

The Puppet Theater

In a part of town, not far from the Bastille, where the chaotic has a certain dignity, where noses in all colors appear to choose their directions self-consciously, where gentle faces smile behind bright windows, where delicious delicatessen are sold in small corner shops, and where the spirit of the people is cheerful and melodious, is a small marionette theater.

The theater of Louis Silhouette in the Rue Oberkampf has been there since more than twenty years, and everybody here knows who he is. He performs himself as a puppeteer almost every night, and he still rejoices when he spots a new face in the audience. But more than his audience, he has bonded with his marionettes. Louis likes two marionettes more than all the others: La Belle, the blond beauty who has six different hats and a silk azure dress, and Moses, the pensioned commissioner who likes doing good works. He plays La Belle with his left hand and Moses, with his right. Louis is so skilled in playing these two characters that his fingers seem to move by themselves when he performs with them. How he could indulge in it!

Every evening his small theater is filled with excited children who don't let him finish his sentence during the introduction only to adore him - unknowingly - a moment later when the puppets have appeared from behind the curtains. It is the moment Louis likes the most, when he enters the puppet booth at the center of the stage. The marionettes are lined up peacefully at their shiny threads, waiting to play. Sometimes Louis wonders why it always fills him with enthusiasm.

After he has a quick glance at the marionettes and their props, he installs himself on the

round cushions in the booth, warms up his fingers and takes the control bar of the heroes of that evening in his hands. This is also the moment when he signals his assistant Ombreux by pulling a long cord, to turn down the light. Usually, the audience is very when Louis gives a short yank to open the curtains. Then the show begins. If the puppeteer sees a chance to let Moses and La Belle play together, he takes it with both hands. He lets them play all possible roles. Moses has played a marketeer, a vagabond, a scrap metal salesman, and even Santa Claus. The audience, after all, loves diversity. La Belle, with her mesmerizing beauty, could be anybody. Moses and La Belle were so versatile that Louis envied them sometimes. After all, he had to play the same role as a host in his theater every time.

When the show begins, Louis is quiet as a mouse. Most of the time Moses takes center stage and makes a funny remark about the man who had just introduced him. Moses knew a lot of witticisms.

"Did you see that his tie isn't straight?" he would say, for example, and gesture with his marionette hand along his chest, from his wooden neck down to his girdle. Louis liked being teased by Moses so he moved his right index finger up and down at exactly the same moment. Moses also tells jokes that were so funny that Louis has to prepare himself for it with a big gulp from his little flask.

One night, after Moses had begun the show as usual with a joke about Louis, and the audience was already laughing and waiting for what would follow, he had to play a chimney sweeper. Louis had carefully put a little ladder on his shoulders and encouraged him with his thumb and index finger. As he noticed that Moses didn't like his performance, he guessed the cause of his doubt was that the audience would recognize him. What would they think of him, the dignified missionary who had to crawl into the puppet chimney to make ends meet? Louis ignored his complaints and ensured the puppet that he wouldn't be recognized. He had put some shoe polish on Moses' face to

perfect the disguise, and sent him on stage with itchy fingers. Moses tried in vain to get the shoe polish off his handsome marionette face but to no avail. The audience saw how he fluttered his hands awkwardly in front of his face and roared with laughter. La Belle, who in this play was a lady of nobility who just wanted her chimney swept, approached him with open arms. Louis was relieved when she did that, and stretched out the fingers of his left hand.

"Good morning, monsieur chimney sweeper, finally you have arrived!"

- "Alright, alright" Moses murmured, still afraid the audience would recognize him.

"Come on in."

Louis had created a cardboard rooftop with a chimney and placed it on the marionette stage, about thirty centimeters to the left of the puppets.

He let the marionettes walk towards it. Once the characters had arrived at the roof, the chimney sweeper positioned his ladder while Louis measured the distance between his thumb and index finger. While La Belle was powdering her nose next to the ladder, Moses climbed up. At that moment, Louis twitched his middle finger and the pretending chimney sweeper looked down. Louis was afraid that Moses was afraid of heights. His fingers began to shake as the ladder fell down. The audience cheered. The heavy ladder knocked down La Belle while Moses managed to hold on to the roof. Like Louis had predicted, he slipped and fell into the chimney. The audience roared. Louis extended his right pinky. Moses yelled

"Fire! The fire is still burning!"

The audience went crazy. Louis quickly lit a match and following the script carefully scorched the seam of Moses' chimney sweeper uniform before sending Moses and La Belle back on stage.

"Thank god" said the duchess with relief, "I forgot that the butler lit the fireplace."

Moses looked at the audience with a foolish smile that made Louis turn his wrist, but they had already taken sides with the lady of nobility. Moses was overcome with a

sadness that affected Louis as well.

A part of the seam of his chimney sweeper uniform and his lower leg was burned, so the audience could now see the knotty scar on his wooden legs. A small boy recognized the scar from another play, in which Moses had walked barefoot towards a peculiar sea, and pointed at the helpless marionette.

"Hey! That is Moses! The chimney sweeper is Moses!"

Moses tried to hide behind La Belle. Louis moved his hands nervously but he knew it was over. The marionettes got tangled and he took them down without a word.

Now that Moses was exposed, the audience couldn't hide its disappointment. They felt that they had been played and demanded to see other marionettes perform. Louis brought out all the puppets he had, even old Napoleon, who had caught a lot of dust. Yet, the children still believed it was Moses.

"Take off your clothes!" they would shout in unison, "you move just like Moses!"

All the shows now revolved around trying to expose poor Moses. The children were very demanding and refused to watch the show if the puppets didn't remove their clothes. Louis felt that the marionette's dignity was at stake and refused. Instead, he finished the play in front of a resentful audience. Moses himself meanwhile was most of the time resting because the damage of his burn hadn't been repaired yet. Neither La Belle nor Louis could change anything about the situation. There was hardly any applause and the children who did clap were doing it out of habit. After a performance, Louis would sit alone for hours in his little theater and whimper.

His melancholy tainted the marionettes. The muscles in his fingers didn't obey him, the strings of his marionettes were slack. Each night, the puppets gave the audience less joy. The children thought that all the puppets were Moses in disguise, and that all the stories were fake. They began to hate the puppets. Each performance had fewer visitors than the

previous one, and Louis became very discouraged. On a gloomy day Louis and his marionettes were performing in front of an empty theater.

On that day, Louis crawled out of the puppet booth, went backstage and switched on all the lights. Then he laid Moses and La Belle next to each other and sat down in the bright hall, his elbows on his knees and his fingers entangled. Twenty years, he sobbed. His hands moved but Moses and La Belle were no longer attached to him.

"What should I do now?" Louis wailed. Moses and La Belle kept silent. He couldn't ask them anything. The silence in his theater was no longer the sacred, spellbinding silence that precedes a wonderful play. It was a dry mustiness that sucked all hope out of Louis. Louis shook his head and went outside, his hands in his pockets.

For a long time he walked along the Seine, nodded faintly at some known faces and smiled at the musicians on a bridge. It was near the Rue Mouffetard that Louis got an epiphany. He felt the same drowsiness and weakness as his marionettes, so why should the reason for his sensations be different?

He started to take larger steps because he suddenly knew what failed him: a strong hand. Of course not a human hand, but a giant hand, that would let him move freely and vigorously, a giant floating hand above him that would play his strings. Taken into account his own size, Louis estimated that the hand should be a few meters tall and probably float in the air. The giant hand would hold an enormous control bar to play him, but that was none of his business. Because Louis didn't know any store for giant hands, he decided to stick an advertisement to all the streetlights in central Paris:

Cherche une main énorme (qu'elle me conduise)

Tel: 86867575

A few days passed before Louis was called by a man who could deliver such a hand. After he had convinced himself that it was a serious offer, he agreed. The man asked for his weight and length and went through a number of formalities. When he hung up the phone, Louis was gleaming with hope for a new, dignified life.

For safety reasons, the hand would be attached to him on a hill outside of Paris. He had taken the RER in the early morning and stood on the hill, waiting for his hand. After a quarter of an hour the man appeared. He was poorly clad and looked rather unfriendly as he pulled a handcart up the hill. Louis welcomed the man with a nod and attempted to shake his hand before handing him over the agreed amount. The man nodded back and began to put leather straps around his ankles, elbows and chest, to which he attached strong cords. Without saying another word, he took a contraption out of his handcart and started to inflate it with an electric pump. Louis stared hazily at the thing as it slowly began to take on the shape of a hand. He felt happy and his legs and arms began to tingle with excitement for the moment that the hand would take his control bar. The hand got bigger and bigger and eventually began to float. It swayed back and forth in the air against the backdrop of the metropolis. The cords attached to Louis' limbs tightened and slowly his arms began to move. He was happy like a child. That is how Moses must have felt when he would go on stage! This is what it must have felt to entangle oneself in delightfully misunderstandings with La Belle!

Suddenly, Louis felt a fierce yank at his arms and when he realized what was happening he was already several meters above the ground.

Underneath him the man with the handcart disappeared from the scene without looking back. He had become the victim of a ruthless criminal. Louis tried to scream but he was gasping for breath. His hand quickly gained altitude and began pulling the strings. Louis hung helplessly at his cords and the giant hand had decided to float back to Paris.

The puppeteer felt cold and melancholic. Underneath him he recognized the geography of his city, the Eiffel Tower, Montmartre. He flew over the Moulin Rouge and imagined how the people down there pointed at him. He became overwhelmed by a feeling of despondency. Cold and hot air blew through his clothing that alternately bulged like a balloonfish and glued to his body. Louis felt how he was played by the gigantic hand, and in vain he tried to withstand or at least understand the tearing at the cords. Helpless he flew high over the city, scaring the birds. The cream white clouds further troubled his mind as he flew over the thick cobweb of Hausmann's boulevards far below.

Louis was jealous of his favorite marionette, who had always known so perfectly what Louis' intentions were, whether he was a missionary, a chimney sweeper, a small prince, or a mercenary in Algeria. He moved his own fingers and tried to remember how Moses and the others walked on the stage. Meanwhile, the enormous hand kept rising. Louis didn't know what the giant hand's intentions were so he let himself and his limbs be pulled in all directions with indifference. The high air dazed Louis and suddenly made him remember something important.

After the last show, when the audience consisted of only a few people who neither smiled nor cried, and afterwards left the theater grudgingly, he had changed Moses' clothes too roughly, and in the process a button had come off his jacket. Louis felt a strong and not unpleasant responsibility. He had to go back to his theater.

Without looking down, he slid his right arm out of the strap and pulled at the cord that had been attached to it. Above him he saw how the index finger of the giant hand was bent, and he also felt how he lost a little bit of height. Encouraged, he began to pull the other cords and observed, with a certain delight, that the giant hand above him began to make the movements that were so familiar to him, the movements he had made himself for Moses and the others. It was as if the giant hand lived up, as if he was happy with Louis' efforts to take control. The giant hand moved exactly as Louis indicated. Such a

marvelous invention, Louis thought. I have to tell Moses about this. His hand is often indecisive as well.

Below, Louis saw the Bastille and the majestic Père Lachaise cemetery. He was close to his destination. The giant hand jumped with his fingers, swiped his thumbs alongside, turned and swirled, raised his pinkie as a rudder at a slight angle upwards, dribbled with ring and index finger through the air while Louis pulled at his cords as they gently descended on the city. The hand obeyed Louis without hesitation. They approached the little theater in the Rue Oberkampf. The streets were full of people pointing to the sky.

"He is coming down!" the people shouted.

There were camera crews, thousands of curious bystanders waited to see how Louis would land, there were traffic jams and a famous madame who had fainted in the enthusiastic crowd was carried away on a stretcher. Louis gave a few more powerful jerks at the cords until he felt that his feet stood on something. He had landed on the roof of his own theater. The crowd cheered and applauded him. Behind him the enormous hand landed softly. A tall man appeared on the roof. He had used a construction ladder and wanted to ask Louis a few questions. The man wanted to know if Louis was an experienced stunt pilot, if the giant hand symbolized something, and how difficult it was to control. The man didn't stop his avalanche of questions and soon other ladders appeared. Photographers, journalists, doctors, school teachers, and curious passersby swarmed on the roof of Louis's small theater.

"Monsieur Silhouet", said an experienced reporter.

- "Please smile into the camera" another reporter interrupted the first one while setting up his equipment. Louis shook his head and smiled. He took his time to remove the cords from the giant hand and told the news reporters, who were running wild, to be

calm.

"Everything that you want to know about my flight, about the giant hand and the air above Paris you will hear tonight, here in this theater. It will be told by my best friend Moses. You are all very welcome to be in the audience. Tonight will be a very special night because the grown-ups are allowed in the theater. If you will excuse me now, I have to repair my friend's jacket."

* * *