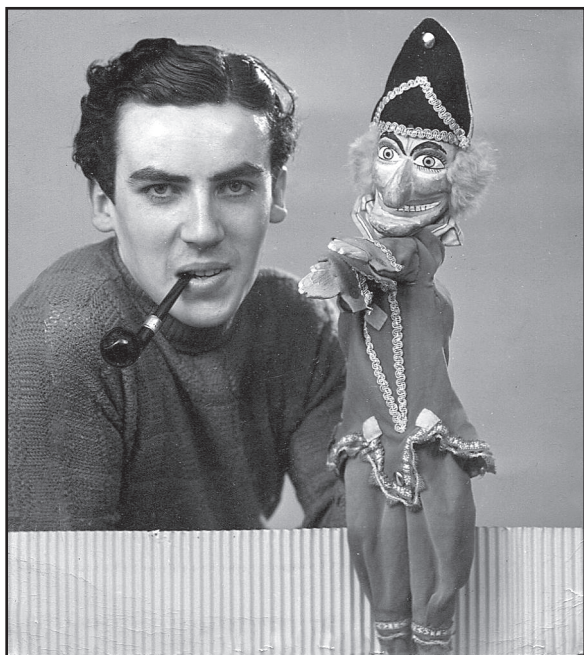


Miles Lee and Olivia Hopkins:

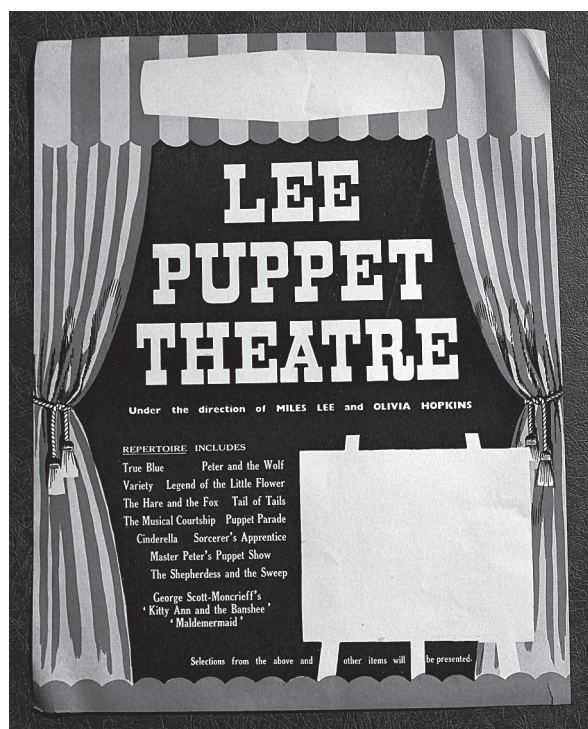
Puppet Theatre Production and Manipulation Re-visited



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What is the true nature of the art of the puppet theatre? In his classic text *Puppet Theatre Production and Manipulation* published by Faber & Faber (1958) and re-published by Charlemagne Press (1991), Miles Lee set out to answer this question in terms of the relationship between theory and practice on the one hand, and tradition and innovation on the other.



Several decades later the book still contains a gold mine of information. Miles Lee's text and Olivia Hopkins illustrations are the product of years of practical collaboration and experimentation. Their puppet theatre toured widely in Scotland, Northern England, Scandinavia and Iceland as well as running a regular season between 1951-1961 in their Belgrave Mews Theatre in Edinburgh – Britain's first permanent post-Second World War puppet theatre. In clear and simple language the book highlights the following aspects of puppet theatre production; the theory of puppets; the artistic and educational uses of puppetry; the role of the puppet theatre director's preparatory work on a play; the planning of movement and grouping; the uses and application of stage lighting and sound; puppet speech, acting and voice differentiation; the making and selection of puppet plays; and puppet manipulation techniques and exercises for training the actor-puppeteer. The emphasis within the book is on "*puppetry as an artistic form of entertainment in its own right, possessing a long and interesting history with rich and varied potentialities for development in any culture, not least in our own here in Britain.*" (Charlemagne Press p195).

Lee was one of the first to advocate the need for specialised studies and professional training in puppet playing, production, drama, play-writing, speech and manipulation as well as the allied arts of modelling, painting, carving and music.

The legacy of Miles and Olivia's work is preserved in the business archive and puppet collection (formerly kept at

Jordanhill College of Education curated by Lizbel Forder during 1971-1986) which is now securely housed at the Scottish Mask & Puppet Centre in Glasgow. If by legacy we mean the material or immaterial thing handed down by a predecessor then we have in the Lee Collection a most remarkable resource. This resource is not just a random collection of figures but an entire troupe of 234 puppets and marionettes, booths and fit-ups, properties and effects with an accompanying business archive and documentation record (scrapbooks, press clippings, correspondence files, photographs) of the Lee Company's growth and development. The basis, indeed, for a national collection of Scottish puppet theatre; an ideal complement to the English work of Waldo and Muriel Lanchester conserved by Michael Dixon under the auspices of the National Puppet Archive. Miles Lee was born in Leeds on 6th May 1922 and later educated at Glebe House, Hunstanton in Norfolk and then at Loreto School in Musselburgh, Edinburgh. Unlike many puppeteers, Lee did his apprenticeship in mainstream theatre before deciding upon a professional career in puppet theatre. Between 1938-39 he was a stage manager and theatre apprentice to Sir Barry Jackson at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. During 1941-46 he served in the Air Ministry Entertainment and Welfare Unit at the R.A.F. and it was there that he started to develop professional puppetry shows. Thereafter he became an Adviser and Lecturer under the Carnegie scheme to the Scottish Community Drama Association. After the war the search for premises began and the Lee Company was formed in 1948 as a touring company. In 1950 the company did thirty performances in the Arts and Crafts Centre playing to some 5000 people during the three-week run of the Edinburgh Festival.

The following year during the Festival of Britain they did some fifty seven performances of *Master Peter's Puppet Show*. Shortly after demobilisation Miles had also met and worked with John Wright and they formed a firm friendship. Miles' concept of forming a permanent puppet theatre was to become a great influence on John who at that time was only thinking in terms of a touring company. Some believe that *The Little Angel* came out of thin air and was developed as "the home of British puppet theatre" in a hermetically sealed manner.

In fact there was a first permanent Scottish antecedent, and of course, other major developments connected to the *Harlequin Theatre* in Wales and the *Lambert Puppet Theatre* in Ireland!

In 1951 Miles and his wife, Olivia Hopkins, opened the *Belgrave Mews Puppet Theatre* in a disused stable attached to the side of their house. It was one of Scotland's smallest theatres with a maximum capacity of sixty-six seats. The March premiere included a mixed



programme with hand puppets consisting of *Peter and The Wolf* (with music by Prokofiev), *The Town and Country Mouse* and *Puppet Parade*. By July they had re-designed the stage to work with marionettes as well as with glove and rod figures. In 1952 they created productions of *Kitty Ann and the Banshee*, *Variety*, *The Legend of The Little Flower*, *The Musical Courtship* and *The Hare and The Fox*. In the Autumn they received an invitation to undertake a ten-week tour of Sweden and Iceland.

The 1953 season included lecture visits by Gerald Morice and George Speaight since they had already become members of the *British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild*. Their main shows at the Edinburgh Festival were *Kitty Ann and The Banshee* (glove) and *Maldermermaid* (marionettes).

Two new marionettes shows went into production shortly after this: *The Shepherdess and the Sweep* and *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

Then for the Christmas season they developed a new glove and rod performance of *Cinderella*.

In 1954 both Miles and Olivia were instrumental in helping to form the Puppet Theatre Group and Olive Blackham's Roel Puppets and John Wright's Marionettes and Harro Siegel's Marionettes with *Faust* were their guests at the Edinburgh Festival. Their three-week tour of Iceland followed in September and thereafter they launched their new adaptation of *Hansel and Gretel*

and *Rip Van Winkle*.

In 1958 Miles became one of the first theatre specialists to be selected and sent on a mission by UNESCO to help establish the Asian Theatre Institute and the Indian National Drama School in New Delhi. In this developmental post his brief was to suggest ways in which drama and puppet theatre could be used in community projects, schools and universities. During his eighteen month assignment he made a unique photographic record of the disparate forms Indian puppetry and wrote a significant unpublished article entitled *Excursion into Indian Theatre*. In 1959 the Belgrave Mews season presented *Jinty and The Traveller* by Morna Elmhirst and Lee used a troupe of Rajasthani puppets donated to him by the Haim Raj company on his travels. Then for Christmas the company worked with Scottish Television director, Liam Hood, on *We Could Go In*; and also on a Nativity play aptly titled *The Star* written by Mary Marble with puppets, set and props designed by Olivia Hopkins accompanied by the Edinburgh University singers. Also in 1960 Miles latest article on Kathputli *An Experiment* was published in a UNIMA publication *Puppetry Around The World*. Between July and September the Lee Company brought their production of *Alice in Wonderland* to the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow. In addition the company was invited to give



lectures and appeared in variety acts and organised puppet play adaptations for both the BBC and Scottish Television.

At this time he was also in regular correspondence with Harro Siegel (Germany), Bill Baird (USA) and Sergei Obraztsov (USSR).

To return to the original question what is the true nature of the puppet theatre? In the Lee Company we find the coming together of a gifted team of artists, writers and singers to underscore the role of the actor-puppeteer. Miles constantly theorised about his practical involvement with puppet theatre as a director and performer while Olivia used her art skills and visual imagination in a tireless and enthusiastic manner. They not only established a dedicated puppet theatre but sought out Scottish writers and Scottish stories to create a popular repertoire. They undertook the first puppetry work on television in Scotland. They lovingly hand-crafted their figures, properties, booths and permanent blue and gold theatre to create a unique environment in which to



do the work. Their perspective was resolutely international and open-minded, a salutary reminder of the puppet theatre as an artistic form of entertainment in its own right, its importance as an educational tool and in the promotion of peace and friendship between nations.

Their way of life was rich, variegated, harsh and stressful and was combined with bringing up a family. When the experiment came to an abrupt end in 1961 Miles left for a new career in Africa (Head of Radio Communications in Kenya) and Olivia went back to art teaching in London. Their children Lydia Campbell and Raymond Lee went into physical education teaching (England) and accountancy (Singapore) respectively.