



TINY NINJA SHAKESPEARE

Erika T. Lin

Opera glasses are distributed to audience members as they file into the theatre. The show they are about to see—Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*—is the product of an ensemble cast. The company’s motto? “There are no small parts, only small actors.” The lights dim. The action begins. And then it’s clear that the actors are quite small indeed. About an inch tall, to be exact.

The Bard’s greatest works take on an unexpected twist when staged by Tiny Ninja Theater, the creative brain-child of puppeteer Dov Weinstein whose ingenious use of cheap, plastic ninja figurines garnered rave reviews at the 2000 New York Fringe Festival. Weinstein has since performed at festivals world-wide, from the Edinburgh Fringe to the Piccolo Spoleto. His innovative productions were even recently included in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Complete Works Festival. “It was the first time I’ve ever played in England proper,” Weinstein says. “I was afraid that ‘Uppity American Toy Pusher Thinks He’s Better Than the Bard’ would show up in the newspaper headlines.”

Initially trained as an actor, Weinstein first became interested in Balinese theatre and mask performance, which he studied with Professor John Emigh at Brown University while majoring in Philosophy. After receiving his degree, he performed in the *commedia dell’arte*

tradition in Italy and later in Sweden. “I came to New York,” Weinstein says, “thinking that’s what I wanted to do—group collaborative work, like what comes out of Le Coq. But that didn’t work out at all.”

Then the moment of inspiration struck. “I saw all these little tiny ninjas in vending machines, and I thought, ‘Wow, these guys are so great, and nobody’s doing classical theatre with them.’”

Weinstein’s experience as an actor informs not only his manipulation of the inch-high puppets but also the performance philosophies he brings to Tiny Ninja Theater. I spoke with him recently about his creative processes and goals.

My approach has always been very straightforward.

A lot of it is just problem-solving: “Okay, the text says that this happens, so how does that happen?”

Any director has to deal with those issues. In terms of editing, it’s very story-driven. The ninjas are really good at telling stories; they’re not so good at long monologues. They’re just like any actors: you have to play to their strengths! I once had people from a local rep company come to see *Macbeth*. I was talking to them afterwards, and one of the actors said, “It’s so nice to see all of the actors working together.” Usually when you do *Macbeth*, for the guy who plays Banquo, it’s a play about Banquo, and for the guy who plays Macduff, it’s a play about Macduff. Everyone’s playing his own part so strongly that nobody’s telling the story. When you’re using figures like the ninjas, the story tends to take a more prominent place than it might otherwise. Trying to make it clear who’s talking, where the focus should be, how you move the audience’s attention from one figure to another—that kind of thing becomes more important. The funny thing about puppets and particularly about the tiny ninjas is that there are really only two choices: either you invest in the convention or you don’t. Once you accept the convention, ironically, it’s less distracting if Lady Macbeth is a small plastic figure than it would be if she were a real person. When you have actors, it gets messy, but the ninjas are very clear. They are what they are.

The heightened language and the really big place that Shakespeare has in our culture—to bounce that off of these tiny, almost disposable figures creates a great tension, a great contrast. My hope is that it tends to make the audience hear the play in a new way. Something that’s familiar becomes unfamiliar and then becomes familiar again. I know I’m sounding very “Brechtian theory” here. My intentions, though, are entirely anti-Brechtian. My hope is that this is all just a way to become involved in the characters. A lot of those meta-levels of commentary are entirely in the audience’s hands, and I think that’s where they belong. We had this great experience where I played in Chicago a little while ago at the Shakespeare Theatre at Navy Pier. They have this pre-recorded, canned announcement that they do before every show: “Please turn off all cell phones and beepers. For the safety of the actors, please refrain from using flash photography”—that sort of thing. I didn’t have anything to do with it, but on the first night when they played it, the audience just started cracking up. They saw it as this comment about actors whereas it was actually unintentional on everyone’s part.

Weinstein sometimes takes part in his own productions, blurring the boundary between actor and puppet. Audiences responded so well to his brief “cameo” as the Porter in *Macbeth* that he has explored this approach more fully in recent productions.

At the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, there’s a moment when Romeo goes down into the grave to find Juliet dead. I have this guitar case, and on top of it is the graveyard. When [the figurine representing

Romeo] goes into the grave, I open up the case, and everyone disappears behind it including me. Then when I come up, I’m holding a little red jewelry box, and I open it up slowly and [the figurine representing] Juliet is lying inside it. *I’m* now Romeo; *I’m* delivering Romeo’s lines. When Romeo kills himself, we disappear back under the guitar case, and then come up again with me holding Romeo dead in a cup, which is the cup of poison that he drank. I drink this cup, and then *I’m* Juliet, doing *her* death.

Now in *Hamlet* we’re using live video. I have these two small spy cameras, which I move around, and then these two large projection screens where the images are being projected. A lot of times the figures are hidden, so you see *me* and you see the *projection*, but you don’t necessarily see the figures all the time. There’s a color camera and a black-and-white camera, and the color camera is [the ninja] Hamlet’s point of view. So you often don’t see Hamlet; you see the scene through Hamlet’s eyes. It plays to a much larger house because of the video. *Romeo and Juliet* is very small, about 20-30 people, whereas we play *Hamlet* to 100-200 people. There are scenes where I’ll literally go up into the aisles and present the figures to people so they can see them up close. It becomes a little more about the guy doing the show *Hamlet* rather than “just *Hamlet*.” It wasn’t my intention to begin with, but Hamlet as a character is so self-conscious that it just went that way naturally.

I’ve also started to do a show based around a *mishnah*, which is a piece of Jewish text. I use figures





and objects not only to tell the story itself but also to show how it is that a guy who does puppeteering for a living started learning this material. It plays in Jewish day schools where kids are studying this stuff anyway and also at young adult mixers and synagogues. It's much like Shakespeare in that, if you know the play, it's a very different experience than if you don't. For me personally, it was a way to combine two interests that seem very, very disparate.

When asked for his thoughts on the future of puppetry, Weinstein reflects on changes in its more recent past.

You can imagine what it's like for me at dinner parties. When people find out what I do for a living, it becomes this involved conversation. To me, it's neither surprising nor overwhelmingly interesting that what I do is perform Shakespeare with inch-high plastic ninjas. That seems to me to be a job on par with "garbage man" or "lawyer." In the time that I've been in New York, people have been saying that adult puppetry is getting big, and that's a change you can definitely see. I still get a lot of, "Oh, what is it you do? Oh, for kids?" When I say "for grown-ups," it's not that weird anymore. Ten years ago it was that much weirder.

You can also see a change on Broadway and in other shows that now use puppets. It sounds kind of trite to say, but I think it's true that theatre is still trying to figure out what it's supposed to do with itself now that there are TV and movies. Puppetry is, in a way, one of the answers to that question. There's something fundamentally theatrical about puppets. That isn't true of just another production of *Three Sisters*. Maybe that's one of the reasons puppets are becoming more mainstream. I know it's heresy to say it, but maybe movies really *are* better at telling stories with people. With puppets—well, this is something real that we can do that nobody else can do better. There's something wonderful about the fact that it's really there. Theatre's very ephemeral—you do it and then it's gone—but here you have the physical thing to hold onto.

For more information, go to www.tinyninjatheater.com.



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