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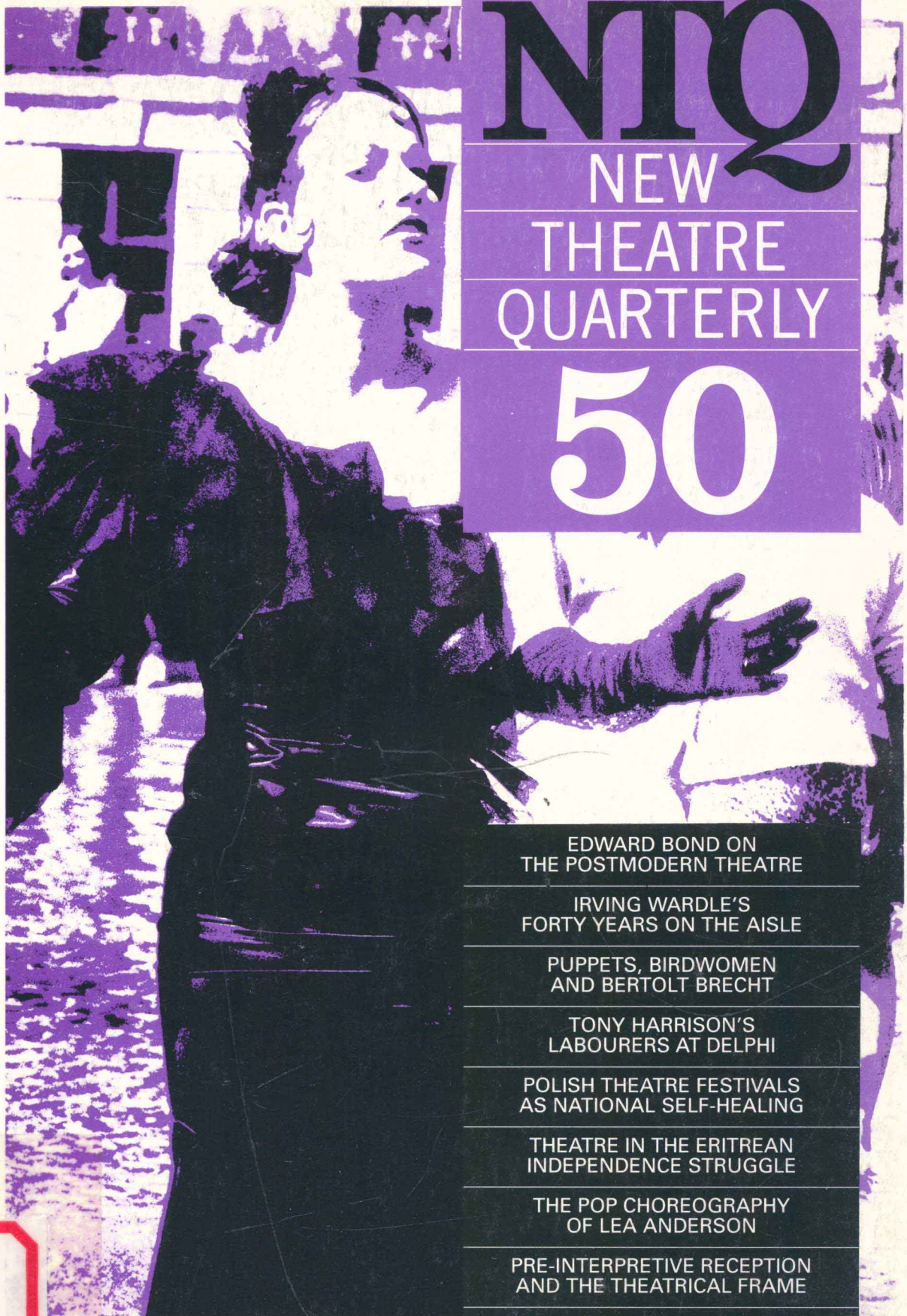

NTQ

NEW THEATRE QUARTERLY

50

EDWARD BOND ON THE POSTMODERN THEATRE

IRVING WARDLE'S FORTY YEARS ON THE AISLE

PUPPETS, BIRDWOMEN AND BERTOLT BRECHT

TONY HARRISON'S LABOURERS AT DELPHI

POLISH THEATRE FESTIVALS AS NATIONAL SELF-HEALING

THEATRE IN THE ERITREAN INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLE

THE POP CHOREOGRAPHY OF LEA ANDERSON

PRE-INTERPRETIVE RECEPTION AND THE THEATRICAL FRAME

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NTQ
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Edward Bond
interviewed by Ulrich Köppen

Modern and Postmodern Theatres

The work of Edward Bond has featured regularly both in NTQ and the earlier *Theatre Quarterly*, from the interview and casebook published in TQ5 (1972) following the production of his version of *Lear* to Ian Stuart's study in NTQ39 (1994) of the concept of 'Theatre Events', as developed during Bond's workshops with Royal Shakespeare Company actors in 1992. A few months before his RSC production of his new play *In the Company of Men* last autumn, Edward Bond talked with Ulrich Köppen, a doctoral candidate at the University of Mainz, about the relevance of Theatre Events to the debate over modernism and postmodernism, in which Bond has also actively participated – not only through his dramatic works but in prefatory statements and published letters – and the ways in which such ideas illuminate and underpin his plays.

TALKING ABOUT *postmodernism in general, and postmodern theatre or drama in particular, in your opinion do such concepts have a useful function?*

There is no established theatre I would call usefully postmodern. Our theatre results from the ruins of modernism: it has lost its functional purpose. You have to ask yourself: what is the proper role of theatre? The imagination has become much more important in the ways societies are managed and organized. There is a radically new role for imagination in society.

I regard my plays as postmodern. They are a response to the changed situation. But there is a failure of contact between today's dramatists and the theatres themselves. This prevents the creation of a postmodern form of consciousness. By consciousness I mean self-consciousness. I would describe a postmodern consciousness as the proper ethos of our society. I would call this an existential debt. It is the job of people who creatively use the imagination to try and redeem that existential debt.

Back in 1990 you headlined or supertitled two of your plays – Jackets *and* In the Company of Men – *'Two Post-Modern Plays'. What exactly justifies this denomination? Is it the plays' plots, their language, their characters, or your message?*

Really all those things, they go together. It might be helpful to explain what I regard as the postmodern condition of being, and why for example, Brecht's and Beckett's theatre is no longer of use to us. Their theatre is the theatre of ruins. Absurd theatre is utterly pessimistic and does not help to explain things. A writer has the task of explaining things. Human affairs are decided by the mediation of various factors: one is technology, the other is society, and the third is human beings themselves – what we are biologically and psychologically. History represents the relationship between those three factors.

When thinking about that denomination, did you only have the adverse effects of postmodern society in mind?

No. I was trying to describe the state of affairs that we find ourselves in. To achieve this I cannot follow the conventional structures of a play. This means that I can and want to use time differently in my plays. My purpose – namely the investigation of a situation – is not meant to be negative. Talking about three of my more recent plays, which I would describe as a postmodern trilogy – *Jackets, In the Company of Men,* and *Coffee* – they are comparable to what people do in quarries, when they want

to dislodge rocks. They drill into the rocks, pack the hole with dynamite, and then explode it. It's like entering into that situation and trying to extract the elements of meaning from it. That is the pattern of those three postmodern plays.

Take *Jackets* for example. It is the biography of one person. The earlier part plays in medieval Japan, the latter part in the modern city. I wanted to show the continuity between the two stories. I wanted to bring the past into the present, and continue at the same time into the future.

We are nowadays travelling towards the classics. They are no longer solely part of our heritage, they now constitute an integral part of our future. This works in two ways. It works in terms of the imagination, and also in practical terms – that is to say the way in which societies are organized.

Is your concept of 'Theatre Events' something to be regarded as a modern element, a postmodern one, or something completely different in the theatrical field?

Everything I do now I would describe as part of the postmodern world. The concept of 'Theatre Events', TEs for short, has in my own work replaced the Brechtian alienation effect. There is no need to say what the event is, but to say what you want to use it for. This is because there is an intervention between us and the material determinants of our life. The technological state of society has changed. We no longer relate to reality. Reality has, in fact, become a fiction for us. Fiction then takes on the determinism of reality. The arbitrary becomes necessity. If we do not understand this, the arbitrary becomes fate, and then we are condemned by the frivolous.

Describing Jackets *and* In the Company of Men *as postmodern plays, where do you see the difference between those two plays and earlier ones?*

My plays after *Jackets* and *Company* I would describe as a continuation of postmodernism. My former plays can be seen as an exploration of the failures of modernism – a state I was caught up in, a paradigm experience in our society. One could certainly say that my previous plays reflected the failures of modernism.

One is at times left with the impression that there is a thematic dissociation between the not infrequent 'Introductions' to your plays and the actual contents of the plays. Not always does a connection between the two entities become very obvious or even absolutely clear. Do you share that view?

No. I don't share that view. We don't live in a culture which interprets experience in a uniform way. We live in a culture of disorientation. This is how one should understand the plays. The 'Introductions' are the keys to the plays, they act as determinants of the plays, yet they are not the actual plays themselves. The 'Introductions' give you more or less the bearings or orientation, the way you should look at things. Critics tend to turn the meaning of my plays upside down. It is for that simple reason that I sometimes feel the necessity to explain the approach to a play in the form of a guiding 'Introduction'.

In the 'Introductions' you seem to be preoccupied with certain motifs and notions. First and foremost among these I would mention your ideas about technology. This is nothing new. In the 'Introduction' to a relatively early play of yours, The Fool *of 1976, you elaborated in detail your personal ideas and apprehensions. What do you think constitutes the necessity to discuss this and other subjects minutely but without distinct reference to the ensuing play?*

Only if you understand a problem can you understand the ideological confusions in the wake of it. This, of course, holds true for technology. Ideological confusions around a problem are not explanations. They become part of the individual problem. Ideology, so to speak, is society's explanation of its technology. It serves two functions: one is to stabilize society, the other is to legitimize change. Change defines itself in relation to

the ideology of society and the owners of society – who also own its technology. This requires explanation.

In the plays I describe experience and the determinants in human beings which are able to change situations. Technology is one of them. Society in the past could only be changed by using the existing ideology. The curious thing about our situation is that ideology no longer functions in that way. The status quo no longer prescribes and legitimates revolution. Thus revolution must become more radical.

About your concept of the 'Threefold Relationship' – 'people/technology/boundary' – Is that something particularly postmodern, or is it a concept inherent in all your dramatic work?

I think the concept of the 'Threefold Relationship' is inherent in everything I have written. It is the structure of history. I have now a very complex understanding of the way plays work, the structures of plays, why plays are written in certain ways. And I can apply my concepts, including 'Theatre Events', even to Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Euripides.

Theatre Events are not only to be found in my plays. Concepts such as the 'Threefold Relationship' and ideas like 'Theatre Events' are not exclusively postmodern, but they have simply been given a wider understanding in our postmodern era. What is so strange about a writer like Shakespeare is the impermanence that is constant in his work. You can constantly TE his work in different ways and thus enable a more radical understanding of his plays. The plays lend themselves to the concept.

In the past you just had less choice about the ways of interpreting things. Everything was dictated by the culture of the age. The prologues to Shakespeare's plays served the function of my 'Introductions' today. Shakespeare may imagine that he is stating a certain case, but it is necessary for us that we use his plays to say he is stating something else. Shakespeare's plays are still powerful, because they define the relationship between those three factors – people/technology/boundary – that structure all human life.

In No. 65 of your Notes on Post-Modernism *in 1990 you claim that 'In terms of the threefold relationship postmodern people live on the boundary. . . . If there is no boundary beyond authority and people there can be no utopia.'*[1] *Can you go into that a little further?*

If there is no boundary beyond authority, this would mean that authority entirely owns the imagination. For the imagination to be owned means that it is being corrupted. Now for us that would create a fascist or stalinist situation, or some other rigid theocracy. But I think modern society does not own imagination, it only exploits it. That is a different thing. It really means a new definition of our freedom. Imagination must relate to reality only, not (as in the past) to reality and ideology. Ideology has become the textbook of Auschwitz and of Hiroshima. Ideology must no longer intervene between reality and the story.

About your concept of wants and needs. You have said in a letter that 'Postmodernism is a society of wants not needs.'[2] *Is that a personal notion, a postmodern idea, a simple matter of fact, or a self-fulfilling prophecy? What is behind that concept?*

The concept describes the condition that we are entering into in postmodernism. In so far as western capitalism is now the predominant world culture, wants replace needs. It does not mean that at the same time many people are not in a state of need, but, as I have put it ironically, people don't die of starvation. It is only medically speaking that they will die of starvation. Culturally and collectively they die of unfulfilled wants. The child may be dying of starvation, culturally it is dying of the lack of toys. This is a consistently paradoxical situation. In the postmodern world you cannot have the necessities without the luxuries – and by the postmodern world I mean, of course, a capitalist economy. This renders Brecht's dictum about 'Fressen' and 'Moral' empty.

Needs relate you to a material reality. They produce technology tools. In postmodernism you do not relate to a material world in a direct way. Before, our relationship to the material world was always disciplined. It is so no longer. The technological circumstances have changed. If we continue to survive as spiritual beings, we have to be materialist.

Think of the Bible. God did not create human beings and then a world for them to live in. It is the other way round. He created the material circumstances and then put human beings there. Even in early religions the materiality of our existence has been acknowledged. In postmodernism it is no longer true that technology relates us to an ideological dream. There is always what I call a 'Napoleon factor'. Bonapartes or Hitlers dream about a united Europe, but when they take their armies to Moscow, it will snow.

The power of ideological invention is vast. You change the way you dress, you change your pictures, your theatre, your politics, you change your ideology, but then it will snow. You have to take that into account. If you don't, you go mad. In the past everything that happened in human society was ultimately determined by the material circumstances, by this threefold relationship. Technology is not merely a way of relating us to the earth. Because technology is so powerful, it always creates a form of ownership. Whoever owns the machines owns society. And this becomes more and more true as the machines become more and more powerful.

Technology is a determinant factor in that way. But the human mind is not technological. It is there for imagination. The mind is there to make a story. But it makes a story *because* we have machines, *because* we have technology. Technology has cut us off from an unstoried relationship to the world, from the world of pre-human animals. So we always have to invent stories in order to be human. In the past, ideologies would tell us stories and those stories related the individual to the world. What has happened now is that there are no longer any coherent stories. If there may be coherent stories, we don't yet tell them.

The human situation inevitably promotes stories. The stories are accounts of the tensions we experience. It could be possible for stories to become more truthful about the threefold relationship – *not* about an ultimate 'closure', an end to the story. This means that you have to take back to the story the element of tragedy. Otherwise there is no real political theatre.

The idea of catharsis is no longer useful, but we still require notions of tragedy. That is part of the human story. What happened is that our stories have become unreal. They are not based on the material world at all, they are based on fantasy. Postmodernism, as it is popularly practised, is a world of fantasy, which has no relation to reality. But the imagination is always the language of reality. Technology is our relationship to the material world; it is also our relationship to our society. Technology both promotes and indeed makes necessary the ownership of society in some form or other. In the past ownership has always dictated the ideology, it has always owned the story. If you own the story, then you own the psychology of the people hearing the story.

What is constant about human beings is the nature of the human mind, with its capacity for imagination. This entails the necessity for explanations. You have to ask where the human beings get value from. The human mind in a young child asks 'Why?' because it has to learn. And it can only learn by making a map of its world. That map is a story. The child inscribes itself as part of the map. You cannot make a distinction between what a child is and what a child knows. Technology is one language, human beings speak another language, and yet they are determined by technology.

This is a very complex situation, which is mediated by society in forms of ownership. Technology, one of the elements of this tripartite relationship, has got out of hand, because it is now explosive and incredibly powerful. It is now entering into realms of manipulation of understanding which it has never been able to penetrate before. In my

plays I want to deal with the consequences of technology for imagination.

Technology, however, changes so quickly that imagination cannot keep up with it, cannot understand any longer what is going on. The media have produced a multitude of new ways of creating aesthetic effects, of making imagery or experiences for the imagination. In the past it was necessary for ownership to stabilize the imagination. Religions are very good examples of this. Heresy has always been a threat to the ownership of society. Therefore you had to destroy heresy. It has, however, always been done for the best reason, namely that it is important for us to live in a stable society.

Heresy has now become orthodoxy. Our culture is founded on heresy. We will find that heretics have no orthodoxy to deviate from. This is livable only if we make our society heretical. And that means social politics, not merely personal politics. Otherwise reaction will fill the void that has been created. But because ideology can no longer provoke – and does legitimize – change, its role is taken by unmediated technology. The danger is not that the machines will do our thinking for us but that we will dream their dreams.

Why are the Greeks so important to us? They took the basic elements of imagination and examined it. All Greek plays deal with basic relationships, have basic stories, in which psychology is related to society in certain ways through authority. Because the Greeks were looking at the imagination with a high degree of seriousness, their plays are still absolutely relevant to us. For two thousand years after the Greeks it was necessary for the imagination to be codified, made rigid, given a series of images and stories, which were profound, tragic, supernatural, capable of covering all aspects of human experience. And it was all the word of God, and could not be changed. God was the storyteller. And the story was more or less unchanging, because technology put no great pressure on it.

When technology changed, you had to accommodate the change. You had to have religious changes. Now that technology has exploded, you have to do exactly the opposite with imagination. Instead of saying that something is real – it is the story of God, it is the story of sacrifice, it is the story of the meaning of the world – now you have to say imagination must never be allowed to be consistent and the story unchanging. It must be completely changed all the time. That is the style of postmodernism.

A platter of images now becomes marketable. It is no longer detemined by material reality. It floats like a dream. In between us and the real world we have this fictional manipulative dream. This is what technology does all the time. It is used to produce a dream. Its final form is virtual reality. That is the problem of postmodernism. It always seeks reality, just as technology always wants to relate to reality. The human brain actually always seeks reality. That is an extremely dangerous situation, because we have now become strong enough to put our illusions, our fictions, into reality. But in truth there is no new reality. The imagination does not want it, cannot conceive it any longer.

The most important thing about human beings is that they have imagination. This is the ground to their freedom. I try to find out what is consistent with imagination.

How can your 'Notes on Imagination' – the preface to Coffee[3] *– be interpreted in the light of such concepts of the story and its ownership?*

There is always a direct link between the mind of the child and the mind of the adult. As the child grows, it learns that the outside world is not what it thought it would be. That it is not in fact the map, which the child created by inscribing itself in it. The story which the child needed to become human is, at the same time, used by society to corrupt the child, to make the child inhuman. I don't think we have human societies. This condition is brought about by ownership. What the child really wants is justice. The object of all theatre, of all drama – and there are many forms of it – is justice. That is, I think, what human beings seek.

The task of the writer in the postmodern world should not be the providing of the

destructive fictions of western capitalism: his or her task should be to rewrite today's world, to recreate the meaning of justice in our situation.

How does your concept of TEs differ from that of other dramatists' understanding – say Shakespeare's – of comparable theatrical notions?

I add to the concept of TE the concept of use. The truth lies in the use. The TE uses an incident in a play in an entirely different way to what you might expect. In the scene of Gloucester's blinding in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for example, he uses a seventeenth-century TE, but in my *Lear* I put in a modern TE. In Shakespeare's TE the servants attend the blinded Gloucester. In my TE the servants first attend their dead fellow while Gloucester crawls about the stage. They are different TEs. All stories are usable in that way. Stories for Shakespeare had a set meaning, stories nowadays no longer have a set meaning.

How would you rate your plays in retrospect – as modern plays, because they have been written in modern times, or postmodern plays, because they detect and reflect postmodern thoughts and ideas?

This is a very legitimate question. I am surprised at the consistency of my plays. In all my plays there are always two worlds. In many of them this is overt, but all of them fall into two parts. A clear example of the former would be *Jackets* – and perhaps *Early Morning* (1968), which partly played on earth, partly in heaven. There are nearly always two worlds in the way we look at things. And my plays exploit the difference between the two worlds, taking the character from one world to the other.

In contrast to this, Shakespeare always wants to press things into one coherent world. I think the pressure which the characters experience in their travel from one world to the other is a postmodern experience. All my characters have to struggle in two worlds, they have to take the journey from one world to the other world. If they don't do that, they are destroyed. The imagination in our postmodern worlds has to rethink the ways in which it can negotiate its travelling from one world to the other.

If I look at my trilogy of postmodern plays – *Jackets, Company,* and *Coffee* – I would say, these are postmodern plays. Perhaps plays written before that I would regard as plays recording the movement towards postmodernism. But what comes later is inherent in those earlier plays. And also all plays have to be acted in a postmodern TE way. And directors, of course, don't know anything about that. This is the simple reason why I have said 'No' to the staging of any of my plays in this country for the past fourteen years.

My plays are an attempt to discover meaning. I have discovered at the same time that the means of acting have to change, because you always have to say to yourself, what do I use this for, not what is it? Society has silence, which asks for justice. And the imagination has a voice, which also asks for justice. You have to make that articulate on the stage.

I want to look at the imagination of the audience at a very deep level – at the grammar of the audience's imagination, so to speak. This is where things are held together, where opinions and values are formed. Language is now being emptied, and we have to go back to original values.

Looking back now some thirty years, over some thirty plays or so, is there a consistent message you wish to convey, or have your personal views and ideas changed very much since Saved *in 1966?*

My basic message remains the same, but it has developed. If you want to live in an inhuman world and accept it, you become inhuman. You need to say why that world is inhuman, why it matters to you, and why you want to change it. It all relates to ownership. What I aim at is a form of socialism in which people can own themselves.

There are, however, limitations to social engineering. One of the things technology

cannot change is our mortality. Being mortal is a tragic experience, for me it is also a ground for human happiness. I shall leave this world happy. This is so, because I know that other people's deaths have been wasted, and they ought not to have been. The concept of justice has meaning. It is difficult to put into practice. It is the *Lear* question, and there is no easy solution. That is the human ambition. That is the imperative that has driven everything I have ever written.

Coming back to TEs: where do you see that concept realized in your more recent plays?

The TE is a basic element of drama.[3] I have not invented it, I have simply drawn attention to it. However, as I mentioned before, I have added to the idea of TE the idea of use. Academic postmodernism is a doctrine about the relativity of values. I do not think that everything is relative in the way that Nietzsche said it was. Nietzsche mad is less useful than Nietzsche sane. There is an inherent logic in the situation, because we are children who become adults.

Really, in everything I do I try to see the concept of TE being realized. As to *Coffee*, the whole play functions in a TE way. You therefore need a style of acting which will explicate and use that. I want to use everything I can in a play like *Coffee* to explicate the meaning of what is happening, what it is being used for. It is necessary to use the visual and the verbal in a way that does not dislocate or alienate meaning in a Brechtian way.

In Coffee *you explain in detail the development of a child's mind. How important are children to your work?*

Children have always played significant roles in my plays. In order to understand their special situation I have to try to pursue the mind to its origins. I want to find out why human beings behave in a certain way, why they are capable of great humanity and also of great inhumanity. I want to explain why creativity also implies the possibility of destruction, and why one thing happens and another does not. Destruction disguises itself as creativity, just as capitalism disguises itself as democracy.

What are your plans as director and playwright?

I will direct *In the Company of Men* in November 1996 at the Barbican in London. I am very intrigued by my trilogy of postmodern plays, because they look at postmodern problems in a way which enabled me to learn about the postmodern world. *Jackets*, for example, allows you to look at the history of individuals within different power structures. In *Company of Men* I look at the relationship between power structures and personal relationships. *Coffee* is about the act of creation, and it takes place in the most determined of societies, the Draconian dictatorship of an army at war. That is the experience of all human beings: either they will create or destroy themselves.

My next play to be published will be called *At the Inland Sea*. It was written for Theatre in Education groups and young people. Then I want to write a play suggested to me by the last scene of *Coffee*. In it the hand of a dead woman hangs down from the ceiling. What is she pointing at? Why does she point as she dies?

Notes and References

1. In *Two Post-Modern Plays* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 236-7.
2. Letter to David Jansen, 3 October 1989, published in Ian Stuart, ed., *Edward Bond: Letters, Vol. I* (Reading: Harwood, 1994), p. 145.
3. London: Methuen, 1995.

Poh Sim Plowright

The Birdwoman and the Puppet King: a Study of Inversion in Chinese Theatre

Poh Sim Plowright recently spent six weeks in Quanzhou, in the Fujian Province of China, watching the puppeteers, actors, and audiences of her native Fujian theatre tradition. Here she was able to observe at first hand the principle of inversion that, she believes, underlies all Chinese theatre: and in the following article she argues that this principle is clearly illustrated by the string puppet and human theatres of Quanzhou, whose origins can be traced to the official 'Pear Garden Theatre' set up in the eighth century by the Tang Emperor, Ming Huang. Theatre in this part of South China is, Plowright suggests, living testimony to the continuing basis of Chinese theatre in the practice of ancestor worship, through which most performances become sacrificial offerings – a connection she believes Brecht to have missed in his celebrated confrontation with Chinese acting techniques in Moscow in 1935. Poh Sim Plowright is Lecturer in Oriental Drama and Director of the Noh Centre in the Department of Drama, Theatre, and Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is the author of a book on the Noh, and also of several plays and features on theatrical subjects for BBC Radio Three.

OVERHANGING the Grand Buddha Hall in the Kai Yuan Temple in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China, are twenty-four magnificently coloured and carved birdwomen. The Hall houses the largest and best preserved altar in China – Ganlujie, first built in 686 during the Tang dynasty.

In a country where footbinding was once a widespread custom, confining lotus-footed women to the hearth and the bottom end of the social scale,[1] it is difficult not to feel exhilaration at the sight of these women, their outspread wings elevated to the top of columns and holding up, like caryatids, a most sacred edifice. In the official guidebook one is informed that these figures are representations of the magical singing birds which once flocked to this Great Hall to listen to Buddhist sutras. Symbolically, they fuse the opposing but complementary forces of the human and natural worlds, whose close alliance is the basis of Chinese life.

Although motifs of birdmen[2] appeared in early Han art (206 BC – AD 220), these seventh-century birdwomen are unique and important. Here is a self-evident glorification of the extraordinary, later forgotten function of women, their bowshaped arms carrying the four treasures of the scholar (writing brush, ink stand, ink slab and paper) as well as musical instruments and fruit, ingeniously interlocked into a complex system of brackets which literally hold up the columns of the Great Hall. Apart from any religious or philosophical connotations, this unique construction is considered an architectural masterpiece, prohibited to casual photography.

Twenty-four in number, the birdwomen are also meant to symbolize the twenty-four divisions of the solar year in the traditional Chinese calendar. Besides being immortalized as the attentive listeners to Buddhist scripture, they are regarded as the Guardians of Scholarship (a predominantly male prerogative from time immemorial), as well as presiders over the passage of time in the Chinese calendar. Since the calendar is considered the supreme legislator in Chinese life, 'valid at once for human society and the natural world',[3] these figures assume a position of extraordinary importance.

In Quanzhou today, the birdwoman, who also features in the corners of its town hall devoted to theatrical and musical functions and even on teeshirts worn by actors and puppeteers, or given to honoured guests,

Three of the Birdwomen in the Grand Buddha Hall carrying some of the scholar's treasures.

has become the official emblem of all cultural activities and, in particular, theatre.

Various intertwined ironies are implicit: the theatre, for which the birdwoman has become the emblem, has been one of the main instruments for enshrining the conventional image of female confinement. The lotus gait assumed by the *dan* or female role on stage, until fairly recently played only by the male, is considered one of the most striking characteristics of Chinese acting. It requires of the actor assigned to mastering such a craft long arduous training, almost comparable in rigour to the tortures once imposed on women by footbinding.

Then, as an extension of female characterization in Chinese theatre, and within the same context of confinement symbolized by the lotus gait, is the liberating role of the *dao ma dan* or woman warrior – which this century's most celebrated actor, Mei Lan Fang, made famous in the play *Fu Mu Lan*. Wearing small wooden shoes, he portrayed a young woman who disguised herself as a man to replace her father so as to fight a triumphant battle against her country's enemies. She far excelled her male compatriots and succeeded in concealing her sex from them. Although here there is no such direct connection between the 'warrior woman' and the 'birdwoman' as in western mythology,[4] the affinity is remarkably strong through the superhuman scale of her military exploits.

The Image of the Bird – and the Theatre

The bird is often associated with creation myths[5] and, in particular, its connection with shamanism is worldwide because the bird itself denotes rising, activation, change, and vitality. These are characteristics associated with the spirit-possessed shaman, and in Siberia, for example, not only is the eagle the prototype of the shaman but the same word is used for both.[6] In early Chinese peasant society it was the reappearance and disappearance of birds which became the pivotal emblem of the system of rotation, Spring and Autumn, of the going out into

the fields and the return to the village, of outdoor and indoor activities.

This polar opposition of outer and inner reflects the basic elementary classification of all Chinese life into two distinct but complementary orders: female (*yin*) and male (*yang*). Thus, from the beginning, the male worked in the fields[7] while the female laboured at the hearth. This essential division of labour is preserved in the popular stellar myth of the Heavenly Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden,[8] who were punished for their love and only met once a year with the assistance of birds whose wings formed a bridge across the Milky Way. From this arose the idea of birds as helpful intermediaries, the envoys of the shaman, and sometimes the shaman herself.[9] The fusion of woman and bird in one image is especially powerful in Chinese thought.

What is now forgotten is that initially Chinese society was matrilinear, the surname in ancient times passing down through women.[10] As early as the Shang dynasty (*c.* 1600–1028 BC), the family system had become organized on firm patriarchal lines. But if we go back to the Neolithic era, the situation was reversed. Indeed in some places a matriarchal society survives – for example in certain ethnic minorities in south-west China such as the contemporary *Naxi*, whose women organize production and provide the family surname, with the grandmother as the head of the family.[11] Indeed, in the earliest days of Chinese history it was women who enjoyed supremacy and reverence. The conventional belief in a fiercely male society stems from a powerful Confucian overlay in the sixth century BC.

When we move from society to theatre, we discover a reflection of this overturning of commonly held assumptions in the network of inversions which runs through Chinese theatre, particularly in the string puppet theatre of South Fujian – the *kuei lei hsi* or in Fujian (Min-nan) vernacular *ka le hi*, meaning 'the theatre of auspicious ritual'. The 'Min-nan' vernacular (which I speak, since my grandfather came from the vicinity of Quanzhou) is one of the most archaic dialects in China, traceable to a form of early Chinese carried south seventeen centuries ago. So *ka le hi* in Min-nan demotic not only gives the sound of the dialectical pronunciation but denotes a puppet form closely connected with Taoist exorcisms.[12] I shall return to this important theatrical form.

Although the supremacy of the 'birdwoman' is therefore distinctly entrenched in Quanzhou, she does not feature directly in a play. But throughout South-East Asia, particularly in North Malaysia and Thailand, there is a prevalent story of a 'birdwoman', captured by a mortal of royal blood, forced into marriage with him, and nearly sacrificed by his hostile court – a story endlessly repeated in theatrical performances which are primarily related to shamanistic practices. It is said in these regions that the 'birdwoman' is of Buddhist origin,[13] and so linked to the birdwomen in the Buddhist Kai Yuan Temple of Quanzhou.

In the fourteenth-century classical Noh Theatre of Japan, two seminal plays are devoted to 'birdwomen', one directly and the other indirectly. In the former, *Hagoromo*, the birdwoman is an angel, surprised by a fisherman who has stolen her feather robe while she is bathing in a pool; in order to retrieve her robe without which she cannot return to Paradise, she is forced to perform for her thief the 'Dance of the Feather Robe', and the ritual of her robing is given nearly as much importance as the dance itself, to emphasize the indivisibility of ritual from performance.

In the latter, *Yokihi* or *Yang Kuei Fei* (in Chinese), the central figure of the 'birdwoman' is the famous concubine of the Tang Emperor Ming Huang (712–756). The action, as in many Noh plays, takes place after her death and is in the form of a seance in which a necromancer contacts her spirit. This indirect portrayal of her as a birdwoman is indistinguishable in essence from direct shamanistic 'birdwoman' performances in South-East Asia.

In the Chinese theatrical tradition, as indeed in Chinese literature, Yang Kuei Fei is only presented indirectly as the 'birdwoman', but their strong affinity is unmistakable: the Emperor's first glimpse of her is

while she is bathing in a pool;[14] she is referred to by the famous Tang poet Li Po as 'the most beautiful flying swallow' trapped in the palace,[15] as well as by many other bird images;[16] while performing for the Emperor the famous 'Dance of the Feather Robe', she is demanded as a sacrifice by his rebellious troops; and in a seventeenth-century play about her tragedy, *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, by Hung Sheng, she is shown as a victim hanging, almost puppet-like, by a silken cord from a pear tree. This is reminiscent of the famous 'Pear Garden' in the capital Changan, which was the first official base of Chinese theatre founded by her royal lover, Emperor Tang Ming Huang.

In all the stories about the 'birdwoman', east and west, there is a similar pattern of loss followed by a search for the loved one in another world. In this way there has grown around the myth of the 'birdwoman' the cult and ritual of powerful female trance mediums who specialize in communicating with spirits.

Puppets, Jokes, and Exorcism

There is an ironic and extraordinary connection between female trance mediums, sacrificial victims, and puppets in certain areas of the Fujian province, not found in any other part of the world. They are all called by the same term, *ang*, which is the local vernacular of the ideograph *wang*. This is the same character or word used to denote diseased or deformed persons.[17]

The fact that puppets, female trance mediums, and diseased persons were all referred to by the same term reinforced their common sacrificial, exorcistic function. Initially, this activity of communicating with spirits was regarded with such male scepticism that the expression *li teh khan bong* in Min-nan vernacular – meaning 'you are raising up the dead' – is still synonymous with 'you're telling a lie'.

However, throughout China, in current theatrical convention, puppets are placed first, boy actors second, and adult actors last.[18] Though the literacy of puppeteers is an important factor in raising them to the top of the theatrical scale, what is even more crucial is their special efficacy as agents of exorcism in a society where age-old superstitions die hard.

Closely connected with this function of exorcism is the ancient association of the puppet tradition with jesting: as early as the sixth century, puppet shows were known as 'the theatre of Baldy Guo', from the name of a real-life joker who had lost all his hair in an illness.[19] One of the implications behind calling the puppet theatre the joker's theatre is the emphasis on jokes and laughter as part of the infrastructure of exorcism and purification, since the joke, by inverting the accepted order, symbolizes levelling, dissolution, and reunification.[20] As will be seen, the joker in the puppet theatre is a ritual purifier and the patron saint of both puppet and human theatre in Quanzhou, standing for divine jester as well as divine musician.

The two great Tang Emperors who were closely connected with theatre, Ming Huang and Chuang Tsung (923–926), often dressed in the robes of the lowly *chou* or clown to perform with their actors in court. For this and other historical reasons, it is the clown who is chosen to burn incense to the statue of the principal theatre god, believed to be the divine manifestation of either or both emperors. It is held by many scholars that the first actor in Chinese theatre was the jester Meng,[21] and in Chinese puppet circles there is a superstition that should *chou* or clown puppets be accidentally placed at the bottom of the box after a performance, they will find their way to the top.[22]

The great Tang Emperor Ming Huang not only identified himself with the *chou*'s clown role, but also with the image of a string puppet during the twilight years of loneliness after the loss of his beloved concubine. The following poem was ascribed to him:

> They've made an old man,
> Wood-carved string-pulled,
> Chicken-skinned crane-haired
> Like the genuine thing;
> The show over in a flash,
> Loose-ended,
> Once more I am back in this
> Dreamlike human life.[23]

This is poignant on more than one level: before Emperor Ming Huang established the famous 'Pear Garden Academy', initially for musicians and dancers, and later for actors, he had set up in 714 a special academy in his inner palace for puppeteers. More than any other royal patron, he provided the impetus for an exchange of stagecraft between his puppeteers and his actors, and under his patronage the movements of puppets and actors merged to such a degree that even today the term *fan hsien*, 'to reverse the string', is used to describe a mistake on the human stage. [24]

It was ironic that he who had made it possible for the artistry of two different theatrical genres, human and non-human, to overlap saw himself ultimately as indistinguishable from a puppet: highest blurring with lowest, emperor turned puppet in a supreme image of inversion. Arising from this, the ambiguity of puppets being first and last in the Chinese theatrical and social scale is another example of inversion which permeates customs and daily habits.

In Shansi Province, for example, on the fifteenth day of the first moon, it has been traditional since the sixth century for a man dressed as the 'Spring Woman' to go from shop to shop stealing lanterns without being stopped by the shopkeepers. It is believed that the thief in this ritual, known as the 'Spring Lantern Theft', would be cursed and the act of cursing would bring good luck.[25] Similarly, role reversal in Chinese theatre, until the rigid Manchu Edicts of the seventeenth century prohibiting the appearance of women on the stage, was an essential part of this general rite of inversion.

Puppet and Human Theatre in Quanzhou

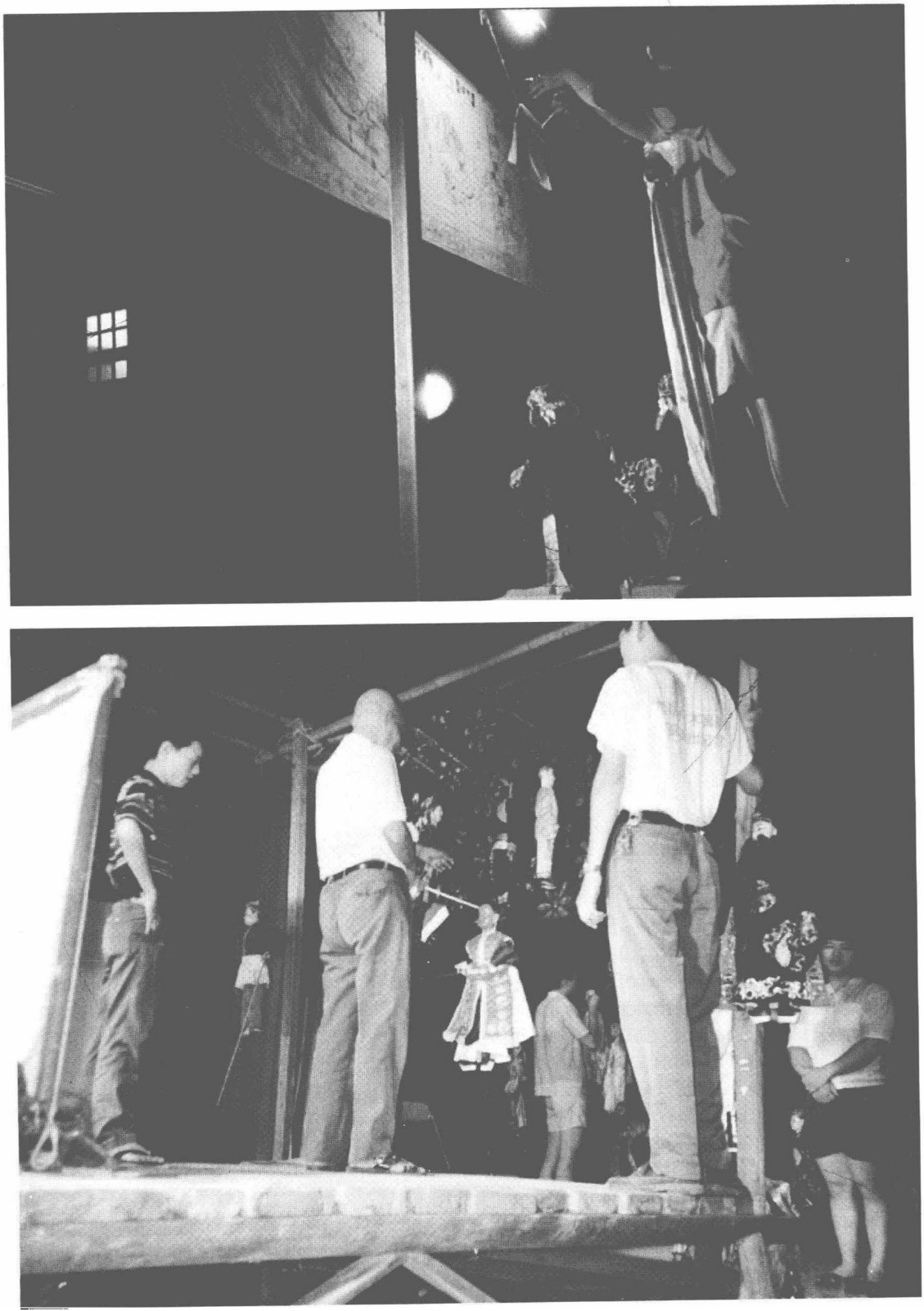
In the summer of 1994 I was awarded a British Academy grant to spend six weeks in Quanzhou in order to compare the stagecraft of its most important string puppet theatre *ka le hi* with that of its principal human theatrical form – *li yuan hsi* or 'Pear Garden Theatre'. Through the Cultural Section of the Chinese Embassy in London, I received an official invitation from the Cultural Bureau in Fujian to document its two chief theatres, which perform predominantly in August, traditionally regarded as the month of *pu du* – a term meaning 'a service for destitute spirits'.

Within days of my arrival I realized that *pu du* was a practice frowned upon by the Chinese hierarchy in Beijing, which held ancestral sacrificial offerings, whether in the form of paper wreaths, horses, or of theatrical performances, to be extremely wasteful. None the less a mammoth five-day puppet performance entitled *Mu Lien Saves His Mother* had been scheduled to take place. This was based on a ninth-century text originally taken from the ancient Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, and the scheduled puppet presentation was considered a most powerful form of exorcism.

The entire range of dramatic devices deployed in the presentation reinforced the principle of inversion, using jokes, abuse, and constant shifts of tone. These ranged from use of the sacred text pinned on a ledge at the stage front (there were altogether four volumes of text to be recited) to coarse improvisations – which made it sometimes impossible to distinguish between the sacred and the profane. Puppeteer and puppet, human and non-human, blended together, as for instance when a puppeteer unceremoniously offered his own shoe from the side of the stage to represent the boat for a journey required by the puppet he was manipulating.

Although the presentation was intended as a hymn to filial piety during a season devoted to honouring ancestors, Mu Lien's mother was subjected to verbal abuse and a range of tortures, conducted with such vigour that it almost seemed necessary for the sanctity of the 'mother' to be inverted for it to be preserved. In a lighter vein, (shifts of tone were frequent) a coquettish hag, jocularly called *Ah Chim* in Min-nan vernacular, wearing a red flower in her hair and carrying a parasol to protect her wrinkled skin from the sun, was mocked for the futility of her efforts.

On a more serious note, but still in a vein of unmistakable banter, the Confucian



Top: puppeteers reciting from the sacred text of *Mu Lien* during a performance. Bottom: the Puppet King is lowered from his presiding position at the conclusion of *Mu Lien*.

subservience of women was expressed in a rhyming couplet:

Cha boh chay ta boh
Ti teng loh kiam ho!

That is: 'If a woman were to sit on a man, Heaven would pour salt rain!' Throughout the performance, in what was said and in the way it was delivered there was a variety of inflections and rhymes which seemed to capture the elemental function and the spirit of banter itself as it might have occurred in early Chinese peasant societies. When groups of marriageable young men and women from different villages met for the first time in the Spring festival, gender confrontation must have taken place in a spirit of courtship and contest patterned on the calls and answering calls of birds.

Banter, in this context, was initially a disguise for shyness; in *Mu Lien* it was a method of inversion and indirect assertion. Then the frequent recurrence of scatological jokes, an essential part of the purification ritual during a month of heavy monsoon rains when pollution was high in an area of poor sanitation, turned *Mu Lien* into a kind of communal laxative, a purging ritual suggesting a turning over in all senses for the purpose of preserving the status quo.

The Puppet King

Before and after the play there was an elaborate ritual of paying homage to the patron deity, in the form of the principal puppet whom the puppeteers addessed as 'Marshal Tian of the Court of Wind and Fire in the Nine Heavens'. In the prelude, sacrifical paper was burnt at the front of the stage and, led by the *'sai hu'* or master puppeteer (aged seventy-four and the last of his kind in Quanzhou), the troupe chanted magical incantations while the 'Puppet King' or Marshal Tian was hoisted up at the back of the stage. From here he presided throughout the performance, both as the most important puppet and as 'puppeteer'. In the postlude, he was lowered from his elevated position and made to perform a dance at the front of the stage by the puppet master, concluding with a deep bow to the audience in a self-evident posture of inversion.

The choice of Marshal Tian as the 'Puppet King' as well as the 'Leader of the Actors' in Emperor Ming Huang's Pear Garden Academy is in itself a significant example of inversion: a common royal patron fostering a close interdependence between the two theatrical forms in a two-way dialogue. Through this, the puppet theatre provided the human theatre with many of its steps and gestures, and some of the movements of the stage actors were found by puppeteers to be useful when they were manipulating puppets.[26] In this context, the traditional story of the origin of the 'Puppet King', so far ignored by western scholars, offers fascinating evidence of his importance:

In the company of his high priest, Emperor Ming Huang went to the moon where he heard many pieces of heavenly music. When he returned to his own palace he was nostalgic for the melodies he had heard. Not long after, Heaven sent him a jade flute but no one could play it. In Quanzhou there was an exceptionally gifted musician. He was the grandson of the Su family but born without a father. As this was considered inauspicious, the baby was abandoned in a field. A tenant of Su's, called Lei, picked up the foundling and looked after him. Four years passed, and one day when Su came to collect rent, he recognized his grandson through an identification mark and took him home. As it was a difficult decision whether the boy should be called Su or Lei, he was named Tian meaning 'field', after the place where he had been abandoned. He was so musical that he could play any musical instrument given to him, but unfortunately he could not speak. One day, while the villagers were sinking a well, they found some ancient musical scores which no one except Tian could decipher. Ming Huang heard about him and summoned him to his capital. He was endowed with the gift of speech by the Emperor and was the only person who could play the jade flute. For this he was promoted to the status of 'Imperial Scholar'. He was only eighteen years old. After his death he became known as 'The Leader of the Pear Garden'. The actors of 'The Pear Garden' or *'Li Yuan'* theatre addressed him as *'Hsiang Kung Yeh'* (honourable young lord) as well as *'Tian tu yuan shuai'* (Marshal Tian). In front of his shrine (*Han Lin Yuan)* they added two words: 'Jade Sound' and, on either side, they wrote this verse: