

Beyond the Puppeteer: Exploring Performer-Puppet Separation and Agency in Live Performance

Georgina Woo
Hunter College Theatre Department

March 28, 2025

Problem & Hypothesis

Puppetry traditionally relies on direct performer interaction, but increasing separation between performer and puppet—through hand-operated puppets, performer-triggered stage effects, 3D-printed masks, and tele-operated robotics—challenges assumptions about agency in performance. This project examines how audience perception shifts as separation increases. The hypothesis is that as the performer becomes increasingly removed from direct control, the audience's perception of agency shifts, requiring new strategies to maintain expressiveness and engagement.

Methods

Four projects explore different levels of performer-puppet interaction:

1. **Hand-operated foam puppets**, using scale changes, fabric effects, and transformation to create illusions like growth, flight, and injury while maintaining direct performer control.
2. **A stage rigging effect**, where a visible performer uses a Kabuki drop to trigger falling leaves, blending performer agency with environmental spectacle.
3. **A 3D-printed monster mask**, obscuring facial expression and shifting expressiveness to body movement and voice, altering how audiences perceive the performer's presence.
4. **A tele-operated robotic puppet** (a work in progress), designed to explore whether remote control could maintain expressive movement and audience engagement without direct human presence.

Results (Expected Findings)

Audiences accept performer-operated puppets as extensions of the performer, treating both as a single entity. The robotic puppet remains an open question, but if completed, it may introduce a sense of autonomy distinct from human control, fundamentally changing audience perception of agency.

Conclusion & Significance

Greater performer-puppet separation alters perceptions of agency. While audiences embrace puppets as performer extensions, full autonomy could challenge traditional expectations of live performance. Future work will explore whether robotic puppetry can evoke the same suspension of disbelief and emotional connection.