

MAGAZINE.ART

No 13

NEW YORK

WINTER-SPRING

2005



 New York Dance &
Arts Innovations, Inc.
A Not-for-Profit Organization

Appearing in: Winter issue of Magazine.Art, a publication of New York

Objects Making Sense

An analysis of Chris Green's "object-theater" play *Lyubo*, performed with puppetry, dance, and live original music.

BY ANDERSON WEEKES

Lost letters. Found objects. Detached images and deeply rooted lore. *Lyubo*, meaning *love* in Bulgarian, is a multi-media theatrical event created by Chris Green featuring puppetry, dance, video, original music and illustration, and dramatic monologue of poetic intensity. It was presented at HERE Arts Center as part of its Dream Music Puppetry Program in January, thrilling audiences that seemed to grow in size and enthusiasm with every performance.

At one level, *Lyubo* is autobiographical. Green's story has a Borgesian beginning: an ancient place, a furtive merchant, the acquisition of literary documents of unknown content and mysterious provenance, and coincidences of unnerving improbability. Green purchased fragments of old letters (in English) from a book dealer in the Sophia market. Later he went to explore one of the outlying ghost villages that were mysteriously deserted in the 40's. This one seemed to have been abandoned by its whole population suddenly and without warning. Valuables had been looted in the interim, but ordinary items—unfinished correspondence, personal effects of daily use—had lain untouched for more than half a century. Here Green unexpectedly found himself in the very house described in the Sophia letters, seeing photographs of the people he had only visualized.

Fusing the rich Bulgarian tradition of *object theater* with contemporary thinking about *archeology as performance*, Green presents the audience with the very images, objects, and literary fragments he found in Bulgaria. Rather than tell the story that, for Green at least, finally configured around the objects, *Lyubo* reenacts the configuration taking place. The process of finding a unifying narrative to fit fragments already given becomes both the structure and the theme of the play, and ultimately the play's metaphor for life.

Lyubo is ostensibly about an American railroad engineer and amateur naturalist, Philip Sweetbriar, who ventures to Bulgaria in the 1920's to capture the lucrative business of building a national railroad. Instead, he finds himself stranded amidst violence and political chaos, deserted by his investors and disavowed by the wife he selfishly left behind. He does menial work on a local railroad, is accused of being a communist spy, and is reported dead in a terrorist bombing. But his daughter continues to receive letters and parcels containing natural curiosities and peculiar found objects. His last letters relate his taking up residence among peasants and his growing admiration for a solitary old woman who seems to draw spirituality from patiently working the earth.

Green is a talented playwright: he spins an engrossing tale without ever stopping to tell it. He also plays the lead, composed the music (performed with exquisite beauty by the Balkan folk duo Rima Fand and Megan Wyler), and constructed the puppets (marionettes, hand puppets, shadow puppets, and bunraku-style puppets). Joined by the talented duo of Matthew Acheson and Erin Orr, Green animated the finely articulated puppets with a body language that was supple and convincing. The dancers Lisa Gonzalas and Deana Acheson integrated the different scales of representation with choreographed movement that ingeniously assisted the puppetry. Two pure dance interludes expressed the polarity defining the play's search for meaning—one with swinging pendulums suggesting time heavy with danger and one evoking the groundedness of peasant life in the constancy of the earth.

In *Lyubo*, Green realizes at multiple levels the emergence of narrative structure out of preexisting fragments. To reach their seats the audience must walk across the performance space, past a museum-like exhibit of the sundry objects Green retrieved from Bulgaria. The audience is already *in* the space of the performance, participating in a search for a narrative that fits the objects before the play even begins. Similarly, the opening presents a cycle of striking images floating in and out of dark space—images that recur at the end, still disembodied but now infused with the meaning of a narrative that has crystallized around them.

Sweetbriar's first monologue begins by directly addressing a striking beauty whom he is surprised to find so far away from home—no, it turns out, not a girl, but a species of wildflower familiar to him from Arkansas. After a cascade of detail seems to support one *Gestalt*, a different one crystallizes. We experience how the meaning emerges from fragments of detail—but fitfully, because our encounter with the fragments never really precedes their embrace by some more or less definite prefiguration of meaning. Perhaps this explains why Green is impossible to pin down on what is “fact” and what is “fiction” in his story.

The pathos in Sweetbriar's story comes from his profound dislocation. Having wheedled their savings out of little old ladies to finance his scheme, he finds himself penniless in Bulgaria, unable to speak the language. In a highly theatrical scene that could be realized only with puppetry, we are treated to a picnic where two jaded demons—figments of Sweetbriar's troubled conscience—frame a theological debate that both exposes his own conflicts and sets up their ultimate resolution. Green plays Sweetbriar performing both voices as the demons are manipulated above him. One of the demons feels that the devil's life is passing him by. He yearns for the high life of apocalyptic mayhem. The other works himself up into a dither justifying his complacency. He likens himself to the blind fig wasp, who is born, mates, and dies without ever leaving the inside of the fig flower. Oblivious to the rain forest outside, he is yet indispensable to the life cycle of its great trees. The image gives to a theological sentiment that seemed exhausted long ago the undiminished power of a fresh metaphor.

This scene artfully blends naturalistic with purely symbolic movement. The superbly expressive body language of the puppets becomes increasingly stylized until at last they stand foot-to-foot, their heads like antipodes, and spiral through space imagining great

things. The construction of the demons is ingeniously grotesque: their bodies are human in shape, yet sinewy and bat-like in their finer articulations. Their heads are simply the black-gloved hands of the puppeteers. This gives them at once the expressiveness of the human hand and the facelessness of a gloved fist: despite anthropomorphic behavior, they repel us as inhuman and sinister.

The emergence of narrative structure from initially fragmented experiences ceases to be a purely formal pattern and achieves a moving poignancy in the culmination of Sweetbriar's life story. His alienation and self-fragmentation are set forth in strikingly imaginative ways. As Sweetbriar, Green huddles inside himself at a formal reception where his socializing, public self—top hat and white-gloved hands—are separate props manipulated by puppeteers over and around him. Finally, Sweetbriar darts outside of himself to observe his own nervous courtliness from behind a pillar. In a letter to his daughter he lists phrases he wishes he could speak in Bulgarian, culminating with: "How far is it?" "How will I know when I am there?" In the end, Sweetbriar finds the narrative coherence he is seeking only by giving up the demand for it. From the old peasant woman he learns the wisdom of the fig wasp, who toils, and toils, and never asks how much farther he has to go before the story makes sense.

None can doubt the artistic gravity of puppet theater after experiencing the dramatic climax of this piece. Sweetbriar the puppet, distraught over the imminent death of the old woman and staggering blind with bad drink in the winter night, is first menaced by his own conjured demons, but then confronted by the altogether unexpected life-size Sebastian figure of the old Balkan myths. Covered head to toe with white shaggy fur, goat-horned and towering eight feet high on cloven hooves, this apparition de-gloves the demons and then stalks Sweetbriar himself, cutting one by one the strings of his wildly trembling marionette. This shocking violation of the conventions of puppet theater elicited groans of sympathy and dismay from the audience. As the opening cycle of images recurs in the denouement, we now recognize the fig flower, the wasp, and many other symbols rooted in local Bulgarian lore and orthodox Christianity. They have acquired a dream-like coherence and the power of revelation. When Sweetbriar tells his daughter that for the first time he fell to his knees and prayed, we are moved; we understand him; we share his rapture.

In a cynical culture such as ours—where taking religion seriously is considered foreign to an open mind—it may be that only puppets are immune to the corrosions of irony. But that makes them trustees of all the things we are too self-conscious to say. Green exploits this powerfully. When I asked Green if *Lyubo* was an apology for religious faith, he said *no*, but added that the knee-jerk dismissal of religion so familiar to us is hardly possible in a place like Bulgaria, where faith is in the soil. Religion, he said, is a lost opportunity for those who dismiss it lightly. *Lyubo* is the compelling story of how it is still possible for a cynical westerner to be touched by this opportunity and to find meaning in its narrative.

Edmund Miller and Robert Carlisle contributed to the article. The author would like to thank Chris Green for being so generous with his time.