



The Victorian Marionette Theatre (Studies Theatre Hist & Culture)

By John McCormick

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In this fascinating and colorful book, researcher and performer John McCormick focuses on the marionette world of Victorian Britain between its heyday after 1860 and its waning years from 1895 to 1914. Situating the rich and diverse puppet theatre in the context of entertainment culture, he explores both the aesthetics of these dancing dolls and their sociocultural significance in their life and time. The history of marionette performances is interwoven with live-actor performances and with the entire gamut of annual fairs, portable and permanent theatres, music halls, magic lantern shows, waxworks, panoramas, and sideshows. McCormick has drawn upon advertisements in the Era, an entertainment paper, between the 1860s and World War I, and articles in the World's Fair, a paper for showpeople, in the first fifty years of the twentieth century, as well as interviews with descendants of the marionette showpeople and close examinations of many of the surviving puppets. McCormick begins his study with an exploration of the Victorian marionette theatre in the context of other theatrical events of the day, with proprietors and puppeteers, and with the venues where they performed. He further

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Editorial Review

From [The New Yorker](#)

The historian and puppeteer John McCormick conjures Britain's nineteenth-century marionette theatre, where travelling companies played in rickety wood-and-canvas tents to entertainment-starved hordes who were warmed by open coke fires, ale, and prostitutes. The bankruptcy-prone troupes also sold hot peas, potatoes, and chocolate to supplement the meagre gate and voyaged as far as Probolingo, Java, in search of audiences. Their repertory favored melodrama and farce, and leaned on the special effect: puppet acrobats worked trapezes, dragons spewed fire, skeletons scattered and reassembled under the influence of hidden magnets. In time, the rural spectators, who admired the marionette theatre's realism and novelty, abandoned it for cinema; fortunately, they were replaced by a smaller, avant-garde audience that prized its artifice and antique patina.

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Review

"This meticulously researched, excellently written book is full of interest not only for puppetry enthusiasts but for theatre researchers and historians of the nineteenth century. Nothing is left out—audiences and their perceptions, the 'figure workers' and their managers, repertoire, music and musicians, portable theatres great and small, are all described. The book is a gold mine of revelation and information, to be referred to again and again."

About the Author

A fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, and director of Ireland's first university theatre department, John McCormick took early retirement in 1998 to work full-time as a puppet researcher and performer. His publications include *People's Theatre*, *Popular Theatres of Nineteenth-Century France*, *Dion Boucicault (1820-1890)*, and (with Bennie Pratasik) *Popular Puppet Theatre in Europe, 1800-1914*.

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