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IDEAS

PUPPET UPRISING

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Paul Kennedy
I'm Paul Kennedy, and this is *Ideas* on the Bread and Puppet Theater.

Margo Lee Sherman
I did not like what I saw in the American theatre. It was too commercial. It was too much about selling some commodity, some perfection. And when I saw Bread and Puppet, it was not about that at all. I felt that I saw something that was as old as the stones and was not perfect and was not trying to sell itself and not trying to make you envious of it, and I felt that I had found what I had been looking for in the theatre all of my life.

Paul Kennedy
In New York City in the early 1960s, a new theatre was born: the Bread and Puppet Theater, named for the course, flavourful sourdough bread that was given out at its performances, and for the grave, evocative puppet figures that were the theatre's main performers. The theatre was created by Peter Schumann, a German-born dancer, musician and sculptor, who found in puppet theatre a way of blending all these arts into a form uniquely his own. Schumann's art is deeply political, but he's also won artistic acclaim for the sculptural genius of his puppets and for the solemn theatrical ceremonies that he's created with them. In France in 1968, his work was so much *à la mode* that students pounded on the doors of sold-out theatres until they were allowed in.

But despite this glowing artistic reputation, Schumann has always stayed close to puppetry's popular roots. He's kept his theatre poor, anarchic and non-commercial, and he's poured his talents into the restoration of popular forms like pageants, parades and passion plays. In the 1970s, the Bread and Puppet Company drew tens of thousands of spectators to a huge, annual summer pageant called "Our Domestic Resurrection Circus." They've toured throughout the world, often on a shoestring, and wherever they've gone, they've planted a vision of puppetry as the theatre for our time: cheap, accessible, deprofessionalized and able to give voice to all that has been hurt and forgotten in the onrush of civilization.

Tonight on *Ideas*, David Cayley begins a four-hour series about Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater. Pictures of some of the puppets are available at our website: cbc.ca/ideas. The series is called "Puppet Uprising," and in this opening program, David Cayley introduces the theatre and tells Peter Schumann's story up to the time of the theatre's first successes in New York. "Puppet Uprising," Part 1...

Actuality (archival news report)
One of the largest anti-war movements in United States history continued today with demonstrations in a score of cities and more planned for up to 100 other centres. In New York, the demonstration centered around the Armed Forces Induction Center...

Amy Trompetter
I saw them march down Fifth Avenue with a peace demonstration, and to see these puppets on Fifth Avenue — a giant airplane that had a dragon's mouth going over the top of these huge Vietnamese women who were blindfolded with their hands tied together in a long chain line, and when the airplane passed over them with these sharp drumbeats, they went down to the ground and then slowly got back up and moved forward, past the airplane, so that the sequence was repeated as a walking parade — it was so strong, such a moral call and esthetically so beautiful. It was beyond what we had seen on the streets for protest. And I knew I wanted to work with them immediately.

David Cayley
The streets of New York were where a lot of people first saw the Bread and Puppet Theater. Amy Trompetter went on, as she wished, to become a member of the theatre, and today directs her own Blackbird Theater as well as teaching at Barnard College. What she saw on Fifth Avenue in the spring of 1966 would not be so surprising today. Big puppets have become a staple of anti-globalization protest. But at the time, Peter Schumann was creating a new political language. He had dispensed with the pickets, chants and shouted slogans that were the normal rhetoric of political demonstrations and instead brought a distillation of war itself in front of people. His puppets were witnesses who could give their testimony without ever falling into banality or self-righteousness.

This new rhetoric of protest was just one of Schumann's many innovations. He also reinvigorated many old forms, like religious pageantry. Omar Shapli is an actor, director and teacher of theatre. He remembers a performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It was set to the music of a mass by the Renaissance composer Josquin des Pres.

Omar Shapli
I still have such a glowing memory of the Ave, Mare Stella, the mass to the Virgin, "Hail, Star of the Sea," which is an extraordinary text anyway, I think. And what he built for it! The mass didn't enter into it at all, at first. There was a series of dangerous and destructive images done very slowly throughout the first part. And my memory is not very clear about many of these, but it ended up with things failing in many ways, many places, and a sense of despair and disorder settling on the universe that was this room that we were all in. And at that point, everything became quite dark. And then at the very back of the room, we began to hear the Josquin mass sung, of course, *a capella*. And you looked around behind, and you saw a ship with coloured lights along the top of it from mast to mast and up to the prow, a fairly large ship, made mostly of people moving slowly up the aisle, with the chorus backing it up, coming through very slowly, and throwing out lines or hands to objects that had been cast aside and pulling them into this ship. As it came up little by little, you saw the ship as something that brought hope and a kind of salvation and order and love to all of this madness that had been going on in the world around it. And it was perhaps the most powerful, single religious image of that sort that I can remember in my own past. It was the sort of thing that left your mouth open. It was like lightning striking. It was gorgeous in the extreme. One wept.

David Cayley
Arresting images, like the gathering and enfolding ship of the Ave, Mare Stella, are characteristic of Peter Schumann's art. His assemblies of puppets possess a mysterious and inviting depth and universality.

Marc Estrin is a theatre director, musician and novelist who has been part of the Bread and Puppet Theater for more than 30 years. He remembers a sequence of shows called The Gray Lady Cantatas that were done in the 1960s and '70s. The puppets for which they were named were oversized female figures whose very simply sculpted faces expressed what the Germans call *weltschmerz*, "world sadness," "the tears of things."

Marc Estrin
The Gray Ladies weren't this or that person. They weren't even Vietnamese people who were being bombed or whatever. They were the people who looked like and walked like gray ladies in the world and whoever that is. They didn't belong anywhere. They belonged everywhere, including the "gray lady" part of every person. Even George Bush has a "gray lady" in him. And to recognize this figure, what your "gray lady" is and how your "gray lady" would move, even if it were inside of you, as it moves through the interior of your body, that's who they were. They're very, very big and important, universal figures.

One of the things that happened to me that was important early on in my coming to Bread and Puppet happened around a Gray Lady. The entire scene was the Gray Lady crawling across probably a 12-foot proscenium stage, a really tiny claustrophobic stage. She would start the scene. The curtain would be drawn back, and she would be on Stage Right, and 10 minutes later, she would be on Stage Left. And I'm sitting in the audience, because I was maybe a musician for this so I wasn't on the set, and I'm saying, "Okay, okay, I get it already. I get it. She's crawling across the stage. It's hard for her. I get it." And Peter said to me, "You don't get it. Just watch it." And I realized that was a crucial flaw in my psychic operation. I would get things, and then I wouldn't be present at them anymore and wouldn't be available to them anymore because I'd "gotten" them. And Peter said, "That's not what we're doing, 'getting' things." "Getting it" is reductive, and experiencing it is as deep as the phenomenon itself, depending on your capacity to be open and to be present at it. And when you have an artist like Peter designing it, what he's doing is opening that out for you. It's like an opening that leads down into the centre of the Earth, one of these magical things where you would be able to go to the underworld through this particular cave. Well, Peter is designing doorways. In fact, the door is a big Bread and Puppet symbol. There was a show called The Door, and people standing with doors have occurred continually in Bread and Puppet, and

I think Peter is creating doorways for people to enter. It's kind of like the Kafka "Before the Law" parable, where a man sits outside a door, and he waits, and he waits, and he waits, and he waits, and then before he dies, the door closes, and the guard says, "This door was for you and only for you." Peter is helping people to understand that the door can be walked through because of the nature of the door that he designs.

Amy Trompetter
Peter is like the history of the world. All of this early, untamed impulse in theatre-making and inventing is springing out of him. And in our little culture, with its text-based theatre, we have very few examples of that. There are traces of it in a vase painting or in a statue in a museum or in some kind of music that you hear. You know it. When I see Peter's puppets, I recognize them as if I were meeting them in a dream. They're familiar to me. Anybody who sees them would say that. These big images in the street parade, they're familiar. I know them. I know what they are. I know what they're about: their goodness, their evilness, the juice that's in them. It's clear, like I've met them before in that way that when you meet something in a dream, you know what this is. That's what these archetypes are that we have.

David Cayley
Amy Trompetter calls the art of the Bread and Puppet Theater "archetypal." Marc Estrin says that it opens doors into the depths of existence. Omar Shapli, that it instills religious awe. All point to a theatre of what Northrop Frye called "primary concern," concern with the most basic elements of existence. The company's very name associates art with food. Its themes have been equally basic: war and peace, love and death, fall and resurrection. Many of these themes are drawn from Peter Schumann's childhood, which was passed in a close family driven to the extremities of existence by war. He told me the story during a long interview, which stretched over several days, in the CBC's New York studios.

Schumann was born in 1934, the second youngest of five children, in Silesia, near the city of Breslau, which was then part of Germany and today of Poland. His father was a schoolmaster who imparted a deep love of literature to his family. Breslau was an industrial city and a railway junction, so it was heavily bombed when war came. Schumann remembers the sky above the city ablaze with light.

Peter Schumann
We called them "Christmas trees" because they always happened at night, and then they would throw lights, like fireworks, into the sky before they did their bombardments and then the detonations and the bombs. So, we would all run out to admire the "Christmas trees" and then rush to our holes. We had a hole in the garden. My father had dug a deep, deep hole and made a cover over it, like a private, little family bunker, and we all rushed in there and then outwaited the bombs, and then you would hope that it wouldn't hit you. But the town was burning pretty badly on the day when we left, and we heard the Russian cannons from one side of town, and we had Allied attacks from the top. The trains were catastrophes. They were totally overloaded with people hanging like grapes on the outside of trains to get out of there. But we got out.

David Cayley
The family fled ahead of the occupying Russian forces to the northern province of Germany where his parents had met and still had friends. Peter was ten. There again, he witnessed aerial bombardment, this time of a German ship transporting prisoners of war.

Peter Schumann
We were right on the Baltic Sea, on the Bay of Lübeck, and we boys stood on a hill, and we saw the airplanes attacking that ship. It was just a spectacle of seeing the airplanes coming, dropping bombs, going away, coming again, making the round, dropping bombs, flying away. And like this, we saw the whole attack. Then in the following days, corpses in striped suits would be washed up on shore by the hundreds. They were concentration camp prisoners. It was a prison ship that was bombarded by the Allies.

David Cayley
And what did you do, you boys, when you find them? Did the village bury them?

Peter Schumann
Yes, they went with their carts. They picked up the bodies. They made mass graves, and they buried them.

David Cayley
The village where the Schumanns found refuge was organized on almost feudal lines: tenant farmers working the land with horses. The family made their bread from what they could glean from the remains of the harvest.

Peter Schumann
Since there were many refugees in that village, the lines of gleaners were long. It was an unforgettable experience because we didn't have shoes either during that time, or we had, I think, a pair of shoes to share among five kids, so you always had bloody ankles doing this because of the stubble that's left. You walk amongst the stubble barefoot, and it cuts right into the ankle. You bloody your feet, as you walk. But the amount that you get is surprising. You have your little bag with you, and you fill it up, and then there's a basket or a larger bag which you empty that into, and you keep walking, and it's amazing the amount that you get. I think we made all the bread for our family from gleaning, all the kids and my mother, all working together, gleaning.

David Cayley
With the gleaned grain and an old coffee grinder to make it into flour, his mother baked the family's bread, as she had always done.

Peter Schumann
When we grew up, we always baked, and I happened to be my mother's helper for baking, so I helped her with kneading already as a kid. Her hands were worn and thin from maybe too many other chores and washings and so on, whatever else. She enjoyed very much having a kid in the family who wanted to help her bake, and that was me. The baking was done once a week, and it was learned from a Silesian peasant woman who was my mother's child helper, maid and it was Silesian sourdough rye bread. She never baked any other bread, other than for Easter or Christmas white loaves, quite seldom. But her real baking, the real bread was always sourdough rye made from a roughly ground rye flour.

David Cayley
The bread sustained them, and after the war, the family moved to Hannover, where Peter's father became the principal of a high school. Hannover was, like Breslau, an industrial city, and it too had been heavily bombed.

Peter Schumann
Everything was destroyed. The baker across the street from us started putting bricks together and build a little hut over an old oven that was still down there in the rubble. So, he cleared that out. It was an underground bakery, so to speak, just a little hut going over there, and that's where we baked our bread. My mother always baked, and we carried the loaves to the baker, to his oven down there, downstairs, into this underground hollow there where he had this oven. But this impression of people, especially women I remember, standing in long lines in these piles of rubble — there was so much of that.

David Cayley
Out of this rubble would soon rise the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the economic miracle of post-war German reconstruction. But young Peter Schumann did not much like the glossy new facade that was being erected. After high school and a very short stay in art college, he left home, travelling with a friend to France, Sweden and Greece. They bought a horse and cart, which they used until the horse went lame, and then an old car, which also broke down after an accident. Peter was already an artist. He painted, sculpted and played the violin. At school, he had co-opted friends into strange experiments in theatre and dance. He and his friend performed wherever they could. Eventually, he settled in Bavaria, in a village near Munich, where he established the Group for New Dance in an attempt to realize the idea that then pre-occupied him.

Peter Schumann
It seemed to me it was possible to move right, to create something where movement would be like people should move. It seemed to me that the way people moved was wrong, that people were wrong because they moved wrong. Instead of walking forward, they should walk backwards. And all the mannerisms of normal life seemed to me wrong, so I thought dance would be to invent how humans should move, that that would cure the other parts of wrongness attached to the bourgeoisie, which isn't just movement. But it was a very violent idea that things could be righted by using that animal body and letting it do the correct things, and I had very clear ideas of what that "correct thing" was. I even went to

dance studios, and I gave classes. I was so convinced that this would be the thing. And in the dance studios, I experienced the difficulty that they were already so educated in a certain type of movement that the whole struggle was to shed all the things that they had learned, to get rid of all the esthetics and habits that they attached to their movements. So, I struggled, and I had a hard time with them, but I did it in Sweden and in Frankfurt and in all kinds of places. I just went to ballet schools and said, "I'll show you how to move," and often enough, they said, "Thank you very much. No." And often enough, I was persuasive enough to make my way into there. It was ridiculous naturally, but I was very convinced of the rightness of it.

David Cayley
Schumann's vision of "moving in the right way" can be seen in retrospect as the seed of the future Bread and Puppet Theater, a theatre without esthetic pretension, unburdened by the history of theatre and able to perform its gestures in precise attunement with the present moment. But in Germany in the late 1950s, only his deep conviction sustained him. He was able to cobble a group together, and even to mount a tour, but there were constant defections, and Schumann was never really able to convey the urgency of his vision to his collaborators.

Then came a visit to the United States. In Munich, Peter had met and married an American, Elka Schumann, a student at Bryn Mawr College, spending a year abroad. And in the spring of 1961, with two young children, they decided to visit her parents in suburban Connecticut, not far from New York City. There, Peter Schumann would find the milieu in which his talents could thrive.

New York in 1961 was in state of cultural effervescence. Visual artists, unhappy at merely making commodities for the art market, were creating what were called "happenings." John Cage was experimenting with new forms of music, as was Merce Cunningham with dance and the Living Theater with drama. Peter Schumann found this atmosphere more congenial than Germany's, and he and Elka decided to stay, settling on the Lower East Side.

At first, he pursued his interest in dance, but the following year, when Elka got a job teaching Russian at her alma mater, the Putney School in Vermont, Peter began to do puppetry with students there. He had been fascinated with puppetry in childhood and had already been making masks for dances for a number of years. Now he began to build puppets and to create shows. But according to Elka, the inspiration to begin working on the larger scale that became one of his trademarks didn't come until the next summer.

Elka Schumann
In America, he went to a puppet festival in Hurleyville, New York, and came back and described to me the Sicilian marionettes: heavy wooden figures, clad in armour. Very simple to manipulate: one iron rod into the head, and the sword arm has a rod, and they're just bounced and jostled across the stage by very strong men, because their arms are outstretched for three hours at a time, and they have to say all the lines. And what the puppets do basically is declaim speeches, and then they fight, and the fighting consists of these bodies clashing together. Peter came back from that totally entranced to discover that puppetry wasn't just bunny rabbits, as the other things at that festival were. He said, "Pink bunny rabbits and belly dancer puppets," and he was totally disgusted by that. But the Sicilian marionettes showed him that puppetry could be virile, violent and also very simple.

David Cayley
The Sicilian marionettes were operated by a Brooklyn family called the Manteos. They performed scenes from an epic called Orlando Furioso, which traces back to the Middle Ages. The puppets were in fact no larger than some that Schumann had already built, but their strength and the epic character of the story they enacted made them seem larger. He was inspired and now began to build puppets of every size, from tiny table puppets to giant figures that reached far beyond the human scale. This was the beginning of the Bread and Puppet Theater. The bread in the name was the same coarse sourdough rye that his mother had made. Peter now baked an identical bread himself and offered it at each performance — a gesture of hospitality meant to indicate the kind of communal relationship the theatre hoped to establish with its audiences. The puppets had the same integrity as the bread: a rough,

expressive vitality that was worlds away from the winsome Kermits and Cookie Monsters who have tended to monopolize the image of puppetry in the era of television. Many of Schumann's puppets are displayed today in the Bread and Puppet Museum, which is housed on an old barn on the farm in northeastern Vermont where he and Elka have lived since 1975. I toured the museum recently with Peter Schumann, and he showed me some of the puppets with which they made their first shows.

Peter Schumann
These are disciples and the Jesus figure from the early crucifixion plays we did in New York City, starting probably in '63 or '64. We did annual Easter stories, mostly about the war, and we used this Jesus figure against the war in Vietnam. And pretty soon, early on, an airplane was the crucifix, and then the crucifixion itself happened by erecting the airplane behind the Jesus figure and climbing up there and tying him to the airplane. And then there were big court scenes that were imitations of political battles in Congress and such, and the figures of Judas and of Caiaphas and so on were always politicized figures that modern people would recognize as having to do with politics.

David Cayley
The disciple and Jesus puppets, which towered above us in the museum, were gaunt, draped figures which had been operated by the puppeteer from the inside. The politicized passion plays in which they were used were performed at various churches in Brooklyn and Greenwich Village. Bread and Puppet also performed in its own loft on Delancey Street and rarely in theatres. Most shows were political, but there were occasional explorations of more abstract and more lyrical moods. One early example was Leaf Feeling the Moonlight, a delicately choreographed movement piece to the music of a Japanese flute with the puppets spotlit against a black backdrop. Bread and Puppet shows of whatever kind often left a vivid impression on their audiences. Trudy Cohen is a puppeteer who was part of the Bread and Puppet company for many years, and she thinks that the reason for this lies in the fact that puppets, much more than human actors, are able to concentrate emotion.

Trudy Cohen
To understand an emotion so well that that's all you're presenting, to bring it down to its absolute basic thing so that a tear is just that tear, is for me just incredible. And for an actor to cry, it's so complicated that to believe in that tear is really difficult for me. I was thinking of this great moment, which was also one of the first things that I saw of Bread and Puppet, in a Gray Lady Cantata where the son goes off to war, and the Gray Lady cries a glass prism. It just comes out of the face of the puppet and very, very, very slowly drops down on a string, and for me it's like the essence of crying. I totally felt that. I've seen actors on stage or on film try to cry, and it's harder to believe that basic, basic sadness.

David Cayley
Puppets, in Trudy Cohen's eyes, possess a purity and simplicity of expression that actors rarely, if ever, attain. Puppets can embody pathos or joy without the distortion that is unavoidably produced by any actor's basic self-regard. For Trudy Cohen, as for Peter Schumann, this gives puppets an advantage as theatrical performers.

But it was not theatre as such that interested Schumann. He didn't want to be part of what he saw as the enclosed and self-absorbed world of the arts. Artists like composer John Cage or dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, whom he knew, served as negative examples. However adventurous and avant garde their technique, Schumann thought, they remained locked within their professional milieu.

Peter Schumann
For me, New York, when we came here, and Cunningham and Cage did their things in little clubs, and the painters did their things in their little clubs, and there was this elitist, little audience going from one thing to another — for me, the decisive moment came when we said, "We'll take our sculptures in the street. We'll show them to people. We'll see how they respond. We'll talk about the fire department or the police department or the war in Vietnam later on. And it has to be done for that moment in the street and for the pedestrians that happen to be there." That for me was what was to be learned from New York. Especially in that Lower East Side slum, that seemed to be what was needed, not to enter the art scene.

David Cayley
In the streets of New York, Schumann put on puppet shows and also adapted various other traditions of popular performance to new circumstances. One such variation on tradition was a new way of telling stories with pictures that he called "cranky movies."

Peter Schumann
It's a scroll of paper. You paint on it and you scroll it. You put it into a box, and you put a crank on it. Can you imagine? And then the paper flows by. So, you should call it a movie. It's a movie. The picture moves. And I thought of it that way: as a counterproposal to the existing movie culture. You just put it on a garbage can outside. People don't have to pay. And you tell what's needed. You don't talk about people kissing each other or going into the bedroom or having problems or this kind of bullshit. But you show them about the rats and the fire department and the whole business of what's going on in the street, and we put it on that thing to show it to people. So, it was a serious proposal to replace the movies with these movies. And also, it didn't cost any money to make them because the paper scroll was outside the newspaper offices for free. It's from paper that they toss out.

David Cayley
Another form of popular street theatre that Bread and Puppet practised was the parade. When mass opposition began to be expressed to the war in Vietnam in the mid-'60s, Schumann's troupe added a poignant eloquence to the peace parades. George Bartenieff, a New York actor who later worked with the theatre, remembers a parade performance similar to the one described by Amy Trompetter at the beginning of tonight's program.

George Bartenieff
What he had was about 20 women dressed in very simple robes, and on their heads were masks that were pretty much life size, but it was the whole head. And what's so extraordinary about Peter's masks, unlike any other puppet theatre that I have ever seen — now, of course, there are many imitators, but at that time, there was no precedent for what he did — the masks were so simple, and yet so deeply and profoundly human, that you believed that they were indeed people. And these figures were walking very slowly to the sound of a drum in the parade, and then they would stop, and then the drum would suddenly increase. And over their heads would come these planes, jets, that were on long, long, long poles, it seemed, 20 feet up in the air — maybe it was less — but the planes would come over them, and then the women would drop when the planes were overhead, the women would just drop, like that. Then they would stop, and then they would get up, and then they would walk again. And then the planes would again come from the distance over them, and then they would again drop. It was such a simple thing and so powerful. I mean, I just thought this is sheer, sheer genius.

David Cayley
Schumann's genius was also appreciated by novelist Grace Paley, a long-time friend of Bread and Puppet, who was then an organizer at the Greenwich Village Peace Center. She remembers how much the theatre contributed to the emerging peace movement.

Grace Paley
One of the things they brought was beauty, which is missing to this day since then without him, and truth and unending labour. I mean, the hardness and heaviness of the work they all did to make the meaning of the parade shine really, it was just endless and hard. And people became very dependent on them — that was another thing.

David Cayley
Dependent?

Grace Paley
Yes, whoever was the parade committee became totally dependent on the fact that Bread and Puppet would certainly show up and certainly do this and certainly do that. I mean, his figures of Vietnamese women, they were extremely effective, and people were pretty amazed.

David Cayley
These white masks of Vietnamese women that amazed people in the street also became part of an indoor performance which gave the theatre its first recognized theatrical success in 1966. The show was called Fire. Its occasion was the death by fire of three Americans who had immolated themselves in protest against the war in Vietnam and in tribute to the Buddhist monks who had done the same in Saigon.

Actor Margo Lee Sherman performed in Fire many times. Here she describes the final scene, in which a masked woman in white remains alone on the stage...

Margo Lee Sherman
At the very end, the person doing this part has in her hand a roll of red electrical tape and slowly, keeping it in her hand, unwinds it — and if you unwind this kind of tape, which I think is cloth-based, it makes a ripping sound, so it sounds like fire, flames — and runs various pieces along her body so that there are strips, flames coming up from the feet, the legs, the arms, across the face, the eyes. And then the person slowly — it's very hard for me to talk about it without entering into it — the person slowly, slowly crumbles down.

We were working with a lot of distortions. We were working with doing things very slowly. It's very hard to put this into words, but it's not the kind of work you could do without wearing masks because a mask protects, it conceals, it transforms, and it allows a person to get into a place that's very deep, that people can't usually enter as long as they know that they're being seen. But if you can't be seen, if no one can judge you, if there are no prying eyes of the audience trying to get at you or get something from you, then you can enter a very, very, very deep world.

David Cayley
In a review of Fire, writer George Dennison described the play as a kind of prayer. Fire, he said, is not a protest play, but rather a response to the horrors of Vietnam that allows its audience also to respond....it is a service for the dead. This comes close, I think, to Schumann's intention. He is trying to respond to his time, to make ceremonies adequate to the moment, to allow people to integrate what is going on.

Peter Schumann
Sometimes information is so overwhelming and you want to bring it across that you try to find language and puppetry that is really the best attempt to do that job. I remember a piece that we played a lot in the war years: A Man Says Goodbye to His Mother — a tiny, little, ten-minute playlet with just a couple of masks in it, and we played it so much. And in its origin, all it was was a group of Spanish Harlem women talking, asking me, "We have a demonstration. Can you bring a piece?" And the situation was, the Puerto Rican boys, they were the ones who died in the Vietnam war right away in great numbers, and all of a sudden, the mothers in the neighbourhood all got these letters, "We regret to inform you..," and the women told me that, and then I made up that sketch on the basis of that "We regret to inform you" letter. And it became sort of our anti-war standard piece, but it needed to be thought of as the gift for these women to say just the right thing to the American public. So, I didn't write it with anything else in my head. I only wanted to say — so I accepted — the right thing about these mothers. That's all it should say to the American public and to the political system.

David Cayley
Bread and Puppet is called a "theatre," but it is a theatre of a most unusual kind. Peter Schumann is an artist, not a dramatist, and his puppets are not created as characters in stories. The puppets come first, each with its own inspiration, and then the show. Texts can be quite rudimentary, and what is shown often obeys a visual, rather than a narrative, logic.

Peter Schumann
The visual element as a separate element, with its own rights, as part of the theatre production was in my mind from the beginning. I never thought of having puppetry be used for something, or for music to be used. I always meant that music should be music and sculpture should be sculpture, and that you have to allow these great areas of our brain, like music, to be totally themselves, to work undegradedly, to work not for purposes, but to work in their own spirit. So, when these things come together, you don't know what the final result is. When you take a piece of music and a piece of sculpture and put them in the same space, you don't know what the result is in there, in your brain that's sitting out there. That's the risk and the productiveness of what you do, that it isn't finished, it isn't there. You don't compose what's in the brain. The brain composes that. You just give the biggest chunks of food you can, and the brain does the job of making it into digestible something.

David Cayley
The show, for Schumann, is like the bread:

"digestible something." The audience is the final composer, not him. He doesn't want to manipulate audiences, though he often has something that he urgently wants to say. His idea is that he and his performers should try to do things correctly, to move in the right way, rather than strive for effect. Each puppet has to be allowed to disclose its proper way of moving and not simply be used in some pre-cast role. Often Schumann's productions move quite slowly. Sometimes their meanings remain obscure. He gives no evidence of caring. He's not interested in what he calls "culture mongering" or "elegance production" He's looking for gestures of a revelatory truthfulness, and this often involves an extreme simplification of things.

Peter Schumann
You make a person with one arm into the arm dancer, and you make a person who's hard of hearing into the chief listener. This is important: to press the extremes out of things. It's the same attitude that Indian sages have devised for a certain stage in their life when they make themselves blind because they cannot bear the grandeur any longer of what the eye gets to see, because it's much, much, much that the eye gets to see, and they cannot take it in. So, only when you are blind can you see sufficiently small amounts to be able to deal with them, and that's to me a very understandable thought.

David Cayley
So, reality has to be reduced and intensified.

Peter Schumann
And art is such a reduction. Exactly. It's as if you take all the traffic noises and all the Muzaks of New York City, and that's your material, and out of that, you select a few notes, and by selecting these few, you make it possible to bear the rest of all of them.

David Cayley
With these "few notes" drawn out and intensified, Peter Schumann produced theatre pieces of striking originality, but he never became part of New York's theatrical sub-culture, and his work has not been widely recognized in North America, though it has been widely copied.

Omar Shapli taught theatre at New York University when Bread and Puppet was starting out. He thinks that one of the reasons for this neglect is that Schumann was often more interested in working out moral and political problems then he was in positioning himself as a theatrical stylist.

Omar Shapli
Most experimental theatre is based on a fixed esthetic of some sort. "This is what we do" — a way of solving problems, a way of approaching the problem, a way of doing all this. Peter has, I'm sure, such ways also. But he's far more likely to ignore them totally, that is, to create a condition in which, "You can't judge this on the basis of my work because you don't know what my work is, nor do I, at this moment." That's why if somebody comes up and says, "That was a little slow, Peter. Couldn't you get it going?" it doesn't mean much to him. It would mean very much to somebody from any number of very avant garde theatre groups who were told the same thing. They would say, "Now, how do we close that up? How do we do all this?" But Peter is just, "We're working this out. And maybe we'll never work it out, but it is what it is. Come and join us as we work it out."

David Cayley
Peter Schumann wanted to give his audiences "something digestible," something they could complete, rather than showing them a finished, self-contained product. This emphasis on working things out made the Bread and Puppet Theater hard for critics to classify. Omar Shapli thinks, nonetheless, that Schumann has worked on an historical scale that goes far beyond most contemporary theatre.

Omar Shapli
I think that Peter's work is both extremely modern and extremely ancient. It draws its roots from the earliest theatre. And one of its strengths is that when you see a work of Peter Schumann, there is an uneasy sense that you're watching something in which time plays a very odd role; that is, you're watching something that evokes a very far past: the earliest move toward what we call "theatre," the whole ritual function of the mask and the motion in common of a group of people together, as with the ancient chorus. At the same time, you're watching something that is breaking rules all the time, breaking

more recent rules all the time, and going into totally new ways of discovering and viewing things.

What I've just said to you now is in itself a reason for viewing this as a phenomenon of major theatrical importance. The fact that that has very little directly to do with Off-Broadway, Off-Off-Broadway or Broadway — the only categories of theatre basically recognized by the major critics, at least in New York and probably, in one way or another, in most places — should not cut it out of the big discussion or the big comprehension of what we have here. I think Peter is large. Peter's work is large. And to me, there's something wrong with you if, seeing his work, you do not come away with that feeling that there's something very important going on, something very large.

Margo Lee Sherman
A few years ago, there was some kind of mask exhibit at Lincoln Center Library. There was a whole bunch of different mask-makers represented, and I went to see it, and I see a beautiful mask here, and I see a pretty mask there, and I see a fancy mask here, there, all over. Just as I'm leaving, in the corner, I see a mask which looks like a soul, a naked soul. And who made it?

David Cayley
That was Margo Lee Sherman, with the final, unspoken word of tonight's program. I'll continue in the next program of this series with an account of Bread and Puppet's wild success in Europe at the end of the '60s, the story of the puppet pageant that attracted tens of thousands of spectators to a tiny village in northern Vermont during the 1980s and '90s, and more on Peter Schumann's unique style of theatre-making.

Paul Kennedy
I'm Paul Kennedy. This is *Ideas* on the art of puppeteer Peter Schumann.

Trudy Cohen
He's perfectly happy to make mistakes, to do it completely wrong, to have everybody else hate it. That's what he sees at that moment. That's what he's going to do. I've never worked with anybody else like that who didn't care if it was working by somebody else's standard. That's what I call "genius."

Actuality: Bread and Puppet Circus Band, circus opening...

Paul Kennedy
Between 1970 and 1998, the Bread and Puppet Theater invited all comers to a northern Vermont field for their annual Domestic Resurrection Circus. How many people came is only a guess. The local sheriff once estimated the crowd at 30,000, and other estimates have ranged as high as 40- and even 60,000 people. What they came for was a day-long, outdoor happening, culminating in a giant puppet pageant on the theme of death and resurrection. You can see photographs on our web-site, at cbc.ca/ideas People watched from the banks of a natural amphitheatre which opened onto a large meadow. What they saw was unforgettable.

Clare Dolan
I had never seen a show that used the kinds of elements that the Bread and Puppet show incorporated. I'd never seen that before. I'd never seen a show that used landscape. I'd never seen a show that used huge sculpture. I'd never seen a show where paintings were active, moving dancers. I just had never seen that before.

Paul Kennedy
The Bread and Puppet Circus expresses the genius of Peter Schumann, a German-born sculptor and painter who moved to the United States in 1960. He started his theatre in New York three years later. The theatre was political and dealt with the questions of the day, but the expressiveness of Schumann's puppets and the originality of his shows allowed him to rise far above the banality and the preachiness that besets so much political art. Today, Peter Schuman is widely recognized as one the most influential artists of his generation. In this four-part *Ideas* series, David Cayley examines his accomplishment. Later in the hour, you'll hear more about the Resurrection Circus and about Bread and Puppet's aesthetic innovations, but we begin tonight's program in 1968, when a radical street theatre from New York suddenly found itself playing the toney theatres of Paris and London. "Puppet Uprising," Part 2, by David Cayley...

Actuality: News reports on 1968 riots in Paris and Chicago

David Cayley
1968 was a wild year. Occupations and uprisings spread around the Western world, from near-revolution in the streets of Paris in May to the pitched battle that raged around the Democratic Party's Convention in Chicago in August. In this heady atmosphere, the Bread and Puppet Theater became, for a few years, the theatre of the day. Their shows were an astonishment, seeming to be at once modern and medieval, politically engaged, yet brooded over by mysterious, giant puppets that looked as old as time and gave the plays a grave, ceremonious quality. When they appeared at the World Theatre Festival in Nancy, in France, the newspaper Le Monde called their performance "a revelation," and they were invited to play in fashionable theatres in Amsterdam and in London. Other European tours followed. Marc Estrin was a musician and puppeteer on those tours, and he remembers the disorientation of a company used to playing in the street or in their loft above a gypsy club in New York.

Marc Estrin
One of the striking things for me about the tours was being treated like rock stars, which seemed so foreign to the material that we were bringing. We would play, say, in Vincennes, in the theatre there, and it would have 500 seats, and it would be sold out every night for two weeks, and people would be banging on the doors literally. The French students, if they couldn't get in, they'd bang on the doors until they were allowed in, because we couldn't have the show because they were banging on the door. And that really seemed odd to me. We weren't consumer objects, but we were the object of consumer demand.

David Cayley
Among the plays that seemed foreign in this atmosphere of adulation was Fire, the show that had first led to the company's invitation to Europe. It was a prayerful, almost dream-like piece conceived in memory of three Americans who had immolated themselves in protest against the war in Vietnam. In Berlin, an excited late-night audience, unable to adjust to the play's meditative pace and harrowing subject, laughed uneasily at its solemnity. Others audiences were more respectful and attentive. But Peter Schumann and his company remained uneasy, Marc Estrin says, about whom the shows were for.

Marc Estrin
There was a lot of political tension around that because Peter and the company have never wanted to be a theatre for the rich. On the other hand, it was those big theatres that were paying for 20 boxes of puppets to come over and 15 puppeteers and all of that stuff, and the people on the street weren't paying for it. But there was still this tension about needing to serve the people on the street, and so the days would be devoted to outdoor, free shows, and then in the late afternoon or evening, we would go to the theatre and prepare the expensive show. It was a kind of nice balance, actually. The expensive shows were gorgeous. I remember one that was called That Simple Light May Rise From Complicated Darkness — beautiful, beautiful show. We did a show The Bird-Catcher in Hell, with huge demon puppets and Yama, the King of Hell. That's not stuff you can take on the street, and yet they were amazing artistic events. And the public responded to them. But then we would take these little shows and perform them ten times during the course of a day in marketplaces.

David Cayley
Bread and Puppet enjoyed many artistic successes during these years, but it was often the company's radical political side that was most galvanizing and most likely to attract converts amongst those who saw them. Massimo Schuster was then a student at the school of the Piccolo Theatre, in Milan, and he remembers his reaction when Bread and Puppet played there in 1969.

Massimo Schuster
When Bread and Puppet came, it was just, wow, what is this? It was like a UFO. Everybody was doing everything, and the actors were not stars, and there was not all this paranoia going between one and the other, between the star and not star et cetera. Plus it was the communitarian kind of living, and the girls looked nice — I mean, it was the whole thing basically. We were just fascinated. It was the hippie generation. I was not interested in puppetry. I'd never seen puppetry before in my life, and I really didn't give a damn about that. It was more their political involvement around the Vietnam War. It was the pacifism of the company and all that. Those were the kind of reasons that made me want to work with them.

David Cayley
Massimo Schuster did join Bread and Puppet and worked with the company for several years during the 1970s both in Europe and in North America. Today, he has his own puppet theatre based in Marseilles.

The Bread and Puppet Theater's vogue in Europe lasted well into the '70s, but being anointed as an important artist didn't seem to have much effect on Peter Schumann's sense of himself or his vocation. Marc Estrin recalls him as indifferent to his reputation and quite unwilling to interpret himself for others.

Marc Estrin
After shows, people would want Peter to give interviews or to go to a public seminar that's being held at the University of Nanterre or something, where people would come and question him about the meaning of the work and its political implications. You can imagine this European political, radical kind of analysis from all of these people who had been schooled in this kind of dialectics. And Peter just hated that stuff. He didn't want to answer questions. He'd say, "The answer is the work." You have a question? We'll do it again. Come tomorrow."

David Cayley
Peter Schumann's reluctance to be drawn into the discourse of theatre critics and academic word-spinners had several sources. One was his vision of puppetry as something humble and openly foolish, art out of a garbage can, free of pretension, the work of artisans, rather than of — capital "A" — Artists. Another was his unwillingness to ingratiate himself with audiences. Even where admission had to be charged, he refused to think of himself as someone

bound to deliver $10 worth or $30 worth of theatrical entertainment. To him, the audience was being invited on a journey, rather than offered a packaged destination, and what they got on a given night depended on what stage of the journey that particular show was at. Puppeteer Michael Romanyshyn was a member of the company for many years, and he remembers arriving at a theatre festival in Ireland with an unfinished work.

Michael Romanyshyn
During our first performance there, Peter had to stop the show and change things in the middle of the performance, and it was the gala opening of this festival. People were all dressed up in their theatre-going clothes and were sitting there waiting to see the première performance of the festival, and he was running it like an open rehearsal. He would stop the show and say, "Do it like this" or "Not like that." It was awkward for the audience and for us, but when I look back on it, I think it was kind of courageous and great that he did it that way.

David Cayley
The show that didn't quite première at the Irish festival — it was called The Life and Death of the Firemen — was an extreme, if revealing, case. Most Bread and Puppet performances were more or less ready to go by show time. But few of the longer ones ever achieved a permanent, canonical form. Rough edges were definitely part of the company's style. "If you get the big, red colour of the thing you want," Schumann once wrote, "you need not care so much for the finesse." Too much finesse, too smooth a finish, the fall into mere elegance could, in his view, be a drawback. Michael Romanyshyn agrees.

Michael Romanyshyn
It's an honest kind of theatre. When something breaks, you don't pretend that it hasn't. I remember seeing the Manteos, the Sicilian puppet theatre that was from Brooklyn, and they did a show where half the stage fell down. It was a battle scene, and Orlando was fighting some Saracen, and the sword hit the curtain, and half the curtain fell down. And then you saw these guys in their rolled-up T-shirts, smoking cigarettes, with their tatooed arms right behind there. And they bent over, and they picked it up, and they fixed it, and then they continued the battle, and that was fine. That was my ideal. That's fine when that happens. It's even sometimes better.

David Cayley
It can be better, in Michael Romanyshyn's view, because it potentially shatters the passive trance state into which spectators can so easily fall and brings the audience into a more collaborative relationship with the performers. The performer can strive for truthfulness, not just a seamless illusion. And it is just this striving that gives Peter Schumann's theatre its distinctiveness and its importance. For him, something much more crucial than mere polish or plausibility is always at stake in a performance, something that Michael Romanyshyn says was at first hard to understand.

Michael Romanyshyn
This was something that troubled me in the beginning, that I only later figured out. Sometimes you felt that you did a terrible show, you did everything wrong, and Peter would say it was great. And then you felt like it was a really great show, and he would say it wasn't any good. And it was something about getting at the real essence of what the show was supposed to be and performing it in a way that took it as far as it could go at that moment. And maybe it was also the room and the night and the people in the audience and all those things together. And in those moments, it really didn't matter if the curtain fell down or if you tripped over something. You could still do a perfect performance. And that contrasts with how ragged and rough and unfinished and underperformed a lot of the Bread and Puppet shows are and how people see them and say, "This is just a bunch of ragamuffins, and they don't have any training." That is an aspect of Bread and Puppet and one that I like a lot. But then also there's that aspect of just total, complete perfection. You had that contrast as a puppeteer between something so disciplined and exacting and having to be perfect in order for it to be done right and doing things that it totally didn't matter how you did them — there was a bigger thing involved.

David Cayley
Michael Romanyshyn got to participate in one of these moments of perfection early on in his Bread and Puppet career. It occurred during a show called The White Horse Butcher, which concerned the death and resurrection of a horse.