the name of love.

The general pattern of the 1974 *Domestic Resurrection Circus* is that of a dance of life. It begins with birth, the birth of "the people" and of the Circus Director, which is followed by a circus with life on show, and concluded by the triumph over death. The beginning is solemn, with the entrance of the God mask from the *Easter Show*, an enormous face supported on poles, that is sorrowful and transcendental and vaguely Asian. "The people" are born by being hauled out from under a tarp by the Devil and his Helpers. They emerge with signs that read War and Peace, Law and Order, Rags and Riches, Guns and Butter, Day and Night, Sun and Rain. The polarities are all ridiculed with slapstick as each set emerges. The playing is so broad that it crowds attention away from the Devil's Helpers and the Gray Lady on the sidelines who are intended to provide a framework of suffering and regeneration, but who remain a kind of passive iconography alongside the fun.

This sequence is followed by a dance of giant puppets, Uranus and Mother Earth. They are about 20 feet high, grotesquely ugly, and seem a nightmare of drunken parents careening out of control. Mother Earth complains of feeling ill after a short waltz, and a doctor drives up, climbs a ladder to treat her and delivers her of Zeus-the-Circus-Director, who moves the ladder over to his father, knocks off his head, and completes the skip-rope version of the Theogony. The cheerful parricide then proceeds to conduct the circus acts that follow. Daddy is dead and we can all have fun, so we have jugglers who drop everything, tumblers who fall, weightlifters who die trying (Hubert Heaver), magic acts, dancing bears (Ethyl and Butane), with a group of Two Penny Circus clowns who egg on the audience with a polished style that is in sharp contrast to the ineptitude of

the parody circus acts that are all show and bluster. In this primal revolution, life simply bursts forth and the new Daddy remains a child.

After the Circus proper retreats, the finale begins, a convoluted allegorical dance of life where the figures go through a series of stations that suggest growth, initiation, taking on the values of civilization, death, and some kind of resurrection. Each puppeteer, in the role of "the people" enters through a door set up in the middle of the field, and goes through a series of stations that signify the process of a complete life. Each is given a face mask, climbs a ladder to look at a star (which dangles from the end of a telescope), works at an ironing board, pays homage to a little house with a family of tiny puppets by placing a stone on it (a funeral gesture?), visits the Gentleman Angel who shows him his face in a mirror, gets his Dance of Death costume, and disappears through the door he entered. The death dance is peaceful, with none of the expressionistic exaggeration of the medieval form that celebrates the triumph of death. When the last puppeteer is through Death's door they all knock it down, and carry off, standing on the door, a figure wearing a robe bearing the words "All People." This is done to a wildly rollicking tune called Charlotte's Wag (see Appendix II) that is the appropriate music for this easy triumph over Death. The order born from such transcendental mayhem is clearly some notion of a human community, and not a pious mystagogy. The *Circus* is an elaborate celebration of life with a nod to death and the evil, a divine low comedy that displays, in Kafka's phrase, "a great careless prodigality."

#### Bread Alone or The Economic Base of the Theater

If one begins with some notion of the artist working out of the resources of the self, then collaborative art, having to work with and around the needs of others, having to please politicians, decency review boards, and most tyrannically the mass paying audience, involves unthinkable loss of control of the artistic product. But Peter Schumann comes to theater via sculpture and his Bread and Puppet Theater is now beginning the fourth phase of his attempt to control the economic necessities that shape his art. For eight years, from the beginning in 1961 to late 1969 (with a summer of communal living in Maine in 1968), the theater ran with temporary volunteer help for performances. Schumann says, "In N.Y. I had a scattered crew who came to rehearsals and then disbanded again. Basically, I worked solo with help."<sup>5</sup> For a short period, from the winter of 1969 to the summer of 1970 there was a group of 11 salaried puppeteers (at \$35 per week), which, despite the ludicrousness of the wage, posed a severe financial demand.

In the summer of 1970 Schumann moved to Cate Farm at Goddard College, and a part of the company opened a free theater in Coney Island. The Coney Island group ran for about a year on the money from a European



tour in 1969, and for another year on a grant from the New York Council on the Arts, with some help from Nathan's Famous, Inc. Schumann has always tried to operate without grant money for two reasons: he rejects the absurdity of receiving grant money for protest, and he never budgets shows beforehand. He makes some money and then builds a show with what is available—he insists it leaves him freer to experiment. (A member of the company applied for the Coney Island grant and Schumann says he must have signed the application himself but he doesn't remember it. It was surely an aberration.)

For its first year Schumann kept control of the Coney Island venture: shows would be developed at Cate Farm and moved down to the city. Gradually this control shifted to the New York group itself, which folded at the end of the second year. In Vermont, Goddard provided a large house, a barn for a theater and workshop, and took care of the remodelling and utilities. Schumann refused any further financial support from Goddard: he did not want to increase his responsibilities to the college by joining the faculty. He simply worked with the few committed students who made the Bread and Puppet the major part of their curriculum.

In the middle of the European tour in the winter of 1973 Schumann announced that he would disband the company the following summer, because the communal company, too, had begun to impose its financial necessities and was shoving him into the pattern of the professional theater world which he was trying to avoid.

I don't like the general situation of theater that one gets oneself into when one becomes a professional recognized theater . . . and then responds to the channels which respond to that . . . that ask for that type of theater. In other words, when we go to perform both in this country and in Europe, we would very much like to perform for people cheaply, in our places rather than in the halls of fame of theater . . . but we end up playing in a lot of professional places . . . for bored high-ticket people. A lot of things happen that we don't agree with, but we do it because this is our contact. One gets involved in this and loses control of the creation of that place where one performs. Theater production as *we* understand it, is that one creates that place oneself. You don't assume that because one pays \$3 what they see is theater. You want to be able to create a surrounding that you create for them . . . not one that is "just there." And that is not possible when you are part of an organization travelling and performing wherever you are invited.<sup>6</sup>

The search for a model of a poor theater goes on as success in the previous forms has brought its deprivations. In the case of the Bread and Puppet,

the model of the poor theater is one that allows uncompromising control by Schumann of the conditions, in fact the entire ambience, of his art. Although a communal living style might have created the conditions for a profound collaboration, it has in fact created the reverse, the conditions for a solitary artist to shape a company that performed his work for a while with the fewest possible concessions to financial need, that is, to popular success and the tastes of the theater circuit.

Stefan Brecht succeeded in upsetting the members of the company with a program credit on *The Cry of the People for Meat* that he composed for his *TDR* article, not because it was untrue but because it violated the general decorum of modesty and anonymity. The credit reads:

Conceived, produced, directed and narrated by Peter Schumann  
performed by his Bread and Puppet Theater.  
Masks, costumes, lighting and music by Peter Schumann,  
with much help and a little inspiration from the company.

This, in fact, allocates the credits with precision. It is *his* Bread and Puppet Theater. This is worthy of mention because Schumann is a modest man and does not appear for bows at the end of performances. His name rarely appears on program credits, which seldom do more than give the name of the company.

I do not wish to overstate this issue. Schumann controls as most directors do—a puppeteer will perform a gesture a certain way or introduce a variation and Schumann will accept or reject it. It is, of course, within the framework of his scenarios and very detailed instructions.

There are other aspects of this theater that both keep down expenses and allow his control. The decor and music are distinctively homemade, and the masks, of course, are Schumann's sculpture. That he has described theater as an extension of sculpture suggests the degree to which the model of the autonomous and individual artist still motivates him. And this is a basic denial of the form of the theater as given. The Bread and Puppet is without actors and their expensive and demanding personalities. There are instead puppeteers without glamor, virtuosity, or bodies and voices that are trained to impersonate. In their masks they *personify*. Anyone can "play" the King of Hell.

After the company broke up in the summer of 1974, the Schumann family moved to a farm in Glover, Vermont. It now seems like a time of retrenchment. Future plans are still vague. Between the summer of 1974 and 1976 Schumann has toured Europe with small companies and has conducted workshops at a variety of universities and colleges. The one piece that I have seen since 1974, the *Circus* in the summer of 1976, seems more static

than in the past. There is a lot of repetition, and the retreat (with the times) from moral and political protest has left it a little churchy. Allegory petrifies fast. Political protest has always been at the center of Schumann's religious vision, and even pieces from the sixties and early seventies had their didactic and propagandistic elements subsumed into a vision of suffering and compassion that was never simply partisan. The image of the Christ as a revolutionary was not the convenient sloganeering young Marxist, but the man of suffering. The taking on of suffering was revolution enough. It is difficult to tell where Schumann will go from this point. While he is hardly in retirement in Glover, it is unclear to me where he will engage next.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note, by the way, that on film, where distortion is the visual norm, the power of the Bread and Puppet Theater that depends on exaggeration of size and subjective irregularity of time is entirely neutralized. Because of the visual plasticity of film we are too detached from the perspective of the viewer fixed in a human scale to experience the necessary disparity. Recently the innovative filmmaker, Chris Marker, has done some work with Bread and Puppet, and it will be interesting to see how he deals with this problem. The PBS film was a washout.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Schumann in an interview with Margarita Barab, *Country Journal*, Plainfield, Vermont, July 18, 1974, p.6.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Brecht, *TDR*, Vol. 14, No. # (T47), discusses Schumann's theological directions in his essay on *Sacral Theatre*.

<sup>4</sup> Schumann objects to his own use of the word "beautiful" and wishes to make it clear that he is not striving for the decorative.

<sup>5</sup> Barab interview.

<sup>6</sup> Barab interview.

## Appendix I The Famous Bread Recipe

Begin with fresh rye, ground in a hand grinder instead of milled. Mix 6 pounds of grain with lukewarm water to pudding consistency. Let sit for two days with starter dough or three or four days without it, in a warm spot. Add water as needed. When it smells strong enough, add another 6 pounds

of fresh ground rye, knead for about 20 minutes with more water and 3 small handfuls of salt. Flour hands and board and shape loaves. This should make 6 loaves of 4-5 pounds. Bake at about 275° for one to one-and-a-half hours.

## Appendix II

### CHARLOTTE'S WAG



© Sid Blum

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## CRITICISM / JAMES BRESLIN

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### Allen Ginsberg: The Origins of "Howl" and "Kaddish"

Most literary people have probably first become aware of Allen Ginsberg through the media, in his self-elected and controversial role as public figure and prophet of a new age. Ginsberg's public personality has changed over the years—from the defiant and histrionic angry young man of the fifties to the bearded and benign patriarch and political activist of the sixties and seventies—but the personality has remained one that most literary people find hard to take seriously. Compare Ginsberg's reception with that of