

## **Visibly Invisible**

**How shifting the conventions of the traditionally invisible puppeteer allows for more dimensions in both the puppeteer-puppet relationship and the creation of theatrical meaning in *Ubu & the Truth Commission***

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### **Introduction**

**I**n the play *Ubu & the Truth Commission* the visible puppeteer is used in a variety of ways to give new dimension to his relationship with the puppets, and to create new meaning on stage. There is a careful exploration of the dichotomy between the interdependence, and the separate existences of the puppeteer and the puppet. Through the use of different realities on stage the audience is forced to question which the one is "real", and what really does exist on stage. There is a play in this with the existent conventions of the visible puppeteer; thus an exact understanding of the term and of the puppeteer's traditional role becomes essential.

There is some confusion surrounding the exact definition of the word "puppeteer", primarily because the term is often used to refer not only to the person who makes the puppet, but also to the person who animates it. In the case of the visible puppeteer the term takes on an even broader meaning. In most cases the assumption that the animator is also the puppeteer would be correct, but due to the difference in the roles that they play, it is necessary to draw a distinction.

Unlike artists and their creations in other disciplines, the puppeteer and his puppet, as creator and creation, depend on one another and cannot be separated.... Should the puppeteer and his puppet lose their connection, so they would lose their

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expressive power. The puppet can only come to life when manipulated by the puppeteer. Without this rapport neither would survive (Dagan, 1990:10).

In this extract Dagan is referring to the puppeteer as the “maker” of the puppet, yet in that context the statement that he alone can bring the puppets to life seems somewhat farfetched. Puppets often need more than one animator, and although by convention they usually keep the same voice, in some cases they are not animated by the same animator throughout the play. In *Ubu & the Truth Commission* the dog puppet is at one point separated from its animators (this moment will be explored more closely later on) and is animated by one of the actors for a few minutes - yet in the changeover the puppet never “loses its life”. It doesn’t even change character. Part of the very magic of Puppetry exists in the audience’s belief that the puppet somehow has a life of its own separate from the manipulator.

It is a mistake, therefore, to assume that the “act of creation” ends with the making of the puppet, and that the subsequent “bringing to life” of the puppet follows naturally. As Dagan notes:

a puppet can exist as a museum exhibition, but it becomes a static sculpture, it is dead. Its expressive potential can only be realized when moving on stage and it is in the imagination of the spectators that it begins to exist and evoke emotions (Dagan:1990:10).

The animation of the puppet is an integral part of the creation of a living puppet. I have seen puppeteers animate plastic bags in such a way that they have a very specific character. To define either the puppeteer or the animator as the “creator” of the puppet is a mistake: only their combined efforts can bring the puppet to life.

Yet with all this focus on the human creators it needs to be borne in

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mind that well-made puppets, like masks, have a "life" of their own. This "life" seems to spring from an inherent energy in the puppet: certain characteristics will surface in the "character" of the puppet no matter who is animating it. These characteristics might be suggested by the physicality of the puppet or by the nature of its movements, and they will surface in the animation of the puppet without the animator's awareness. So, for instance, if different animators had to work with the crocodile puppet without any preconceptions about the character, different characters would emerge, but they would all belong to the same type - a menacing, foreboding, dangerous being (as is suggested by the huge mouth with rows of teeth and the snake-like, circular movements of the body). In most cases the puppeteer who made the puppet probably has the greatest understanding of its "life", yet he is often in danger of imposing something on the puppet by trying to make it realize the function for which it was created rather than discovering its true life.

The term "visible puppeteer" is therefore somewhat confusing exactly because the *animator* is, after all, the one who is visible to the audience (and, as we have established, he is not necessarily the puppeteer). The very existence of the term, the fact that the visible puppeteer is not referred to as the "visible animator" seems to imply that the term "puppeteer" when used in terms of the "visible puppeteer" gains a new meaning. In my opinion this extra dimension separating the visible puppeteer from the invisible animator, lies firstly in his relationship with the puppet, secondly in the fact that the audience can observe and judge this relationship, and thirdly in the fact that they can draw conclusions about the animator himself.

The moment that the animator becomes visible the audience is confronted very explicitly with the fact that the puppet does not move of its own accord, but that it is animated by a person (a fact that most audience members choose to ignore when the animator is invisible). It is in this acknowledgment of a human being on stage that the new

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meaning of “puppeteer”, as used in the “visible puppeteer”, surfaces. As soon as the animator becomes visible he is no longer merely an animator in the traditional sense. With the visible animator his very presence on stage means that he has to animate the puppet in another way, that his focus has to be on the puppet throughout. It is very difficult for the visible puppeteer to successfully animate two puppets at the same time precisely because his focus is needed to give the puppet life. If he is looking at and talking for one puppet the other can very easily go dead. It is a more complete surrender of the self than in the case of the invisible animator. The visible animator becomes in a way a living extension of the puppet. He becomes a part of the life of the puppet.

The primary difference between the visible puppeteer and both the “puppeteer” in the traditional sense of the maker, and the animator, is therefore that the animator’s personality needs to somehow merge with the puppet’s in order for it to live. When, for instance, one watches a marionette that is animated by an invisible animator, the marionette is in a sense separate from both its puppeteer and its animator. It is in a sense complete, even if only in the moment of performance. The personality and physical appearance of the puppeteer are of no importance to the audience, whereas this does, even subconsciously, become an issue when the puppeteer is visible. The best way to illustrate this would be with an example: if there is a puppetplay in which a female puppet is raped, and the animators are invisible, the focus will be completely on the stage action. If, however, the animators are visible, the play would be making different comments and raising different questions in the mind of the audience according to who the animators are. If the aggressor is animated by a male and the victim by a female the play is making a very different comment to if it is done in the reverse. Clearly there is a sense of the “person behind the puppet” that steps in: the very presence of the puppeteers is already a comment on the action.

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With the acknowledgment that his presence on stage is in some way a comment within the play, and with the knowledge that he is not a character in the play, comes the audience's interest in the puppeteer's reactions to what is happening on stage as someone who is, essentially, outside the action. This is, of course, something that the visible puppeteer cannot do, because his focus on his puppet keeps it alive. If he were to comment on the events or the characters or to become too closely involved with the emotions of his puppet he would become a character in the play, and because his internal focus and the focus of the audience would shift from the puppet to him, the puppet would no longer live.

The tension that is created on stage between the audience's expectations and the inability of the puppeteer to subscribe to them is exploited extremely effectively in *Ubu & the Truth Commission*. It is perhaps because of the subject matter of the TRC confessions which automatically demands sympathy from the hearer; perhaps it is because the puppeteers animate different puppets (the same puppeteer is seen to animate both the aggressor in the form of the dog or the crocodile, and the victims in the form of the people puppets giving the accounts); as the play progresses there is a mounting need (certainly from my personal experience) to see some kind of response from the puppeteers.

William Kentridge, the director, expressed awareness of the audience's mounting frustration at their unfulfilled desire to see a reaction from the puppeteers<sup>1</sup>. In the beginning the puppeteers' presence goes almost unnoticed as the puppets receive their due focus; as the play progresses and gradually becomes more and more emotional, and as the audience watches the puppeteers switch back and forth between the animation of the aggressors and the victims, their neutrality becomes unbearable. They are on stage practically the entire time and are therefore aware of all the events, but refrain from comment, and thus they become incredibly powerful. Added to all of this is the fact that they appear silent - when they speak for the puppets one believes that it is the puppet

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speaking, and when they move out of their roles as animators and become translators (a shift which will also bear some closer examination later on) they are again saying words which are not their own. They are therefore essentially silent, much in the same way that they are essentially invisible (if not according to the audience, according to all those involved in the stage action). They become omnipresent shadows that frequent the stage and have a part of all the action without the inclination or ability to exert influence over it.

The puppeteers become fascinating figures when one attempts to define them in dramatic terms as individuals on stage and not in terms of their puppets (the focus of the observer would have to shift towards them while they are still completely focused on their puppets). They become what is best described as neutral Brechtian actors. They are distanced from the action and exist on stage as people, not as characters, yet they refuse to comment on anything that happens on stage as Brechtian actors do. They appear to be aware of all the conventions that exist, and they do not allow themselves to be swept up by the emotion of the play or of their characters (the puppets); yet despite all this knowledge they continue to fulfill their duties in the play without giving any personal opinion.

This separation of the puppeteer from his puppet cannot be achieved easily because the puppeteer's focus constantly directs one back to the puppet itself, and it is of more use to examine him in relation to his puppet. In the animation of the puppet, the visible puppeteer is treading a very fine line: his complete attention and focus have to be on the puppet at all times, he even has to see everything on stage through the eyes of the puppet, yet he can never become too involved because he then overpowers the puppet. He has to remain a "medium" throughout, the interpreter between the puppet and the audience. Dagan notes that the "puppet lacks a direct rapport with the audience" (Dagan, 1990:10). It is the animator who speaks to the audience, yet his speech is also not direct, as he speaks through the puppet. There is an interdependence

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between the puppet and the puppeteer in their efforts to communicate to the audience.

With this interdependence between a lifeless object and a human being there exists a great irony: when they are seen on stage the puppet appears to have a life while the puppeteer is dead to the audience. In *Ubu & the Truth Commission* this irony is explored to great depths by making the human manipulators visible, and by giving them a very specific focus which often works against the traditions of puppetry.

When the manipulators appear on stage dressed in beige and white suits it is immediately evident that there is no attempt to prompt the audience (as black outfits would) towards accepting the convention of invisibility. The audience is forced to acknowledge that there are real people on stage fulfilling a very real function. Their presence is constantly accentuated through the use of handles (attached to the limbs of the puppets) in the manipulation, so that they often touch the puppets, rather than being physically distanced from them as they would be if they were manipulating them with strings.

Further focus is drawn to the puppeteers by not attempting to synchronize the speech (emanating quite visibly from the puppeteers) with the movement of the mouths of the puppets (which are held still). The way in which the puppets mouths are held slightly open, gives one the impression at the times when the puppet really comes to life, that the voice does indeed originate from somewhere inside the puppet and drift out to the audience without the mouth having to form the sound.

This willingness of the audience to convince itself of the life of a wooden object, ignoring the clearly visible person bringing it to life and speaking for it, greatly interests Kentridge. According to him this is a conscious rather than an unconscious act: one catches oneself believing in what one knows to be an illusion, one consciously tries not to look at the puppeteer so as to more easily believe in the life of the puppet. The

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manipulation of the mouths of the puppets was therefore a conscious choice inspired not only by the technical difficulty of synchronizing the mouth movements of the puppeteer and the puppet, but by a belief that the audience needs to acknowledge the fact that the puppeteer is speaking. The production consciously challenges the audience not only to believe in but also to question the belief in this imposed reality.

The audience is furthermore not asked to believe in only one imposed reality, but is confronted with different realities that are juxtaposed with each other and exist alongside. The director was consciously experimenting with how many of these realities could exist alongside each other in the minds of the audience, and how quickly the switches could be made from one reality to another. Although it was apparently not a part of the original concept, but rather a meaning that emerged as a result of this experimentation, the different realities that are constantly played off against each other comment on the situation in South Africa, where there are so many often opposing truths existing alongside each other.

The puppeteers and puppets play a major role in these different realities, precisely because they often break the boundaries between them. On the first level is the reality of Pa and Ma UBU, portrayed by human actors. In the minds of the audience theirs is the simplest reality to acknowledge. On the second level is the existence of the crocodile and the dog puppets, yet this already becomes confusing to the audience because it is not a simple situation of the puppets interrelating with one another - they interact with the human actors.

The audience is therefore not asked to ignore all humans. They now have to deal with two people talking to one another, and acknowledge one as a character that exists within the reality of the play while imagining the other to be merely a medium who should be ignored as far as possible. Using these shifting conventions while these two characters (yet it needs to be acknowledged, also these two people) are

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having a conversation is a difficult thing for the audience to do. It also requires specific focus from everyone on stage. If only these two realities existed in the production, they would after a while become reconciled in the minds of the audience. The third reality offers the real challenge.

On the third level are the human puppets giving accounts to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Puppets were used specifically out of respect for the victims whose accounts were used. The audience does not have to deal with a true account, as the actor speaking it is not the real person to whom it happened. There is, nevertheless, a sense for the audience of being present at the real hearings. This is achieved to a great degree by having the accounts spoken in Zulu by one of the manipulators, and by having it then translated into English and spoken in a very public address manner by either Ma UBU (who appears to step out of role to do so, though one is never sure) or by one of the puppeteers who is not then animating a puppet.

The puppeteers stepping in and out of role as translators reinforces their status as interpreters between the audience and the puppets. This, and their role as stagehands, accentuate their existence as separate from the puppets. Yet they are not given any specific new character. And as if this is not confusing enough to the audience they also have to deal with the fact that the human actors never interact with these puppets as they do with the animal puppets; they never even acknowledge the presence of the human puppets. Because these puppets are invisible to the actors on stage, the audience perceives them differently as well. They become, as Kentridge observed, dream or memory images on stage. Throughout this the puppeteers move from being manipulators to being interpreters. They speak the accounts out in loud voices, and yet no-one on stage is willing to admit that they are there. They are not acknowledged by the actors, by the puppets, or even by each other.

The third and first levels exist therefore alongside and comment on each

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other precisely because of their ignorance of each other. I find the interplay between these two levels, that of the major aggressor and the victims, reminiscent of apartheid South Africa, where in retrospect so many different stories and realities existed alongside each other. In looking back, and in hearing people's different accounts, one often wonders (as one does when watching the play) which is the "real" reality. This image of the world of the aggressor having an influence on the world of the victim is made clear in a scene where the UBUS are having dinner, but the salt and pepper that they use are at the same time wares that a street vendor puppet is trying to sell. Though the scene is comical, sympathy is created for the puppet whose wares keep disappearing without his being able to understand it.

Although the puppets and the actors manage to ignore each other's existence, the levels are brought together on stage by their sharing the same space. The house of Pa UBU is also the TRC court. In one scene the puppet telling its story is behind the sleeping Pa UBU, who is lying on a table. Kentridge described in the speech given at the University in Antwerp how they discovered in rehearsal that the puppet appears to be a dream image if it tells its story from behind Pa UBU's head, whereas if it is positioned behind his stomach his body turns into a landscape, and if the puppet touches Pa UBU towards the end of the account, it appears to be giving him absolution. These different meanings are evoked on stage through throwing the two realities together and allowing the audience to judge their interaction. Apparently (again according to the director) the play works at its best when Pa UBU is going all out to get the audience's attention. It then becomes the task of the manipulators to wrest that attention back.

In the manipulation of the "human" puppets a further evocation occurs: the puppeteers handle the human puppets in an infinitely gentle way, which evokes images of the real TRC hearings and the comforters who stand alongside the victims with the sole function of listening to them and comforting them. The manipulators are cast into yet another role in

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the minds of the audience, one that makes perfect sense in their relationships with the puppets precisely because the accounts are so personal and emotional. According to Kentridge this effect was a coincidence, and one that in his opinion detracted from the accounts the puppets were giving so that as the run progressed the puppeteers were asked to handle the puppets in a less sensitive manner.

One of the most interesting moments in the play occurs when the manipulator speaking the account suddenly stops animating the puppet half way through and holds it around its neck while he continues to give the account. The puppet immediately becomes merely an object hanging awkwardly in the hands of the puppeteer. The puppeteer giving the account points at different parts of his head that are referred to in the account, and the puppeteer alongside him, who was previously animating the puppet with him, simply watches with the neutrality with which he watched the puppet.

This moment is a prime example of how the puppeteers break through both realities constructed in the play, as well as their normal role as visible puppeteers. This moment arose in rehearsal as a practical solution to the awkwardness of pointing of the hand of the puppet at its own head, without any preconceived idea of revolutionizing the role of the puppeteer; yet the audience immediately reads a multitude of meanings into it. The more obvious reaction to this moment is that the puppeteer really is giving his own account, and that half way through he decides to "take off the mask", to stop speaking through his medium and speak directly to the audience. The other possibility is that the performer becomes so involved in what he says that he either forgets, or is too overcome to animate his puppet further. This latter option seems palpable because he continues with the account in the same neutral manner with which he started it, after being reminded by the other puppeteer. The very manner in which he is treated by the other puppeteer, who listens silently yet sympathetically, and gently touches him on the shoulder (again in a way that is reminiscent of the TRC

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comforters), makes the account even more powerful. This is also the only moment at which the puppeteers acknowledge each other's presence on stage, and the way in which they resume the animation after the touch on the shoulder emphasizes the fact that they assume a role in order to fulfill a function. Even after the previous structure is reinforced, however, the audience finds it impossible to believe that the puppeteer is not emotionally involved. They believe that they saw the real person on stage for a brief moment, although they can never be quite sure that he was not assuming another role, becoming another character. The audience now watches even more carefully for any personal reaction or contribution from the puppeteers.

Because the puppeteers have such a great importance on the second and third levels, it is interesting that on the fourth and fifth levels there is a denial of any human presence at all. On the fourth level is the screen at the back of the stage. On this screen are projections and animation, and at one point the image of a shadow puppet of UBU (the puppet itself appears on stage later). The animation also evokes the image of a shadow puppet in the strange movements of their joints, and because this level serves to comment on Pa UBU I think that these images which function without a visible puppeteer show his lack of humanity.

On the fifth level (one that exists on stage throughout), is the vulture puppet. This puppet appears to be a sculpture in the beginning, and is completely still for the greater part of the play. Whenever something particularly powerful happens on stage, the puppet either starts rocking forwards and backwards, or spreads its wings, or squawks. These comments on the stage action are, however, rare, and for the most part the audience watches the puppet silently watching the stage action. It is obvious to the audience that although the puppet might comment on the action every now and then, it will never actually interfere. In its silence, its inaction, and its apparent invisibility to the characters it is in a strange way similar to the puppeteers, and like with them it is

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rendered powerful in the minds of the audience because of that.

Notably this incredibly powerful puppet is the only one that exists three-dimensionally on stage while being manipulated from off-stage. It has no visible puppeteer. This was done in order to not make the moments when the puppet would “come to life” predictable (although there is never a doubt in the observer’s mind that the puppet is very alive even if it is sitting completely still). Because it exists alongside the other puppets that are visibly manipulated by human beings, this puppet gains an independence and a life of its own that differs greatly from the other puppets. It is also allowed to speak (or squawk) for itself without it being interpreted to the audience (the dogs, on the other hand, never just howl, the puppeteers speak for them in English). This puppet has no mediator between it and the audience; it exists in its own right.

I would, however, argue that this puppet would not have been as powerful, and would not have had as much of a life of its own if it had not been seen alongside the other puppets which need a visible puppeteer to animate them and give them life. It is clear how these different levels on stage influence each other in the minds of the audience, and allow new meaning to surface by subtly commenting on one another.

The subject matter of the TRC hearings is another major element that allows for meaning to surface, not only in the relationship between the puppeteer and the puppet, but in the meaning and comment of the play as a whole. In dealing with a subject that is so raw and immediate puppets are an excellent distancing device that can be used without losing any of the immediacy of the situation. As Dagan notes: “Since time immemorial, puppets have served as a theatrical means to animate and transmit a society’s emotions, feelings and ideas” (Dagan, 1990:4). Kentridge commented on the use of the puppets as the victims of racial injustice in a speech given in Antwerp:

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There seemed to be an awkwardness in getting an actor to play the witnesses - the audience being caught halfway between having to believe in the actor for the sake of the story and also not believe in the actor for the sake of the actual witness who existed out there but was not the actor. Using a puppet made this contradiction palpable. There is no attempt made to make the audience think the wooden puppet or its manipulator is the actual witness. The puppet becomes a medium through which the testimony can be heard...It is trying to make sense of the memory rather than be the memory (Kentridge:1997, not in print at time of publication).

Kentridge noted further on in this speech that "[the puppets] were also able to generate a whole series of unexpected meanings that became central to the play". Although it was not a meaning intended by the production, the use of the human puppets suggested to me that in apartheid South Africa the common man became a puppet in the hand of the government. This impression is furthered by the fact that the victims are not the only puppets. There are also the dog and the crocodile, representatives of the police force. With the amnesty hearings of the TRC in mind, in which policemen often claim to have merely been obeying orders, it seems apt that they are depicted as puppets, and manipulated not only by their manipulators, but by Pa UBU as well (who is an officer).

The difference in the relationships between the puppeteers and that of Pa UBU with the dog-puppet, is explored in another potent moment in the play. The puppeteers hand over the puppet between two scenes to Pa UBU, who lulls it to sleep while the puppeteers go and stand at the back of the stage in a very casual manner. When the dog is asleep Pa UBU opens it up and steals some of the evidence that it carries in its body (the body of the puppet is a suitcase) while the puppeteers stand at the back and watch in their usual expressionless way. This evidence will later lead to the arrest of the dog.

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At the moment when the puppeteers are slouching along the back wall, separated from their puppet, they are more powerful on stage than at any other time. They still appear to be invisible to Pa UBU, who takes no notice of them after he has received the puppet, yet they watch him directly and not through the eyes of their puppets for the only time in the play. The audience (again here I can only state my own reaction to the situation and assume that it was shared by some other members in the audience) cannot bear to watch the puppeteers watching their puppet being violated in this way. There is an expectation that they will step in for their puppet and defend it, even if it is only through stepping back in and animating it at this critical moment. But they never do. They simply watch (yet do stay focused on what happens to their puppet, they do not look away or pretend not to see, which might in some way make the audience suspect that they are assisting Pa UBU by willfully submitting their puppet to him). Once again it is their very refusal to either show emotion or to take action, and the mystery surrounding their thoughts on the matter and the motivation for their inactivity, that renders them so powerful. One cannot help but hope that some kind of greater knowledge of the events prompts them to stay outside the action.

According to Kentridge this moment too was arrived at as a practical solution rather than a preconceived idea. The puppet needed to go to sleep in order for Pa UBU to remove the documents, and as it does not really move in its sleep it could be separated from its puppeteers. Initially the puppeteers would exit the stage and re-enter after the scene, but this made much more of a statement from the puppeteers, it became an "exit" and an "entrance". It was also found in rehearsal that if the puppeteers exited the stage, the puppet would no longer be asleep, but would suddenly "go dead", become a mere prop lying on the table.

This is an incredibly meaningful discovery in terms of the puppeteer-puppet relationship. The very presence of the puppeteer on stage gives

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the puppet a degree of life, even if it is not being animated or even touched by the puppeteer. And at the same time the puppet can be animated by the actor (at some moment he strokes the dog in its sleep and it starts wagging its tail) and retain its life separate from the puppeteers.

The close exploration of the relationship between the puppeteer and the puppet, and of the invisible puppeteer in the production (both in relation to and separate from his puppet) has clearly borne fruit. The production of *Ubu & the Truth Commission* constantly revolutionizes the role of the puppeteer. The puppeteer is given much more focus than he normally gets, and the audience is constantly challenged to acknowledge his presence on stage and question his role. The puppeteer and his puppet are then cast in various relationships with the other characters on stage - again allowing for exploration beyond what would have been possible if the play functioned only on one level.

By the end of the performance the audience is acutely aware that the puppeteer is not merely there to animate the puppets. In the production as a whole the puppeteer plays a much larger part. His presence on stage is, in itself, a comment. The puppeteer in this production constantly raises questions in the minds of the audience, forcing them to constantly re-evaluate the relationship between the puppeteer and the puppet and interpret the comment that it makes.

The audience is constantly faced with the dichotomy between the interdependence, and the separate existences of the puppeteer and the puppet. They are never entirely sure which is the medium. They are never sure which one is "alive". Through the revolutionary role given to the puppeteer the magical world of puppets is created, a world where imagination rather than logic is the rule that constructs reality.

### **Note**

1. All information on the rehearsal process of *Ubu & the Truth Commission* as
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well as personal opinions of William Kentridge that are cited stem from an interview conducted with Kentridge in Johannesburg in September 1997 by the author. The interview is unpublished.

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