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OFFSTAGE –

PUPPETS in the STREET, in APARTMENTS, on a BARGE

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

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Extraordinary Bodies in Ordinary Spaces: *Royal de Luxe in Montreal*

by Dassia N. Posner



THE LITTLE GIRL GIANT'S DOG XOLO. ROYAL DE LUXE, LA GRANDE INVITATION, MONTREAL, MAY 2017 © SERGE KOUTCHINSKY

Chasing the Giants

For a decade, I had wanted to see the Giants. In May 2017, energized by the disappointing news that Chicago cancelled what was to have been French street theatre company Royal de Luxe's first US visit, my daughter and I went on a pilgrimage to see the Giants' first Canadian appearance, a celebration of Montreal's 375th anniversary. We secured a hotel room that overlooked their route on the day we would follow them—the third day and final day of the event, which took place May 19-21. We mapped out our Giant-chasing strategy, and early Sunday morning we set out by subway toward the Radio Canada plaza on the outskirts of town, where the Giants had slept the previous night. Our train took on more people at every stop until it was overfilled with a peaceful, expectant crowd that exited the station en masse. Once outside, it was difficult to know where to go next. We had been expecting signs, but soon realized that music was the herald calling us to the first performance site.

When we arrived, a crowd was watching the Little Girl Giant (30 feet) asleep on the lap of her uncle, the Deep Sea Diver (50 feet). These two massive mechanical marionettes had wandered independently for two days, and, after an affectionate reunion the evening before, were now inseparable. Both were supported by ropes hanging from a single massive crane. With eyes closed, their chests rose and fell as the sound of their breathing played over loudspeakers. Along with small children on their parents' shoulders, cell phones dotted the air above the crowd, trying to capture the movements of the Giants who were not yet moving.

As the two slept, Xolo, the Little Girl's dog (9 feet), "played" records (by a live band) on a giant phonograph and greeted the crowd with sniffs, howls, and a massive lolling tongue, presenting spectators with a smaller-scale version of what to expect from the larger puppets and serving as an interlocutor between audience and gods.

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As the time of the Giants' advertised awakening drew near, a group of Lilliputians—Royal de Luxe's name for their puppeteers—in vivid red velvet livery, entered to avid applause and took their places around the Giants and on the massive crane. When the Giants awoke, they did so slowly. The Diver opened his eyes, looked at the little girl, then turned to look at us. The little girl then did the same. Both gazed at us—alert, calm, dispassionate—then at each other, establishing their profound slowness in relation to human pace and allowing spectators to marvel at the astonishing mechanics of an eye blink. The Lilliputians dotted the space in red, visibly working the ropes and pulleys that effected each movement. The Giants, whose greatest expressiveness is in their gaze, noticed their handlers with the same mild curiosity with which they observed the rest of the world, watching as the Little Girl Giant's ropes were unhooked from the Diver's crane and attached to a second, higher crane that allowed her to stand.

All the Giants' movements thus far were "micromovements," to use the terminology of Handspring Puppet Company's Basil Jones (63). Their next performance was a virtuosic display of "macromovement," as the Little Girl and her Lilliputians danced. Her ropes were on pulleys so that her nine handlers could work her from below as she soared into the air. As she danced, the Lilliputians created a parallel choreography on the ground, leaping high so her knee could fall, moving in expanding and contracting patterns so her whole body undulated, running in a massive circle so she pivoted in the air. The Diver looked on, his hand keeping time.

Making it possible for the much taller Diver to stand and walk required an even greater display of Lilliputian virtuosity. He watched the red-clad figures as they clambered up his chest and onto his shoulders, detaching and repositioning ropes. He observed them as they lowered a massive helmet onto his head and then peered through its glass. Finally, he stood, slowly.

Puppeteers holding ropes leaped in pairs from a platform on the left side of the crane. They glided to the ground, their bodies providing the counterweight that lifted his left foot. Puppeteers did the same from the right side of the crane to lift his right foot—and so he walked, one remarkable step at a time, across the plaza, down narrow tree-lined streets,

and, finally, down the broad Rue René-Lévesque and out of sight. Following him was a boat, on which sat the Little Girl, blinking at her surroundings, head attentively tilted, as she passed. Thus began a journey through the landscape of a transformed Montreal.

The Giants traveled at the speed of a human jog. Later that day, subway trains—train after train after train—became too crowded to ride. Streets filled to capacity, crowds slowing the progress of those wishing to accompany the Giants on their journey. The effect of this on giant chasers like ourselves was that we saw them in glorious snippets. First, we waited in increasingly packed crowds to see them awaken in the Place des Arts.

This was followed by a dash to watch them from the vantage point of our fifth-floor hotel window as they strolled by, accompanied by percussionists playing atop double-stacked cars and a massive cannon that ejected clouds of confetti and postcard mementos—and then, finally, a mad rush back to the Radio Canada plaza to see them depart.

As the crowds grew, the predominantly peaceful and joyful spectators who understood that the Giants' size would inevitably make them visible to all became peppered with occasional individuals who pushed in front of others in search of a marginally improved vantage point. Such anxiety dissipated, though, once the Giants returned to their final departure point. As the Diver was lowered into a shipping container and the Little Girl, now in a bright yellow raincoat, rode away on her boat, the crowd slowly dispersed with their bikes, smiles, strollers, phones, and postcards, wondering where the Giants would go next—and what to make for dinner.

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THE LILLIPUTIANS PUT ON THE DEEP SEA DIVER'S HELMET © SERGE KOUTCHINSKY



THE DEEP SEA DIVER, VIEWED FROM ABOVE PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

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Remembering to Dream

From 1993–2018, the Giants of Royal de Luxe performed in cities all over the world—Guadalajara, Perth, Santiago, Liverpool, and many others. Wherever they went, their size, slowness, and astonishing mechanics made them feel like gods from another realm, another time, another scale, another tempo that has temporarily collided with ours. The puppets’ movement is surprisingly lifelike, yet the mechanics of generating that movement remains intentionally visible. They are made from malleable, organic materials such as wood, hemp, and velvet, yet supported with unyielding iron cranes. Their massive size and the complex mechanics of effecting the simplest gesture renders mundane activities—breathing, walking, showering, changing clothing—astonishing. Ordinary things become extraordinary: The Diver looms taller than buildings; the Little Girl dances high in the air in defiance of gravity.

From their earliest days, Royal de Luxe has experimented with juxtaposing what lies within and what lies outside of the fictional frame in the context of street theatre (Webb 66), which, unlike theatre in a building with wings and a backstage, cannot hide the mechanics of its making. This early interest in embracing the fundamental simultaneities of live street performance has grown into a theatre structured around collisions of the ordinary and extraordinary, the massive and the tiny,

reality and fiction. Here, I examine how Royal de Luxe uses ordinary actions to transform ordinary urban environments into extraordinary ones, looking at space, scale, and the visible mechanics of the Giants as they wander through and transform the landscape around them.

Though the same puppets often are reused in multiple geographical locations, Royal de Luxe reframes the Giants’ story and actions in response to the cities they visit. In the words of founder and artistic director Jean-Luc Courcoult, “A lot of places want me to come, but I turn them down unless there is a deep myth that connects the Giants to the people... If that is not there, then it is just a circus” (McNulty).

The Giants have appeared to millions worldwide in dozens of locations, yet each time their interaction is designed to be local: It is often tied to celebrations, such as the Montreal celebration I attended, and it is interactive with these locations. In Guadalajara (2010), the Little Girl Giant became an indigenous girl from a Diego Rivera mural. Two years later, she was the niece of a Titanic worker in *Sea Odyssey*. Residents in many cities (Liverpool, for instance) have come to consider and care for the Giants as theirs. In Limerick, residents even baked cakes for the Giants and knitted one of them an enormous scarf (Caccetta).

Cities transform in up to year-long preparations for the Giants’ visits: Routes are planned, lampposts and signs moved, cars relocated, and obstructions cleared. As the Giants’ arrival nears, barriers are placed along routes and gathering points to preserve space for them to move. On the event days, these barriers become living frames as thousands of spectators fill all available space around them. When the Giants arrive at designated stopping points along their route, local volunteers (“ushers”) in matching T-shirts sit on the ground just inside the barriers, creating a smaller human frame within. The city’s residents and visitors transform, too, by forming crowds of up to a million, walking the streets en masse to follow the Giants, and breaking their daily routines to pilgrimage through the familiar yet transformed landscape.

Urban plazas metamorphose when the Giants are in them, but quickly revert to more drab versions of their former selves once the Giants have gone, the only physical residue to mark their presence being confetti and a few overlooked postcards of the hundreds shot from canons in the Giants' wake. As the Giants journey on, they provoke an imagined sense of infinite space, not only because the puppets are unbounded by a proscenium (even if spectators act as a living frame), but because they travel faster than a human, making their journey feel boundless to those who can't keep up.

The Giants seem to linger everywhere they have been. Some Londoners remarked after Royal de Luxe's visit that they could never again see familiar sites without imagining the Giants in them. As London Arts Council member Sarah Weir wrote, "I'll never look at the National Gallery again without seeing the image of the elephant coming out of the Haymarket and appearing, trunk first, against the backdrop of that building which seemed dwarfed by the elephant's presence. I'll never forget feeling so joyous and tearful and free..." (Webb 25).

As they stroll along boulevards or nap in parks, the Giants rupture the frame of ordinary scale, calling into question what we perceive (and often dismiss) as normal. By comparison to the Diver, the Little Girl, and even Xolo the dog, we become so tiny that they feel like magnificent and omniscient gods. Because frames of reference are disrupted, perspective becomes skewed. Giants in the distance appear to be close, due to their sheer size. Trees become bushes; cars become toys; humans are bright dots in a toy-theatre landscape. Instances in which scale is obviously wrong make the overall experience more delightful—for instance, ...tiny soap bubbles trail in the air in the massive diver's wake. In the words of scholar-puppeteer Mark Sussman:

The work of Royal de Luxe is manifestly gigantic, dwarfing the surrounding buildings, streetlamps, and bridges. It is also miniature. The human performers in antiquated uniforms, who operate the machinery... appear to be on the scale of toys... Toys and players have switched positions (Sussman 268).

When confronted with the ordinary actions of these extraordinary Giants in a transformed landscape, humans become tiny, scurrying things—our tempo too fast, our worries banal. As Courcoult explains, "Sometimes we really

need to see things with greater dimensions than ourselves—to remember that after all we are only human beings" (Ash).

The Giants' vast slowness has a profoundly calming effect, as if humans are records that have always been played too fast and now are being shown at the correct speed. The slowness of a blink, of a turning head, of their breathing when they nap for hours in city squares—all this makes one imagine that their enormous wooden hearts also beat more slowly. These things in conjunction with one another—our own miniaturization and the soothing tempo of these massive creatures—provoke feelings of safety and wonder, serenity and awe.

As they move through the environment, the Giants transform it in yet another curious way. Many elements of our cityscapes are human scale—the width of sidewalks, the height of park benches, the positioning of signs and streetlamps. Others are not. We marvel at the height of skyscrapers and of monuments that are intended to awe by being out of scale with us. It is an odd thing, I've often thought, that many spectacular human accomplishments are designed to make humans feel small, from Stalin's massive watchtowers to ancient cathedrals that render individuals insignificant in the face of the Almighty.



THE LITTLE GIRL GIANT TAKES A SHOWER © SERGE KOUTCHINSKY



THE LILLIPUTIANS OPERATE THE DIVER'S FEET. PHOTO: MARC BRUXELLE/ALAMY LIVE NEWS

The Giants, by contrast, transform our out-of-proportion cities, constructed of rigid materials like metal, glass, and stone, into something smaller and more malleable. Suddenly figures that seem human tower over subway entrances and peer into fifth-floor windows. Buildings shrink to a fraction of their ordinary size. The Giants interact with natural elements in these city spaces, lighting a bonfire on a public square, taking a shower, or emerging from the waters of the St. Lawrence River.

Through the Giants, we are empowered to exist, however briefly, in a more egalitarian relationship with our surroundings. As puppeteer Theresa Linnihan explains, “I think that a big puppet, whether you see it inside or you see it outside in the street or you see it come across a meadow... It is landscape and humanity combined - that’s why it’s so powerful” (Kantor 33).

The sheer massiveness of Royal de Luxe’s street marionettes makes even the simplest gesture virtuosic, both in terms of the sophistication of its design and the difficulty of its lifelike realization. The more exposed the mechanics, the more real a creation often feels. Royal de Luxe’s Lilliputians are not only visible—they are hypervisible, in their red livery and gold trim. They clamber onto the hands and shoulders of the Giants, switching ropes, changing costume pieces, preparing the puppets to perform their next activity. The mundane lifelikeness of the Giants’ gestures is paired with the audience’s ever-present knowledge of how difficult it is to realize these gestures. John Ellingworth, a volunteer at one performance, described the acrobatic labor of the Little Girl’s walk:

The manipulators run forward a few steps, jump, turn midair—or pirouette, their coattails spinning out behind—and land backward, bending the inside leg and keeping the other straight to the side, drawing the cord down to shin level (Webb 32-3).

Royal de Luxe does not simply bare the mechanics of performance; they bare the virtuosic labor of its mechanics, thus providing a rare window into the workings of the acrobatic inner souls of gods.

London resident Stuart Hogg captured a common response to the Giants when he mused, “I have the strangest feeling today, something in between grief and joy...” (Webb 45). Why is it that so many weep in the presence of the Giants? Is it their grace, their slowness, their majesty? Or is it something deeper, a response to the creation of life itself? Handspring Puppet Company’s Basil Jones argues that humans have always believed in the life of inanimate objects:

We suspect that objects may have life, and that dead people may have an afterlife. So when we go into a theater and the lights go down, and we once again are shown objects—i.e., puppets—that are brought to life, I think it ignites a smoldering coal of ancient belief in us—that there is life in stones, in rivers, in objects, in wood (Jones and Kohler 12).

In the case of Royal de Luxe, we marvel at the life of the Giants, at the bold vibrancy of the Lilliputians—and at the breathing of new life into our automated perception. Seeing the world differently, on a scale so vast and glorious, opens us to infinite possibilities for how that world might be imaginatively transformed. As Courcoult explains, “Adults... have forgotten how to dream and the Giants remind them” (McNulty).

DASSIA N. POSNER is an Associate Professor of theater at Northwestern University. She is the author of *The Director’s Prism: E.T.A. Hoffmann and The Russian Theatrical Avant-garde*, and is also the peer review editor for *Puppetry International*.

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