

Puppet with a Soul

MURIEL WHITAKER AND JETSKE IRONSIDE

Petrouchka, Elizabeth Cleaver. Illus. by the author. Macmillan of Canada, 1980. 16 pp. \$12.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-7705-1877-X.

The distinguished Canadian illustrator, Elizabeth Cleaver, has chosen as the subject of this picture storybook the Russian ballet "Petrouchka" in order to "rediscover for myself images and a variety of feelings" and "integrate my love for the magic of the puppet theatre, ballet, music, costume and stage design."¹ Set to the music of Igor Stravinsky (who was also responsible for the story), the ballet was first performed by Diaghilev's Ballet Russes in Paris, June 12, 1911, with costumes and stage designs by Alexandre Benois. The chief characters are the ballerina, a stupid temptress; the puppet master, an evil oppressor; the Moor, a powerfully aggressive figure to whom the ballerina is attracted, and Petrouchka, a clown who loves the ballerina but is rejected. Petrouchka was danced by the legendary Nijinsky whose costume emphasised a dehumanised appearance that complemented grotesque make-up and stilted movements. The difficulty of the part lies in the dancer's need to convey a range of emotions (love, jealousy, fear, loneliness, sorrow, humiliation, dignity, revolt) while remaining a puppet. Critical responses revealed such widespread confusion about the ballet's meaning that Stravinsky was moved to explain his intentions:

For me the piece had the character of a burlesque for piano and orchestra . . . the real subject was the droll, ugly, sentimental, shifting personage who was always in an explosion of revolt.²

While complexities of character and plot can be realised in ballet by means of music, choreography, costume, and the dancers' physical and dramatic skills, it is much more difficult to achieve a corresponding effect through the illustrations and text of a picture book. Cleaver has been only partially successful.

Diaghilev was the inventor of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the fusion of painting, choreography, dancing, and music into one art form. Similarly, Cleaver has combined several techniques - monoprint, lino print, cut and torn paper, and frottage - into a collage which recreates aspects of the source. The first six pages correspond to the ballet's Act I; the animation of a Shrovetide Fair held during the Russian winter is

expressed through a multitude of forms and colours. Act II focuses on the puppet stage. Against a cool blue background (pp. 7-11), the puppets develop their love-jealousy relationship while the orange puppet master blends into the orange-red frame of his puppet theatre (see figure 1). Pages 12 to 15 depict Petrouchka's "world" – a narrow

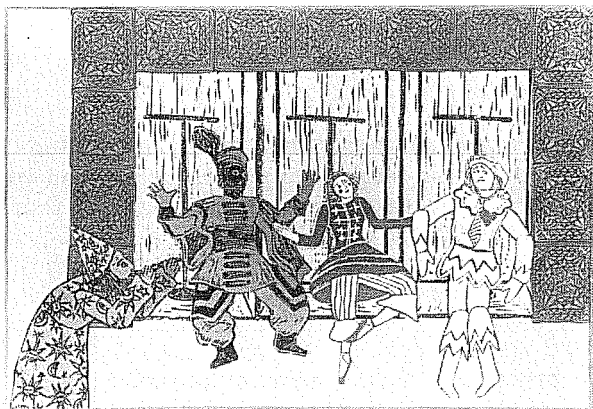


Figure 1

cell (painted dark blue)³ enlarged by schematic stars and mountains drawn on the walls. The orange portrait of the puppet master with its hypnotic eyes presumably reminds Petrouchka that he is subject to the master's spell, while the colour link between the master and the ballerina suggests that she, too, is evil. Pages 16 to 19 show the elegant room of the Moor (see figure 2). The set's exotic blue and green plants



Figure 2

on a red background overpower the muted orange of the silly ballerina and the purple of the Moor; the dazzling background foliage optically moves forward while the purple and orange recede with a consequent diminishment of character and action. The Moor's coconut loses its identity, becoming a black hole in the red background. Bursting in upon the flirtation scene, Petrouchka in his white costume is powerfully silhouetted against the garish background. But the ominous mood which should be created by the Moor's attack is frustrated by the fact that his scimitar is lost in the obtrusive foliage.

The story ends with a return to the street where the fair is being held. The dominance of red and purple symbolises the violent action as the Moor kills Petrouchka (see figure 3). Unfortunately, the impact

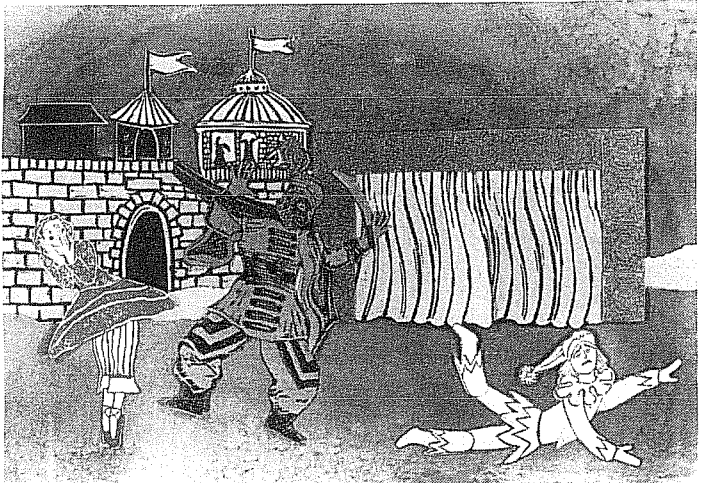


Figure 3

of the Moor as an evil character is diminished because his colour fuses optically with that of the set. The final illustrations lack the strong delineation required by the dramatic climax. In the original ballet production, the soul or ghost of Petrouchka was illuminated in green (the colour of hope) on top of the puppet theatre while his body was dragged away below. Cleaver's adoption of a similar colour differentiation might have enhanced a child's understanding of the conclusion.

The confusions created in the illustrations by a sometimes inappropriate choice of colours and by disproportionate formal relationships are not always clarified by the text. In some cases, the text does not correspond closely to the matching illustration. For example, an illustration of Petrouchka lying on the floor of his cell is paired with:

The dance was over. The puppet master kicked Petrouchka into his bare, narrow room. Left alone, the poor puppet rose to his feet and tried to find a way out.

There are also inconsistencies in verbal style. Some sentences use the simple structures and restricted vocabulary that are thought appropriate for younger children. Others present unfamiliar words with meanings that might not be deduced from the verbal or visual context – “Shrovetide,” “pirouette,” “competition,” “pointes,” “rigid,” “despair,” “idly,” “elegant,” and “scimitar,” for example. Grace, correct structure and euphony are often lacking:

The ballerina danced to the music she made herself on the trumpet, and found that she liked to please the Moor.

As the Moor began to flirt with her, Petrouchka became very jealous. This made the puppet master very angry because this was not a part of the dance.

In the re-tellings of Canadian myths and folktales which Cleaver has illustrated,⁴ there are clear-cut contrasts between good and evil. The characters are easily classified, their motives easily ascertained. The forms and colours of the illustrations complement the development of plot, character, and mood. In the ballet “Petrouchka,” however, there are many problems. The central character is complex and contradictory. The characters are not recognisably Russian but the setting is. The puppet body is controlled by a master while the puppet soul struggles for independence. One comes to the conclusion that “Petrouchka” is too sophisticated a subject for a children’s picture book. This particular work is more likely to be a collector’s item than a nursery favourite.

NOTES

¹Cleaver has discussed her work in “The Visual Artist and the Creative Process in Picture Books,” *Canadian Children’s Literature* 4 (1976), pp. 71-79. Her interest in puppetry is the subject of “Fantasy and Transformation in Shadow Puppetry,” *Canadian Children’s Literature* 15 and 16 (1980), pp. 67-79.

²Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (New York, 1978), p. 67.

³Benois’ originally stage sets featured an entirely black decor.

⁴Cf. *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham* (1969), *How Summer Came to Canada* (1969), *The Miraculous Hind* (1973), *The Loon's Necklace* (1977), *The Fire Stealer* (1979), *The Witch of the North* (1975).

Muriel Whitaker teaches Middle English literature at the University of Alberta. A recent study leave has been devoted to research on medieval iconography. Jetske Ironside teaches art history courses in the University of Alberta's Department of Art and Design. As author and illustrator respectively, they co-operated in producing a children's picture book, Pernilla in the Perilous Forest (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1979).