

Borderlands

Performative Acts Across Language,
Culture and Media

Eva Ulrike Pirker, Kathrin Hettrich & Leslie Fried (eds.)

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar



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Herausgegeben von hhu books,
Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Düsseldorf 2022.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24336/hhhubooks.41>

ISBN: 978-3-942412-07-0

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Titelbild: [iStock.com/Litay](https://www.istock.com/Litay)

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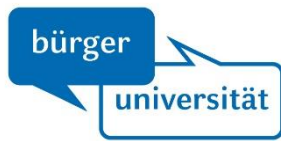
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Danksagung



Die vorliegende Publikation, die ihr vorausgehenden Diskussionen und Recherchearbeiten wurden durch das Förderformat »Bürgeruniversität in der Lehre« der Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf ermöglicht.



Die Podcasts zur Publikation wurden durch den E-Learning Förderfonds der HHU Düsseldorf ermöglicht. Die Podcasts sind abrufbar über den [Anglophone Literary Studies Blog](#) des Instituts für Anglistik und Amerikanistik sowie über [Spotify](#).

Für das Lektorat der Beiträge danken wir Janna Krampe.

Kathrin Hettrich & Leslie Fried

Adapting *Life & Times of Michael K*: J. M. Coetzee's Novel and the Handspring Puppet Company

[Leslie Fried:] A man and a wooden puppet are sitting next to each other on a bench. The puppet is about half the size of the man. The man pulls out a sandwich and hands it to the puppet. From behind the puppet, one of three puppeteers reaches for the sandwich and takes a bite. He passes it on to his colleague, who also takes a bite and hands it to the third puppeteer, who finishes it. After all, puppets do not eat sandwiches. The three men then proceed with moving the puppet together, one of them lending his voice to the puppet character, saying the words which the latter is supposedly saying. The other two are moving different parts of the wooden body. The man on the bench and the puppet go on with their conversation as if nothing had happened.

[Kathrin Hettrich:] This is quite the unusual scene for the eyes of a German theatre audience. On the 17th of June 2021, the theatre adaptation of J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* premiered in Cape Town, South Africa, and was available for German and international audiences via a livestream provided by Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus and Festival Theater der Welt. In this podcast, we want to talk about this unique production. We began working on this podcast in the context of the seminar »Borderlands: Performative Acts Across Language, Culture and Media« at the Department of English and American studies of Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf.

[LF:] In the seminar, we explored different kinds of boundaries and the possibility of their crossing, but also the ways in which some artworks travel from medium to medium, in the case of Michael K: from novel to a very specific kind of stage adaptation. We read Coetzee's novel, which was published in 1983, and we watched the premiere of the stage adaptation in South Africa. We also had the chance to talk to some people involved in the production both in South Africa and Germany. For our podcast specifically, we talked to Felicitas Zürcher, who was involved in the staging of the play and part of the cooperation of the two theatre companies.

But first: What is *Life & Times of Michael K* about? The novel tells the story of Michael, a social outcast, who struggles through life in a South Africa that is torn apart by a civil war. He lives in Cape Town and stays with his sick mother, who wants to return to the farm she grew up on one last time. On their tedious journey, Michael's mother dies, and he is left alone to deal with the uncertainties of life and the conditions of the war.

To answer some questions about the adaptation of the play and its narrative techniques, we talked to Felicitas Zürcher. She was the head dramaturg at Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus when the cooperation with the South African director Lara Foot, the Handspring Puppet Company, and Festival Theater der Welt was in the planning

stages for the festival in 2020. However, this festival was cancelled in the end due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A hybrid version was realized in 2021 and involved the performance of *Michael K*, adapted and adjusted to the new situation.

The Challenges of Adapting *Life & Times of Michael K* for the Stage

We first talked about the specific challenges in adapting this particular novel for the stage. *Life & Times of Michael K* by Lara Foot and the Handspring Puppet Company is a mix of puppet theatre on the one hand and narrative theatre on the other. The reasons for choosing these particular conventions lie partially in the features of the novel itself.

Even though, according to our interviewee Felicitas Zürcher, any text—even a phone book—could theoretically be adapted for the stage and turned into a proper theatre play, it is also true that some literary features call for specific modes of transfer.

There are novels and texts with lots of dialogue, so you can focus on that when you are doing an adaptation for the stage. [...] *Michael K* has very little dialogue, [...] which means that you need other ideas for the transfer from text to stage. From an early point on, Lara Foot's idea has been to make use of an old tradition of narrative theatre in South Africa, where characters on stage narrate stories for the audience.¹

In a text in which dialogue and the verbal interactions between characters play a minor role, one must also focus more on the things that happen, on actual events, Felicitas Zürcher says.

The use of puppets raises many questions. Choosing it was, according to Felicitas Zürcher, inspired partly by pragmatic considerations. At first, the distinct description and characterization of the protagonist *Michael K* in the novel had to be taken into account:

It was clear from the start that the character of Michael K could not just be played by any actor, because Michael K is characterized in such a specific way. He is defined by the fact that he belongs to a specific community in South Africa, by his disfigurement, and by the way in which society treats him. No matter where he goes, he always remains a complete outsider, an outcast, so it was obvious that we couldn't just pick someone from the cast. That we needed to come up with something special to present this special character.²

One of the passages from the novel that characterize Michael K is the following: »The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip. The lip curled like a snail's foot, the left nostril gaped.«³

Here, the one physical feature that marks Michael K is described. As it is the first thing we learn about the protagonist, right in the beginning of the novel, it is crucial

for the way we imagine the character. But even more importantly, this physical feature shapes Michael K's experience in the world, the encounters he has with people. His hare lip strongly influences the way they interact with him.

Should Michael K therefore be represented by a puppet? A puppet which the puppeteer can form freely according to a specific description? Basil Jones, one of the founders of the Handspring Puppet Company, emphasizes that the somewhat pragmatic reason of solving the problem to find an actor who fits the physical description of Michael K was by far not the only motivation for the use of puppets:

Michael K has a severe hare lip, so it's easier to make a puppet with a hare lip than make a prosthetic hare lip for an actor. But that's not the real reason why we're doing Michael K as a puppet play; it's something more than that. The puppet is a prosthesis of the self – like an artificial limb. I think we feel that only a prosthesis can truly represent an individual as dignified, otherworldly, and complex as the character of Michael K that Coetzee has invented.⁴

We think that the use of a puppet furthermore emphasizes the distance between audience and character while on the other hand opening up a space for imagination, projection and interpretation. Felizitas Zürcher describes it as follows:

It's basically what is called the magic moment in theatre. Even though you know and see that it is a puppet, you develop a great deal of empathy. In my opinion, this worked extremely well with *Michael K*. Probably it is precisely because he is impersonated by a puppet, that people feel so connected to him, because the puppet creates a certain distance, and this distance can then be overcome by using your own imagination in that magic moment.

The cards are on the table, everything is displayed openly, as if this was theatre in its original state. You see the puppet players, you see that somebody else is talking, not the puppet, but you still believe it. [...] It is almost like a small miracle, every time. For me, this also addresses the very art of theatre on so many levels.⁵

In the interview, Zürcher also remembers the scene in which the puppet players share a sandwich, the section in the novel when Michael K meets an empathetic stranger who offers him food because Michael is obviously craving something to eat.

The body height is not the same: Michael K is much smaller than the actors, but it still works. It was brilliant, for instance, in that scene where the man offers Michael his sandwich: the three puppet players, or rather the two puppet players and the actor who is speaking Michael K's part, eat that sandwich together. I find that a great opportunity when working with puppets, that you can display the means, the technique openly, but the disclosure will not ruin the illusion.⁶

Maybe it is exactly because the puppet is so obviously not »real« or »realistic« that the audience members need to engage with it more actively, use their own imagination, give in to the illusion, and thereby reinforce the »agreement« between audience and performers, the so-called fictional pact.

Another interesting aspect concerning the use of puppets is the fact that only some of the characters in *Life & Times of Michael K* are »played« by puppets: Michael, his mother, three children, and a goat which Michael hunts down in order to eat it. All other figures are played by human actors. The production of one puppet takes at least two months. In the case of Michael K, the puppeteers at Hand-spring Puppet Company made use of the extra time they had after the premiere was postponed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic and proceeded with working on the puppets. The forced pandemic break enabled them to give the puppets that were representing the characters of Michael K and his mother even more detail.



Michael K with three children. *Life & Times of Michael K* dir. Lara Foot (2021)

© Sophia MacPherson

But the lengthy production process was not the reason why only some of the characters were turned into puppets. Rather, according to Felicitas Zürcher, the intention was to turn those into puppets whose relationship to Michael K is in a way distinct, the characters with whom he is on the same level, the characters that he feels connected to in a way that differs from the way he relates to the rest of the world, and who relate to him in a way that is different from how the rest of the world does. In one scene, Michael kills a goat as he is hungry but finds that he is unable to eat it because he feels some kind of connection to the animal. Hence, it makes sense that the goat should – like Michael K – be represented by a puppet.

Which characters are played by puppets, then, has been determined by the way the protagonist relates to them. The use of puppets therefore also serves the purpose of displaying a web of relations, or more precisely, Michael K's relationships with the animate world and how he perceives them.

The performance has triggered our interest in the very specific art and craftsmanship it relies on. We wanted to know more about the Handspring Puppet Company, its history and meaning.

The History of the Handspring Puppet Company

[KH:] One of the puppeteers who could be seen on stage in the production was Craig Leo. He and the designer of the puppets, Adrian Kohler, are both known to be among the world's best in their fields, which is why it is safe to say that *Life & Times of Michael K* presented »world-class puppet theatre.« In Germany, and many other contexts, puppet theatre for adults is not well-known as an art form. So, it is worth taking a brief look at the history of puppetry in South Africa and the history of the Handspring Puppet Company.

In South Africa, puppetry is a thriving contemporary art form which can be seen in theatre, in television, even in education and therapy formats.

Looking at the history of puppetry in South Africa, many articulated figures in museums show that puppetry predates colonial influence. However, according to the Handspring Puppet Company's website, »cross pollination between European, African and Eastern forms of puppetry have contributed [...] to much more complex interdisciplinary performance styles that define South African puppetry in the 21st century.«⁷

In 1981, a group of art students founded the Handspring Puppet Company, and the company has since then been growing under the leadership of Artistic Director Adrian Kohler and Executive Producer Basil Jones. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, they began to work with directors of regular stage theatre. Such works as *Faustus in Africa*, and *Ubu and the Truth Commission* in collaboration with artist William Kentridge have been touring internationally since 1991.

The most noteworthy feature of the company's work—and not only a feature of the production of *Life & Times of Michael K*—is the fact that the puppeteers are very visible on stage. They are not trying to blend into the background



Michael K, his mother, and their puppeteers. *Life & Times of Michael K* dir. Lara Foot (2021) © Sandra Then

by wearing black clothes, for instance, as is often the case.

The South-African author, literary scholar and director Jane Taylor has been studying puppet theatre for several years and has written two plays for the Handspring Puppet Company. She describes the company's style as a »somewhat unorthodox interpretation of Japanese Bunraku puppetry.«⁸ In Bunraku, the puppeteers are visible on stage, yet often concealed by wearing black and having a cloth cover their faces.

South African puppetry hence shows a different and complex approach to representation and subjectivity on stage.

So, why did this style become so popular in South Africa from the 1980s onwards? Jane Taylor draws attention to the fact that in the 1980s, the divisive system of Apartheid was at its height in South Africa; resistance movements within the country did not subscribe to the bourgeois understanding of individualism that they saw reflected in the ways of life of the white ruling classes. Instead, they modelled concepts of selfhood along collectivist lines.⁹

When they started out, the members of the Handspring Puppet Company soon realized what could be gained by highlighting the collectivity of the subject by actually keeping the puppeteers visible on stage. According to Jane Taylor, it shows that there is an »all but invisible serving class that maintains and sustains the life force of the puppets, as well as the figures that they embody.«¹⁰ In the political climate in the South-Africa of the 1980s, the audience welcomed this political and aesthetic choice that effectively emphasized that this serving class does indeed exist.

Apart from its theatre productions, the Handspring Puppet Company is also especially known for its giant puppets. A recent project, *The Walk*, for instance, is an ongoing public art event in which the giant puppet of a refugee girl walks 8,000 kilometres in total from the Turkey-Syria border through Europe to the UK—a project which has been called »one of the most ambitious live artworks ever staged.«¹¹

The Company's Aesthetics/Politics and *Life & Times of Michael K*

Knowing about the company's approach to subjectivity and representation allows us to see the production and the interpretation of the figure of Michael K in a new light.

First of all, Jane Taylor calls attention to the fact that in Western culture and philosophical tradition there is this ideal of radical agency, of ideal autonomy. This makes the idea that someone is being a puppet something that is deeply negative. Our perception of the play hence may be somewhat biased. In a review of the play, Sascha Westphal, a German journalist reviewing the play after its streaming at Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, wrote, for instance, that a puppet is ideal for the representation of Michael K because he is an outcast, a plaything, someone who does not have control over what happens to him.¹² However, we think that there is more to it.

In the novel, Michael K remains this somewhat obscure, mysterious figure. Especially in the second section of the novel, we only learn what happens to him through the perspective of a medical officer at a work camp, where Michael is at one point being detained. As Jane Taylor puts it, »puppets [, too,] reaffirm the profoundly mediated nature of human subjectivity.«¹³

At the beginning of the play, the puppet of Michael K is carried onto the stage wrapped in a blanket. As the figure of Michael emerges from the blanket, the human characters and the puppeteers breathe with him, like a chorus. This thing, the puppet, is becoming a being through the triad of human performers, inanimate object and audience—via the fictional pact.

Throughout the play, the puppeteers are always clearly visible. In a discussion of another play staged by the Handspring Puppet Company, called *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, Jane Taylor states, »It is through the intense gaze into the face of the puppet that the audience is led (via the puppeteer) back into the puppet.«¹⁴ In the staging of *Life & Times of Michael K* we saw streamed via Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, now, one puppeteer, the one who mainly voiced Michael K, indeed gazed intensely into the puppet's face. The other puppeteer who operated Michael's upper body, however, always looked straight ahead. This mirrors the directionality of our understanding of the self—we understand ourselves by looking inward and outward at the same time.

There is one scene in which Michael K fights off several strangers who bully him. The puppeteer who mainly voices Michael leaves the puppet, goes to the centre of the stage and engages in a physical fight with the bullies who are played by human actors. Is Michael now unable to fend for himself? Or is this a representation—facilitated by the physical limits of the puppet—of the way one characteristic of his multifaceted being dominates in this fight?

[LF:] In this podcast, we took a closer look at an unusual adaptation of J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* for the stage. The play staged by Lara Foot and the Handspring Puppet Company raised general questions about the adaptability of the work, the art of theatre itself and about enactments, or embodiments, of subjectivity and collectivity. We were lucky to have had the chance to speak to Felicitas Zürcher of Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, who gave us valuable insights into her work and her understanding of this complex stage production. We realized that puppetry is an underappreciated art form here in Germany and found out how the use of puppets in the play opened up paths to a deeper understanding of *Life & Times of Michael K*. And yet, we may never be able to fully grasp all there is to this fascinating work and its protagonist.

NOTES

¹ Felicitas Zürcher, Interview with Leslie Fried, »Warum muss das jetzt auf die Bühne?« Interview mit Felicitas Zürcher über ihre Arbeit als Dramaturgin und *Life & Times of Michael K*,« *Borderlands: Performative Acts across Language, Culture and Media*. (Düsseldorf: hhu books, 2021), 53. Translation ours.

² *Ibid.*, 52f.

³ J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), 3.

⁴ Basil Jones & Adrian Kohler, Interview with Lindsay Kruger, »BWW Interview: Bringing Award-Winning Novel to Life Through Puppetry in LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K,« *Broadway World South Africa*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/south-africa/article/BWW-Interview-Bringing-Award-Winning-Novel-to-Life-Through-Puppetry-in-LIFE-AND-TIMES-OF-MICHAEL-K-20210520>. Access 15/12/2021.

⁵ Zürcher, »Warum muss das jetzt auf die Bühne?« 55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷ »Puppetry in South Africa circa 1800-1969,« Handspring Puppet Company, <http://www.handspringpuppet.co.za/south-african-puppetry/puppetry-in-south-africa-circa-1800s-1969/>. Access 16/08/2021.

⁸ Jane Taylor, »The »As-If« Reality of Puppet Theatre,« *The Puppet Show*, eds. Carin Kuoni & Ingrid Schaffner (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2008), 59.

⁹ Jane Taylor, 2011, »Handspring Puppet Company and the Dispersed Body.« Paper presented at Puppetry and Post-Dramatic Performance: An International Conference on Performing Objects in the 21st Century, Connecticut, University of Connecticut, April 2011, 5, <http://www.handspringpuppet.co.za/our-work/talks-and-publications/the-dispersed-body/>. Access 15/12/2021.

¹⁰ Taylor, »Dispersed Body,« 9.

¹¹ Claire Armitstead, »Meet Little Amal, the Puppet Girl Refugee About to Walk 8,000km,« *The Guardian*, July 4, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jul/04/meet-little-amal-the-puppet-girl-refugee-about-to-walk-8000km>. Access 15/12/2021.

¹² Sascha Westphal, »Durch ein zerrissenes Land,« *Nachtkritik*, June 17, 2021, https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19676:leben-und-zeit-des-michael-k-theater-der-welt-lara-foots-adaption-von-j-m-coetzees-roman-als-liveuebertragung-von-kapstadt-nach-duesseldorf&catid=38:die-nachtkritik-k&Itemid=40. Access 15/12/2021.

¹³ Taylor, »Reality,« 53.

¹⁴ Taylor, »Reality,« 59.

Kathrin Hettrich studied Literary Translation at HHU Düsseldorf and translates from English into German. She holds a bachelor's degree in English and American studies and Communication and Media Science from HHU Düsseldorf. She has been responsible for coordinating the programme of guest lectures »Staging Worl(d)s, Embodiments: Performance and Translation.«

Leslie Fried is a graduate student of Literary Translation (English and Spanish) at HHU Düsseldorf. She earned her B.A. in Social and Cultural Anthropology and Comparative Literature at Freie Universität Berlin. She has been responsible for facilitating the podcasts emerging as part of the project *Borderlands: Performative Acts across Language, Culture and Media*.

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