

Disrupting Age Stereotypes in Theatre for Young Audiences with Older-Bodied Puppets

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Article abstract

Although expressions of aging and old age differ across other identity categories, they most often yoke aging to notions of deterioration and loss. Young audiences are exposed to this narrative of decline through wide-ranging cultural references in advertising, cartoons, fairy tales, children's books, and theatre. However, various forms of theatre can also reimagine age narratives in positive ways. In this article, Henderson uses close performance analysis, analysis of archival video, and an interview with Vancouver theatre artist Chris McGregor to examine the Vancouver-based TYA puppet plays *The Little Old Man* by Theatre Bagger Arts Society and *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* by Axis Theatre. Both plays share a number of age-related themes and establish nuanced, positive messages about aging, older age, and intergenerational relations. By drawing on Steve Tillis's theory of puppetry and Anne Davis Basting's depth model of aging, Henderson argues that puppets can be used to interrupt negative age stereotypes and hostile age-related narrative tropes, and encourage children to reimagine old age, aging, and relationships with older people in complex and hopeful ways. In the case of these two plays, Henderson contends that they interrupt age stereotypes by portraying children and older characters as having agency, foregrounding positive intergenerational relations, and reimagining decline. They do this, Henderson argues, through their themes, aesthetics and performance styles, and the embodied performances of the handlers in conjunction with their animation of the puppets.

Disrupting Age Stereotypes in Theatre for Young Audiences with Older-Bodied Puppets

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Les expressions du vieillissement et de la vieillesse varient en fonction de plusieurs catégories identitaires, mais le plus souvent, elles sont rattachées à des notions de détérioration et de perte. Les jeunes sont exposés à ce récit du déclin par des références culturelles très variées qui figurent dans la publicité, les dessins animés, les contes de fée, les livres pour enfants et au théâtre. Or, diverses formes de théâtre peuvent réimaginer les récits liés au vieillissement de manière positive. Dans cet article, Julia Henderson présente une analyse détaillée des performances et des vidéos d'archive des pièces *The Little Old Man* de la compagnie Theatre Bagger Arts Society et *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* de la compagnie Axis Theatre, deux spectacles de marionnettes pour jeunes publics présentés à Vancouver, de même qu'un entretien avec l'artiste de théâtre Chris McGregor de Vancouver. Les deux pièces partagent un certain nombre de thèmes liés au vieillissement et transmettent des messages nuancés et positifs sur le vieillissement, la vieillesse et les relations intergénérationnelles. Prenant appui sur les écrits de Steve Tillis sur la marionnette et le modèle d'appui du vieillissement d'Anne Davis Basting, Henderson fait valoir que les marionnettes peuvent aider à mettre fin aux stéréotypes négatifs et aux tropes narratifs hostiles liés au vieillissement et peuvent encourager les enfants à imaginer autrement la vieillesse, le vieillissement et les relations avec les personnes âgées, pour en faire des concepts complexes et pleins d'espoir. En examinant les deux pièces à l'étude, Henderson soutient qu'elles rompent avec les stéréotypes liés au vieillissement en montrant des enfants et des personnages plus âgés qui sont investis d'une certaine puissance, en mettant de l'avant des relations intergénérationnelles positives et en imaginant autrement le déclin. Selon Henderson, les deux pièces y arrivent grâce aux thèmes abordés, à l'esthétique et au style de jeu employés, aux performances incarnées des marionnettistes et à la manière dont les marionnettes sont animées.

Mots clés : marionnettes, vieillissement, vieillesse, marionnette au corps vieillissant, théâtre jeunes publics, modèle du vieillissement, profondeur temporelle

Although expressions of aging and old age differ across other identity categories, they most often yoke aging to notions of deterioration and loss. Young audiences are exposed to this narrative of decline through wide-ranging cultural references in advertising, cartoons, fairy tales, children's books, and theatre. However, various forms of theatre can also reimagine age narratives in positive ways. In this article, Henderson uses close performance analysis, analysis of archival video, and an interview with Vancouver theatre artist Chris McGregor to examine the Vancouver-based TYA puppet plays *The Little Old Man* by Theatre Bagger Arts Society and *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* by Axis Theatre. Both plays share a number of age-related themes and establish nuanced, positive messages about aging, older age, and intergenerational relations. By drawing on Steve Tillis's theory of puppetry and

Anne Davis Basting's depth model of aging, Henderson argues that puppets can be used to interrupt negative age stereotypes and hostile age-related narrative tropes, and encourage children to reimagine old age, aging, and relationships with older people in complex and hopeful ways. In the case of these two plays, Henderson contends that they interrupt age stereotypes by portraying children and older characters as having agency, foregrounding positive intergenerational relations, and reimagining decline. They do this, Henderson argues, through their themes, aesthetics and performance styles, and the embodied performances of the handlers in conjunction with their animation of the puppets.

Keywords: puppets, aging, old age, older-bodied puppet, TYA, depth model of aging, temporal depth



The “narrative of decline,” first identified by age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette (10–13), is our culture’s most common story about aging. According to theatre scholar Michael Mangan, the master narrative of decline is “the invisible but dominant cultural ‘message’ which encourages men and women to experience and articulate growing older essentially in terms of loss, isolation, and diminished physical mental and material resources” (8). Although expressions of aging and old age can differ across gender¹ and other identity categories, most often these stories link aging to notions of deterioration and loss. As aging populations swell worldwide,² it becomes urgent to consider societal attitudes toward aging and old age, and how they are embedded in our cultural stories, starting in childhood, and work to normalize ageist beliefs and discriminatory behaviours. Children are exposed to the narrative of decline through wide-ranging references in advertising, cartoons, fairy tales, children’s books, and theatre. However, in this article I argue that carefully wrought plays for children featuring older-bodied puppets have the potential to disrupt the master narrative of decline, and encourage children to reimagine old age, aging, and relationships with older people in complex and hopeful ways.

In addition to the omnipresence of decline stories, there is a dearth of older-aged bodies on Canadian stages, especially in theatre for young audiences (TYA). For example, in Vancouver, according to the artistic directors of its three principal professional TYA companies, only one has hired a total of three actors aged sixty plus in the last eleven years.³ The reasons for this are multifaceted and deserve further study.⁴ The use of puppets to portray older characters does not solve the problem of the lack of older bodies in Canadian TYA; however, in some cases it is a viable alternative. It can help avoid problems inherent in casting young bodies to play (often much) older characters.⁵ In this article, I draw on Steve Tillis’s theory of puppetry in *Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Act* and Anne Davis Basting’s depth model of aging in *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture* to argue that puppets can be used to interrupt negative age stereotypes and hostile age-related narrative tropes. Through examining the Vancouver-based TYA puppet plays *The Little Old Man* by Theatre Bagger Arts Society and *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* by Axis Theatre, I contend that they represent children and older characters as having agency, foreground positive intergenerational relations, and reimagine decline and other age stereotypes. They do this through their themes, aesthetics, and performance styles, and the embodied performances of the handlers in conjunction with their animation of the puppets.

In this research I use the primary method of close performance analysis to examine how these TYA plays use puppets to portray central male characters who have aged beyond mid-life. I chose the plays because they both established nuanced, positive messages about aging, older age, and intergenerational relations, while acknowledging issues associated with aging like loneliness, isolation, and the complexities of relationships across generations. The two plays also shared a number of themes: having empathy leads to greater happiness, overcoming adversity is possible through bravery and open-mindedness, and facing one's fears and obstacles is possible at any age and will increase connectedness and well-being. I attended each play twice, once alone and once with my children. I also reviewed archival video of both plays and interviewed Vancouver theatre artist Chris McGregor, who adapted (with puppet-maker Frank Rader) and performed in *The Little Old Man*, and adapted and directed *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch*.

Cultural Conditioning of Age Narratives

According to Gullette, “In all cultures, literate or illiterate, linguists tell us, children are exposed, early and unconsciously, to ‘the accepted story-structural forms’” (12–13). These story-structural forms tell the meaning of time passing and construct foundational narratives about how to “act” one’s age. They do this “in large part through the moral and psychological implications of the narrative ideas” that they convey to us, starting when we are very young (Gullette 11). In Western contexts many stories teach children to imagine old people as unhealthy, incapable, lonely, sickly, grumpy, lacking resources, forgetful (or senile), and to be feared. In theatre, this is often aided by the use of stereotypes and stock characters (Mangan 23). Vanessa Joosen notes that “media narratives in popular culture often ascribe interchangeable characteristics to childhood and old age—the nature of these characteristics is extensive, ranging from physical weakness and the need for care or education, to wisdom and moral superiority” (5). Furthermore, while the loving grandparent and the wise sage also appear in children’s literature and performances, discord between generations is a recurrent trope and is frequently blamed on older characters.⁶ Hence, while not exclusively negative, our culture messages about childhood and old age are pervasively ageist, and set expectations about how to “act” old and young, and how to interact across generations.

Advocacy for older actors to be hired in TYA is needed to counter stereotypes like the narrative of decline. However, noting that this will take time, another way to improve the representation of bodies of all ages in TYA, while also dealing with the complexities of embodied age identity, is through the use of performance forms that do not follow the traditions of realism. This makes it possible to represent older characters in a range of ways besides age-appropriate casting. One such performance form is puppet theatre, and as I will demonstrate, puppets can be quite effective in countering age stereotypes.

Steve Tillis defines the puppet as

a theatrical figure, perceived by an audience to be an object, that is given design, movement, and frequently, speech, so that it fulfills the audience’s desire to imagine it as having life; by creating a double-vision of perception and imagination, the

puppet pleurably challenges the audience's understanding of the relationship between objects and life. (65)

Tillis outlines a continuum of acting styles from naturalistic at one end, to puppets at the other extreme. He argues that audiences simultaneously perceive puppets to be objects and to have life in a process he terms "double vision." According to Tillis, "the puppet pleurably challenges its audience's understanding of what it means to be an 'object' and what it means to have 'life'" (64). Audiences can identify with and emotionally invest in the puppet as a life (through imagination), while concurrently maintaining aesthetic distance by knowing that it is a non-living object (through perception). According to Shifra Schonmann, aesthetic distance is desirable in TYA because, especially at young ages, children risk being lost in the story (66). Schonmann writes, "Young children, inexperienced in theatre, tend to become immersed in the world of make-believe; for them, the illusion of reality is sometimes understood as reality instead of as illusion. When distance disappears art does too" (89). Puppets offer potential for simultaneous emotional investment and distancing.

Matthew Reason's research with primary-school-aged children corroborates Tillis's theory of double vision. Reason asked ninety-eight children to watch one of three different plays featuring puppets, draw what they saw, and then explain their drawings. In response to a play about a goose, the children demonstrated the ability to fully invest in the goose character, while at the same time noticing, appreciating, and engaging with the techniques used to create the character (353). According to Reason, these findings "affir[m] Tillis's concept of 'double vision,' providing a dual reading of the puppet which oscillates between attending to the real and the unreal. The tension, indeed the power, of the experience thus resides in the balance between faith and doubt" (353).⁷ Reason argues that "children do have the ability to juggle contradictory interpretations and to see simultaneously on two levels" (353).

However, can puppets educate and empower children about age, aging, and intergenerational relationships? According to Cariad Astles, "Puppets [...] have a historical role in popular culture as purveyors of news, and as social or political commentators. [...] On a more fundamental level, the making of and performing with puppets seems to respond to a very basic desire to create, play with, and critique, representations of human life" (104). While there is little research on how children, in particular, perceive age narratives as conveyed through puppets, a study by Leni Vieira Dornelles examined how a group of six- to seven-year-olds from a public school in Porto Alegre displayed their understandings about aging bodies through their play with five different "old-people-body-puppet[s]" (174). Dornelles notes, "Children showed us that the body is the means through which we become visible, and that it is through it that the others recognize us" (182). The children made it clear that they were aware that older bodies were inscribed with notable features and performative acts that marked them as old, such as physiological changes to their appearance and movement, and the use of objects such as mobility aids (181). The children used "older" props (such as canes, glasses, dental prosthetics) most often to help the puppets have a better life or even to make their bodies more beautiful (178). The children also found ways to correct the puppets' imperfections, such as performing surgeries (179). Through engagement with the puppets, children demonstrated that they believed old age could be pleasurable (having time to see friends or doing what one wants),

but that they were aware, too, that comfort in old age was linked to social and health circumstances (184–85). Most children’s understanding of old age was positively influenced by their grandparents’ stories (185). In summary, Dornelles argues that the children were aware of the acceptable ways of acting old, and that this knowledge was gained through various circulating discourses that they had assimilated (176–77). Clearly, in TYA, puppets can be compelling tools for creating conversation, developing thought, and reshaping ideas for children about aging and intergenerational relationships.

To think further about the interconnected, embodied performances of age identity of both the puppeteers and puppets, I turn to and expand upon Anne Davis Basting’s “Performative Depth Model of Aging” (141–46). Historically, life-stage models have assigned inherent characteristics to chronological ages. Such models are now criticized for dividing the life course into binaries in which “older adults must perform and display productivity, activity, and health as characteristics of aging” as ways of proving their cultural worth (Basting 135). In order to think about aging beyond fixed age-stage categories, Basting draws on Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity in *Gender Trouble*, and proposes that embodied age identity also can be thought of in terms of its performativity—as repeated, culturally informed acts that become consolidated over time and give the appearance of being natural or inherent (136, 141). However, scholars like Kathleen Woodward (*Figuring Age* xxii) and Valerie Barnes Lipscomb and Leni Marshall (2) argue that while age may be socially constructed and performative, the performativity of old age is in undeniable tension with the physical aging of the body. Basting, however, contends that there can be a postmodern poetics of the aging body that acknowledges its temporal component.

In *The Stages of Age*, Basting offers “the performative, depth model of aging” as a framework of reception that interprets “the body’s performance of time in/across the life course” (145).⁸ According to Basting, “To see the body in depth is literally to see time across space” (141). Basting suggests that a performance of age is not simply the performance of a fixed age identity or moment in time. Rather a depth performance of age is one that encourages audiences to see an accumulation of past aged-selves and a projection of future aged-selves. According to Basting, “To see the *older* body in-depth is to recognize the wrinkles and age spots while also seeing the thick, pliant skin of a child. To see a *younger* body in depth, on the other hand, is to imagine the unchartable changes that the body will produce” (141, emphasis in original). The potential of the depth model of aging, asserts Basting, is that it offers the possibility of shifting stringent divisions between life stages (142). As such it encourages generational continuity and discourages the pitting of generations against each other.

I propose that Basting’s depth model can be applied to the interconnected performances of age between handlers and puppets. A performance of temporal depth in puppet theatre, I argue, is one that enables audiences to see accumulations of aged-selves, possibly across generations, such that performers produce “the effect of both the passage of time, and the simultaneous existence of several time periods” (Basting 144). In the case of TYA, when children gaze at puppets and puppeteers, they might be able to simultaneously see ages, genders, and bodies as interconnected within the same moment. In conjunction with Tillis’s notion of double vision, which allows for both investment and aesthetic distance, this creates the potential for children to disrupt simplistic views of age and aging through experiencing puppet theatre.

The Plays

Before embarking upon my analyses, I will first describe the backgrounds and performance styles of the two plays. This provides readers with a foundation for understanding my discussions of aesthetics, puppetry conventions, and embodiment of the puppets and handlers throughout the rest of the article. The first play I consider, *The Little Old Man*, was initially adapted in 2007 by Frank Rader and Chris McGregor (Theatre Bagger Arts Society) from a Swedish story by Barbro Lindgren (1992). I saw the play at the Vancouver International Puppet Festival, on the Arts Club Review Stage, from 14–16 October 2016. The play tells the story of a lonely old man who has no friends, and of a little girl and a dog who become his companions. *The Little Old Man* uses rod puppets to portray the human characters and a stuffed toy to depict the dog.

The two puppeteers are visible on stage and interact with both audience, puppets, and each other. They operate each human puppet by means of a small rod that extends from the back of its head (Figure 1). Often the same puppeteer uses their other hand to operate the puppets' arms or legs to create movement, gesture, or to place the puppet in a resting position. However, sometimes the other puppeteer moves the puppets' limbs such that two handlers are moving the same puppet. The puppets' arms are held and moved from the wrists, and their legs from the ankles. The puppets' arm gestures have a strong human quality since, to create the movement, the handler is moving their own arm in the same movement pattern. The puppets, their props, and the set pieces are all small—the Little Old Man (LOM) puppet, for example, is about one foot tall and the Girl is slightly smaller. The minimalistic set consists of four tables covered with beige tablecloths, a small set piece that represents the LOM's house, three small metal trees, and a few props. Before and after the performance I attended, the company had a puppet-making area available to the audience. The play's puppets were also available following the performance for children to inspect.

The second play, *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* (Axis Theatre, Vancouver) was adapted by McGregor in 2017 from a children's book by Eileen Spinelli (1991). I saw the show on 23 and 24th March 2018 during its run at Playwrights Theatre Centre in Vancouver. The cast of the version that I analyze included Jeny Cassady, Christine Reinfort, and Sarah May Redmond. *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* tells of an apparently middle-aged man overcoming loneliness through generosity. A play within a play, it is framed by three 1940s washerwomen who enact the story of Mr. Hatch each day on their break. Their puppet play involves all actors singing and manipulating puppets and props, as well as two actors (Reinfort and Redmond) playing ukulele. According to McGregor, he imagined these women as having loved ones who had gone to war, and their storytelling was a way to imagine a better world.

Mr. Hatch is a direct-manipulation puppet that is approximately two and a half feet tall. In the production, Cassady always puppeteers Mr. Hatch's head and torso using her right hand inside the puppet. Her left hand moves the puppet's arms from the wrist or positions his legs. The other actors at various times move Mr. Hatch's arms and legs; sometimes all three actors handle the puppet together. Mr. Hatch's movement is quite human, with much detail in the gestures and use of tiny props. For example, Redmond makes Mr. Hatch's arms strum the ukulele so it appears that he is playing it; she also helps him dust with a small handkerchief. The only other human-bodied puppet in the show is Little Melanie, who is like a small doll. All of the other characters are either embodied by the actors or played with symbolic performing objects such as the hats that have been previously worn by the actors when playing particular characters.



Figure 1. In *The Little Old Man*, Chris McGregor and Thomas Jones animate the Little Old Man and the Mean Old Man. Photo Credit: Frank Rader. Used with permission from Theatre Bagger.

The Play Texts

To reveal how these plays redress age stereotypes, first I will address their scripted content, such as characterizations and themes. At the start of *The Little Old Man*, nobody likes the eponymous character. He lives, friendless, in a house at the edge of town. Audiences might imagine this is because he is old, but we learn that it is because he is “so little,” a clever upending of expectations. It interrupts the ageist belief that being old is contemptible and replaces it with an idea that we accept as foolish—that being small is abject. It allows children to identify and sympathize, as they, too, may feel limited by their size. The play also includes two mean old men who make fun of the LOM for his smallness, one of whom kicks him. This deft characterization avoids pitting youth against old age. Since both villains and protagonist are old, the play divorces age from negative character traits; we do not sense that the old men are mean *because* they are old.

The simple plot involves the LOM struggling to find a friend. He puts up signs that say “Lonely Little Old Man is Looking for a Friend,” showing his positive outlook and agency. He finds companionship with a dog. They play ball, sit together, and share food. While playing, the LOM participates with pluckiness. When he falls backwards, the narrator tells the audience, “The LOM thought it was fun to fall over. He hadn’t fallen over in forty years, well at least not backwards!” Eventually, the dog stays to live with the LOM, who gives the dog his bed and sleeps in a box. Their relationship involves mutual caregiving and brings them happiness. Thus, the narrative challenges decline. It tells of resilience and new companionship in old age.

Partway through the story a Little Girl (LG) enters. The dog is excited to meet someone new and the LOM fears the dog prefers the LG. Although the LG and the dog do not treat him unkindly, the LOM feels left out and goes off to the woods alone. He sits under a tree in the woods for “seven days,” while the LG and the dog wait for him across the stage. Finally, on the eighth day, the LOM decides to return home and see if the dog and the LG are still there. The LG and the dog greet him with joy. The LOM sits on his step and the dog puts its head on his lap and the LG puts her hand in his. Then they all play ball together. The script,

narrated by the puppeteers, ends with the line, “And the LOM never had to feel lonely again.” While this sentiment is idyllic, it avoids the false common ending, “and they all lived happily ever after.” The play suggests that anyone can become isolated—it is not an age-related fault—and it can be solved by connecting with those around us. It proffers that we may find companionship across ages, or even with a different species like a dog. While the story simplifies the complexities of isolation for elderly people, and narrows the solution to the LOM’s will, it offers agency to both an old character and a child (not to mention an animal), and stages an example of enduring cross-generational friendship.

Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch is a similar story. Mr. Hatch is a single man of working age, but not young. According to McGregor, Mr. Hatch could be “anywhere from fifty to seventy.” Mr. Hatch lives alone and each day goes to his job at the shoelace factory. While Mr. Hatch is polite, he does not connect with his neighbours or co-workers, and like the LOM, he is isolated. One day, the mailperson, Mr. Goober, brings Mr. Hatch a surprise package. He opens it to find a box of chocolates and a card that says, “Somebody loves you.” This gift changes Mr. Hatch’s life. He begins to greet his neighbours and co-workers, helps them, tries new things, plays the ukulele again, and invites his friends to an impromptu party in his backyard. But eventually Mr. Goober returns and tells Mr. Hatch that he delivered the package to the wrong house. As a result, Mr. Hatch becomes introverted, sad, and distances himself from his new friends. Concerned, the other characters confront Mr. Goober, who tells them what happened. They are dismayed because Mr. Hatch is important to them and they realize he does not know it. Mr. Goober summarizes by saying, “Mr. Hatch thought somebody loved him. Now he thinks nobody loves him.” The group decides to throw Mr. Hatch a surprise party complete with a banner: “Everybody loves Mr. Hatch.” They teach the audience this phrase so that when Mr. Hatch appears, the playgoers join in, affirming their love for Mr. Hatch. Mr. Hatch sees that he is valued. By participating the audience (mostly children) has the opportunity to enact changing someone’s life through kindness.

In *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch*, even more so than in *The Little Old Man*, a middle-aged-to-old male character improves his own life through his actions. We see him learning to connect with others through warmth and generosity. For example, Mr. Hatch takes care of the newsstand so Mr. Smith, its owner, can go to the doctor. Mr. Hatch helps Mr. Todd find his daughter, Little Melanie, and gives her a piggyback ride home. When we see Mr. Hatch decline, it is the result of perceived social circumstances, not inevitable internal traits. We also see him recover and overcome decline through friendships. Although this play also simplifies the complexities of social isolation connected to aging, the idea that aging past midlife causes continuous and progressive decline, loss, and isolation is effectively disrupted.

Aesthetics of the Puppets

The aesthetics of the puppets in these plays also contribute to positive messages about age, aging, and intergenerational relations. *The Little Old Man* highlights the connectedness of different ages by depicting likenesses across puppets. According to McGregor, Frank Rader modelled the puppets after Eva Eriksson’s illustrations in the book. The LOM and the LG have similar faces. The LG is smaller and has brown braids and freckles, and the LOM is bald—otherwise they appear very similar (Figure 2). The LOM does not sport other stereotyped markers of age



Figure 2. The Little Old Man and the Little Girl have very similar aesthetic features. Photo Credit: Julia Henderson. Used with permission from Theatre Bagger.

like wrinkles, saggy skin, or grey hair. Neither does he use old-age “props” like mobility aids or glasses, although, as we know from Dornelles’s study, children can perceive such props as beautifying older characters (178). Similar to the LOM, Rader created Mr. Hatch to emulate Paul Yalowitz’s illustrations from that storybook. The puppet has a slightly elongated, oval-shaped head with no hair. He has small blue eyes and gently closed pink lips; he wears dark-rimmed, round glasses. His face has a sense of agelessness. He is tidily dressed in a shirt and pants with suspenders. Mr. Hatch is tall and lanky and often wears or carries a hat. The props that he uses are not strongly connected to a particular age, although they do suggest adulthood. These include a newspaper, a dusting cloth, a paper-wrapped turkey thigh, a ukulele, and a box of chocolates.

The LOM also looks remarkably like one of the puppeteers, Thomas Jones, who sometimes operates him. This highlights the puppet’s connection to human circumstances and to ages across the life course, since Jones’s age falls between that of the LG and the LOM. Similarly, Mr. Hatch resembles Cassady, the puppeteer who primarily handles him (McGregor noted this in our interview). Further, Cassady’s facial expressions sync with the feelings the script describes Mr. Hatch as having (Figure 3). Although the puppet’s face does not change, we perceive Mr. Hatch’s emotions through Cassady’s mirroring. We connect his experiences with people across ages and genders. Thus, these aesthetics help facilitate performances of age in temporal depth as described by Basting’s model (an idea to which I will return).

The doll-like features of these puppets and their smallness make them appealing to children, according to McGregor. He notes, “I think it’s that they [young audiences] can really



Figure 3. Jeny Cassady's face often mirrors Mr. Hatch's feelings. Photo Credit: Jayda Paige. Used with permission from the Axis Theatre Company.

relate to it [the LOM]. It's little. Tiny—I mean if it was a real man, I don't think they'd be able to relate to it as much as this." Despite Joosen's implication that media narratives connecting childhood and old age are often negative, as she reveals, they can be positive too (5). In the case of the LOM's experience of smallness, his size offers a point of identification for child audiences. After the performance of *The Little Old Man* that I attended, the puppets were made available for children to investigate. The children could also make their own puppets with materials provided, offering them further opportunities to explore various bodily characteristics and concepts of size raised by the play.

Both plays, then, offered aesthetic opportunities for young audiences to reimagine age identities through the visual design of the puppets. In Dornelles's study cited earlier, the author calls for an expanded repertoire of puppet bodies in TYA, including old-people-bodied puppets:

Perhaps it is also important that parents and teachers can deconstruct, reinvent, pluralize, present different repertoires of puppets to be used in children's plays, as in the case described here with elderly-bodied puppets, so that the question may be placed as to the different types of bodies and of what they make children and adults think about the ways of being elderly today. (187)

The Little Old Man and *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* address Dornelles's challenge because they employ puppets to create novel aesthetic opportunities for young audiences to reimagine

aging and older age. In particular, *The Little Old Man*, which provided the chance for children to interact with the puppets and make their own puppets after the show, offered the occasion for children to integrate the play's age-related narratives into their personal experience through play.

Conventions of Puppetry that Interrupt Age Stereotypes

Not only do aesthetics influence narratives of aging and older age, certain performance conventions of puppetry also work to bolster positive age narratives. According to Tillis, puppet theatre operates outside the bounds of reality, so it “offers the artist the puppet’s licence to act and speak with remarkable freedom. [...] Thus, the puppet is especially suited to the flaunting of social conventions and consequences” (33). This is, in part, because puppets—even more so than human actors in non-realist modes of theatre—are “unbounded by nature” (36) and have the potential to create what Michael Malkin has identified as the “plausible impossible” (6–7). Puppets can integrate the real and the fantastic with far greater ease than theatre with actors alone (Tillis 37). McGregor echoes this sentiment, noting that young audiences relate to the puppets because of their magical or extraordinary qualities: “because puppets can do anything, and they can go anywhere, and they can tell any kind of story, it is more of a connection with the kids.” In the case of older characters especially, puppet theatre allows representations beyond what age stereotypes suggest are possible in real life. Such characters prompt children to question what they know about older age and open their imaginations to new possibilities.

We see the LOM fall spectacularly backwards without getting injured. He also sustains being kicked by the mean old man and being attacked by a dog without injury. He can jump unrealistically high and head the soccer ball with great force and accuracy. He is also able to float and fly through the air to travel distances, and at the end of the play he jumps the large space between tables. Likewise, Mr. Hatch can float and jump great distances.

Both plays, then, by showing older characters with magical qualities engaging in the plausible impossible, especially through their movements, inspire us to question age stereotypes and begin to reimagine them. Although such superhuman feats edge towards inspirational images of aging that are not achievable for most older adults, instilling the older puppets with magical qualities and allowing them actions outside the strictures of reality offer important and unusual alternatives to the decline story of aging and old age.

This brings up an interesting paradox. While Gullette has criticized the casting of young bodies to play older characters in realist theatre on the grounds that young actors lack a psychological connection to past experience and have difficulty suppressing their default bodies (170), one of the strengths of older-bodied puppets lies precisely in their ability to move *unlike* a stereotypical older person (or, at times, unlike a human at all). This, I argue, relates to the audience’s expectations for how such a body should perform. The human or “alive” qualities of the puppet allow us to emotionally invest in it; however, our simultaneous knowledge that it is an object allows us enough distance to remove our preconceived notions for its movement and behaviour. In other words, the puppet’s ability to shed the expectations of living human bodies enables a new imagining of old age that is not simply connected to frailty or decline.

So, while a young actor can have trouble convincingly playing an older character because they cannot move like one, a puppet can be believable and challenge stereotypes as an older character because it can move in unexpected ways.

Basting's Depth Model of Aging Expressed Through Puppets and Puppeteers

One further explanation for why the puppet's age embodiment seems emancipatory, rather than unrealistic or disingenuous, can be found through applying Basting's performative depth model of aging (141-46) to the interconnected movements and performative, embodied age-identities of the puppet(s) and the puppeteer(s). In *The Little Old Man* and *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch*, the use of older-bodied and child-bodied puppets animated by visible young adult and middle-aged adult handlers creates opportunities to view the bodies on stage in temporal depth. I will highlight one striking moment from each of these plays in order to illustrate my interpretation of Basting's model as it can be applied to the intertwined age performances of puppets and puppeteers.

At the end of *The Little Old Man*, the LOM is reunited with the LG and the dog in a sequence of action that, for me, creates a strong impression of temporal depth. As the LOM returns home, the dog greets him enthusiastically; Jones handles both puppets. The LG holds the tablecloth across the gap between tables for the LOM and the dog to cross; McGregor operates her. During this action Jones narrates the line, "The LOM felt warm with happiness." All three puppets then head towards the LOM's home to stage right. McGregor sits the LG on the doorstep, and Jones moves to stand so close to him that their shoulders almost touch. Their comfort with this proximity mirrors the physical intimacy and emotional connection of the puppets. Jones passes the LOM to McGregor and McGregor gently seats him beside the LG while narrating in a soothing voice, "And then the three of them sat together on the steps just as before." Jones continues to puppeteer the dog and positions him, ardently, beside the LOM, continuing, "The dog put his nose in the LOM's hand." McGregor seamlessly takes over the narration, "And the LG put her hand in his other one." The LOM and the LG look lovingly at each other and the LG puts her head on his shoulder, while Jones finishes with the line, "And the LOM never had to feel lonely again."

In this scene the interactions between the LG, the LOM, the dog, and the not-yet-old adult puppeteers create a poignant moment, presenting interconnected, layered performances of age across generations, genders, and even species. The actors simultaneously perform their own ages while also enacting the ages of a child, an old man, and a dog. In particular, the seamless trading of puppets as Jones brings to life the LOM, then passes him to McGregor to animate, creates a performance of temporal depth across the bodies of the actors and through this puppet. As Jones and McGregor both at different times, in rapid succession, enact the LOM as well as their own-aged selves, it makes it easy to perceive a performance of time across space. In addition, moments in this brief scene when McGregor simultaneously plays the LOM, the LG, and himself create a strong impression of temporal depth with concurrent, layered performances of age across generations and genders performed together within one

body. Complemented by the narrated script, in which the two puppeteers trade lines and finish each other's sentences, this scene connects generations and breaks down age binaries through its depiction of bodies, both human and puppet, working in harmony to create a performance of age in temporal depth.

A similar moment took place in *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch*. Cassady and Redmond puppeteer Mr. Hatch to stage right, where he is cleaning his study. Cassady animates his head, torso, and left hand, while Redmond moves his right arm briskly to dust with a little cloth. During this moment, Reinfort narrates, "Then he did something he'd never done before." Redmond picks up the line, "He laughed." Now Cassady takes over solely handling Mr. Hatch and makes him laugh heartily. Reinfort then continues, "And jumped for joy." Cassady now elegantly jumps Mr. Hatch to the table at centre stage where the chocolate box sits, saying in Mr. Hatch's voice, "Ohhh, I've got a secret admirer!" Reinfort continues, "Then, he took a chocolate from the box," as she picks up the box and glides it up to Mr. Hatch. Cassady and Redmond manipulate the puppet while he deliberates and chooses a candy. Cassady moves his head and torso to examine the different chocolates while she touches his chest, scratches his head, and intermittently covers his mouth with his left hand. Redmond animates his right hand to point to and almost choose several chocolates before settling on one. Then Redmond announces, "And he ate it!" as he moves his right arm to pop an imaginary chocolate into his mouth. Following this, the three actors deliver a series of lines in rapid succession as they move into position to all operate the puppet together:

Cassady:	Oh my!
Redmond:	So sweet
Reinfort:	So delicious
Cassady:	So yummy!
All three:	Oh So good!!!!

Now, with Cassady still handling Mr. Hatch's head and left arm, Redmond operating his right arm, and Reinfort manipulating his feet, the three actors float him into the air onto his back and all turn, sublimely, in a circle while swirling his arms and legs almost as though he is swimming the backstroke (Figure 4). The three actors laugh and make sounds of joy and wonder while completing this action as the lights change to a dreamy red. Cassady delivers the line, "Oh this chocolate makes me feel sooo good!" In a similar way to the scene in *The Little Old Man*, this interconnected performance of variously aged bodies and voices creates a strong impression of temporal depth. Together the three actors, aged themselves from young to middle adulthood (and also having played a range of ages and genders throughout the show), all come together to animate Mr. Hatch. They perform a layering of their former-aged selves, as well as a projection of their future-aged selves, along with those of Mr. Hatch. Just as Basting suggests can happen in performances of temporal depth, this scene takes advantage of the multiple ages of the puppeteers and the older-bodied puppet to perform an "accumulation of the moments across the life course and across generations" (140). In so doing, the scene disrupts age binaries and connects generations through staging variously aged bodies and



Figure 4. Jeny Cassidy, Sarah May Reinford, and Christine Redmond all animate Mr. Hatch, performing age in temporal depth. Photo Credit: Jayda Paige. Used with permission from the Axis Theatre Company.

voices working in harmony to bring an older-aged puppet to life in a specific story moment that resonates across time.

Discussion

It is clear that these plays confront young audiences with important, yet complex, age-related issues such as loneliness, isolation, prejudice, and mistreatment. I contend that the element of puppetry makes these complex subjects more approachable for young audiences. In keeping with Tillis's and Reason's findings, McGregor has observed,

That probably these characters can go through things and it's real but it's not threatening. They [child audiences] can absorb it a bit more. [...] They can take on loneliness and go okay, there's a bit of a separation, it's only a puppet, but we're still there, we can still go on the emotional journey but we're not going to be completely collapsed about it.

Interestingly, aligned with Dornelle's findings, McGregor has received many reports from audience members who have attended the shows that their children have integrated the cultural

age narratives of the shows into their own play at home: “from what people have told me [...] that they [their children] recreate the story themselves in their bedrooms using their stuffed animals and toys and they have their own version of it. Many people have told me that!” This supports the assertion that the themes of both plays were approachable, were taken up by young audience members, and were integrated into and experimented with in their own play, which ultimately allows the production to intervene in cultural age narratives. Gullette beseeches readers to realize that “children also need a foundation of heightened age consciousness on which to build their future age identity and confront future risks” (20). The two plays discussed here, through the puppets they use to tell their stories, successfully complicate young children’s concepts of age in ways that they can incorporate into their play, and therefore into their thinking.

Conclusion

These plays make important inroads into reimagining cultural age narratives for young audiences in Canada and beyond. By intervening early in the life course through presenting other story-structural forms of aging (Gullette 13–15), McGregor and his colleagues do important work in dismantling the authority of the narrative of decline.

In Vancouver, TYA companies have shown commitment in recent years to expanding diversity in the casting of actors, the subjects of plays, and the types of characters represented. However, so far, this has focused mostly on gender and ethnicity. Carole Higgins, artistic director of Carousel Theatre for Young People at the time this article was written explains, “In more recent years, our focus has been exploring and revisioning gender of characters as part of our own commitment to advancing and supporting female practitioners and dismantling gender biases. We have not really been exploring age. The question of why is a good one.” While none of the companies has expressed a formal agenda to redress age discrimination, this would be a logical next step in the ecosystem of Vancouver TYA. Chris McGregor is leading the way in this regard through his championing of the productions I write about here (as well as Axis Theatre’s recent play *The Troll Grandfather*). All three of these shows represent older age identities and intergenerational relations in unusually nuanced and age-positive portrayals.

Of course, we must recognize that puppets cannot replace the need for actual older bodies on stage. Thus, while these plays go a distance to dismantle stereotypes of aging and older age, they do not represent a significant step in changing working conditions for older performers. Gullette asserts that “a culture needs to see people of all ages on the stage of the world, rather than the increasing *disappearance of older default bodies*” (178, emphasis in original). Failure to recognize and represent the full life course, she says, “Is wrong, not just on the legal grounds of job discrimination, but on aesthetic, ethical, developmental, cultural, and democratic grounds” (178).

However, as Gullette also suggests, age-appropriate casting is not the only way forward. We need to avoid age-unaware casting. Casting without considering the implications of a performer’s age can lead to inadvertent age narratives that are at best problematic, and at worst negative, demeaning, and ageist. *The Little Old Man* and *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* are examples in which the use of puppet theatre, along with age-conscious casting, allows

multi-aged actors to use their unique skills to tell nuanced stories through older-bodied puppets. In doing so the plays succeed in claiming a presence for older age on stage and unsettling negative age stereotypes.

Notes

- 1 See “Performing Age, Performing Gender,” in which Kathleen Woodward argues that representations of aging women are more negative at younger ages than those of men (163).
- 2 According the World Health Organization’s 2015 World Report on Ageing and Health, “Today, for the first time in history most people can expect to live into their 60s and beyond” (3). In 2016, for the first time in Canada, the number of people over sixty-five was greater than those under fifteen (Statistics Canada, “Section 2” par. 4).
- 3 Vancouver’s three principal professional TYA companies are Axis Theatre, Carousel Theatre for Young People, and Green Thumb Theatre. In the last eleven years, only Carousel has hired senior actors to represent older characters in *The Secret World of Og* in 2009, and *Elephant and Piggie’s We Are In a Play* in 2019 (Higgins).
- 4 Canadian TYA tours rarely hire senior actors due to systemic barriers such as those identified by Patrick McDonald of Green Thumb and Carole Higgins of Carousel (at the time this article was written): there is a lack of TYA scripts featuring older characters, pay rates are more attractive to actors in their twenties, touring is strenuous, and it is not financially viable for multiple actors to be hired for the same role and rotate in and out of a tour because each would have to be on a full Equity contract. In addition, there is an assumption that senior actors would rather not do TYA. Higgins revealed that this latter assumption was proven wrong in their last two seasons when a senior actor expressed interest in performing with the company and was hired. McDonald emphasized that in spite of the barriers, it is “incredibly important for young people to see older performers.”
- 5 Although Jeanne Klein notes that children prefer age-appropriate child actors in child roles (119), in Canadian TYA it is common practice for young adults to play both children and much older characters (see endnote 4). Gullette argues that when younger actors portray older characters, they are often unconvincing because they lack a psychological connection to past experience and have difficulty suppressing the embodied habits and gestures (or “default body-mind”) that express their current age identity (170). Valerie Barnes Lipscomb posits that we tend to more readily accept an actor acting slightly outside of their age range, and censure anyone crossing a generational divide (i.e., twenty years or more) (2).
- 6 Michael Mangan, in *Staging Ageing: Theater, Performance and the Narrative of Decline*, maps the senex character (in various forms domineering, blocking, greedy, envious, lecherous) over time (79–117). See Kristin Hanson for discussions of mother characters of all ages—frequently abusive, domineering, smothering, martyred, or absent and, as such, blamed for discord in mother-daughter relationships on stage. These stock character types reiterate antagonistic intergenerational relationships in which older characters are at fault. Well-known, ageist older stock character puppets in children’s entertainment include *The Muppets’s* Statler and Waldorf and *Sesame Street’s* Professor Hastings and Granny Fanny Nesselrode (Acuña).

- 7 Tillis actually claims that attention in double vision is *synchronous*, not oscillating as Reason writes: “We would call the process double-vision, for, in the course of the performance, the audience sees the puppet, through perception and through imagination, as an object and as a life; that is, it sees the puppet in two ways at once” (Tillis 64).
- 8 Basting’s depth model of aging explains her reception of Butoh dancers Kazuo Ohno and Yoshito Ohno’s performance of *Water Lilies*. She contends that by performing a range of gendered and aged roles, the passage of time, and multiple simultaneous time periods, “Ohno’s performance conjures a body that encompasses a *lifetime* of changes and possibilities at the dense point of overlap between theatrical performance and theoretical performativity” (145, emphasis in original).

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